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**The unsung heroes of welfare collaboration: the complexity of individuals' contribution to effective inter-agency working in LSCBs**

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**The unsung heroes of welfare collaboration: complexities around individuals' contribution to effective inter-agency working in LSCBs**

## **Abstract**

The article addresses an under-explored aspect of public partnerships: individuals' role in the effectiveness of collaborations such as the Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) in England and Wales. Building upon theoretical concepts around complex emergence, we conceptualise individuals as conveyors of complex negotiated individual, professional and organisational frames. Shifting focus away from organisations and towards inter-personal communication in partnerships is consistent with miscommunication being the widest recognised problem in collaborations. Qualitative data from policy documents, interviews, and participant and non-participant observation are used to show how individuals in the LSCB case study are essential to collaborative work as 'boundary spanners' or 'reluctant' partners.

**Key words: partnerships, welfare, children, individuals,**

## **Introduction**

Recent announcements around the privatisation of elements of the child protection infrastructure in England (Butler 2014, Parton 2014) is another proposed solution to concerns about the perceived vulnerabilities of public service provision in that area. The latest moves to make this realm of public policy more effective has entailed increased focus on the formulation of partnerships or alliances in the public sector to improve service delivery effectiveness.

The practice of partnership working is not an exclusive UK phenomenon, as similar drives occur in many other countries worldwide. These partnerships have been cloaked in various guises, from ‘forums’ to ‘networks’ (labels applied according to their degree of connectedness –see for example, Keast et al. 2007). Many of these partnerships have emerged from explicit strategies of partner agencies, recognising a range of shared interests. Others have been ‘mandated’ by government under a statutory duty requiring organisations to commit to the requirements of ‘shared programmes’, with the single focus on the service end-user.

Of the latter category is, in England and Wales, the policy area of children and young people (this is a non-devolved policy area in Wales, which is why we considered both nations). Here, the Children Act (2004) and the ‘safeguarding children’ reform (DfES 2004) introduced a formal partnership between the local agencies delivering policy outcomes for children and families. This reform announced more extensive, universal service provision for children, advocating a role for government organisations to tackle, not only critical cases of children at risk, but also safeguarding all children by targeting any potential ‘incubators’ of such critical cases. To this aim, Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) represented mandatory partnerships with the role of coordinating,

monitoring and challenging the commitment of local agencies to joint aims around safeguarding children (HM Government 2006). The role of the LSCB partnerships in questioning professional and organisational practices while emphasising the importance of integrated work, represents a significant challenge to their member organisations' normal working cultures and associated mind-sets.

Our case study is a LSCB in 'Brempton' (a pseudonym chosen to protect anonymity) a Metropolitan Borough in North West England, a fairly standard local authority with no particular problems and with no history of serious case reviews. However, the LSCBs are not generic partnerships. They are amongst the very first mandated public sector partnerships in the UK, therefore having the potential of revealing early contributions to a theory around drivers of mandated partnerships' effectiveness. Mandated partnerships are still rare in the UK and also beyond, which makes them rather interesting. Secondly, LSCBs' core members (see the Annex) are all welfare organisations, which presents us with the opportunity of studying interactions which may well be particular to welfare organisations, professions and the type of individuals motivated to follow these career paths.

This case study forms the basis for our arguments around welfare collaborations and allows us to address the problem of persistent service failure despite several government reforms directed at integrating services prior to 2004 but also, more recently in 2013-2014. Persistent miscommunication amongst partnership members (highlighted through infamous serious case reviews –see, for example, Laming 2003) is suggestive of a theoretical gap in our understanding of the key drivers of effectiveness in partnerships.

Previous theorising around this issue has not captured the role of individuals as communication vehicles and representatives for member organisations and professions. Indeed, partnership effectiveness was explained as relying on member organisations (Provan and Milward 1995, Benson 1975), member professions (Leathard 1994), as well as the ‘ties’ between partnership members (Provan and Milward 2001), but not on the individual partnership representatives. Our study therefore contributes to the slim (yet growing) body of literature suggesting the importance of individuals in successful collaborations (e.g. Huxham 2003, Meerkerk & Edelenbos 2014) and in complex governance issues (Koppenjan & Klijn 2004, Edelenbos et al. 2013).

### **Emergence and complexity in partnership working**

Government regulation of the LSCBs targets the member *organisations* (through policy aims, performance indicators, inspections, as well as making their collaboration statutory) and, in some cases, their *professions* (such as the move towards core skills and joint training in welfare professionals) but *individuals* seem to be left out and it is them that we have observed to make the real difference to the partnership work in ‘Brempton’. We therefore propose a theoretical framework which emphasizes individual partnership members as essential components of ‘complex wholes’ (see, for example, Buchanan, 1992; Dubrovsky, 2004) made of individuals, their professions and their organisations as three-dimensional ‘members’ of the LSCBs. To illustrate the assumptions underlying that framework, we first need to unravel issues around ‘emergence’ (of behaviour, of decisions, etc.), particularly in the context of partnership working.

