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COMMUNITY-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING IN COLLECTIVE IMPACT GROUPS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Greg and Darlene, who are distinctly but equally my lifelong pillars

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study focused on better understanding the experience of participating in community-driven decision-making within collective impact groups. Through interviewing both collective impact facilitators (n=12) and collective impact group members (n=6), experiences related to both barriers and supportive elements arose. These experiences were coded into themes which ranged from external pressures and meeting logistics to interpersonal interactions, power dynamics, and self-awareness. Findings demonstrate that on average, these stakeholders experience effective community-driven decision-making occurring roughly 50% of the time within collective impact groups. Further, the way people define community-driven decision-making varies, especially during times where the group does not naturally agree on a course of action. This data helped highlight the need to create applied definitions of equity and community, to support psychological safety for group participants and facilitators, and to recognize alignment between barriers to community-driven decision-making and threats to psychological safety. Overall, this information can be used to guide future research related to creating mechanisms to measure the effectiveness of community-driven decision-making across different types of decisions and different types of groups. Also, it can help elevate ways group members can hold one another accountable to ensure equity and inclusivity is built into both group processes and outcomes related to decision-making.

Key Words: Collective Impact; Collaborative Action; Community-Driven Decision-Making; Equitable Group Decision-Making

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background

This dissertation examines mechanisms that impact equitable, community-driven decision-making within collective impact spaces. Collective impact groups are defined as, "a network of community members, organizations, and institutions who advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems level change" (Collective Impact Forum, n.d., para. 1). The project idea developed based on the researcher's own experiences as a collective impact facilitator, where she saw first hand the complexity of tasking groups with making community-driven decisions. More specifically, there was interest in learning how to better support groups with overcoming power dynamics that can negatively impact decision-making within collective impact groups.

Through the graciousness of OU faculty and students, along with ImpactTulsa colleagues and StriveTogether partners, the researcher delved into conversations that helped guide what specific topics would not only fill a gap in the literature, but also potentially provide technical and adaptive utility for collective impact practitioners. Collective impact groups are encouraged to orient towards equity-based outcomes (Kania et al., 2022), and focusing on this particular topic provides opportunity to gain clarity on how to bolster equity and inclusion into the decision-making process.

The overall aim of the dissertation is to elevate observations and experiences of collective impact facilitators and group members to better equip collective impact groups to engage in consistent, equitable decision-making. Questions and concerns about effectively supporting community-driven decision-making arose for the researcher related to her own identity as a white, female, group facilitator and wanting to better understand how identities of stakeholders

(i.e., collective impact facilitators and group members) may affect the decision-making process. Those same curiosities arose in thinking through how the researcher's identity may impact both the development, implementation and analysis of the data. Thus, in an effort to minimize researcher assumptions and bias, infusion of community power was integrated into the design and analysis of the research. This started with validating that the idea would be valuable to other collective impact facilitators before finalizing the dissertation topic. It also shaped the research design in regard to how data was shared back with participants throughout the process. Overall, this study was designed and analyzed utilizing elements of a transformative framework in which collaboration with research participants was embedded throughout the process, and there is a call to action to further integrate equity into collective impact decision-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Social Context

The world continues to grapple with increasingly complex and time-sensitive social challenges in education, healthcare, politics, climate change, and economics (Beech et al., 2021; Destin et al., 2019; Glick & Christiansen, 2019; Zieff et al., 2020). With the recognition that these types of systemic issues cannot be resolved through single entities, cross-sector collaboration has become a more widely recognized and utilized approach to engage in social change (Virtanen et al., 2021; Gillam et al., 2016; Gomez et al., 2021). As the seriousness of remedying social issues becomes entangled in time sensitive contexts, urgency to transform conditions and effectiveness in doing so become social priorities. The longer communities take to understand how best to undo systemic oppression, the longer people suffer. Often the most marginalized communities experience the greatest disparities (Irwin & Scali, 2007; EPA, 2021). Cross-sector collaboration is recognized as a systems-level approach that includes key

stakeholders from a wide array of sectors who collectively share expertise and resources to identify solutions to complex societal problems (Becker & Smith, 2018). Thus, cross-sector collaboration can be a vital approach to override existing disparities.

Research Objective

Collective impact was introduced as a cross-sector collaboration framework in 2011 (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Since then, both scholars and practitioners have worked to evolve the model to be anchored in equity and community power (Ennis & Tofa, 2020). Shared decision-making has been elevated as a key component to placing equity and community power in action. Further, collective impact experts highlight shared decision-making as a key tool to disrupt power dynamics within collective impact groups that may otherwise impede the group's ability to make decisions that will benefit those directly impacted by the issue (StriveTogether, 2021). Gillam et al. (2016) specifically highlight the importance of collective impact group members all contributing to decision-making via a "fair and open process" as being a vital component to successful collaboration. While the importance of shared decision-making is highlighted across a number of reports, there remains a lack of research about the facilitators' and group members' experiences with shared decision-making within collective impact groups.

Protocols exist for engaging groups in shared decision-making processes such as using a majority vote format or a consensus-based approach. However, research has demonstrated potential equity issues that arise with use of majority rule, as it may limit the ability of the "minority" opinion to influence the group's work (Risse, 2009). Furthermore, consensus based approaches have also shown to have issues with taking too long as well as having concerns with internal group power dynamics impacting decision-making (Leach, 2016). Thus, there continues to be a lack of research about specific protocols and practices that effectively disrupt the wide

variety of power dynamics that can co-exist in collective impact groups. The aim of this hermeneutic phenomenological research is to facilitate a better understanding around the experience of engaging in community-driven decision-making within collective impact spaces. More specifically, it aims to elevate challenges and helpful tools that impact the experience from both the perspective of facilitators and group members.

Dissertation Structure

The remainder of the dissertation is structured to align with the logical sequence of the research project. Chapter Two is a literature review that synthesizes the available research and insights related to collective impact and decision-making within groups. Chapter Three goes on to provide detailed information related to the methods for both parts of the research. Part One of the research focuses on gathering perspectives from collective impact facilitators, while Part Two focuses on gathering perspectives from collective impact group members. Next, Chapter Four provides details about the results that came from analyzing the research. Finally, Chapter Five concludes with interpreting the results from the research, as well as detailing limitations and ideas for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This section reviews the development of collective impact as a framework, including criticisms that sparked evolution to key components of the framework. It also details how the framework has been applied and what is currently known about the impact of this framework. Furthermore, the structure of collective impact groups is described along with existing literature related to shared decision-making in group settings. Finally, this section showcases gaps in the literature that help reinforce the need for research related to the community-driven decision-making process.

Cross Sector Collaborative Approaches to Address Systemic Disparities

In the United States, there continues to be documented social inequities that intersect to create deeply problematic disparities. For example, economic inequality continues to widen (Horowitz et al., 2020), there's been an increase in gaps between the highest and the lowest achieving students (NCEE, 2020), there is evidence of ongoing structural racism within the healthcare system (Yearby et al., 2022), and food insecurity continuing to disproportionately impact people living in lower socio-economic conditions (Mozaffarian, 2021). At the same time, other factors such as political tensions, climate change, and new advances in technology further complicate conditions in ways that exacerbate inequalities (Siripurapui, 2022).

One approach to addressing systemic problems is cross-sector collaboration. Cross-sector collaboration essentially refers to individuals and organizations from the non-profit, for-profit, government, and philanthropic sectors using their collective resources, power, and knowledge to address complex societal problems (Becker & Smith, 2018). The premise for cross-sector collaborative approaches focuses on the belief that single organizations or actors are limited in

their ability to impact system-level change (Kania & Kramer, 2011). This type of collaboration creates opportunities to fuse diverse perspectives that can ultimately support creation of novel and effective solutions to very complex problems (Leonard & Swap, 1999). Thus, bringing together cross-sector partners creates opportunities to combine perspectives, resources, and experiences that enhance the possibility of tackling problems systemically and in ways that are both equitable and sustainable. This can be especially relevant when communities seek to address systemic disparities with intersecting components that often have no known technical solutions (Senge, Hamilton & Kania, 2015).

Key Components of Collective Impact

Collective impact began to evolve into an approach through the leadership of Saul Alinsky's work in the 1930's. He is recognized as the "Father of Modern Community Organizing," and his work shapes many of the collaborative frameworks that exist today (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). One of those frameworks is collective impact, which was first introduced in the literature in 2011 by John Kania and Mark Kramer in the Stanford Social Innovation Review (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Based on Kania and Kramer's original description, collective impact is having a common agenda to solve social problems at scale through cross-sector collaboration and appears to be an effective approach because of the emphasis on centralized infrastructure and having shared goals that are measured the same way (Kania & Kramer, 2011). Other descriptions note collective impact as being a place-based approach that utilizes cross-sector partnership to create population level change (Ennis & Tofa, 2020) and includes long term commitments from the participants (White et. al, 2019).

In a blogpost written by Kania and Kramer (FSG, 2016), they describe the precipitance for creating the collective impact framework developing through team discussion where Kania,

Kramer and their team identified fragmentation as being one of the biggest barriers to progress for social change. At the time, Kania and Kramer were both consultants for FSG, which is a global consulting firm that specifically focuses on helping clients tackle social change in ways that elevate equity (FSG, n.d.). Through work on an article that helped frame the importance of adaptive leadership in social change efforts, they began to see self-directed collaborative work across organizations as a potential lever for creating more effective social changes. This moved them to begin researching successful cross-sector collaboratives that spanned a wide range of topics and sectors. Kania and Kramer analyzed the methodology of those groups, identified key conditions of success and then tested those hypotheses with consulting firms that had an even greater range of experience with collaborative efforts. This formed the basis of the original framework (FSG, 2016) that included five specific conditions to guide the collective impact framework (Table 1).

Table 1

Original Five Key Elements of Collective Impact (Kania and Kramer, 2011)

Common Agenda	Shared Measurement	Mutually Reinforcing Activities	Continuous Communication	Backbone Support

Based on Kania and Kramer's (2011) descriptions, each of these components provide distinct yet connected functions. First, a common agenda serves to create agreement on the existence of the problem that will be addressed, agreement on the general approach to solving the problem (note this is different from the specific strategy, but rather agreement about using a collaborative approach to problem-solving), and agreement on primary goals for the group. Second, shared measurement systems build upon the common agenda by ensuring there is clarity

and alignment about how success will be monitored. This translates to identifying specific indicators, as well as reporting timelines that work across the group. Third, the focus on mutually reinforcing activities helps heighten the value of having diverse stakeholders work together to address an issue. There are differentiated activities based on each stakeholder's expertise, access to resources, and perspective that together serve as a strategy to address the common agenda. Fourth, continuous communication relates to both evolving levels of trust among the group members, as well as exchanges of information that are timely and inclusive. Last, the support of a backbone organization ensures there is a team focused on the group as a whole and can respond to needs and evolving conditions in a way that helps the group to maintain momentum and move the group forward. This organization also often serves to plan and facilitate meetings, support group communication, and provide data support for the collective impact group. Wolf (2016) notates the importance of the backbone ensuring they are not driving the goals or the agenda, but rather serving as a catalyst to support the group in identifying and meeting their goals. The intentional use of a backbone organization is one feature of collective impact that distinguishes it from other community organizing initiatives (Brooks, 2018; Easterling, 2013).

