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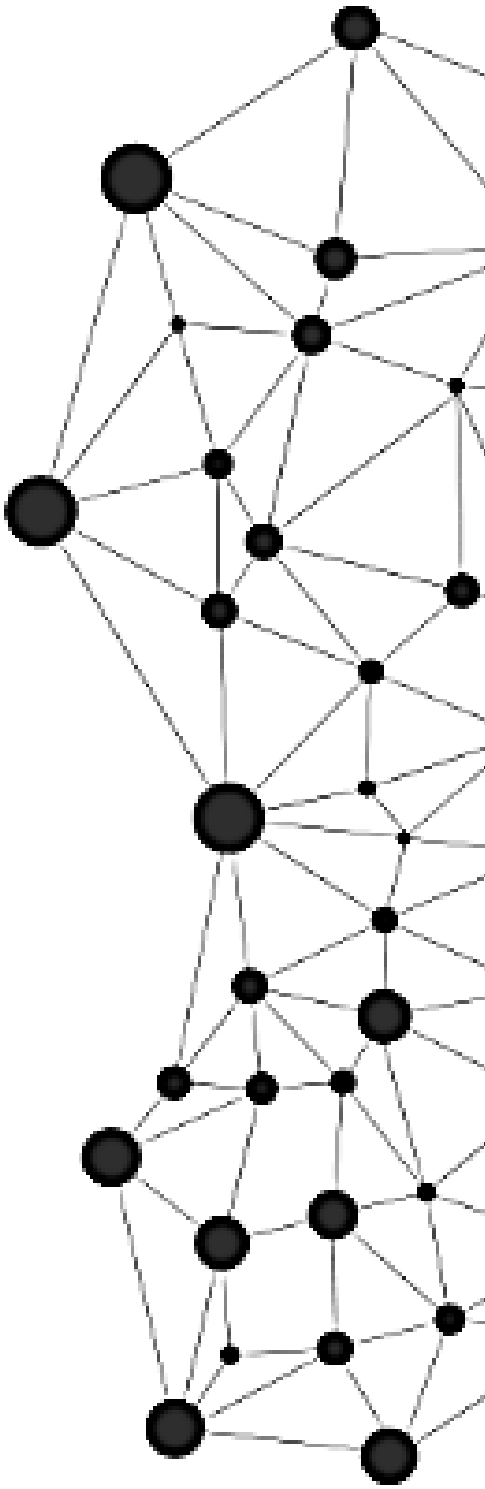

Partnerships, Relationships & Organisational Dynamics in Large Social Research Studies

Tara Polzer Ngwato & Julia de Kadt

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Abstract: Organisational partnership dynamics in implementing large research studies are among the most challenging and critical components of research practice, but they are rarely thematised explicitly. Based on the case study of a large, longitudinal, multi-partner social survey in South Africa, we argue for the need to understand relationships as important in their own right and explicitly discuss, value, plan and evaluate these. We put forward a framework for assessing relationships through a people- and systems-centric approach. The article includes a detailed set of indicators for assessing and measuring different levels of organisational relationship management, including at the levels of structure (context), leadership (process) and sustainability (outcomes). The operational implications of intentional relationship management we discuss include defining and measuring clear and agreed relationship quality criteria; adapting processes for selecting research partner organisations; and planning for adequate budgets and staff time resources to consider relationship-building and maintenance activities.

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1. Introduction

Organisational partnership dynamics in implementing large research studies are among the most challenging and critical components of research practice, but they are rarely thematised explicitly.

There is some public management studies literature about the nature and dynamics of organisational partnerships (Huxham & Vangan, 1996; Argento & Peda, 2015; McQuaid, 2009; Trafford, 2006; Boraine, 2017; Marais, 2014), and the responsibilities of leaders in terms of building relationships within and across organisations (Weymes, 2002). Where partnerships between research agencies and others are discussed in the social sciences, this is largely about good practices in maintaining broad institutional relationships (iie.org; Zhao, 2002) or achieving greater impact from research findings by engaging with research users (Tseng, 2017; Cousins, 1996) or research subjects/beneficiaries/communities (Strier, 2011). The social research literature, however, includes virtually no reflection or documentation which applies these organisational dynamics and organisational relationship modalities to the operationalisation of specific social research studies.

The quality and nature of relationships in research collaborations, and particularly international collaborations, have also received some academic attention. For the most part, however, these pieces focus on researcher-participant relationships, rather than those between research partners. There are some exceptions, however. For example, a useful edited volume reflects on relationships in research collaborations of varying levels of complexity (Ritchie, 2007). However, there is little focus on inter-institutional and service provider relationships, and while a series of best practices are outlined, the volume stops short of providing an overarching framework for managing multiple types of relationships. Other relevant pieces focus on the maintenance of ethical relationships in research collaborations (Shordike, et al., 2017), how to manage and resolve conflicts

in the context of international research collaborations (Bagshaw, Lepp, & Zorn, 2007), how to learn collaborative skills while carrying out a collaborative interdisciplinary study (Freeth & Caniglia, 2016) or provide an exploration of key aspects of relationships during the life course of an international collaboration (Stead & Harrington, 2000).