The concept of emergence (Lewin 1999) is useful to our arguments in two regards. First, it allows us to conceptualise the nesting of *professional* and *organisational* characteristics into *individual* behaviour and ‘boundary spanning’ ability (Tushman and Scanlan 1981, Williams 2002) of network members. Secondly, it helps us visualise how adverse events arise from the usual day-to-day functioning of an organisation (or a partnership, in this case), facilitating the understanding of the relation between miscommunication and service failure.

‘Emergence’ was brought about by the rise of complexity and systems thinking, which also came to be applied to child protection (see Stevens and Cox 2008, Munro 2011). Serious case reviews in child protection during the past four decades reveal crises which occurred unexpectedly, in spite of concentrated efforts to avoid them. We could explain that through ‘emergence’: systems are made of components which influence each other; hence seemingly inexplicable behaviour has its precursors in the behaviour of related elements, making low probability events possible. Within this context, networks have emerged as a form of ‘inter-organisational innovations’ (Mandell and Steelman 2003) which have been adopted to help deal with this complexity – or ‘wickedness’ – of policy problems (Rittel and Weber 1973). Other uses of networks are seen in cost reduction attempts (Thompson et al. 1991) and in the achievement of ‘collaborative advantage’ (Huxham and Macdonald 1992), whereby agencies working in partnerships can achieve more than they can when working separately. There have also been discussions of they can improve service delivery in particular partnerships (e.g. of Youth Offending Teams -Burnett and Appleton 2004).

These formally configured ‘collaborations’ are not necessarily the only way to achieve collaborative advantage, the mere co-ordination of efforts between organisations is often seen as enough. Therefore, the degrees of partnership that exist in practice range from loose networking to closely-knit networks (Keast et al. 2004), or from ‘cooperation’ to ‘collaboration’ (Keast et al. 2007). At the lower end of the continuum spectrum, we find processes taking place around intermittent coordination, whereas at the higher end, we see a requirement for formalised commitment, trust and often the development of a cultural paradigm to embrace the development of joint goals and standards (ibid.). Our case study -‘Brempton LSCB’- comes close to the latter end of the continuum, although we may not always refer to it as strictly a ‘network’ or ‘collaboration’, but rather more generically as a ‘partnership’. This body of literature helps us conceptualise the introduction of the LSCBs as an indication that complexity in child protection has been recognised by policy makers, and can only be tackled by integrated efforts and resources not dissimilar from those of 'networks'. The theoretical framework, which we suggest to be describing accurately the dynamics of partnerships such as the 'Brempton' LSCB, was built upon our observation of the field.

### **A theoretical framework of partnership dynamics**

Complexity and emergence are important assumptions in this model, and manifest themselves both within and between the ‘complex wholes’ of partnership membership. The previous section dealt with the latter, whereas this section focuses on a theoretical account of the interactions within the ‘whole’, between individual characteristics,

professional values and organisational culture at the level of each and every partnership member.

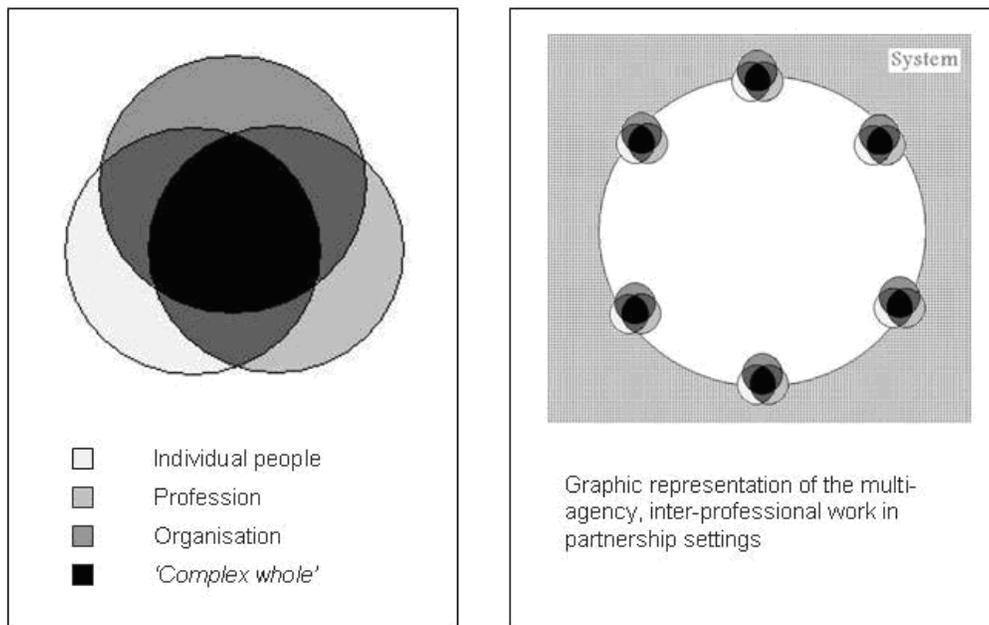
Network scholars have claimed that one of the critical issues in networks is the network itself, or more specifically, the network ties (Provan and Milward 2001, Hudson 2004, Benson 1975). However, within the ‘Brempton’ LSCB, we found that the network members themselves were important in determining the success of the network – the level of connectivity between organisational members was enhanced by the ‘identities’ of the individuals who developed such connections. These are the member organisations, the professions at the core of the organisations represented in the partnership, and the individuals who sit on the board and interact with each other.