Overall, these components together create emphasis on collective impact being more than a convening of partners, but rather an intentional approach to support relationships among partners while they collaborate to address a shared goal (Edmondson, 2018). Scholars have observed that the collective impact framework is not entirely unique compared to other collaborative approaches. However, it pulls various existing components together while also refining and adding specific conditions that help set cross-sector teams up for success (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016). It is important to note that collective impact itself is not the solution to the

complex societal problems it aims to tackle; rather it is a mechanism of organizing teams to approach doing the work together (Preskill et al., 2014).

Since the framework was originally shared, it has continued to garner a great deal of interest. The original article by Kania and Kramer (2011) has been described as being the most downloaded article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review's history with over one million downloads as of 2022, along with 2400 academic citations (Kania et al., 2022). Proponents of the framework have shared that it is an asset to the social sector field because it provides shared language and guiding elements that can translate to being both disciplined and flexible (Brady & Juster, 2016). However, Kania and Kramer (2011) acknowledge that the framework is not the best fit for all problems, rather it is best suited for adaptive problems where solutions are not known and groups need to learn before taking action. It is also noteworthy to acknowledge that collective impact is also referenced by different names such as collaborative action but does utilize the same fundamental framework. Prange, Allen and Reiter-Palmon (2016) make sense of this connection through understanding collective impact as an instance of collaboration, rather than thinking of them as two completely distinct processes. The researcher uses this same lens to understand the connection between collective impact and collaborative action networks throughout this dissertation.

Evolution of Collective Impact

While collective impact is widely used, there are criticisms of the approach. One of those criticisms is related to lack of empirical evidence to show the effectiveness of the approach. As evidenced in the earliest available literature, many of the original articles explaining and exploring collective impact are available through online publications rather than academic journals (Ennis & Tofa, 2020). It wasn't until 2017 that an academically rigorous study was done

to better understand the impact of collective impact as a framework (ORS Impact; Spark Policy Institute, 2018).

Other criticisms have surfaced as well including criticism that falls into three themes (Wolf, 2016; Ennis & Tofa, 2020):

1) not adequately addressing issues related to equity and power;

2) utilization of a top-down approach; and

3) lack of focus on utilizing a systems-change perspective.

More specifically, the criticisms related to equity and power highlight a lack of inclusion of those who are most personally impacted by whatever problem the collective impact group is trying to resolve, including both general involvement and opportunities for shared decision-making (Weaver & Kabaj, 2019).

A notable component to collective impact is that Kania and Kramer, as well as other scholars and practitioners, have invested in building upon the framework instead of simply defending it. The Collective Impact Forum is an initiative of FSG Consulting and the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions. It is a space devoted to supporting collective impact practitioners who work to use cross-sector collaboration as a means to advance equity and achieve systems-level change (Collective Impact Forum, n.d.). They have been responsive to community criticism in several ways. For example, they have improved clarity in the framework through making connections between collective impact and complexity theory and acknowledge the emerging state of understanding if, when, and how collective impact is effective (Kania & Kramer, 2013). In addition, there have been evolutions of the approach that build upon gaps or concerns raised by practitioners.

One year after the release of the original description, there were pre-conditions for success identified by Hanleybrown et al. (2012). These conditions included having an influential champion, adequate funding resources, and a sense of urgency for change. Having an influential champion means that there is a person or a group that effectively obtains and maintains engagement from leaders across relevant systems. Further, the authors note that an influential champion needs to be a person or entity that effectively leads while also creating space for the collective impact group to make key decisions. Adequate funding resources was suggested to be at least 2-3 years worth of financial backing available to support the collective impact group's work. The authors do not provide detail about what kinds of costs should be covered within the financial backing. Finally, a sense of urgency was explained as there being something that occurs to move a community to action. That could come from a crisis, a report that generates more community awareness, or access to new resources that move people to want to take action in new ways. Ultimately, the authors proposed that if these pre-conditions are met, it helps equip a collective impact group to have the motivation and ability to collaborate in ways that could sustain the duration of a multi-year collective impact initiative (Hanleybrown et al., 2012).

In 2016, five years after the framework was shared, practitioners proposed eight additional principles (Table 2). The move to identify these principles arose from Kania and Kramer getting feedback from practitioners that the five elements were "not enough to achieve impact at the population level" (Brady & Juster, 2016, para. 2). Similar to how the first five elements were identified, Brady and Juster (2016) used feedback from practitioners across multiple disciplines and multiple collective impact organizations to shape the principles. Brady and Juster acknowledge that the principles are not unique to collective impact; however, the bridging of the original five elements with the eight principles support greater likelihood of

social change as the desired impact. Even as they shared these principles, they continued to acknowledge the importance of the original five key elements as the core of the collective impact framework (Brady & Juster, 2016).

Table 2

Collective Impact Principles of Practice (Brady & Juster, 2016)

1)	Design and implement the initiative with a priority placed on **equity**.
2)	Include **community members** in the collaborative.
3)	Recruit and co-create with **cross-sector** partners.
4)	Use data to continuously **learn, adapt, and improve**.
5)	Cultivate leaders with unique **system leadership** skills.
6)	Focus on program and **system strategies**.
7)	Build a culture that fosters **relationships, trust, and respect** across participants.
8)	Customize for l**ocal context.**

Around this same time, Weaver and Cabaj (2019) note that the five conditions originally described by Kania and Kramer would benefit from being updated rather than replaced. They illuminate the following opportunities for evolution that ultimately promote a shift from a management orientation to a movement building orientation:

1) Continuous communication should emphasize authentic and inclusive communication in ways that centralize the community;
2) Moving from a common agenda to a shared community aspiration to support broader movement for change;
3) Expanding shared measurement to be focused on inclusion of active evaluation to support learning (both sense-making and decision-making) throughout the process;

4) Adjusting focus on mutually reinforcing activities to intentionally focus on leveraging the most impactful activities, not simply the ones that are best suited for cooperation among the group;
5) Understanding the role of the "backbone organization" extends into creating a container for change that ultimately allows collective impact groups to balance dynamics in ways that allow the group to navigate through the complex work (Weaver & Cabaj, 2019).

These proposed changes were also hypothesized to help ensure a systems lens is utilized as opposed to isolated impact. Ultimately, the inclination to focus on a movement building orientation was identified as creating opportunities to transform systems instead of simply improving existing systems (Weaver & Cabaj, 2019). Although sometimes used interchangeably, there is a distinct difference between system improvement and system transformation. Specifically, system transformation focuses on making funding shifts in policies, practices, resources, and power structures (Martinez, 2021).

Other collective impact practitioners within the health sector also identified three adaptations they believe make the framework more successful (Gwynne et al., 2022). These adaptations span across the pre-conditions as well as foundational conditions. For the pre-condition related to having identified an urgent problem, they elaborated by noting that it is most useful to identify a problem that is complex and entrenched. For the foundational condition focused on having a common agenda, they specifically added the necessity of having an agreed upon long-term sustainability and exit strategy as part of the common agenda. Finally, they advocated for the need to clearly identify having a public policy outcome as part of the process, built into the expectations of the collective impact group.

In the education sector, Parshall (2022) also identified seven pre-conditions through her analysis of five regional collective impact groups who had each successfully bolstered post-secondary enrollment among Black and Latino students. These pre-conditions, also described as value-adds, include cross sector collaboration, data capacity, an equity focus, support from StriveTogether (a national organization that supports collective impact practitioners), regional support and investment, leveraged funding and utilizations of a cradle to career approach. Through use of process tracing methodology, she also identified five key steps of the process that align with continuous improvement. These steps include convening cross-sector partners, collectively reviewing data and predictive factors, utilizing a landscape analysis, developing and testing solutions and then repeating steps as necessary (Parshall, 2022).

Across sectors, there has also been emphasis on embedding equity into each of the five conditions. In fact, Kania and Kramer specifically note that without an intentional integration of equity into each condition, changes brought forth through collective impact are not likely to create sustainable change in the community (Kania & Kramer, 2015). Based on that notion, they identified additional best practices to support meaningful integration of equity into collective impact which include:

1) Ensuring teams navigate through uncomfortable truths rather than avoid them. The example they share relates to how teams sometimes avoid addressing racial disparities by opting instead to focus on socio-economic indicators. They also discuss how political climate can change if, how, and when groups may be willing to discuss local truths.

2) Ensuring teams take time to develop common language related to key drivers in the work. Specifically, creating space for teams to identify what equity means to them.
3) Ensuring teams are using disaggregated data as a tool to identify variance in people's experiences and to expose disparities that can otherwise be lost in aggregate data analysis. The authors highlight a case study where practitioners highlight disaggregated data as a tool to help remove personal bias from the process. While the article specifically calls out disaggregating student data (Kania & Kramer, 2015), the value proposition shared can be applied across all group types.

Overall, the emphasis on equity described by Kania and Kramer begins to elevate the importance of using it to shape goals and interventions, as well as integrating processes in how the collective impact group functions to ensure decisions are made with community needs in mind (Kania & Kramer, 2015). Equity as being a pivotal component of the work continued to be reinforced by Kania et. al (2022). They specifically called out lack of centering equity as being one of the biggest potential downfalls for collective impact effectiveness. This realization moved them to propose an evolved definition of collective impact which is "collective impact is a network of community members, organizations, and institutions that advance equity by learning together, aligning, and integrating their actions to achieve population and systems-level change" (Kania et al., 2022, para 4).

In alignment to shifting power, a need to embed community authority into collective impact frameworks was called out in 2019. White et al. (2019) describe how early versions of collective impact acknowledged the importance of integrating community input into the process,

but failed to ensure community members who are most impacted by the issue were treated as equal peers with decision-making power to help frame the problem, identify relevant solutions, and determine resource allocation and strategy to implement those solutions. Those authors, along with other practitioners in the field, refer to the shared power as community authority (White et al., 2019). For the purposes of this research project, the author will use the term "community power" instead of community authority, as feedback from fellow practitioners elevated the term to more effectively embrace the intention of ensuring there is space for community members to directly influence decision- making regardless of formal authority.

In community change efforts, among both those that utilize the collective impact framework and those that approach collaboration through a different lens, there can be a tendency to focus on engaging government officials and organizational leaders, as they are the ones with the authority to approve higher level policy changes (Walzer & Weaver, 2019). However, that approach lends itself towards the notion of imposing an intervention on a community, as it fails to include those who are most impacted by the issue into the problem-solving and decision-making conversions. That in turn can lead to a narrower set of goals that may ultimately impact the success of the work (Walzer & Weaver, 2019). In addition, LeChasseur (2016) points out that because of racial disparities related to who holds leadership positions, this approach often fails to incorporate diverse perspectives. Hence, there has been a push in the field of collective impact to move beyond infusing community voice into the process, to truly integrating residents and grassroots leaders as peers in the process (White et al., 2019).