More recently, there has been a growth in articles exploring relationships in research collaborations between universities and partners in the commercial sector. Papers focus for example on negotiating and implementing cooperative research agreements (McDonald & Gieser, 1987), understanding impediments to effective relationships (Fowler, 2016), and developing collaborative relationships (Young & Vreytag, 2021). While these articles usefully highlight important features of effective research relationships, the relationships they focus on have a fundamentally commercial orientation, which does not translate directly to the relationships surrounding the implementation of social research.

This article provides a valuable addition to this body of existing literature by presenting a case study of relationships in the context of a large and complex primary social research project and using this to build a framework which we propose also applies to other kinds of multi-stakeholder research projects such as multi-author book projects, multi-country studies and inter-disciplinary studies. The article shares key learnings from a case study of the nature and impact of the relationships between the commissioning and implementing agencies in the fifth iteration of the GCRO's Quality of Life Survey (2017/2018) (QoL V), along with some lessons learned from QoL III (2013/14) and QoL IV (2015/2016). The Gauteng City-Region Observatory (GCRO) was established in 2008 as a partnership between the University of Johannesburg (UJ), the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the Gauteng Provincial Government (GPG), and organised local government (SALGA). The GCRO's flagship project is a large Quality of Life survey (QoL) which has been conducted every second year since 2009, covering Gauteng Province, South Africa's economic hub and home to 15 million people. In terms of sample size (24 889 in the QoL V iteration), breadth of subject matter and rigour of sampling approach, it is one of the most complex, large-scale, and long-running surveys conducted in the country.

Multi-agency relationships are a core characteristic of this study at multiple levels: the GCRO is inherently a multi-stakeholder entity in that it is a partnership across two universities and various forms of local government. Second, while the GCRO has consistently designed and analysed the survey, it has contracted out the data collection component to a different agency for each of the five survey iterations to date.

The insights presented in this paper derive from the experiences of the authors during the often-challenging QoL V implementation process. The first author served as an independent external observer for almost the entire project period, attending key coordination meetings and interviewing all implementing partners about their experiences with the partnership, while the second author led the GCRO's project team, participating in the majority of engagements between project partners. The first author prepared a detailed internal report for the GCRO on project relationships and their implications for project implementation, and distilled learnings and recommendations to be taken forward for future survey iterations. For reasons of confidentiality, many of the internal details cannot be publicly shared – and may also not be useful to an international readership. Instead, we present here our key insights and learnings in an abstracted form, which can be applied to a broad range of multi-partner research projects operating in diverse contexts, and which contribute to closing an identified gap in the literature.

One of the reasons for this gap in the literature may be that when organisational relationships go well, they are taken for granted, and when they do not, they are so uncomfortable and potentially damaging to reputations that they are associated with failure and therefore not written about. It is well established that there is 'publication bias' against 'failed' studies, for example those which result in confirmation of a null-hypothesis, and that this elision has an overall negative effect on learning and innovation in knowledge production (Hubbard & Armstrong, 1997). We feel that it is both possible and ethical to write about lessons from extremely challenging research experiences in ways that enable systematic learning. We have attempted to do so in this paper and trust that experienced research managers will recognise from their own contexts many of the fairly common situations on which we draw.

The two key insights we offer regarding relationships in multi-partner research projects are (1) the need to understand relationships as important in their own right, and explicitly discuss, value, plan and evaluate these, and (2) the value of taking a people- and systems-centric approach to the process of research. We propose a framework for assessing relationships in these types of projects, placing particular emphasis on issues of structure, leadership and sustainability. We conclude by outlining a series of implications for practice. We applied many of the lessons learned (as outlined in Table 1 and the Implications for Practice sections below), during the QoL VI iteration (2020/2021) and found that the quality of relationships among the multiple partners (funders, hosting universities, commissioning research unit, implementation agency and governmental data users) were greatly improved as a result.

2. The Significance of Organisational Relationship Dynamics in Research Generation

The relationships between organisations can make or break any large project, including large research projects. The quality of such relationships, especially if framed in the particularly intensive form of a partnership, is therefore an existential question for any organisation planning to implement a large research project which requires the participation of more than one organisation.

If inter-organisational partnership dynamics go wrong, this can impact on:

- **Project delivery**, including timelines and budget. Development and management of relationships often require large amounts of staff time, which are often not costed for in conventional research project budgets. Second, misunderstandings between organisations can increase direct project implementation costs. This can happen through the need for multiple revisions to process documents and systems (survey instruments, report or book outlines, analysis plans, data collection technology design, quality control processes, etc.) which requires extensive staff time and can

delay field work and writing; or through repeating data collection if clear expectations were not established in advance. Finally, output quality can be affected if partners have different conceptions of quality, goals, etc. Note that these delivery challenges are distinct from challenges arising from a lack of technical capacity or incompetent project management. They can arise even with highly competent and professional organisations if there is a breakdown in the relationship between them.