These levels bring together the findings of previous studies that focused on one of these three analytical levels. Thus, organisational theorists typically looked at organisations within networks (e.g. Provan and Milward 1995, Benson 1975), researchers of the professions, at inter-professional endeavours (e.g. Leathard 1994), and leadership writers, at individual representatives as conveyors of messages to and from the partnership table (e.g. Hartley and Allison 2000). Our argument, however, is that the three ‘identities’ – individuals, professions and organisations- co-exist at the level of each partnership member.

We conceptualise the latter to be a ‘complex whole’ of individual, professional and organisational features (see diagram 1, figure 1) gravitating around a joint programme and acting as part of a wider system (see diagram 2, figure 1). The integration of the three different levels becomes ‘complex’ due to the fact that, while there are clear lines of behaviour within each of these dimensions (for example, individuals’ actions

being justified by personal backgrounds, professional opinions emerging from training and ethos, and organisational issues based on organisational mandates), the collective of the three, however, remains largely unknown. It is this ‘unknown’ which allows the ‘complex wholes’ to acquire emergent properties (Gribben, 2004; Smith, 2005; Smith & Toft, 2005), making the outcomes of joint work largely unpredictable. The unpredictability of the ‘result’ of the interaction is evidenced by multiple recent failings in children’s services (e.g. see for example DoH 1991, or the latest published serious case reviews on the NSPCC’s website), with different root causes identified, and miscommunication as the overarching one.

Figure 1: The ‘complex wholes’ of individuals, their professions and their organisations, interacting in welfare partnerships



Our ‘complex wholes’ are seen to be situated into the wider environment of government policy. Placed within the context of the soft-systems approach (Checkland,

1981; Checkland & Scholes, 1990) and the systems' failure model (Fortune & Peters, 1995), our research around the interaction of the LSCB members was seen as a sub-system of the wider system of 'Brempton' as a local authority, parent agencies of the LSCB members and national policy. Finally, the system is set in the environmental context which is determined by local socio-economic conditions (just under national average for 'Brempton' but with real implications when they are far under average) and framed by the implications of the national policy for the protection of children.

Where the professional and organisational cultures vary dramatically across the partnership members, the 'complex wholes' risk becoming antagonistic, which can impact negatively on collaboration. The wider system in which these interactions occur, however, can influence this either positively or negatively - that is, facilitating or delaying co-operation, thereby leading to a 'safer' provision of services to children or hindering it.

Furthermore, individual 'boundary spanners' in these collaborations have a role in counter-balancing the antagonism of the 'complex wholes'. Tushman and Scalan (1981) interpret this dissonance as representing the inevitable 'semantic spaces' between organisations (to which we also add the professional groups within them), thereby raising the need for 'semantic bridges' in collaborations. This role can be played by people with an ability to engage with others by coding and recoding information to make it accessible to those from different semantic fields. It is very significant that the literature on boundary spanning sees individuals as the solution to inter-organisational problems.

Boundary spanners ('horizontal' rather than 'vertical' –see Guarneros-Meza and Martin 2014) are inherently flexible information-processing agents (Williams 2002) who

'recode' closed semantics at the boundaries between cultures, be they organisational or professional, or indeed the composed culture of individual, professional and organisational 'wholes'. While similar in some ways to 'collaborative capacity builders' (who are 'given' boundary roles, rather than assuming them themselves in an emergent fashion –see Weber and Khademian 2008) and 'institutional entrepreneurs' (who seize the opportunity to create permanent structures rather than acting flexibly and autonomously across existing structures –see Maguire et al. 2004), boundary spanners are distinctively useful to collaborations because, due to their flexibility, lack of interest in permanent structures and self-organisation skills, they essentially embed the necessary qualities for emergent behaviour, attitudes and decision-making. The key argument to usefulness is that, if collaboration is reliant on communication (Weber and Khademian 2008), this, in turn, depends on inter-personal communication (Menzies Lyth 1989) which is essentially linked to the ability to bridge cultural understandings.

### **Research design**

Taking a case study approach to help understand how we might tackle the persistent problem of ineffective welfare partnerships in the policy area of children and families comes from the authors' preoccupation with the type of practice-relevant knowledge production described by Mode 2 theorists (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001), as case studies allow for a considerable degree of contextualisation. Solving a practice-based research problem can mean that the collection and analysis of data occurs cyclically and, to a large extent, intuitively (Tracy 2007) rather than following an original plan prior 'to entering the field' (see van Mannen, 1979; 1988).

The sources of evidence (Yin 1994) used in our case study of the ‘Brempton’ LSCB were documentary research, participant and non-participant observation, interviews and questionnaires.

The review of the official documents (legislation, policy documents, strategy documents issued at ‘Brempton’, as well as internal documents—namely strategy documents, proposals, meetings’ minutes, memos) was conducted throughout the three years of relevant research. Their analysis framed the context of the study. The participant and non-participant observation components of the research took place at the LSCB regular meetings (held every two months, of which thirteen were observed), and at Development and Away Days (held on three occasions during the study period).