Overall, the evolution of the collective impact framework has been responsive to criticism. Criticism has inspired efforts to strengthen technical elements of the process and to integrate adaptive components that further equip groups for successful collaboration. Collective

impact also continues to be developed via a wide range of practitioner experience, rather than just evolving through the single lens of the original creators (Kania & Kramer, 2015; Brady & Juster, 2016; Cabaj & Weaver, 2016). In addition, there continues to be reinforcement related to infusion of adaptability into the framework. Specifically, ten years after the term "collective impact" was termed, practitioners reflect that the five original elements should be used as a guide rather than a checklist and also specifically encourage practitioners to make necessary adjustments to the framework based upon local context and need (Kania et al., 2022).

Application of the Collective Impact Framework

Although criticisms still exist, collective impact has been used across a wide range of sectors. For example, it was used to clean up industrial waste along a riverbank in Virginia, used to address childhood obesity in Massachusetts, and also used to bolster living and working conditions for cocoa farmers in Cote d'Ivoire (Kania & Kramer, 2011). It has also been a model used across many education endeavors ranging from cradle to career initiatives and including areas such as decreasing chronic absenteeism, increasing kindergarten readiness, increasing arts education, and increasing post-secondary enrollment (Schell, 2022; StriveTogether, n.d.). Most notably, it has been a framework used to guide system transformation in innovative ways. For example, Cabaj and Weaver (2016) describe one city's approach to addressing poverty that intentionally focused on ending poverty within a generation, not simply reducing it. In order to do so, they worked to integrate collaboration across sectors and focus on high level goals such as eliminating racism as part of the strategy to disrupt hunger. According to the authors, that spurred a different level of goal setting and created opportunities for engagement across multiple sectors and throughout the community (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016).

Further, collective impact is an approach that has garnered international attention. Upon the release of the original article describing collective impact, the authors received hundreds of inquiries that spanned every continent (Hanleybrown et al., 2012). Implementation of collective impact also remains an international phenomenon with notable usage seen in Australia, Canada, and the United States (Smart, 2017). In 2016, it was estimated there were about 80 collective impact initiatives currently running in Australia (Graham & Weaver, 2016). In the United States, collective impact has gained enough traction that several national nonprofit organizations such as StriveTogether, the Collective Impact Forum, the Tamarack Institute and the Aspen Institute specifically focus on building capacity for practitioners to successfully utilize the collective impact approach to address disparities across a wide variety of systems including education, health, environment and justice reform (StriveTogether, 2022; Aspen Institute, n.d.; Collective Impact Forum, n.d; Tamarack Institute, n.d.).

Research on the Effectiveness of Collective Impact

From all the research thus far, there exists both encouraging and concerning features related to the collective impact framework. Again, there is little available research to show causality between population level outcomes and use of the collective impact framework, likely due to infancy of the framework and difficulty isolating impact (Parshall, 2022). It is also likely due to the current stage of many collective impact initiatives that have not been established long enough to achieve and or document population-level outcomes (Walzer & Weaver, 2019). The infancy of the framework also makes it difficult to find cross-sector collaborative groups that have fully and solely used the framework in a way that could establish causality with the outcomes. However, there are some promising early outcomes related to use of collective impact, specifically related to enhancing collaborative practices. For example, Bradley et al. (2017)

outline multiple ways in which participants experienced positive outcomes by engaging in the collective impact framework that included feeling greater recognition of group members' values and expertise, bolstering buy-in from a broader array of stakeholders, better information-sharing among group members, and an overall enhanced belief that collaboration would yield better results.

Scholars and practitioners have been moved to critique, build upon, and study the framework in a multitude of settings. In response to an earlier criticism related to lack of available data to understand outcomes of this particular framework, ORS Impact and the Spark Policy Institute partnered to conduct a study of initiatives that used the collective impact framework to better understand when and how it worked best (ORS Impact; Spark Policy Institute, 2018). That study confirmed that collective impact has contributed to desired changes in collaborative spaces, with the most common changes being related to service and practice changes. It also demonstrated that groups who utilized at least four of the five elements tended to see greater changes than those groups that utilized less than four of the elements. Further, it helped identify backbone support and use of a common agenda as the elements that seemed to have the greatest impact (ORS Impact; Spark Policy Institute, 2018). Other researchers acknowledge the need for more studies to understand the effectiveness of collective impact. Addy and Dube (2018) specifically identified that struggles within the collective impact group with measurement systems that include both short and long term outcomes can impede not only the process of the working group, but also make it difficult to assess success.

International interest in understanding the impact of this framework spurred the Australian Institute for Family Studies to do case studies of its usage within two programs. Findings from that study demonstrated that collective impact helped the groups to identify and

develop evidence-based strategies across a cross-sector group. This study further reinforced the underlying premise of collective impact, which is that complex societal problems require both technical and adaptive solutions. While the study has useful findings, it is also limited due to lack of child and family outcomes being available (Smart, 2017).

While there is limited research available that demonstrates causality between the collective impact framework and population level results, there has been a surge in attention to better understand the elements of collective impact and their perceived usefulness from participants' vantage points. A meta analysis of academic studies on collective impact by Ennis and Tofa (2020) provided critical insights into what is known and unknown about collective impact based on peer-reviewed research. Four key themes arose from their research: :

- **Adaptive Use:** Current use of the collective impact framework is used in an evolving or modified manner. Sometimes it is used as a sole framework for collaborative groups, sometimes it happens to align with other frameworks that are being used but was not intentionally sought as a guiding framework, and sometimes it is intentionally intertwined with other collaborative approaches (Daun-Barnett & Lamm, 2012; Flood et al., 2015).
- **Positive Relationships:** Relationships among participants and between the facilitators and participants are vital to the work being effective throughout the duration of the group's work (Easterling, 2013). Although not included as one of the five conditions, trust among stakeholders may be an equally prominent requirement (Meinen et al., 2016) and would benefit from funder investment (Amed et al., 2015).

- **Complexity of the Model Requires Support**: In order to understand, describe, implement and evaluate collective impact work, there needs to be intentional capacity building provided to participants and facilitators (Bradley et al., 2017; Banyai & Fleming, 2016; Wood, 2016). Further, support for effectively utilizing shared data was also demonstrated as a specific need (Meinen et al, 2016).
- **Application of Community Engagement**: Although equity has been highlighted as a needed component, there continues to be variance in the composition of collective impact groups in ways that can disrupt equitable practice. For example, few collective impact groups reported community members being active participants; there are sometimes power issues that arise when foundations serve as the backbone organization; and there continues to be potential disruptive power dynamics when there is too much emphasis on only including top level organizational partners as participants (Gustafson et al, 2017; LeChasseur, 2016; Millesen, 2015).

In addition, research by Gillam et al. (2016) found informal relationships among participants to be the sole factor significantly correlated with successful collaboration. Their research also suggests that the interplay between the elements of collective impact may be the most important facet to the framework, rather than any one particular element. Furthermore, Salignac et al. (2018) found relational elements of the framework to be of particular importance. More specifically, they identified positive relationships, honest communication and a sense of mutual trust as themes that participants noted were necessary. They also identified the diversity of members to be able to offer a range of perspectives to be crucial in the solutions phase of the work (Salignac et al., 2018).

Because findings related to the effectiveness of collective impact are still considered to be emergent in nature (Ennis & Tofa, 2020; Flood et al., 2015), there has been emphasis on guiding ongoing evaluation and research to help better document the outcomes of utilizing the collective impact framework. It has also been acknowledged that because of the long term nature of collective impact projects, evaluation challenges arise related to changes in strategy, context, and key stakeholders across the initiative (Parkhurst & Preskill, 2014). As such, it can be challenging for groups to agree upon performance measurements that would accurately capture whether or not a collective impact initiative was truly effective (Cabaj, 2014). Thus, evaluation efforts are likely going to need investment to support long term efforts that allow researchers to make sense of the evolving conditions. Recommendations for ongoing evaluation include focusing on three specific forms of evaluation, including development, formative and summative evaluation, to best support clear understanding of the outcomes of collective impact (Parkhurst & Preskill, 2014). Further, it has been noted that from an equity standpoint, there also needs to be intention in doing evaluation that includes understanding unintended outcomes that arise from utilizing the collective impact framework (Cabaj, 2014). Smart (2017) points out that although there has been substantial evolution to the original framework, the usage of those evolved components versus usage of the original framework is unclear and warrants additional study.

Structure of Collective Impact Groups

Collective impact groups are often long term, multi-year endeavors (Kania & Kramer, 2011; Stachowiak & Gase, 2018) that include consistent meet-ups of the members. Collective impact groups are composed of cross-sector participants who have a common agenda but represent a multitude of educational and experiential backgrounds, organizational cultures, and competing interests. As noted above, in response to previous criticism that the approach was too

"top down" and failed to include community in an appropriate way, collective impact groups are now encouraged to ensure they have community representation from those with lived experience (White et al., 2019). Thus, community partners are often a key component of the group make-up. For the purposes of this project, the term organizational partner will be used to describe partners who participate in a collective impact group with the focus to take action at an institutional level via their affiliated organization's power and resources versus community partners who participate in the collective impact group with the focus to contribute utilizing their personal (or lived) expertise and access to resources.

In alignment to one of the five elements first described by Kania and Kramer (2011), the backbone organization serves as the facilitator and the network leader for a collective impact group. Network leaders focus on supporting the group to move the work forward and ensure alignment to shared group goals. They typically work from a horizontal versus hierarchical stance (Stiver, 2019), and thus are not the decision-makers for the group. Group interactions are structured in alignment to the cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) where there is co-design that centers on both the relationship between parties and the outcomes of the work together as shared priorities (Ishimaru, 2020, p.148). Thus, by the group members leading the decision-making, there is opportunity to capitalize on the collective wisdom of the group.

Network agreements can serve as a tool to articulate how a collective impact group functions. A best practice is to have the network agreements be co-designed between the network leaders and all of the network members (Stiver, 2019). Although network agreements can cover a wide range of topics such as preferred communication style, expectations of engagement patterns, and accountability processes, they often also include clarity on how decisions will be made by the group. While not an exhaustive list, Stiver (2017) has identified eight agreements

that are especially relevant in collective impact groups (see Table 3). Essentially, the eight agreements focus on creating structure and working environments that enable all participants to share and learn from one another in ways that catalyze collective learning and recognition of needed solutions.

Table 3

Eight Network Agreements to Guide Multi-Organizational Networks (Stiver, 2017)

1) Leverage the power of networks
2) Foster a supportive environment
3) Practice honest engagement
4) Adopt open practices
5) Honor expertise and experience
6) Empower people
7) Make community-minded decisions
8) Fight for equity, access, and justice

The seventh agreement, which is to "make community-minded decisions," is particularly important because it serves as both a practical and technical tool in this space related to how groups determine how to gather, how to use available resources, and what solutions to put in place.

Community-Driven Decision-Making in Collective Impact

In the evolution of collective impact work, the emphasis on equity and utilization of community feedback puts additional significance on shared decision-making. This is recognized across a variety of researchers. Bradbook (2019) calls out the vitality of ensuring that end-users of a system co-develop solutions and have true power rather than simply being asked for their feedback throughout the process. He also notates the importance of governance as a key structure within collective impact to ensure there is joint decision-making that is inclusive of all participants including government, nonprofit, business, and general community members. For

example, Bradbrook (2019) references that legitimacy is established in collective impact work by "bridging the divide between formal decision-making processes and aspirations of the community" (p. 38). Gillam et al. (2016) call attention to the importance of a "fair and open process" as being an essential part of collaboration. Stiver (2017) specifically calls out utilization of community-minded decisions as a key network agreement. In detailing this role, he calls attention to the need for backbone organizations to be intentional and transparent in the decisions they make on behalf of the group and also what decisions will be made by the group.