- **Technical problem-solving**. Practical and technical challenges, such as managing data collection technology glitches, budget or timeline overruns due to external risks, or significant personnel changes within research teams, may become much harder or impossible to manage if partners do not have a 'benefit of the doubt' relationship. As above, such technical challenges can arise even if all partners are competent in their own spheres and responsibilities. The quality of relationships between partners and their ability to collectively and productively solve such challenges (rather than withdrawing, blaming or shaming) may be the deciding factor between project collapse/failure or continuation in such situations.
- **Opportunity costs**, through impacts on other projects. This is especially the result if high levels of staff time are wrapped up in relationship management in an unplanned way, which means they are unavailable for other activities.
- The **reputations** of all individuals and organisations involved, Reputations can suffer if relationship failures result in delivery failures but also if they result in individuals and organisations circulating negative stories about each other within their shared or respective professional (which are also often social) spaces.
- Staff **stress levels** and emotional well-being, impacting on **retention**, **productivity** and general '**quality of life'** at work. Stresses related to working relationships, including those with partner organisations, can harm staff and team members to the extent of serious physical and mental health implications, long-term impacts on families, and skilled and committed people leaving a research organisation or the research profession entirely.
- **Future opportunities.** Research partnerships often occur within a specialised field or sector which has a limited number of national, regional or even global players. In many country contexts, especially writing from a South African and African vantage point, the social research sector overall is small and capacities are limited. When

relationships between research organisations go sour to the extent that players no longer want to work together, this shrinks the pool of potential future collaborators and the overall circulation of knowledge and thought.

In extreme cases, the above factors, individually or often in combination, can result in one or several partners facing major **financial penalties and/or legal consequences** for non-delivery which may, in turn, lead to job losses, changes of management or closure of entire units or organisations. We emphasise that non-delivery due to technical incompetence may have such results even with the best attempts at intentional partnership management, but that technically competent partners can also end up in this position in the absence of good relationship management.

Despite the existential importance of relationship management for large research studies, institutional and team structures rarely take this function into account. Managers of large corporate organisations or in government agencies which work in collaborations or partnerships expect to spend a significant amount of their time and effort on relationship management and there are specific roles and functions within organisations dedicated to this. In academic and similar social research settings, managers are often in managerial positions for reasons unrelated to their organisational management skills and have often received no training in relationship management. While there are senior roles within universities that focus on building and maintaining relationships (with other universities, governments, donors, etc.) there are rarely specific relationship managers at research unit and project level. There are some disciplinary differences here, with multi-country, multi-year and multi-agency partnerships more common in the natural sciences than the social sciences or humanities. While large (social) research studies are no less institutionally complex than many corporate or government projects, they tend to lack the explicit managerial functions and experience to manage the relationship aspects of these projects. There is no established curriculum or 'best practice' handbook for social research managers.

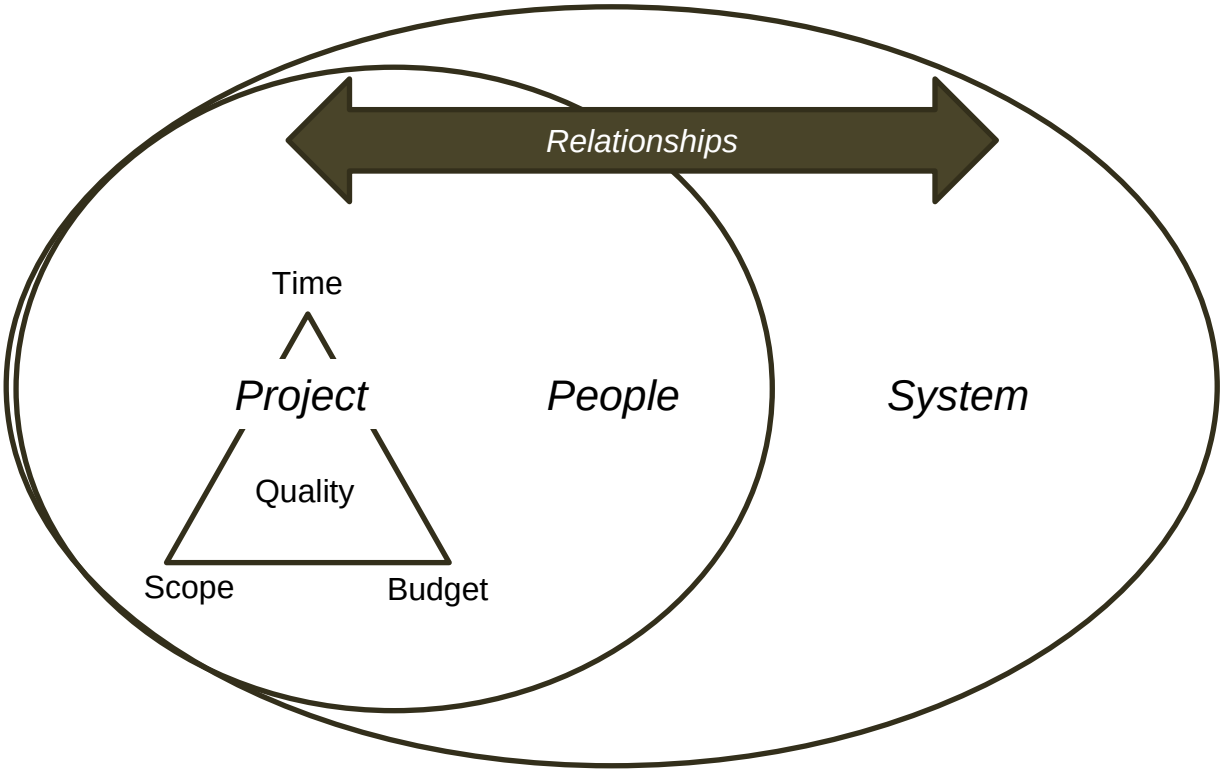
3. A Framework for Understanding Organisational Relationship Dynamics in Large Research Projects