Interviews were initially exploratory in nature conducted with key respondents appointed by the organisation to take a lead in ‘sponsoring’ our research. Then, subsequent interviews became more structured, although the respondents were free to expand as required. The interviewees (27) were representatives of most LSCB member organisations (see a full list of the members in the Annex): the police, social care, education, schools, health authorities, and the youth offending teams (YOTs—essentially a very cohesive partnership in itself, acting as one organisation), as well as senior managers of the Children’s Services and the Lead Member for Children and Young People in the borough. They also came from all tiers of hierarchy (from top management / policy level, tier 1, to practitioner level, tier 5), reflecting the level which parent organisations regarded as most relevant for their representation to the LSCB. They were approached at the end of LSCB meetings and were interviewed in approximately one-hour long, face-to-face individual sessions. As many of them explicitly requested not to

be recorded, data analysis was undertaken on the basis of notes taken during the interview and analysed as soon as possible after each meeting.

Finally, the questionnaires used within the study were mainly open-ended (except for those regarding demographic data, such as hierarchical position), aimed at eliciting the views of a larger number of practitioners than that which could be captured via interviews. The questionnaires were distributed during a development day and nine were returned. The rationale for including this particular method in a qualitative research design comes from the arguments around 'information representativeness' (Johnson 1990, Dewalt & Dewalt 2002), whereby even in qualitative research, attention ought to be paid to whether the respondents are not representative of their 'type' and therefore present a biased view. As the observational aspect of the study was part-guided by the sponsors of the research (those who offered access to the data), we were mindful of the danger that we would not be able to interview everyone in the LSCB and wanted to offer everyone the chance to express their views on the core research issues.

The questions in both the interviews and the questionnaires followed the same structure: personal information, including professional background and personal commitment to the safeguarding children agenda, organisational information including organisational hierarchy level, length of experience, performance indicators and cultural features and, finally, network-related questions regarding time spent doing inter-agency and inter-professional work, perception of work (in)compatibility with other professionals/organisations, as well as of existing barriers and incentives to collaboration.

The empirical data was analysed immediately after collection through a method labelled by Tesch (1990) as ethnographic content analysis. This is a type of content

analysis involving a high degree of interpretation of the textual units of analysis in accordance with the organisational culture that the ethnographer(s) perceived during their fieldwork. It relies on coding and on categorizing, just like content analysis, but the categories for coding words and phrases are not fixed; rather, they are allowed to emerge (Altheide 1987) throughout the study. The questionnaire data was analysed non-probabilistically and based on the coding that emerged from the interviews and observations. The analysis of the secondary data (both internal to the case, e.g. meeting minutes, and external, e.g. Children's Act, Every Child Matters policy documents) supported the understanding of the case study, rather than contributing to the development of theoretical codes.

### **Findings: barriers and catalysts to collaboration**

Our analysis of the data revealed ten pairs of obstacles and catalysts to collaboration (Table 1), clustered around three analytical lenses emerged from observation - individual, professional and organisational. The observation itself was of individual representatives of the member professions and organisations. Professional and organisational issues we saw as either hindering or encouraging collaboration emerged from the individuals' interaction, then triangulated with interview and questionnaire data.

If successful partnership working is primarily reliant on communication (as suggested, amongst others, by Tushman and Scanlan, 1981), it follows that the role of individuals as key vehicles of communication can be an essential determinant of partnership success. This has, indeed, been our observation at Brompton.

One barrier to collaboration has been reported to be the lack of stability in representation to the board (row 1 of the table). Some organisations sent different representatives to ‘Brempton’ LSCB, which was perceived by partners to be very disruptive. Especially where good working relations were established, we witnessed a degree of anxiety amongst the partners when these ‘good’ collaborators were replaced. This was explained by interviewees in terms of a socialisation curve on which the newcomer had to engage with before getting to collaborate –i.e. before internalising others’ organisational and professional priorities alongside their own. Interviewees were asked about the perceived benefit of this practice of membership rotation to the outcomes of the partnership. The majority did not see any benefit at all, and thought it hindered continuity (of commitment and of communication). An example of how effective work was halted by a change in representation occurred when a resourceful police representative was replaced by a colleague who displayed a more rigid and far less cooperative attitude. LSCB members commented on this as of a return to ‘business as usual’ implying that the previous police representative was a one-off in terms of collegiality and therefore conflating individual, professional and organisational characteristics of the police representatives.

Then, among the individuals who appeared to make a difference to partnership working was the chair (row 2 of the table), who mediates the interaction and promotes boundary-spanning behaviour. The importance of this role came to light in one of the away days that were observed. On that occasion, board members challenged the aims of their work and in so doing they acknowledged that the conceptual boundaries they held came largely from the definitions advanced by the first chair of the LSCB, rather than