Multiple case studies by StriveTogether, a national network that supports use of collective impact efforts in education across the United States, directly highlight the need for community authority or community power as an essential element (White et al., 2019). For example, one initiative in Cincinnati aimed to promote quality access to preschool for its residents. Originally, quality access was defined by formalized frameworks from academia; however, as community members became involved in the process, they identified a key missing element from the existing contextualization of quality pre-school, which was trust. Understanding how trust was a necessary component for parents helped reshape the campaign, which ensured the campaign was aligned to parents' needs. That then created more buy-in and led to passing a ballot initiative that helped ensure access to more kids in the city (White et al., 2019).

Ultimately, integration of meaningful community power goes beyond just seeking input from the community about their wants, needs and suggestions, but rather includes them as decision makers with shared authority (StriveTogether, 2021). Sometimes community members are asked to share their experiences, desires and ideas, but that does not always equate to them being part of the decision-making process. StriveTogether depicts this distinction through six categories of community engagement. The spectrum starts with "not engaging," which means

those with lived experience are not consulted. The second and third categories are "informing" and "consulting" and involve a degree of obtaining input from those with lived experience, but not necessarily ensuring their influence. The fourth stage is "involving" and focuses on collecting the needs from those with lived experience and integrating that feedback into strategies. The fifth and sixth categories are "collaborating" and "shifting power," which both entail shared decision-making. However, the sixth category intentionally emphasizes using that shared decision-making to further disrupt power dynamics. As mentioned, evolution of collective impact suggests infusing equity through addressing power dynamics and use of shared decision-making, which is captured in the "shifting power" category described by StriveTogether (StriveTogether, 2021).

Application of shared decision-making is a mechanism for infusing community power in meaningful ways. First, it fosters the opportunity to ensure that decisions about how resources are used and what strategies are selected are in line with community wants and needs. Second, it supports successful collaboration. Slade Shantz et al. (2020) conducted research on cooperative working groups that showed that non-hierarchical group structures decreased levels of conflict within the group and led to higher levels of psychological ownership compared with hierarchical group structures.

Current Decision-Making Approaches Utilized in Collective Impact

As the network leader is a steward of supporting community-driven decision- making, they are often tasked with creating processes that help the group to reconcile competing ideas, needs, and perspectives (Stiver, 2019). To do that effectively, an agreed upon approach to decision-making is crucial. While the majority rule approach to decision-making is often adapted by default (Hastie & Kameda, 2005), there exists ample criticism of its inability to provide

opportunity for the "minority" standpoint to drive change (Risse, 2009). Further, one study (Gillet et al., 2009) analyzed group decision- making in a lab scenario and found that when groups use majority rule, they act more competitively and can more easily fall prey to the tragedy of the commons. The tragedy of the commons is the tendency for individuals to make decisions based on their personal needs, regardless of the impact it may have on others (Hardin, 1968).

Consensus-based decision-making is another approach utilized in some collective impact spaces. This form of decision-making is intended to allow all group members to participate in the process, and they each have the power to veto any idea that they perceive to be morally problematic (Leach, 2016). The ultimate goal is that the group identifies a decision that everyone is willing to support and no one opposes (Pillsbury, 2015). While not thoroughly documented in the data, researchers note general concerns about use of consensus-based decision-making related to it being a longer process, which can lead to group ineffectiveness (Leach, 2016). In response to that concern, researchers note groups may turn to moderated versions of consensus-based decision-making, which integrates the norms of majority rule ultimately having the power to finalize a decision (Polletta, 2013). Research by Leacher (2016) also showed that among groups who utilized consensus-based decision-making, there were still inequalities related to differential speaking time among members during decision discussions and variability in how and if issues of power are addressed throughout the discussion.

Specific to the use of consensus-based decision-making in collective impact spaces, the Annie E. Casey Foundation created Proposal-Based Decision-Making (PBDM), which is a process that entails asking participants to share an idea and then having the group build upon that idea until it becomes one in which the full group can support (Pillsbury, 2015). Although this

may serve as a viable strategy for more inclusive decision-making, there is no literature available to ascertain how often it is used in collective impact, nor what its impact is on the participants, process, or impact on the group's outcomes. In addition, while other approaches to decision making may be integrated into collective impact spaces, there was no available literature to describe those methods.

Barriers to Community-Driven Decision-Making within Collective Impact

Collaboration is a powerful tool, but it does have transaction costs because it is more complex and time consuming (Lawson, 2003). As noted above, integrating community power into collective impact groups requires integrating cross-sector representation from nonprofits, school districts, city officials, businesses, and philanthropy, alongside individuals who can speak directly to the impact of the disparity from their lived experience. This often means there are a wide range of experiences, needs, and competing desires that co-exist within the group. Because collective impact groups are often addressing disparities, discussions require participants to have candid conversations in order to understand the causes of the problem for which they are trying to address. Quijada-Cercer, Cahill, and Bradley (2013) point out that when including people who are often excluded from the conversation, which in this context means including community members who are most proximate to the issue, it necessitates willingness and ability to ask new questions and hear the answers even when they challenge existing assumptions.

Further, the nature of having multiple organizations, who sometimes have the same and sometimes have varying interests, also brings about potential disruptive dynamics. Specifically, there is the threat of "collabetition" that exists when groups are collaborating but simultaneously experience a sense of constant competition for existing resources (Ishimaru, 2020, p.78). Collabetition may also impact the way organizational partners ultimately contribute to group

decisions. Gillam et al. (2016) specifically note there can be early conflict in the process, as organizations might experience varying priorities between their own mission and the shared agenda of the collective impact group.

Research has shown that diversity of groups can have both negative and positive impacts on the decision-making process across multiple domains, including diversity related to demographics of team members as well as human capital diversity (Roberson, 2019). Human capital diversity is divided into four categories that include knowledge, experience, values, and information-processing preferences (Martin-Alcazar et al., 2012). Factors such as full group participation, sharing information, and dialogue prior to decision- making can serve as moderators to maximize the benefits of a diverse group coming together to make decisions (Clark et al., 2000). However, diversity among members also brings forth potential for relationship conflict, which can be disruptive to the quality of decision-making unless it is kept at a minimum (Manata, 2019).

Moreover, some collective impact groups are focusing on issues that affect youth such as disrupting educational disparities for high school students or addressing health discrimination among teen mothers. Research shows that inclusion of youth in addressing systemic educational disparities is vital to successfully improving student outcomes (Bertrand et al., 2020; Irizarry & Welton, 2014). Having groups that have a wide span of ages represented can bring into play power dynamics related to adultism, which is an ideology that adults know better than youth (Bell, 2010). This ideology can be internalized by both youth and adults (Bell, 2010; Conner et al. 2016), thus impacting how youth and adults engage in shared decision-making.

Another potential barrier is the fact that collective decisions are required across the span of the working group, meaning that key decisions are often needed even early in the process. For

example, Smart (2017) describes an effective collective impact process as starting with collaboratively determining the focus areas and co-developing desired outcomes. Thus, while practitioners have shared the importance of relationships helping to overcome power dynamics, there is not always time for those relationships to develop prior to decisions having to be made.

Influence and Power Dynamics on Group Decision-Making

Research supports the value of group decision-making, as it has been shown to be a way to ensure decision makers have access to more information and experience Lewis, 2004; Wegner, 1987; Zhang et al., 2007), which results in better performance compared to individual decision makers (Laughlin et al., 2002). However, drawing upon the strengths of group decision-making is contingent upon how the group members interact with one another. For a group to function effectively, members of the group must influence one another so as to leverage the expertise at their disposal (Bonner et al., 2016; Bunderson, 2003). The source of influence within a group can come from multiple components, including perceived or real expertise related to both experience and task competence (Bonner & Baumann, 2012; Bunderson, 2003). It can also come from perceived or real formal power including control over rewards or control over decision-making (French & Raven, 1959). Bonner et al. (2022) point out that the perception of expertise and formal power are fluid and may change based on the type of decision being made. While there is variance in how individual group members shape their perceptions of who has expertise and/or power, research shows people tend to defer to the perceived experts in the room. This is true regardless of the person's actual competence (Kennedy et al., 2013; Littlepage et al.,1997). It also aligns with findings that show people tend to believe that following the preferences of those who they perceive to be better group members will ultimately help the group make better decisions (Bonner & Baumann, 2012).

As collective impact spaces use a non-hierarchical approach to decision-making, complexity in social interaction arises as research has demonstrated that groups without an established hierarchical structure often integrate a social hierarchy (Tiedens et al., 2007). Status conflict, which is the level of respect group members receive from one another (Magee & Galinksy, 2008), is another relevant phenomenon when understanding how power dynamics may impact group decision-making. Bendersky & Hays (2012) argue that this type of conflict can be harmful in groups because it negatively impacts information sharing in groups, even more than other types of group conflict. Further, their study indicates that it can bring out aggressive tendencies and move members to withdraw from group conversations.

Psychological Safety within Collective Impact Groups

Psychological safety is the belief that one can express themselves authentically with group members without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson,1999; Kahn,1990; Schein & Bennis,1965). Many of the research participants specifically called out trust as being a vital component to the work. Psychological safety and trust are described as "complementary but distinct" constructs by Edmondson (2002). She elaborates that trust is often attuned to dyadic interactions whereas psychological safety is often established at a group level (Edmondson, 2002).

It is notable that there is inherent risk-taking in group decision-making if people choose to be forthcoming and transparent in sharing differing opinions and working to influence others (Pavitt, 2014). Thus, whether or not group members feel psychologically safe can impact how they contribute to decision-making processes and ultimately impact the effectiveness of the group's decisions (van Ginkel and van Knippenberg, 2009). For example, the presence of psychological safety may encourage group members to share when they disagree with an idea,

share when they have made a mistake, share alternative viewpoints, and even be more willing to ask questions (Garvin et al., 2008). This concept seems especially relevant given the diverse make-up of collective impact group members, as research has shown that demographic and status differences among group members can impact their level of psychological safety (Harper and White, 2013).

In relation to the desire to draw upon the collective wisdom of the group, research has also showed that psychological safety within teams increases the likelihood they are able to act upon the unique information held by each team member because it fosters conditions where team members are more likely to share the information with one another (Schulz-Hardt et al., 2006). Further, Mumford (2000) showed a relationship between psychological safety and team performance when teams are working within ambiguous conditions. Collective impact groups are intentionally focusing on addressing problems that have historically been unresolved which means they are often working within ambiguous conditions. Further, as collective impact groups are responsible for making the decisions and acting up the decisions, it is relevant to note that research has demonstrated that increases in perceptions of psychological safety within groups, leads to an increase in group member ownership of the decisions being made (Mogård et al., 2022).