Now that we have established *why* it is important to consider organisational relationship dynamics within the social development and social research sphere, we propose a framework for *how* to think about these dynamics.

In thinking about organisational relationships in social research we looked for transferable insights from management literature focussed on government (McQuaid, 2009; Argento & Peda, 2015), civil society (strengtheningnonprofits.org; Choulatida, 2014) and descriptions of partnerships across corporate and public sectors (Huxham & Vangan, 1996; Trafford, 2006). This literature, however, tends to describe a limited set of normative conditions for good partnerships, along the lines of "good communication, openness, effective planning, ethos and direction" (Trafford, 2006). Our case study, however, showed the importance of managing trade-offs, multiple levels of relationship challenges and partnership failures despite good intentions and good skills, none of which are dealt with in these literatures.

Furthermore, much of the literature approaches relationship management as an element within project management, making relationships subservient to achieving project outcomes. In contrast, our approach, derived from our case study experience and our reflections on other studies we have led and participated in, frames relationship building and maintenance as independent of and equally important to project management, as shown in Fig 1 below.

Figure 1: People and systems-centric adaptation of the classic project management triangle



Our framework is based on two key principles. The first is that while relationships among research organisations are critical to project-based research outcomes, this is not the only reason for their importance. Quality relationships should, for various reasons discussed, be valued, planned, and evaluated in their own right.

Second, doing so requires taking a conscious people-centred and systems-centred perspective to relationships, which is contrasted with a project-centric perspective. We suggest that a people-centric perspective means recognising *researcher* 'quality of life' as a relevant metric for the success of a project or organisational relationship. Researcher 'quality of life' within the experience of a partnership, we propose, is largely about a sense of control and a sense of meaning. As with stress in other contexts (within work teams, personal life, etc.), great emotional strain often comes from feeling a loss of control (Steptoe, 1989). Being dependent on other people or even other

organisations to complete something for which you are (co)accountable – and this is the essence of a partnership – can be extremely stressful if the process and 'meaning' of the relationship is not clear and if project completion and output generation are the only criteria of personal and team success.

Given there are many contexts where partnerships are desirable (because they enhance the skills, capacities or resources present in any single partner organisation), and necessary (because all the required skills or capacities are not present in one organisation), and that partnerships inevitably mean a certain loss of control, we argue that researcher well-being can be increased through a greater focus on the meaning of the partnerships. If a professional partnership relationship (like any other relationship) is well defined in terms of its meaning – how it relates to the broader personal and professional values of participants and the strategic mandates and goals of the respective organisations – then there is more scope for tolerance of shared control or acceptance of uncertainty in terms of control. It is good relationships, not things (reports, datasets), which give human beings a sense of meaning, purpose and satisfaction, and this is true at work as in private life.

In addition to a people-centric perspective, taking relationships seriously also emerges from and requires what we call a systems and sustainability perspective. This stands in contrast to a project management perspective. A systems and sustainability perspective means looking at any particular project, and the people and organisations involved in it, within the larger 'eco-system' within which it (the project) and they (the people and organisations) operate. For the current case study - given the wide thematic breadth, extensive academic use and direct connection to government decision-making of the Quality of Life study - this 'eco-system' could be described as the social and policy research environment in South Africa.

Where a project management approach considers the success of the project in a largely linear and transactional manner, limited to the time period of only the one project, a systems approach asks whether the project, and the relationships and capacities built through it, support the health and strength of the overall research and 'evidence-based decision-making in social policy' environment. Such a systems perspective also requires intentional decision-making when project management success criteria (such as timeline

adherence) clash with systems success criteria (taking the time for capacity and relationship building and for experimentation and innovation). These considerations will be discussed further throughout this article and especially in the conclusion.

