Reviewer's report

Title: How does community context influence coalitions in the formation stage? A multiple case study based on the Community Coalition Action Theory.

Version: 2 Date: 24 September 2009

Reviewer: Rebecca Wells

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I found this to be a well organized and well written examination of an issue of enduring interest. My major suggestions relate to anchoring this paper more explicitly in findings from previous empirical research and clarifying some of the methods of analysis and conclusions thereof. Below I outline some suggestions and reactions organized as requested by this journal into major, minor, and discretionary.

Major

Pg 4: I don’t find statements like “no consensus exists on how to label the stages” helpful, because such consensus is so rare its absence doesn’t warrant comment unless your study will overcome it. I have a similar lack of sympathy when I read that differences across previous studies make it “hard to synthesize findings across studies.” Instead, I want the authors to decide when phenomena that previous authors labeled differently really represented common factors – such as perhaps in this case what Reininger calls distrust and Wandersman et al. call tensions and divisions. Then I don’t want to know what previous researchers were looking for as much as what they found. These patterns can then inform a more directed examination of the study data. At this point it’s not clear to me how the authors picked the Community Coalition Action Theory, in relation to previous findings.

Pg. 9: It looks like the authors operationalized a theme as being supported when 2 authors could agree on something happening in at least 2 coalitions. I don’t see a way of further distinguishing among varying levels of thematic importance. If I’m right about that, perhaps the authors could just refer to “themes” instead of “major themes,” which I see as implying a contrast to minor themes for which there was some degree of, but lesser, evidence.

Pg. 18: Please see Yin’s book on case study research (any edition) for the distinction between theoretical and statistical generality. I think your findings can be generalized to other communities.

Minor

I see my 2004 paper on community coalition evolution – cited elsewhere in the manuscript – as relevant to the statement on page 3 that “community context, including history of collaboration, geography, demographics, and local norms and values, influence coalition functioning and outcomes at each stage of coalition
development. This proposition is strongly supported in the wisdom literature, and to a lesser extent empirically [11,12]."

Pg. 6: During which years did the data collection occur?

Pg. 7: How did the authors pick the 9 primary evaluation sites, and how representative were the final 8 of the full 20? 1 focus group did not work out, right? Because 3 (years) x 8 (coalitions) would = 24.

I see the resistance of “old timers” cited on page 13 as a finding in a “couple” of coalitions. On pg. 18 the authors report that historical tensions were reported in “a couple” of sites, but “it did not emerge as a major cross-site them in our study.”

Discretionary
In the background section of the abstract, I think it would be a bit clearer to say that the community context domains ‘are’ rather than ‘include.’

The stages outlined on page 4 seem more ideal than necessarily reflective of actual practice. My experience is that coalitions are often comprised largely of agency representatives.

The data preparation and analysis processes seem reasonable to me. A part of me wishes the authors had allowed for emergent themes that had not been in the Community Coalition Action Theory, but the categories they used were broad enough to allow for some flexibility in findings.

Pg. 16: I found the influence of previous collaboration very interesting, and believe it raises the question of how new these coalitions really are. My impression is that often a group of community leaders start to work together. Then in part because of the funding mythology that public goods will become self-sustaining in the X years of any given grant, the coalition leaders reinvent themselves to become whatever the next funder wants them to be. This would raise the question of whether or not these coalitions really were in the formation stage, or perhaps instead represented more enduring collective actors within their communities.

On pg 18: Constructs don’t affect anything; they are just the way we conceptualize what does.

I enjoyed reading this manuscript, and hope the authors find these comments useful.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable
**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.