Summary

Overall, collective impact practitioners and researchers continue to identify community-driven decision-making as a key component to success for collective impact's ability to make meaningful and sustainable change. However, the challenges to creating conditions that support consistent community-driven decision-making within collective impact sessions is still unclear. For example, Stiver (2019) emphasizes the importance of facilitators in supporting

groups to reconcile different ideas and opinions as part of the process, but there's no specific details about how to do so. Further, while there is research on understanding how influence and power dynamics impact group decision-making in general, it is not clear how these dynamics play out in collective impact groups given the unique elements that include formal and informal authority, pre-existing personal and professional relationships, non-hierarchical decision-making and prioritization of community-driven decision-making. Further, there is research connecting the existence of psychological safety to group effectiveness, but it is also unclear how this might play out in community-driven decision-making processes. Thus, the next chapter details how this dissertation will approach working to better understand those dynamics.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Introduction

This chapter provides detail related to the research approach, methodology, and analytic process used for this dissertation. It includes descriptions of relevant philosophical principles that guide the use of the phenomenological framework, as well as the role of the researcher. Further, details related to participant recruitment are discussed in alignment to ethical standards. Finally, rationale is provided for each of the key decisions made throughout the process.

Design and Rationale

This section provides background information related to why a qualitative approach was selected in general and why the phenomenological approach was specifically identified as being most suitable for the intended outcomes.

General Approach

A qualitative approach was selected in order to create an opportunity to explore and understand the realities of community-driven decision-making in collective impact groups through documenting personal insights and experiences. In its broadest description, qualitative research aims to study the meaning that humans (individuals or groups of humans) ascribe to a social phenomenon through collecting information that allows the researcher to establish patterns or themes and corresponding descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The results that come from the research intentionally include the voices of the research participants through inclusion of direct quotes and written narrative, in comparison to quantitative research, which is more likely to focus on answering research questions via analyzing relationships between numerical values.

While the researcher considered what a relevant quantitative design approach may look like for the study, ultimately a qualitative approach was selected because it created the

opportunity to provide a baseline understanding of the experience through inductive research. Because both quantitative and qualitative approaches hold great value, a crucial first step to designing a study is choosing which methodology, or what blend of methodologies, best align to the research goals. In choosing between the two methods, the researcher considered the need to better understand the general reality of what occurs in collective impact spaces where groups are engaging in the community-driven decision process. This highlighted the desire to explore and explain that reality rather than try to make sense of it through testing assumptions about the experience.

Further, as a practitioner, the researcher also considered what was likely to yield the most valuable information for the collective impact field as it currently stands. Discussion with other practitioners in the collective impact space helped validate the need to highlight the experiences of people engaged in collective impact groups in more open-ended and descriptive ways that could drive future training for collective impact facilitators. This equates to a need for a more "complex, detailed understanding" that Creswell & Poth (2018) note aligns well to the qualitative approach. Further, in looking to do research in ways that align to the values of collective impact, the researcher was also swayed by the opportunity that surfaces through a qualitative approach related to creating room for others' voices in more open-ended ways. As noted by Skovdal & Cornish (2015), qualitative research protocols can provide opportunities for marginalized populations to have a voice beyond responding to numerically oriented questions. It also serves as a tool to empower individuals in sharing their experiences outside of prescribed question and answer options (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This specifically aligns with the values of collective impact related to prioritizing community power as a key process to solving complex

issues. All of these considerations helped the researcher to identify the qualitative approach as being the best fit for the goals of this particular study.

Specific Approach

Although there are numerous approaches to qualitative research design, Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the five categories that are seen most frequently. These categories include narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case studies. Those categories were the starting point for the researcher to determine which type of qualitative approach would be most appropriate for the study. Ultimately, in reviewing the foundations of collective impact literature that center the intentionality of bringing together cross-sector partners to work alongside community members with lived experience, it seemed wise to prioritize designs that created opportunities to integrate a wide variety of experiences. Thus, approaches that focused on the experience of a single or very few participants (i.e., narrative and case study) were eliminated as options. Next the researcher considered the goal of the research in regard to applicability. An ethnography would provide an opportunity to explore the culture of a group, which could be very valuable in understanding dynamics of a collective impact group related to community- driven decision-making. However, the feasibility of gaining access to a full group outside of the circle in which the researcher currently serves as a facilitator was of concern. Thus, that narrowed the options to grounded theory and phenomenology. Grounded theory was an enticing option because of the structured approach to data analysis that ultimately leads to proposing an emerging theory. While having a conceptual theory for the key elements of the community- driven decision-making process could add great value to the field, the researcher determined that a more appropriate first step would be to start by gathering information that

essentially leads to having a more descriptive understanding of the experience of making those decisions. Thus, the phenomenological approach was selected as the most appropriate fit.

Edmund Husserl is the philosopher who is credited with first defining phenomenology in the early 20th century (Kafle, 2011). Phenomenology as an approach to research essentially focuses on understanding a certain phenomenon (or occurrence) through the lens of the people who experience it (Teherani et al., 2015). Its purpose is to capture information directly related to people's lived experience and find themes across those experiences so that the meaning of the phenomena can be better understood (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach developed based on Husserl's belief in the value of understanding a phenomenon based on the experience of one's consciousness (Neubauer et al., 2019) and the goal of working to find ways for that experience to be captured without undue influence of the researchers' own experiences. This approach is distinctly aligned to the aim of this study to make meaning of community- driven decision-making (the phenomenon) based upon the lived experiences of those who engage in the process. Further, as noted by Laverty (2003), the value in using this approach is the opportunity to use examination of the lived experience of a phenomenon as a mechanism for others to gain a more nuanced and informed meaning of the experience.

After determining phenomenology was the best fit for the given context of this research study, it was then time to select which phenomenological approach would be most appropriate. To make this determination, it was first important to understand the differences between the varying approaches, as well as the varying philosophies that drive those differences. Peoples (2018) describes the two main branches of phenomenology being transcendental and hermeneutic. These two frameworks were developed and described by two founding philosophers, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger (Neubauer et al., 2019). While the

phenomenological approach could be guided by a wide array of philosophers and is not limited to the work of Husserl and Heidegger, Peoples (2018) encourages that novice researchers focus on choosing between those two primary philosophers. That guidance was followed as the researcher related being a doctoral candidate to being a novice researcher. Furthermore, the researcher worked to gain a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences between the philosophies in an effort to determine which was best suited to the goals and philosophical orientation of the researcher.

Edmund Husserl developed transcendental phenomenology based on the premise that nothing should be assumed when focusing on research to better understand a specific phenomenon (Neubauer et al., 2019). Husserl believed that each phenomenon has an essence that is objective and separate from the person looking to make sense of it; however, when we move to make sense of that essence, we inherently infuse subjectivity (Peoples, 2018). Thus his approach prioritizes minimizing the impact of that subjectivity through phenomenological reduction. This translates to emphasis on the importance of researchers suspending judgment when analyzing data. To do this, transcendental phenomenology focuses on the use of bracketing which moves researchers to set aside biases. This is done so that the essence of the participants can be understood based on their experience, rather than only the aspects of the experience the researcher notices due to their own beliefs, experiences, and expectations. Bracketing is a crucial concept to this approach both in developing the design and the data analysis. Further, transcendental phenomenology serves as the theoretical framework in this approach and does not allow for other theoretical frameworks to be included, as that would disrupt the ability to fully suspend judgment (Peoples, 2018).

In contrast to transcendental phenomenology, Neubauer et al. (2019) explained that Martin Heidegger created his own philosophy that centered upon a belief that it is impossible to truly bracket oneself. However, he did agree that subjectivity could cloud the result. He called preconceived knowledge fore-sight and believed there was opportunity to evolve fore-sight to be less subjective through iterative data analysis (Neubauer et al., 2019). Specifically, he elevates use of the hermeneutic circle as a method to support an iterative sense-making process. In other words, instead of approaching data analysis as a linear task, there is an opportunity to treat it as an iterative process in which the researcher circles between working to make an understanding of the whole data set and of the pieces, as well as the two combined. The aim is for the iterative process to essentially create time and space for the researchers' fore-sight to be less dominated by their own preconceived notions and instead truly informed by the participants' experience (Peoples, 2018). Part of this process includes the researcher explicitly recognizing their own bias prior to data analysis via the form of journaling. This process raises awareness of the bias, which then enables the researcher to be more aware of when and how those biases are surfacing throughout the analytic process. In addition, the researcher works to incorporate them without allowing the data to be skewed. Thus, while both approaches aim to limit subjectivity in the analysis process, the approach to doing so is different. An equally important difference is that transcendental phenomenology aims to eliminate preconceptions as much as possible, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology creates space for preconceptions that may help with accurately understanding the data. In other words, in transcendental phenomenology, the goal is to fully suspend preconceptions, whereas in hermeneutics, the goal is to be aware of preconceptions so that evolution of those preconceptions is an active part of the analytic process.

In understanding the fundamental differences between transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology, it created an opportunity to recognize better alignment between the researcher's ontology and hermeneutic phenomenology. As the researcher is a collective impact facilitator and immersed in the field on a daily basis, it felt most fitting to utilize the hermeneutic approach. Not only did it appear to be extremely difficult to fully suspend preconceptions, the opportunity to use those preconceptions productively felt like the best way to capitalize on existing understanding of the language and processes within collective impact in ways that can bolster accuracy in understanding participants' descriptions.

The researcher also considered whether or not it would be appropriate to infuse a second theoretical framework into the study. While hermeneutic phenomenology creates space for incorporating additional theories into the framework (People's, 2018), as this was the first time the researcher was fully engaging in the phenomenological approach, it was determined a single theory provided a more straightforward approach and likely optimized appropriate use of key hermeneutic practices. Thus, hermeneutic phenomenology served as the sole theoretical framework used to further design the study.

Research Questions

Through narrowing down the approach based on the intended goal of the study, as well as the researcher's philosophical orientation towards inquiry and making meaning of information, it guided the creation of a more focused aim statement and subsequent research questions. The aim of this hermeneutic phenomenological research is to facilitate a better understanding of key components that impact the community-driven decision-making process within collective impact groups based on the experiences of collective impact facilitators and group members for the

purpose of better understanding how to support equitable community-driven decision-making. Three research questions support collecting relevant information to achieve this aim:

- How do key stakeholders (facilitators and group members) experience the community-driven decision-making process?
- Based on their experience, what elements hinder community-driven decision- making?
- Based on their experience, what elements support community-driven decision- making?

It is important to note that a deeper understanding of the intended approach helped to evolve these questions. For example, while the essence of the questions stayed the same, the researcher made intentional shifts in language to pull out the emphasis of wanting to understand answers to the questions through the lens of the lived experience. This helped make it more evident that the desire was not just to understand the participant's perspective related to knowledge of the subject, rather the intention is to understand how they make meaning of community-driven decision-making based on their own experience.

Key Concepts

Studying the experience of collective impact group members making community- driven decisions through the selected research questions involves emphasis on several key concepts. These concepts draw upon the existing literature about relevant aspects of collective impact group structure and goals related to decision-making. Identifying and defining these concepts provide clarity and shared meaning prior to the onset of data collection. This clarity helped the researcher stay focused on how information collected, regardless of content, connects back to existing literature about key components of collective impact groups. It is important to highlight that use of these concepts were not intended to be used to create any kind of hypothesis.