Bringing people-centric and systems-centric views together means thinking about the quality of relationships as a distinct and complementary set of metrics from the success of the activities or outputs (the 'project') which the organisations in the relationship produce together (Zhao, 2002). In the rest of this paper, the partnership (the nature and quality of the relationship) and the project (the specific output of the relationship) are referred to as distinct from each other. A strong partnership can produce a failed project, and a successful project can be produced by a set of organisations with completely dysfunctional relationships. Ideally, both the project outputs and the relationship quality would be valued and pursued equally, addressing any conflicts and tensions between the two sets of priorities as they arise. Our point here is that there should not be an assumption that either flows automatically or linearly from the other and therefore both need to be named and monitored.

Thinking and acting in such a systems-informed and people-centric manner is not easy, however, since most institutional incentive systems focus only on producing outputs, not on organisational and inter-organisational wellbeing through the continuous regeneration of positive relationships. Funding is provided, contracts awarded, and promotions decided without any consideration for time and effort spent on building relationships. While there are multi-year programmes specifically dedicated to relationship building across universities or across independent research agencies within a specific sector, most studies, including most large surveys, are managed outside such frameworks.

A final dimension of taking a systems approach rather than a project management approach relates to innovation and problem solving. When a project is conceived as a once-off interaction between partners, purely judged by the ability to complete pre-defined outputs on time and within budget, the time and resources spent on solving problems feel like a 'grudge purchase.' There is often a sense that the problem should not have occurred in the first place and so solving it simply restores something broken in the project and the relationship, rather than building something new. The initial

problem remains the focus of attention and may be used as justification for dissolving or not renewing the research partnership. In contrast, if a project partnership is conceived as a systems relationship, the problem solving process becomes the focus and not the problem itself. Problem solving becomes innovation. Something which did not work the first time becomes an opportunity to build long-term and mutually beneficial capacity by learning how to do it differently, together, the next time. The time and financial resources required to create space for such learning, therefore, can be costed for and valued.

If research managers (and indeed research donors and users) are to make organisational relationship building and maintenance, from a people and systems-centric perspective, part of their explicit mandate, what does this mean in practice? How can this approach be operationalised? What are the conditions and processes for effective partnerships in (social) research?

Based on our Quality of Life V research project case study and validated against several other multi-stakeholder research projects we have led or participated in, we have extracted a set of twenty-six indicators, reflecting aspects of three key dimensions of organisational relationships: structure, leadership and sustainability. If using evaluation language, these might also be called context, process and outcome indicators, respectively. Many of these indicators have been written about separately in the literature, e.g. the value of intentionally managing communication processes in diverse teams and partnerships (Freeth & Caniglia, 2016; Tadmor, Satterstrom, Jang, & Polzer, 2012), but this list seeks to bring together many different dimensions of intentional and systems-oriented partnership management in ways that enable project leaders to translate the theory of partnerships into concrete early-warning indicators for partnership challenges, and pro-active planning for positive partnership dynamics.

Structure refers to the ways in which each partner institution is internally structured as well as how the partnership between institutions is structured. Structure (context) elements are those which are to a large extent outside the control of project-level leaders or precede a specific research project. These include power dynamics created by contracting relationships, resourcing, legal forms, whether and how the specific unit managing or implementing the project is supported within a larger organisation, and

the extent to which a project is 'existential' or 'peripheral' within the larger institutional structure of each partner. Leadership (process) indicators relate to factors within the control of people managing the research project and relate to values, communication and conflict resolution styles. Finally, sustainability (outcome) indicators look at the extent to which a project is designed, managed and implemented in a way that considers and values broader people and systems impacts beyond the limited time period and deliverables of the specific project.

In practice, there is often interaction and overlap between the three dimensions. Large-scale research projects bring with them complex feedback loops between relationships at different levels: relationships between team leaders; relationships between technical experts; dynamics within teams; dynamics between teams as a whole; and relationships between project leaders and their own respective governance and accountability structures. In addition, there are interactions between individual personalities and backgrounds, legal and institutional structures, and project related and unrelated historical precedents, perceptions and contexts. The strength or weakness of one factor may therefore act as a background support or handicap for several other factors. The indicators in our list should therefore not be read as fully independently varying factors but as elements which may be more or less distinct from each other and more or less relevant depending on the context of each specific research project.

Another important caveat is that arguing for the importance of 'good' organisational relationship management inevitably introduces a normative element. Normative judgements about the nature of what is a 'good' relationship are never context, culture or institution-neutral. Our list of indicators is explicitly formulated in a normative way by describing how each indicator looks as a 'positive condition' or (negative) 'challenge' when operationalised. These normative judgements express our specific environment, and our personal, political and professional preferences. We do not intend to suggest that these value judgements are universal or generalisable to all contexts and hope that researchers and managers everywhere will adapt this list and the value judgements within it to their own contexts. Our argument is simply that the consideration of these various dimensions and indicators for organisational relationship management should

be a) explicit and b) ideally done in conversation among the research partners in order to achieve consensus or at least mutual understanding.

This list is formulated so that it can be used operationally in at least three ways:

1. as a descriptive tool with which to structure the analysis of past or current partnership strengths and weaknesses,
2. as a partnership 'due diligence' tool or discussion guide when exploring a new partnership, and
3. as a catalogue of potential indicators for establishing explicit relationship quality goals for a research study and measuring these over the course of the project.