from members' consensus. That particular chair was perceived as a strong leader who gave the partnership a firm direction. Subsequent interviews revealed appreciation of that initial strength of direction (seen as useful in keeping the group anchored to the joint mission) and which also allowed some difficult decisions to be made. Others however challenged it, speaking of a 'strong hand' perceived to obstruct collective decision-making and free discussions, ultimately impeding the LSCB's capacity to 'challenge' the work undertaken by each agency, as their role is prescribed in Children Act (2004). It was not clear, from the evidence collected, whether the balance between the two opposite views was shifting towards a particular perspective. What was clear, however, was that the chair had an important influence on the dynamics of the group, in the sense that they could: a) determine participation in the LSCB (by inviting non-statutory partners to join the LSCB); b) alter the dynamics between the partners particularly if the chair is not independent but from one of the member organisations themselves (this is increasingly not the case in LSCBs more widely, but it was the first LSCB chair observed at 'Brempton'); c) create factions if dominant/leading (such as the first chair of our LSCB) and encourage free communication if weak/following (such as the second chair); d) be more dominant if coming from a member organisation / profession than if they are independent. Furthermore, we observed two external influences of the chairs themselves: timing (a stronger leadership style may be more appropriate at the start of the partnership, according to supporters of Brempton's LSCB first chair), and the indirect influence of the partnership manager who would brief the chair as part of their role.

Table 1: Obstacles and catalysts of collaboration in ‘Brempton’ LSCB

No.	Obstacles to collaboration	Catalysts to collaboration	Analytic lenses (at which obstacles were observed / reported)
1	Discontinued membership to the partnership board	Continuing membership to the partnership board	Individual
2	Firm directions about the remits of the partnership’s work	Encouragement of free debates	Individual
3	Lack of personal involvement with the aims of the collaboration	Taking a personal stake in the partnership’s mission	Individual
4	High adherence to strong professional ethos	Late (or lack of) training in specialised professions	Individual / Profession
5	Professional silos	Inter-professional / inter-disciplinary training Experience working closely with other professions Use of cross-cultural professions (such as YOT officers) as buffer between professions	Profession
6	Rigid organisational culture, long developed around one or a couple strong professional groups	Use of ‘buffer’ organisations (such as the YOTs)	Organisation / Profession

- |   |   |  |              |
|---|---|--|--------------|
| 7 | Rigid structural features of human services organisations (e.g. KPIs, procedures)   | Joint inspection and evaluation regimes (e.g. JAR)   | Organisation |
|   |   | Organisations' representatives' personal commitment to find creative solutions across organisational boundaries. This can be bolstered via familiarity with the partners, both the individuals and the organisations they represent (in away days, shadowing sessions, common training). |              |
| 8 | Hierarchy (including its effect on mixed representation to LSCB, derived from different hierarchical levels of the 'parent' agencies) | Representation to the partnership board from middle management levels of organisations   | Organisation |

The third aspect coming out of the research as being potentially important to collaborative work is individuals taking a personal stake in the partnership's aims (see row 3). The context of inter-agency working allowed some individuals the opportunity to act more dynamically than they could within the (constraining) context of either their 'parent' organisations or their professional bodies. This dynamism can be illustrated with the 'boundary-spanning' activities of some representatives who were active in finding 'solutions' to inevitable problems of incompatibility between organisational mandates. In doing so, some individuals considerably exceeded their organisational mandates by taking personal stake in the partnership's mission (row 1 of table 1). This was in sharp contrast with others who fulfilled their organisational mandates reluctantly. For example, over the three years of our research, three police delegates were observed in 'Brempton' LSCB, and each one contributed differently to the collective LSCB work. One of the three took an informal leadership role in various issues raised by the board and offered to help various partners even when not explicitly asked to do so. The two other representatives, however, seemed to be overly-concerned about sharing too much information with other LSCB partners and openly worried about data protection whenever information was to be shared, and organisational mandate (e.g. manifested by needing to check with their line manager), whenever their input was required. It must be noted that all three representatives had the same hierarchical status within their parent organisations (middle management) and came from the same department, hence their different approaches cannot be accounted for by hierarchy, nor by organisational/professional culture. However, our data offers some possible explanations for their differential contributions to collaborative work.

When we attempted to determine what it was that made successful ‘boundary-spanners’ in partnerships, the length of professional training (row 4/column 2 of the table) emerged from the questionnaires and from the interviews (by linking the item relating to *professional background* with the observation around ‘boundary spanning’ during the meetings). For example, the police representative who proved so resourceful in finding ways to commit their organisation to the partnership goals came to the police service late in life and benefited from a fast-track career progression. The view was that not having a long socialisation into the police culture allowed prioritisation of personal rather than professionally-induced beliefs around aspects of their work. Whether this would have been tolerated within more routine police work is debatable, but what was observed was that, outside their own organisational environment, they appeared to be innovative rather than rule bound. Reportedly, they were able to manifest an affinity with the values of welfare at the expense of the foci on crime prevention and detection that prevailed within police culture.

Out of the four professionals witnessed as displaying ‘boundary spanner’ qualities, two were trained late in their profession (police and social work, respectively) and two (voluntary sector representative and the ‘partnership manager’) had no professional training as such (but rather, a generalist one, such as ‘political science’). It appears, therefore, that an individual’s professional background may determine ‘boundary spanning’ abilities in partnerships such as the LSCBs. The correlate of that is that strong professional ethos is then likely to place limits on the extent of freedom that individuals feel in exercising their own will and judgement in inter-professional exchanges. This was observed in relation to people from professions and organisations

labelled as ‘reluctant partners’ by their LSCB colleagues. We detected no relationship between the level of hierarchy of an individual and his or her ability to span boundaries in partnership.