The first concept is diverse group perspectives. The structure of collective impact groups include perspectives from the government, nonprofit, business, and community space (Bradbook, 2019). More specifically, community members reflect people with lived experience who are directly impacted by the outcomes the collective impact groups produce (White et al., 2019). Thus, in this context, composition of group members refers to the wide range of identities, experiences, perspectives, priorities, pre-existing relationships and preferences that each facilitator and individual group member brings with them into the collective impact space.

The second concept relates to use of decision-making protocols. It includes both tools and processes that may be formal or informal in nature. There may be distinctions between the existence of protocols versus the actual use of protocols. For example, a group may decide that before every decision is made, they want to create space for each member to share their questions or concerns about each option being proposed. Although the protocol is used consistently, it is contingent upon each member being able and willing to fully engage in the process.

The third concept is community-driven decision-making. This includes an outcome in which the decision ultimately prioritizes the community needs and includes shared decision-making power with community members who are directly impacted (StriveTogether, 2021). Although there is no single agreed upon definition for community-driven decision-making, for the purpose of this study the initial definition includes the following provisions:

- inclusion of group members who have both professional and personal connection to the topic of focus;
- shared decision-making via contribution from all group members;

- integration of the groups' collective wisdom in understanding pros and cons to various options; and
- prioritization of decisions that will effectively address the disparity the group has agreed to disrupt.

The fourth concept is psychological safety. When it is present, it implies that group members feel safe in expressing themselves and do not fear negative consequences if they share differing opinions from the group (Edmondson,1 999; Kahn, 1990; Schein & Bennis, 1965).

Researcher Role

As noted through the lens of hermeneutic phenomenology, the role of the researcher in this study was to identify and reflect on the themes that arose through experiences captured from participants while simultaneously reflecting on the researcher's own experience (Neubauer et al., 2019). In alignment to hermeneutic phenomenological best practices, the researcher utilized the hermeneutic circle as a method to address personal bias. This started by identifying known biases, experiences, or vantage points that may impact how the researcher makes sense of the data shared from the research participants. This included reflecting on the identity of the researcher as a white, cis-gendered female, as well as reflecting on the researcher's direct experience with collective impact groups that may shape the sense-making process.

Further, in alignment to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach which notes that biases cannot be fully set aside, it is best practice to ensure assumptions related to the study are clearly articulated (Peoples, 2018). These assumptions include the following:

- Collective impact groups aim to utilize community-driven decisio-n making;
- Participants have awareness of the group goal to utilize community-driven decision-making and are able to define it;

- Participants understand the concept of community-driven decision- making to the degree that they can identify when it is and is not occurring.

As a collective impact practitioner, the researcher had existing relationships with some of the participants. However, care was taken not to include participants who were under either the direct management of the researcher or who were part of groups in which the researcher was a lead facilitator. This helped to decrease any sense of positional power between the researcher and the participants.

Participants

There was intentionality in recruiting participants who represented two distinct perspectives within the collective impact space including collective impact facilitators and collective impact group members. To obtain both perspectives, this study used purposive sampling with specific criteria to ensure all participants had experienced the phenomenon of engaging in community-driven decision- making within collective impact groups. More specifically, inclusion criteria required participation in a collective impact group that was active within the past three years and that the participant was currently at least 18 years of age so they could legally give consent to participate. Use of criterion sampling aligns with common practice of phenomenological researchers (Moser, 2018). In addition, to support practical needs of finding participants with the relevant experience that are beyond the immediate circle of the researcher, snowball sampling was also utilized as participants were encouraged to share the opportunity with their networks. Overall, there were 18 participants in the study.

Recruitment Methods

Facilitators were recruited via email invitations shared with colleagues throughout the StriveTogether network. They were also encouraged to share the email invitation with other

colleagues who may be interested, hence using a snowball method. Facilitators were then asked to share marketing materials to help recruit collective impact group members who were interested in engaging in the research study. Some facilitators also made recommendations of who may be interested, in which case the researcher directly sent those people email invitations to participate.

Sample Size

The study utilized saturation as the guiding principle for sample size. Saturation was first identified as a concept by Glase and Strauss (1967) and refers to collecting data until all the key constructs are exhausted as demonstrated by the repetition of concepts arising without the introduction of new concepts. Since then, it has been acknowledged as both the most common approach to sampling in qualitative research (Morse,1995) as well as a rigorous, trusted mechanism for obtaining a valid dataset (Morse, 2015; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). This process requires an iterative approach that integrates data analysis as part of the process of understanding when an appropriate sample has been achieved via reaching saturation (Sandelowski, 1995). However, for planning purposes, the researcher aimed for sample sizes that have demonstrated likely saturation rates, which are 4-8 focus group meetings for collective impact facilitators and 9-17 semi-structured interviews for collective impact group members (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Saturation was determined by monitoring when themes started to be duplicated across conversations, as well as when conversations were not eliciting new content. This was done via monitoring which themes surfaced in each interview session. This was done across all conversation topics (See Appendix A). Thus, saturation was not fully determined until after the coding was completed. At the onset of the research, it was unclear how similar or dissimilar the experiences between facilitators and group members would be. Hence, there was a plan to code

them separately and seek saturation for each group separately. However, upon beginning to analyze the data for collective impact group members, it became evident that themes that arose for the collective impact facilitators aligned with the themes that surfaced from collective impact group members. Thus, saturation was calculated based on the aggregate group of participants.

Saturation was reached by the eighth discussion across all questions as demonstrated through final codes appearing in at least two distinct conversations. No new themes arose during subsequent conversations with the expectation of the additional question included for Part 2 participants related to describing what it feels like to participate in community-driven decision-making. For that particular question, saturation was reached by the third interview.

Description of Participants

Overall, 18 participants representing four geographic regions participated in the study. Collectively, their focus areas spanned across the cradle to career spectrum including student achievement, workforce development, economic mobility, and housing security. Part 1 of the research included 12 collective impact facilitators who were divided into eight distinct conversations. Although the intention was to structure each conversation to include two to three participants, scheduling challenges led to some conversations including only one participant (Table 4). Their experience as collective impact facilitators spanned from one to over ten years.

Table 4

Number of collective impact facilitators in each discussion session for Part 1

Session Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Number of Participants	3	1	1	1	2	2	1	1

Part 2 of the research included six collective impact group members, four of whom identified as organizational representatives within their collective impact groups and two who identified as both organizational and lived experienced representatives.

All focus groups and individual interviews were completed within 35-60 minutes and were held virtually via Zoom calls, with all but two participants choosing to use their camera throughout the conversation. The sessions were held from October 2023 through February 2024.

Table 5

Characteristics of Participants

Gender	Race	Number of Years as a Collective Impact Facilitator (Part 1 Part. Only)	Type of Collective Impact Participant (Part 2 Part. Only)
Female: 10 Male: 8	Black: 6 Biracial: 3 Caucasian/white: 7 Undisclosed: 2	>1 year: 2 1-3 years: 4 4-6 years: 3 7+ years: 3	Organizational: 4 Organizational and Lived Experience: 2

Data Collection Procedures

The study was split into two parts to support the goal of collecting feedback from two distinct experiences. Part 1 of data collection focused on gathering data from collective impact facilitators, and Part 2 focused on gathering data from collective impact group members. The interviews with facilitators were intentionally done prior to interviews with the group members in case any of the facilitators' feedback strategically shaped follow-up questions asked of the group members. Further, the sequencing of doing facilitator interviews first also allowed for snowball sampling to drive recruitment for Part 2 participants.

There were both similarities and differences in data collection procedures across both parts of the study. The differences related to the semi-structured interview questions and set-up.

Part 1 data collection focused on understanding the experiences and perspectives of previous and former collective impact facilitators via virtual focus groups. A focus group supports interaction among participants that will yield information beyond what they might share as individuals (Krueger & Casey, 2014), which is aligned to the intention of gathering feedback from the facilitators to collectively share experiences and identify patterns.

Part 2 data collection with the collective impact group members was designed to be one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the researcher. This relates to an additional question included for Part 2 participants, which focuses on what it feels like to be part of community-driven decision-making. In anticipation that participants may have to pull on more vulnerability in sharing their experiences related to engaging in community-driven decision-making processes, all Part 2 interviews were conducted via one-on-one conversations between the researcher and the participant. Using semi-structured interviews for this portion of the research allowed for an emphasis on storytelling, which enabled participants to highlight potential aspects of institutional racism or other aspects of oppression that may have impacted their experience of engaging in equitable group decision-making (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

The protocol utilized identical processes for both Part 1 and Part 2 related to the consent process and conversation set-up. All participants were asked to complete an online consent form. Upon completing the form, the researcher then reached out to the individual to schedule an interview time/focus group time. All interviews were held via Zoom to allow for virtual face-to face dialogue regardless of the participant's location.

At the start of every discussion, the researcher worked to establish an environment where people felt comfortable providing candid feedback regardless of pre-existing relationships with the researcher. For example, the researcher began each discussion by reviewing the purpose of

the research and asking if anyone had any questions or concerns related specifically to the consent form or to the project in general. The facilitator then reviewed privacy by reminding the participants of the protocols in place to keep their responses confidential. In spaces where more than one participant was present, participants were also reminded about the expectation that what was shared in the sessions was not repeated. In addition, the facilitator asked participants to call out any dynamics that they believed could shape the level of comfort (either their own or others in the space) with being candid in the space. For example, if participants had pre- existing relationships with each other or with the researcher, that was spoken aloud.

The researcher moved through each of the guided questions. Across both Part 1 and Part 2, the protocol intentionally allowed for additional questions to be utilized as necessary in order to ensure clarity of participant feedback. Having this flexibility created an opportunity for inclusion of questions that helped round out the information needed to answer the larger research questions. Types of questions added would most often relate to asking for clarification or asking for examples of what was being described. However, during the first semi-structured interview, the researcher realized the value of including a direct question about how the participant defined community-driven decision-making as it became clear that not everyone defined community-driven decision-making in the same way, which could ultimately impact subsequent answers. Another change included adding the question about how often the participant experienced effective community-driven decision-making within their collective impact group(s) to the Part 2 question list as a follow-up question in the event it did not organically surface in the conversation. This change was made upon realizing that the response to these questions from Part 1 helped provide context for the way the participants answered other questions.

A minor tweak was made following the first focus group based on an observation on ways to cultivate uninfluenced answers. Originally, the first three questions were shared with participants, and they were given several minutes to individually process their answers before sharing them aloud. However, after realizing that verbal sharing had the potential to shape other participants' initial answers, the facilitator began asking participants to write their answers in the chat simultaneously and then create an opportunity to discuss. This allowed individual answers to be noted prior to any changes that arose based on discussion.

The final question asked in the interviews related to if the participants had any other reflections related to community-driven decision-making and how they make sense of their experience. Having this opportunity for open remarks helped ensure that the researcher did not limit participants only to sharing their experience through the filter of the researcher's questions. Thus, it created space for the participants to express themselves more freely and fully.