We discuss the practical implications of this approach and the indicators further in the following sections.

4. Conditions and Challenges for Effective Organisational Partnerships

4.1. Structure

As described above, structure (context) elements are those which are to a large extent outside the control of project-level leaders or precede a specific research project. Under structure, we consider nine indicators, each of which may have an enabling or challenging impact on relationships.

1. **External Accountability:** relationships are strengthened if the partners have a shared source of external accountability (institutional or normative) beyond the partnership itself, such as an overarching disciplinary and professional body, a shared funder, or a common commitment to a particular group affected by the research (especially if that group has the means to hold the researchers accountable). If the partners have no common sense of external accountability or

if they feel accountable to different (possibly competing) external structures and interests, this is challenging for building strong relationships.

2. **Institutional Support and Accountability:** strong relationships at research project level enjoy support from all relevant decision-makers in all partners' own institutional structures (e.g. political and bureaucratic/administrative leaders in the larger university) while a lack of such support within one or more partner institutions can undermine the project relationship.
3. **Balance of Power and Control:** positive relationships can be built when power is either equal or the unequal power relationship is well-understood and agreed on by all parties. Competition for or uncertainty about where power and control lie is a challenge for building functional relationships.
4. **Balance of Risk and Liability:** good relationships are based on mutual benefit and reciprocity while problematic ones may have one-sided risk and liability or the financial and time commitments for one or several parties outweigh the potential benefits for those parties of being in the relationship.
5. **Balance of Commitment:** in good relationships, there are similar levels of 'existential' commitment to the project or partnership. It is challenging for a partnership if there is unequal dependency on the project/partnership, e.g. for one party it is a small or unimportant project while for the other it is the only or dominant source of income, reputation or career progression. This is also the case if there are unequal consequences (personally or institutionally) if the project or partnership fails, with extreme cases having one partner barely feeling the impact of failure and the other facing career-ending or institution-closing implications.
6. **Institutional Form Alignment:** relationships are easier to build if there is alignment of organisational missions, professional orientations, legal structures, decision-making/governance structures and processes across partners. If this is not the case then mutual awareness of differences across partners is important (e.g. the differences in incentive structures and processes for a university unit and a for-profit surveying company), along with understanding of how such differences may impact on the incentives and constraints of the individuals and teams within the research partnership.

7. **Narrative and Legal Alignment:** relationships struggle when there is a mis-alignment between the partnership narrative and the power dynamics, risk management and conflict resolution mechanisms created by a particular type of legal contract (e.g. a narrative of a learning and risk sharing partnership but a transactional or punitive subcontracting agreement).
8. **Resourcing:** project success in conventional terms (producing research outputs, etc.) is obviously related to having sufficient and appropriate resourcing in terms of finances and skills. Adequate resourcing, however, also impacts on the relationship aspects of a research partnership. Not only does insufficient financing generally increase the emotional pressure on project partners, it may also curtail the staff time partners are willing to spend on relationship-building activities. Missing core skills in the partnership and/or unrealistic understanding of required skills/resources to achieve stated goals can also lead to relationship tensions, apart from the obvious impacts on output achievement.
9. **Dependencies:** similarly, if the research partnership excludes key stakeholders or dependencies to achieving the project goal, such as a tech partner for a necessary software or a politically important partner for achieving uptake of research findings, this may not only compromise the project outputs but also the quality of the relationships among the exiting partners.

4.2. Leadership

Leadership (process) indicators relate to factors under the control of people managing the research project and relate to values, communication and conflict resolution styles. We break this down into twelve indicators.

1. **Reference Points for Success:** most researchers and team leaders will have had past experiences of partnerships and working relationships. If leaders have divergent expectations about the nature of partnerships and/or lack of awareness of historical precedents shaping one or both sides' expectations, such unexpressed experiences may impact negatively on how the new partnership is managed. Conversely, shared and mutually understood reference points of how

successful partnerships work and feel can enable partnership processes to be managed more effectively.

2. **Expectations of Leaders:** under the section on Structure, we noted the importance of project teams generally having the support of their institutions, while here we focus on team leaders having institutional support for taking a leadership style which builds consensus and resolves conflicts in partnerships. In some institutions, team leaders who try to solve operational challenges or delivery delays in ways that build relationships may be labelled as weak project managers within their own organisation or may be pushed into a confrontational or competitive stance or forced to implement punitive contract-enforcement measures irrespective of the impact on long-term relationships.
3. **Goal Consensus:** strong relationships are built on having explicit consensus about the goals and objectives of partnership activities, while conflict about or discrepant priorities for goals and objectives of partnership activities undermine good relationships.
4. **Collaborative Vision**: similarly, if team leaders have and share a vision about the value of collaborative process, relationships can be actively built on this basis, while if such a vision is one-sided and/or some leaders take a competitive mindset, relationship building becomes harder.
5. **Problem-solving Processes**: shared and transparent decision-making and problem-solving processes (within and across partner organisations) support relationship-building, unlike unclear and one-sided decision-making processes and/or blaming or avoidance culture when problems arise.
6. **Boundaries and Roles:** relationships are facilitated by a clear definition of roles, responsibilities and boundaries, within and between partners, while grey areas or encroachment/ meddling across roles, responsibilities and teams undermines them.
7. **Alignment/Diversity of Culture/Values:** strong relationships are built on an awareness of and respect for culture, values, philosophies and work styles among partners, including an acceptance of differences (e.g., norms, ways of working) and ability to 'translate' and communicate about and across differences. On the contrary, when partners do not recognise the relevance of

explicitly identifying, respecting and managing differences in culture, values and work styles, expectations and relationships cannot be managed productively.