Whilst the role of the individuals in partnerships represents the core of our findings, we have found this to be closely linked with professional ethos and with organisational culture. Of the former category, the questionnaires revealed the following ‘barriers’ to collaboration: working in professional silos; defensiveness; territoriality; lack of understanding of the others’ work; ‘confidentiality’ rules (especially in the case of the health professionals, police and, to some extent, social workers), and mistrust. Working in professional silos (row 5 of the table) was seen by most of our respondents at ‘Brempton’ as unhelpful to inter-professional work. These professional silos meant a reluctance to engage with others, particularly where there was a significant difference in occupational ethos between the groups. This brings about the issue of defensiveness and territoriality which was observed through an unwillingness to understand viewpoints of other professional groups. Where persistent, this bred mistrust and, when that occurred, people took stalling actions to prevent collaboration. One such tactic at ‘Brempton’ involved the use of the ‘confidentiality’ argument to prevent information-sharing (for health professionals) and that of ‘data protection’ for police representatives. These arguments emerged at the board as objections to sharing information to other professionals in the board (e.g. release of a convicted offender back into the community for social work to take preventative steps). One solution to this range of problems suggested by questionnaire respondents was seen to be a greater investment in multi-

agency training and more time involved in activities requiring collaboration with other professions.

The analysis of the interview data revealed that barriers are part consequences of the inherent values that were promoted by their professions. Our analysis has clustered these around issues of:

- welfare vs. punishment -differentiating social work from police work for instance, but bringing together probation and police officers
- professionalism vs. amateurism –differentiating, for example, third sector workers from most other professionals in the sense that the former are not ‘professional’
- gender bias -most evident in the divide between police officers and social workers, but present elsewhere too
- common ‘enemies’ - evident in the case of most professionals ‘against’ the police

Professionals expressed views of compatibility and incompatibility with others on the basis of similarity or difference around these themes. YOT professionals were found to be the most compatible with most and were not listed by any as incompatible with them.

Row 6 in the table refers to the organisational culture. Although the questions about organisational culture were different from those about professional ethos, respondents often did not see any difference between the two (for example between the professional culture of teaching and organisational culture in schools), which is an indication that the two are significantly intertwined. For human services organisations, which tend to be dominated and defined by one professional group or a couple of professional groups, and which, in the LSCB, are represented by professionals belonging

to precisely these dominant professions, this is very natural. Hence, the sources of tension or compatibility between professional groups were reported to be the same for organisations, and affinities between professionals to translate into institutional affinity (e.g. police and probation officers work as well together as the police and the probation services).

Going beyond culture to more structural aspects of organisational life (row 7 in the table), barriers to effective cooperation have been described by questionnaire respondents and confirmed by many of the interviewees to be: conflicting key performance indicators (KPIs); defensiveness; lack of a shared database in place; high volume of work corroborated with limited available resources; fear of commitment and of taking responsibility. The conflicting KPIs are a result of the traditional ‘silo’ working and can be corrected by means of a more effective cooperation of central and local government agencies. An example of a measure taken to foster such cooperation is the introduction of Joint Area Reviews (JARs) of local Children’s Services (Children’s Act 2004). This is a control mechanism evaluating the outcome of joint work rather than the performance of individual agencies towards achievement of their different organisational goals (a full discussion of these control systems has been published elsewhere –First Author, 2012). Yet our observation also revealed an alternative (or a complement) to this organisational approach: boundary-spanning by the representatives of the partnership’s member agencies. Indeed, what we observed in the course of our research was that some representatives (the ones identified as ‘boundary spanners’ earlier in the paper) were keen to address the incompatibilities between their organisations and had identified ad-hoc solutions stemming from informal relations they have established with board members

and enacted outside the board meetings. This, in turn, emerged from their commitment to the partnership's aims.

A third antidote to the rigid structural features of LSCB member organisations was reported to be familiarity with each other's cultural through away days, common training and shadowing initiatives. Shadowing was also believed to decrease organisational defensiveness coming with multi-agency work. This familiarity with other people's work, together with a better coordination of legislation acts, come to complement the imminent setup of a shared electronic database where organisations get to input into joint cases (as stipulated by Children's Act 2004), to create a holistic evaluation of multi-faceted interventions.

Finally, hierarchy in the parent organisation was observed to be relevant to collaboration in 'Brempton' LSCB. Members who were at lower hierarchy levels in their own organisations (typical for health professionals) tended to be overpowered by those from top management levels (typically children's and adults' social services). Individuals' degree of expertise was reported to be correlated with their status in their organisations, explaining how the management levels they were at, the more deferent those from tiers 4 and 5 felt towards them, and the less likely the latter were to engage in discussions at the board. When asked to reflect on this, some respondents made reference to a policy act (HM Government 2006) stipulating that representation is best sought from middle management levels of the organisations, to ensure balance in the debates but also to facilitate dissemination of information to and from the board.

The uneven hierarchy, like all other barriers to collaboration identified in Table 1, was seen as a an obstacle not in itself, but in relation to how it manifested in inter-

personal interaction: front-line practitioners' deference to partnership members who came from top and upper middle management layers of their parent organisations. Indeed, 'professional silos', organisational rigidity including their control systems, policies and procedures, are not in themselves blocking collaboration. They only do so because they have an impact on people who have spent years being socialised into their professions (Goode 1957) and their organisations (Menzie Lyth 1989) while also embedding influences of their personality (Tupes and Christal 1961) alongside their upbringing (Anker 1998). The central role of individuals in welfare partnerships of the LSCBs' type will be discussed in full in the next section.