As the discussion ended, all participants were notified that they would have an opportunity to review synthesized notes for the purpose of ensuring the notes accurately reflected their experience and effectively captured the essence of their statements. Those notes were emailed to participants within ten days of the interview. They were encouraged to call attention to any facet of the notes that did not align to their intended message and/or experience. One participant made edits, six others responded that no edits were needed and the other research participants did not respond.

Race and gender were captured for all interview participants who were willing to share that information in order to provide a descriptive summary of the participants. The facilitators were also asked to share the number of years of experience they have as being a collective

impact facilitator. Because the interviews are designed to be conversational, clarity and/or follow-up questions were included as necessary based on each participants' response.

Data Analysis

Prior to starting the data analysis, the semi-structured interview questions for both Part 1 and Part 2 interviews were aligned to the overall research questions (Table 6). This organized how the information would ultimately be shared in the results section, which also created a clear vision for how to synthesize all of the data in ways that would ultimately answer the specific research questions.

Table 6

Interview Questions Aligned to Each Research Question

Research Question	Collective Impact Facilitator Interview Questions	Collective Impact Participant Interview Questions
How do stakeholders experience this process?	How do you define equitable, community decision-making? How do you determine if an equitable, community-driven decision was made? How often do you think this occurs within collective impact groups you've facilitated?	How do you define equitable, community-driven decision-making? How do you determine if an equitable, community-driven decision was made within a collective impact group? How often do you think this occurs within collective impact groups in which you've participated? Can you tell me what it's like from your perspective to participate in the decision-making process? Do you feel heard? Understood?
What elements hinder community-driven decision-making?	What barriers get in the way of this outcome? Are there power dynamics or interpersonal relationships that impact the way the group ultimately makes decisions when there is conflict/varying perspectives? Please describe.	Are there power dynamics or interpersonal relationships that impact the way the group ultimately makes decisions when there is conflict/varying perspectives? Please describe.

What elements support community-driven decision-making?	What tools/processes would you recommend to support more consistent community-driven decision-making?	What tools/processes would you recommend to support more consistent community-driven decision-making before, during, and after the decision-making process?

For the first level of analysis, data was analyzed by sub-question and by participant type (i.e., collective impact facilitator vs. collective impact group member). This included a six-step thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which utilized an inductive approach to coding. The researcher slightly modified the process to include emphasis on organizing excerpts based on the research questions. Ultimately, the six steps utilized included the following:

1) Familiarize self with data
2) Categorize excerpts under relevant interview questions
3) Generate preliminary codes
4) Refine codes
5) Generate themes
6) Report outcomes

Familiarize Self with Data. For data collected from both the facilitator interviews and the group member interviews, data was transcribed verbatim using the AI Zoom application. The researcher also took detailed notes to cross-check the transcription, anticipating there may be instances where the AI feature inaccurately transcribed some phrases. Thus, for the first step, the process of becoming familiar with the data included comparing typed notes to the transcript to ensure all interview components that were relevant to the research were captured. Identifying information was also removed. This was also when the notes were shared with participants to verify accuracy.

Categorize Excerpts under Relevant Interview Questions. The second step focused on categorizing excerpts based on the relevant research questions. The notes were then organized by key concepts as a way to begin to show how the essence of various statements was being connected to interview questions. Aligning excerpts to the related research question was a straightforward process for the vast majority of the excerpts, as research participants were responding to questions directly. However, there were instances where an experience was shared in response to one question, but the content of the question aligned better to a different question. For example, when discussing their experience related to barriers in the process, participants sometimes went on to note what tools help overcome those barriers even though that question arose later in the semi-structured interview.

Generate Preliminary Codes. The third step started with the creation of codesheets for each of the interview questions. Columns in the codesheets included the session number, preliminary codes, and notes or memos that arose during the coding process. This round of coding focused on capturing the essence of each statement shared. If aspects of an excerpt fell into more than one code, the excerpt was further broken apart so the parts of the phrase could be coded accordingly.

Refine Codes. The fourth step focused on reviewing the list of preliminary codes to identify potential categories. When recurring concepts or seemingly related concepts were identified, they were grouped together. Notes were again captured in the codesheet to document insights that arose during this process that helped in the categorization process. This ultimately led to a more condensed list of codes.

Generate Themes. The fifth step included translating the refined list of codes into themes. This entailed working to find names for each theme that effectively encompassed the

broader codes within each theme. While Bazely (2013) describes multiple methods to selecting theme names, the researcher opted to use names that describe the essence of the theme. Descriptions were also developed for each theme.

This step also entailed cross-checking that each refined code fit into a single theme, thus ensuring that the themes were mutually exclusive. There was also intentionality in verifying that all themes had more than one code and more than one excerpt that aligned to it. All revisions, as well as the reason for the revision, are captured in the codesheets. In addition, each excerpt was color coded to show the relationship to the theme into which it was ultimately categorized. Because excerpts were also coded based on the session in which they were shared, it allowed the researcher to identify what themes arose in each of the sessions. This ultimately served as the method for ensuring saturation was reached across each question, as it provided visualization to show that no new concepts arose in the final interviews.

Report Outcomes. The sixth step included reporting the outcomes and drafting the results section, as well as ensuring that codebooks accurately documented the evolution of the codes and themes that arose throughout the process. Drafts of aggregate results were made available to participants for review.

The hermeneutic phenomenological approach shaped the analytic process. While running the analysis, the researcher intentionally created observational loops that moved from reading through a single conversation, to looking at parts of the conversation (broken down by research question), to looking back again at themes across all questions within a single conversation. Additionally, the researcher also took time to review all the excerpts that fell into a single theme to reflect whether or not they were connected. When there were excerpts that seemed to be outliers, the researcher then reread the excerpt in the content of the interview and was able to

determine where the essence of the excerpt best fit. Overall, following these steps essentially created a forwards and backwards process that served to double check that each code was accounted for within the themes and that each theme was unique. Thus, for every interview question, there exists a list of themes with their descriptions that are visibly aligned to the excerpts.

In analyzing feedback from the research participants, the researcher chose to focus on themes that emerged, as well as frequency of the themes that emerged. While including frequencies in qualitative research is debated (Maxwell, 2010), the researcher chose to include them to add another dimension of patterns that developed across participants' experience (Appendix B). However, it is important to note that themes with higher frequency do not necessarily equate to them being more important or holding greater weight than themes with lesser frequency. Rather, it serves as an indicator that could drive future research.

In calculating frequencies, originally, the researcher started to analyze statements by each participant regardless of whether they were in session by themselves or in a session with other participants. However in reviewing the transcripts, oftentimes in the focus groups people would say "I agree with what they just said and...". Because the person may have brought forth multiple themes in their statement, it was unclear whether the person was agreeing with the full statement or just a portion of the statement. In an effort to avoid assumption, the researcher began to count themes based on the number of sessions (i.e., the number of discussions) in which they were present. Thus, frequencies represented in subsequent sections specifically relate to the number of discussions where the theme arose rather than the number of individuals who brought it up as a discussion point.

It should be noted that the analytic process was done manually as opposed to using software. Using a manual process is advised by Peoples (2018) but also was in line with processing and organizational preferences of the researcher. Using a manual coding process required the researcher to create her own tools. Thinking through creation of the tools served to stimulate proactive thinking about the realities of the analytical process. It also created opportunities to include journaling notes in specific ways that were of assistance to the researcher throughout the process. For example, by having columns for notes next to each round of initial coding and theme identification, it was easy to have those visible when relevant but also easy to hide when there was a desire to simply do a logic check and see if the refined codes made sense without the context of the memos. In addition, the process of writing and copying and pasting excerpts in multiple spaces also helped the researcher be more intimately familiar with the data.

Further, there were behavioral choices integrated into the analytical process to enrich the manual coding process based on guidance from other experienced researchers. This included implementing passive activity, which is essentially taking intentional breaks from the data for the sake of opening opportunities to make connections within the data that may otherwise be overlooked with consistent immersion (van Manen, 2014). Passive activity through the study ranged from taking hourly breaks to taking days off from analyzing the data. In addition, memos were kept throughout the coding process that helped track personal reactions to some of the data that led to shifts in understanding. This was slightly different from the process of journaling, as the memos were written in alignment to specific data points, whereas the journaling focused on a broader level of capturing reactions, questions, and ideas that arose from the whole process.

Credibility Strategies

Within qualitative research, there exists a wide array of terms and processes that relate to validity and reliability. Because there is no single standard of terms or processes, experts in the field recommend utilizing multiple strategies, more specifically at least two strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2017), that ultimately help establish the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Validity is described as the "appropriateness" of the tools, processes, and data within the qualitative study" (Leung, 2015: 325). Creswell and Poth (2018) outline nine procedures that can help assure validity in a qualitative study, and specifically encourage at least two procedures be used. This study utilized six of those nine procedures (Table 7) to help address threats to validity.

Table 7

Application of Suggested Procedures to Support Validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018)

Lens	Procedure	How Used	Impact
Researcher's Lens	Triangulation	As two data sets were collected, themes from each of those data sets were compared and contrasted to each other, as well as relevant literature on psychological safety in groups.	Created visibility in understanding in likeness related to the themes that emerged from both groups, which helped to validate the information gleaned.
	Negative case analysis	Not applicable as this technique is encouraged for multiple studies of the same nature (Peoples, 2021)	N/A
	Explanation of researchers bias	Both assumptions and known bias were documented via journaling as well as formally documented in the final write-up.	That helped keep those assumptions at the forefront of the coding process.
Participant's Lens	Member checking	Within ten days of the semi-structured interview occurring, the researcher reviewed the transcript,	One participant edited the responses; six others responded there were no edits needed.

		grouped the notes that categorized participant feedback by general topic and shared with the participants in case anything was inaccurately captured. This provided the participants with opportunities to verify that the essence of what they said was properly understood and captured.	
	Prolonged engagement in the field	Not applicable because instrumentation did not include observation.	N/A
	Collaborating with participants	Preliminary results were synthesized with participants. They were asked to review the outcomes to see if it resonated and if it helped yield meaningful outcomes.	Two participants shared feedback about what aspects resonated with them
Reader/ Reviewer's Lens	External audits	This included having members of the dissertation committee review the procedures and findings.	Created clarity in how to approach making decisions throughout data analysis.
	Rich descriptions	Efforts were made to include all excerpts in the write-up to ensure there were no excerpts unintentionally left out that would alter the results.	Created a longer results section but also added transparency.
	Peer review	Held a meeting with a neutral colleague to share methods and preliminary results of the study to seek feedback about potential weaknesses.	Helped to ensure themes were mutually exclusive and to ensure methods for seeking participant feedback were both meaningful and realistic.

Reliability relates to the replicability of processes and results throughout the study (Leung, 2015). The researcher prioritized this goal in the level of detail that is included in the methods section for the purpose of allowing other researchers to follow the same steps. In relation to the actual analysis, emphasis was placed on clearly documenting memos to support the evolution of initial codes into final themes. Those memos highlight the underlying thinking

behind the emerging themes, including merging of codes and showcasing which codes fall into which themes. By having this information clearly documented, it allows reviewers to follow the logic used in ways that cultivate replicability. Those codebooks are available upon request until May 2027.