8. **Intentional Communication:** a conventional approach to research project success focusses on communicating content with the assumption that the process of communicating is itself unproblematic. Being conscious of relationship-building goals and challenges, however, requires being intentional about communication, including being aware of the need to intentionally establish a common project language, which is tested for mutual understanding across differences of culture, discipline, gender, etc.
9. **Information Parity:** partnerships are easier if there is information parity or if technical information is shared openly, and more difficult if there is information imbalance where one partner has mission-critical knowledge that other partners cannot peer review, e.g. software developers with social scientist partners. If the partners use their information imbalance to exercise control or avoid transparent and collective problem solving, this impacts negatively on the relationship, even if the final output is eventually delivered.
10. **Long-term Mutual Concern:** good relationships are based on an atmosphere of learning, desire to invest in all partners' skills and knowledge, and the ability to reflect honestly on both successes and failures. The alternative is a short-term and transactional relationship where each side is only interested in saving face and extracting value for themselves.
11. **Trust:** the bottom line of good relationship leadership is about generating and maintaining trust in the integrity, intentions, motivations and values of all partners.
12. **Dedicated Partnership Manager:** practically, it is easier to lead a project with good relationships if there is a dedicated partnership manager for the project, who has the right communications and facilitation skills to 'translate' and create connections between partner organisations. For large projects, this may be a full-time role, or it may be a role allocated to one of the project team members, but someone should be responsible for the intentional (both pro-active and reactive) tasks related to building and maintaining good relationship dynamics.

4.3. Sustainability

Sustainability (outcome) indicators look at the extent to which a project is designed, managed and implemented in a way that considers and values broader people and systems impacts beyond the limited time period and deliverables of the specific project. We suggest five indicators.

1. **Relationship for its own sake**: The quality and sustainability of the partnership is valued and invested in for its own sake, apart from the success of joint project outputs. This stands in contrast to a partnership which is seen as in service of project outputs and only valued to the extent that it contributes to these outcomes.
2. **Success Criteria**: The partnership is set up for and judged on short and long-term success criteria, not only short-term indicators.
3. **Planned Level of Effort for Relationship Management:** The levels of time, funding and emotional energy required to build and maintain the partnership are planned for, recognized and sustainable for all partners. The inverse is when there is no planning and provision for or recognition of the amount of time and energy required for partnership building and maintenance, so such investments are resented, considered wasteful or place unsustainable costs on one or several partners.
4. **Emotional quotient**: If the time spent on the partnership feels generally positive and energizing for participants, they are more likely to maintain relationships beyond the project, with positive effects for the sector, than if the time spent on the partnership feels generally frustrating and draining.
5. **Sector Growth:** the most important systems indicator is that the partnership contributes to the overall strength and sustainability of its sector by building up, rather than breaking down, the capacities and linkages of organisations and teams within the sector. A project which reduces or compromises the overall strength and sustainability of the sector by, for example, resulting in teams who

do not want to work together in future, should not be considered a successful project.

5. Conclusions: Taking Relationships Seriously

As noted in the introduction, the nature and quality of relationships are rarely explicitly considered when planning, managing or evaluating the success of research studies. If, however, this dimension of the research process is taken seriously, there are a range of operational implications. We briefly discuss three of these, although there are more: defining and measuring clear and agreed relationship quality criteria; adapting processes for selecting research partner organisations; and planning for adequate budgets and staff time resources to take into account relationship-building and maintenance activities. Ideally, these processes are considered in the design phase of a new project, debated and agreed upon as partnerships are created and as they evolve, and evaluated and documented as important outcomes of a project, alongside the substantive research findings. In practice, many research projects may discover the need to increase their attention to relationship quality once the project budget, partnerships and deliverables are already established, and so need to find ways to carve out different conversations, activities and the associated resource allocations 'while the ship is sailing.'

The first operational implication is how metrics of project success are defined. Conventional success metrics include budget adherence, timeline adherence, data quality, production and circulation of research outputs (reports, articles, etc.) and use of research outputs by key stakeholders. If the quality of relationships is added as a criterion, then one would need to consider how to (formally or informally) monitor the relationship success or 'health' of the project by:

- Defining and agreeing on clear relationship quality goals across all partners in a research project, similar to how project partners conventionally agree on deliverables like a report outline or data quality criteria,

- Establishing who is responsible for facilitating or overseeing the achievement of these goals and how barriers or conflicts are to be managed, and
- Defining how indicators for relationship quality and sustainability are measured and by whom.