## **Discussion**

Our principal interest in this inquiry was to enhance understanding of how the effectiveness of partnerships and collaborations might be improved. In the light of our exploratory study of the 'Brempton' LSCB, we suggest that effectiveness can be enhanced by empowering individuals to act as boundary-spanners across restraining and often mutually antagonistic organisational and professional structures. Key to our findings is the fact that professional and organisational structures are embedded in the individuals' ability to communicate and engage with the collaborative aims. They would do that by bridging communication boundaries (Tushman and Scanlan 1981) imposed on them by personal backgrounds and motivation, as much as by the professional and organisational structures in which they have been socialised. Hence our findings suggest that policy addressing only the organisational or the professional aspect of collaborations

does not go far enough towards achieving a real collaborative mind set, thought to be a pre-requisite to effective partnerships.

As far as theory goes, boundary-spanners have the ability to go beyond the mind-set and behaviour which have been prescribed for them by their professions and organisations through socialisation and control processes (e.g. Goode 1957, Menzies Lyth 1989). In our study, we witnessed four such boundary-spanners acting outside such constraints and in doing so, they moved collaborative work forward, for example by having problem-solving ideas, taking charge of problems, or simply not hindering work previously stalled by other representatives of their organisations. A good example of that is the police representative showing boundary-spanning behaviour in the 'Brempton' LSCB. Before their arrival to the board, the police had gained a bad reputation for collaboration, being seen by partners as 'rigid', 'patriarchal', 'regimented', 'hierarchical', 'opaque', 'mistrusted', and nurturing a 'fear' and a 'blame' culture. So partners were surprised when an issue facing resistance from previous police representatives was met with none whatsoever by this new representative who, by the end of the meeting, also took charge of a sub-committee to carry out work which had been previously obstructed by poor relations between partners. That day, the individual negotiated their organizational mandate and professional ethos in ways which showed them bridging 'semantic spaces' as conceptualized by Tushman and Scalan (1981) and moving away from the antagonism previously created by their previous police colleagues in line with perceptions of their profession's and organisation's cultures. This, in practice, is how an individual embeds the latter and enacts them in partnership with others.

The individuals who are more than themselves and entail the structures which have made them partners in the collaboration turn into ‘complex whole’ interacting with other ‘complex wholes’ and displaying emergent properties both between the layers of the whole and among the ‘wholes’. They do so within the sub-system of the partnership sitting against the gradually wider systems of the borough, wider partnerships to which they might be subordinate, parent agencies, local and national policy. It would be naïve to assume that what happens in such systems does not affect the LSCBs and that if they do, it is entirely controllable which of their elements and how. The policy area of children and young people offers numerous examples of serious case reviews illustrating how failure occurs out of normality –it is not human error taking the blame (much as this is a tempting avenue to take), but system error, vulnerability being built gradually (as suggested, among others, by Smith 2000) and revealed unexpectedly, bringing weight to our application of the emergency theory in claiming that the solution comes from flexible human agency, rather than revised structures: reform enhancing people’s ability to act as boundary-spanners rather than institutional capacity to deal with uncertainty in child protection. The case study of ‘Brempton’ LSCB has provided some insights into the centrality of individuals in partnership working, and their ‘usefulness’ in surpassing barriers emerging from organisational and professional structures.

Fundamentally, it is not professions or organisations collaborating, but people, just as communication relies on inter-personal communication (Menzies Lyth 1989) as interface. This is an interface between complex wholes comprising all these three levels of interaction, as described in our theoretical framework. It follows then that the one most significant element of partnership work is that of individuals. Notwithstanding

contributions to organisational aspects of partnership work (such as agreement with Klijn 2008, that partnerships challenge conventional public accountability arrangements and that in meeting such challenge there should be an alignment of performance indicators and work procedures to allow organisations to show comparable commitment to the joint partnership goals), the core our findings is the role of individuals in partnerships.

We saw boundary spanning individuals to be the key to taking collaborative agendas forward. However, we observed this capacity role being hindered by a number of issues including high adherence to strong professional ethos and organisational mandate, discontinued membership to the partnership board, and firm directions offered by the LSCB chair on the remits of the partnership's work. These issues were, however, mitigated by boundary-spanning initiatives linked to individual cases of taking a personal stake in the joint mission of the LSCB (partly due to lacking long periods of socialisation into their professions), to the continuous presence of some individuals in the board and, finally, to debate stirring techniques adopted by some LSCB chairs in getting the group anchored to common definitions for problems. A particular catalyst here is empowering public servants to make a difference through their work. This has been a theme of debate amongst leadership scholars (Elcock 2000, Newman 2005) and the challenges that exist in encouraging leadership behaviour in the public sector are widely recognised (see Klijn 2005, Dudau 2009). Nevertheless, policy developments in the area of children and families in England (e.g. Munro 2011) show strong support for emphasis on personal leadership in the public sector as they promote the trust in professionals, which decreases the need to control their work closely. What the Munro report suggests is that, in an era marked by unprecedented uncertainty in policy-making, there is a need for professionals

to be effective decision-makers rather than effective administrators, to tackle social problems through educated common-sense rather than through ‘tick-in-the box’ procedures which are centrally designed and may not be applicable to local circumstances.