While each research project will choose and adapt its own priorities from the suggested list above (Table 1) and then consider how to translate these indicators into something measurable, here are some examples:

- Level of emotional/physical **burnout** of project staff, including on commissioning and implementation teams. Have researchers (the most important 'assets' within the social research system) been temporarily or permanently damaged? This can be measured through recording the number of sick days taken, through short anonymous team satisfaction surveys or through regular short interviews/conversations with team members conducted by a manager or an independent external relationship facilitator.
- Level of **trust** between individuals, teams and organisations. How do the individuals, teams and organisations feel about each other? Are they able and willing to continue working together in various constellations beyond the project? This can also be measured through regular short surveys or interviews. Project managers can also assess the extent to which their own decision-making processes and motivations about how to engage with partners is based on the presence or absence of trust, why this is the case, and how to (re)build trust if necessary.
- **Reputational** and relationship **impact** for individuals and teams/ units/ departments **within their respective larger organisations** such as universities or donors. Has the project increased or decreased the ability of people involved to build and use social capital and trust within their organisations to get more and better social research done in future?
- **Reputational** and relationship **impact** for individuals, teams/ units/ departments and organisations in relation **to external stakeholders**. Has the project increased or decreased the ability of people and organisations involved to build and use social capital and trust outside their organisations to get more and better social

research done in future and to have research findings used for better decision-making?

- Whether **learning** took place which has built organisational, partnership and systems capacity. Mistakes and failures in the project are therefore judged not on whether they occurred but on whether they led to an aggregate increase in knowledge and problem-solving ability.
- **Organisational stability** and sustainability in ways which increase the overall capacity of the research system. Have the organisations involved been strengthened or (temporarily or permanently) disabled through debt/bankruptcy, loss of key staff, or reputational damage (unless warranted for actions which harm the overall research system)?

The second operational consideration is what processes and criteria are used to select and contract with research partners. Depending on the type, size and institutional format of a project, research partnership selection processes may range from building on existing personal relationships (e.g. people who studied together or have done previous studies together), to targeted invitation based on technical or subject matter expertise, to formal competitive proposal or tendering processes. Even competitive tender processes which are designed to see pre-existing relationships as a 'bias' to be minimised, can include due diligence around potential conflict dynamics in applicants' structural contexts and their internal leadership indicators (e.g., internal accountability and learning culture, conflict resolution approaches, etc.), in addition to conventional criteria such as technical skills and price. Whether or not a partnership is based on pre-existing personal relationships, if the selection and contracting process does not include an explicit discussion of the specific relational dynamics of the project, for example using the list of indicators we propose as a discussion guide, there are likely to be assumptions and gaps which can pose significant risks to the project.

Our final operational consideration relates to resource planning and allocation, especially team composition and time budgeting. In terms of team composition, it is important to plan for and allocate relationship-related responsibilities. These responsibilities can be distributed across team members or concentrated in one or several dedicated relationship management roles, which may include:

- a dedicated 'relationship manager'. This person might be a core project management team member or someone within one of the partnering organisations who is given partnership management as one of their responsibility areas. Alternatively, which may be preferable if relationship tensions are likely to arise, it could be someone with some distance to the core relationship, either within other parts of the partnering organisations or a completely independent neutral person. This relationship manager's role is to regularly check in on the relationship quality criteria identified at the beginning of the project, to initiate and/or monitor whether relationship-building activities are taking place, and where necessary to mediate when relationship challenges arise.
- a 'translator' who can check on whether partnership participants are fully understanding each other across disciplinary, epistemic and/or cultural lines. The appropriate translator may only become known after the beginning of a project, once communication gaps start to become apparent through practice, since these are not always visible or predictable up front (i.e. even if researchers have the same linguistic, cultural or disciplinary backgrounds they may not be able to communicate well or form trusting relationships).

Budget for relationship-specific activities, such as staff time allocation for 'team building' and informal engagements across partners, and regular 'space' for emotional input management (which could include debriefings or group 'therapy' if there is a risk of severe trust issues or inter-personal or inter-team conflicts) should be planned for up front and respected as investments which are just as necessary as investing in required hardware or skills training.

These operational considerations for how to manage organisational relationships are all components of sustainability for the broader research system. They also reflect the full spectrum of 'currencies' that are invested in a large research project: apart from a monetary currency, other types of investment include time, social capital, professional credibility, creative ideas, and emotional energy.

As with any investment or exchange, there are potential trade-offs. What if the need to manage timelines, budget limits and data quality standards come up against managing

levels of staff stress? What if the requirements of maintaining a relationship with one set of actors (final users needing deliverables on time) clashes with the requirements of maintaining relationship with other sets of actors (internal or partner organisational sustainability)? There are no easy answers, as with any trade-off, but it is about negotiating these relationship challenges openly and with awareness of all the implications for everyone involved.

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