In advancing our arguments about the need to focus policy on individual welfare professionals, we challenge Hallett and Birchall’s (1992) contention that individuals are an unreliable element of collaboration. We do that by identifying some predictable parameters (that is, potential determinants) of boundary spanning (see rows 2, 3 and 4 of the table), as well as identifying a practice which could neutralise the positive effects of individuals’ collaborative behaviour (see row 1 of the table). Our findings bring some weight to Osborne’s (1998) arguments that individual traits must be considered within a context as well as to Meijer’s (2014) assertions that individuals’ influence in partnerships is a collective one. But we extend their arguments by illustrating that individuals embed the other membership levels (of professions and of organisations). We also argue that serious cases in child protection (from our case study) may be avoided by counteracting the emergence of damaging factors (barriers) for the interjected connectivity which, if we are to consider the research of Edelenbos and colleagues (Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2013, Edelenbos et al. 2013), can explain failure in collaborative performance. Suggestions of ways to do so can be found amongst the catalysis identified for each ‘barrier’ in Table 1.

## **Conclusion**

Theoretically, our study contributes to an enhanced understanding of partnership dynamics seen from the standpoint of complex emergence and, specifically, to improving the effectiveness of welfare partnerships such as the LSCBs (where members are professionals representing strong and long-standing organisations). Our findings come close to Currie and colleagues' (2008) study of networks in healthcare. Their findings that inter-professional and inter-organisational relations are interwoven within healthcare settings are complemented by our observation that individuals' boundary-spanning abilities are instrumental to welfare partnerships' effectiveness. Both our study and Currie's (2008) respond to a call for research to integrate institutional, organisational and individual levels of analysis of inter-organizational relations (Marchington et al. 2005).

By way of contribution to practice, the catalysts and barriers to collaboration identified (Table 1) can be developed into a tool of self-evaluation of partnerships' work dynamics, as a barometer of the effectiveness of partnership working. Moreover, some of the issues which we found to be potential determinants of collaborative behaviour can be used directly by organisations (for example, the use of buffer agencies -or professions- or that of inter-disciplinary training).

Weaknesses of the study include the focus on understanding a 'real life' rather than a purely research problem: persistent failure of child protection partnerships, which determined the ethnographic-style research methodology through analysis of a single case study. The fact that the problem was recurring was an indication that understanding of how welfare organisations and welfare professionals work together was incomplete. This called for a 'privileged perspective' (e.g. Huby et al. 2011) through an immersion into a

single case study of a generic type of child protection partnerships (such as the 'Brempton' LSCB) to really observe and unravel variables so far overlooked or underestimated by previous research. This comes with particular challenges in gathering and analysing data from multiple sources and then reporting it back to an audience. Most significantly, the findings of such inquiry cannot be readily generalised to all partnerships, or even to all public sector partnerships, but may be generalizable to all cases of the studied 'type' –LSCBs and, perhaps welfare mandated public partnerships. The second weakness stemming from the adoption of Mode 2 research is that it produced a model which could be perceived as over-simplified. Particularly, the complex wholes are very unlikely to entail equal measures of individual, professional and organisational features for all members. Systematic data is needed to make the model more accurate by gathering comparable evidence about all partnership members rather than just the ones open to observation.

Other avenues for future research include testing our determinants (catalysts) of effective work in welfare collaborations in other policy contexts to check the limits of their generalizability or of 'general applicability'. A comparison between partnerships in various sectors and industries would provide invaluable insights into sector-specific strategies for strengthening collaborative practices. In what concerns our core contribution, that of emphasizing the role of individuals in partnerships, our observation about a possible link between boundary spanning and late training into a profession should be the focus of a study based on a large sample of similar partnerships in an explanatory, deductive fashion.

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## **Annex: LSCBs' role and membership**

The statutory membership of the LSCBs comes under the Children's Act 2004, Section 13(3) and is further elaborated by the Working Together Guidance (HM Government 2006), which lists the members under three membership tiers. The statutory duty to cooperate in with others in the LSCB is limited to the organisations in the first tier.

**Statutory members** District councils, Police, Local Probation Board, Youth Offending Team, Strategic Health Authorities and Primary Care Trusts, NHS Trusts and NHS Foundation Trusts, Connexions Service, CAF/CASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service), Secure Training Centres, Prisons, Adult social and health services

**Other members** NSPCC, local organisations (faith groups, schools, colleges, children's centres, GPs, independent healthcare organisations, voluntary and community sector organisations) the armed forces, the Immigration Service, the National Asylum Support Service.

**Involvement of other agencies and groups** E.g.: coronial service, dental health services, Domestic Violence Forums, drug and alcohol misuse services, Drug Action Teams, housing, culture and leisure services, housing providers, local authority legal services, local MAPPA, local sports bodies and services, local Family Justice Council, local Criminal Justice Board, other health providers such as pharmacists.