Ethics

This study was overseen by the University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board and was granted approval on August 31, 2023. As noted above, an informed consent process was utilized where participants had a chance to review the written consent prior to registering for participation. The researcher ensured her contact information was available and encouraged participants to reach out with questions and concerns prior to signing the form. Prior to the start of each interview, participants were again given an opportunity to talk through questions and/or concerns related to confidentiality or the study in general.

In addition, a data and safety monitoring plan was created to minimize disruptions to maintaining privacy and confidentiality. This includes used password-protected files and storing data with identifiable data (e.g., consent forms, participant trackers) separate from other participant data (e.g., de-identified transcript notes). General data (e.g., codebook, de-identified transcription excerpts, consents and participant trackers) from the research will be stored for three years following completion of the study and analysis; however, the Zoom recordings that house identifying information will be destroyed within three months of the conclusion of the study.

These processes collectively yielded the collection and analysis of information across all of the interviews. The overall themes that developed, along with direct quotes pulled from participant interviews that shaped the themes, are detailed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter is organized into three distinct sections that align to each of the research questions. Within each section, results from the facilitators and participants are included. It follows the order of the interviews so all of the collective impact facilitators' results are presented first for each question, followed by the results from collective impact participants.

Research Question 1: How do stakeholders experience community-driven decision-making within collective impact groups?

This research question consists of four different interview questions related to how stakeholders define community-driven decision-making, how they monitor whether it has occurred, and how often they think it happens based on their experiences in collective impact groups. The fourth question relates to understanding the general experience of being tasked with making community-driven decisions. The fourth question was only asked of collective impact group participants, as facilitators typically do not participate in the decision-making process directly.

Defining Community-Driven Decision-Making

After the first focus group, it became clear that while there were many shared aspects of how facilitators define community-driven decision-making, notable differences also exist. Based on feedback from the participants, three themes emerged related to how facilitators define community-driven decision-making, which were coded as the following: consensus of the group, diverse representation, and intentional processes utilized to elevate community need.

Collaboration. The first theme for this interview question can be described as the group as a whole drives the forward movement of action taken by the group.

***Facilitators*.** In regard to the consensus of the group, one participant noted the way they "frame it as the goal being forward movement based on the will of the collective group." That sentiment helps call out that decision-making has the purpose of enabling the collective impact group to move forward. Thus, it is not just about making a decision in general through the consensus of the group, but making a decision that aligns with the group's purpose. Within this theme, there was also emphasis on the notion that decisions should be "ideas that surface from group [with] collaborative conversations where everyone's voice and perspective is shared." This reinforces a notion that the intention of community-driven decision-making is also about creating an inclusive environment where all collective impact members contribute to the discussions that inform the decision-making process.

CI Group Members. One of the collective impact participants noted that to them, collective impact "implies that the effort is collective and not hierarchical, not driven by one organization or one individual. Instead it's driven by those who have the experience of what is being addressed." Another participant highlighted the intentionality of ensuring changes in power among the members. They described a key element as "ensuring community members have the same power so it's about switching power because normal decision-makers are often disconnected from the community. They don't know the day to day challenges. So this is a chance to balance the opportunity to have both of them (formal leaders and community members) integrate their knowledge."

Diverse Representation. This second theme can be described as inclusion of a wide variety of perspectives such as professional and personal lived experience, positive and negatively impacted folks, and people/agencies beyond existing relationships to the backbone organization.

Facilitators. The diverse representation theme surfaced through participants noting the importance of decisions being "informed by people who have lived experience based on the issue (both negatively and positively impacted)." In other words, ensuring that among people with lived experience, there is intentionality in bringing forth an array of types of experience. One participant shared an example that if looking to resolve disparities related to females gaining access to STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) programming, it would be helpful to include students who identify as female who successfully gained access to STEM programming as well as students who identify as female who did not successfully gain access to STEM programming. Further within this theme, participants also called out the value of ensuring there is a "blend of perspectives that represent personal experience and professional experience (e.g., nonprofits/programmatic lens)." One participant specifically noted that when thinking about diverse participants, there needs to be intentionality about who is invited to participate. More specifically they noted, "the composition of who you invite to the table is important. Not just who you are comfortable with or who you have knowledge of."

CI Group Members. Similarly, collective impact participants also called attention to bringing in intentionally diverse perspectives that relate to the focus of the group. One participant described collective impact as a "group of stakeholders from a variety of different backgrounds and areas of expertise coming together and developing goals and strategies to meet those goals." Another participant expanded by sharing the emphasis on "integrating many angles of perspectives, including voices of the community and having them also be part of the planning process." A different participant alluded to their experience related to the timing of when folks with lived experience are brought into the group and said, "At some point in the process it also involves bringing in actual students or parents of students from schools (or whoever the group is

actually trying to serve) to be part of the group." They further noted, "In my experience, there's an order when people are brought in that starts with organizational experts and then expands to community members." Another participant specifically alluded to variance in ways that those with lived experience have been included based on their experiences in collective impact groups. They described, "It comes from having a way of collecting what's the impact around a decision based on the perspective of those most impacted by the decision." They went on to describe, "There's a spectrum of it from 'hey we have this idea' to 'what do you think about this idea' to' what do you think is causing the problem' to 'what is the problem.'" They summed it up by saying, "It's really about coming with curiosity about how the community will be impacted."

Inclusive Processes Utilized. This third theme can be described as steps taken to cultivate inclusive engagement, shared decision making and transparency.

***Facilitators*.** This theme focuses on ensuring the group is following agreed-upon practices related to how they want to elevate community power. One person said, "the community is involved and has the power to make decisions regardless of what position they hold in their employment." They further noted, "[community is] involved in every stage of the process. Not just invited to give an opinion and [then] not invited to participate for the rest of the work." They also distinguished that, "not just participating through the process but having the authority and power to make decisions that would best serve their community." Shared power was also elevated through the statement, "I think we have different levels of influence and authority and resources we can offer across different stakeholders, but everybody has an equal say in this space and what happens." Multiple participants also reference the Strive Together Spectrum for Community Engagement (StriveTogether, 2021) as a key tool to guide how community members are integrated into the decision-making process. Another participant

explained that as a facilitator, they work to support the group in proactively determining how decisions will be made when the group is not in full agreement. They explained, "Part of what we do in the process is support them in identifying how they as a group will make decisions when they disagree. The approach to decision-making varies based on the group's desires." They shared an example where, "one community decided unanimously they would vote, another community uses proposal based decision-making." Regardless of what method is used, another participant highlights the value of ensuring visibility into the process when noting, "The decisions may be that of all community members, however, it must reveal the reasoning for the final position."

CI Group Members. Interviewees representing collective impact group participants also surfaced using intentional processes as relating to how they define community-driven decision-making. Specifically they noted things such as, "Identify mission first and then goals and strategies to drive change. To develop a program or system, also thinking about systems change as a relevant component" and it "typically involves a facilitator who works at a community organization, inviting partners with various experience (such as school districts and other community organizations) trying to find a way to bring the smartest people together to solve a problem." Several participants also focused specifically on community driving the process. One participant noted, "You have to include, early and intentionally, the voices of those that are most impacted or have the experience to talk about the issue you are addressing. And those voices need to be prioritized and elevated compared to other voices in this space."

Another participant elaborated on aspects of processes that actually override group consensus. They said, "Consensus is difficult and sometimes impossible so it's about driving to ensure everyone is heard in the process." They further noted, "If they don't agree with the

outcome, [it's about] ensuring that everyone in the group has at least been a part of the process and have buy-in for the outcome." Similarly, a different participant shared that based on their experience, they do not think consensus is the best approach. They explained, "Everyone can vote but that doesn't mean that all their parts were brought to the table and has a space to speak and create with the group. They further noted, "[It's about] using community feedback to understand why misalignment exists and how to create around the misalignment so no one has to lose something. Getting space to figure out those other options." Another participant also reflected on the difficulty they experience in defining community-driven decision- making. They said, "That's a hard question. It's decision-making that happens when being informed by data that is relevant to the community." They further described, "[It's] when the community has input and there's data involved that the community has access to. It's also when the community has final say in what the decision-might be. I would give a different definition on different days."

Monitoring for Community-Driven Decision-Making

When asked to describe what they pay attention to when monitoring whether or not a collective impact group had engaged in community-driven decision-making, there were three themes that arose from the participants' answers. Across the themes, it is notable that multiple participants specifically noted that they are paying attention to both verbal (e.g., what are people saying and how are they saying it) and non-verbal (e.g., rolling eyes, not speaking) cues that help them understand collective impact group members' reactions to the decision-making process. In addition to their own observations, some facilitators also specifically ask for feedback about the process via in-the-moment questions, in-the-moment polls, and/or follow-up surveys. Between their observations and the direct feedback they obtain, ultimately, the data shows a general focus on facilitators using that information to determine not only if they as the facilitator think a

decision was community-driven, but also if the participants also feel that the decision was community-driven.

Intentional Processes. The first theme for this question can be described as the group's use of agreed upon processes/tools to support conversation prior to the decision, as well as the act of decision-making.

Facilitators. For this theme, participants were not simply describing processes they use. Rather, they shared processes they want to ensure are occurring as the processes themselves are part of the community-driven decision-making. One participant explained, "How those decisions are being made are just as important as who is there. You can have the right people in the room and still not have community-driven decision-making." These processes centered upon intentionality in reminding the group of their purpose. For example, one participant shared their experience of using a starting point of "agreeing upon the result in the first session, but revisit [the result] in multiple sessions." Another participant shared a similar experience of repeatedly "creating awareness that the focus is on making decisions that benefit the people most impacted."

Several participants further described that they are paying attention to ensuring the group is able to engage in discussion prior to decisions being made as "the rich part is the discussion that is happening before the decision." In order to support that discussion, facilitators described "slowing the group down to ensure all voices are included prior to decision," and "supporting time to explore concerns and allow the group to determine if roadblocks are real or perceived." Another participant noted they watch to ensure that the "ability to propose and introduce [ideas/opinions] is always open so they are never stuck with a decision." They further described,

"It's iterative work so a lot of the decision-making in real time is the decision for that day so it's not your only pass to be part of the decision."

Another aspect that surfaced related to facilitators monitoring the groups' work to ensure they have what they need in order to make a community-driven decision. This includes access to information, support in interpreting that information, as well as other resources that are necessary to make change. One person stated they work to ensure "the community has ultimate power. Looking for evidence (both qualitative and quantitative) that the community has their own agency to solve the problem." Another participant further elaborated the importance of monitoring that "folks in the community are given the necessary resources to make change. Equity would be ensuring they have the right resources to succeed." Another participant further elaborated, "Did the community feel informed and equipped enough to have input in the decision? Feeling informed can even just be knowing what other solutions are out there."

In addition to monitoring what happens prior to the decision-making, facilitators also specifically pay attention to how the group engages in actual decision-making and ensuring relevant processes are followed at this stage. From a straightforward angle, they referenced ensuring the group used the agreed upon mechanisms for making decisions related either to sharing anonymously or sharing openly. One participant described how their group had agreed upon using a pre-voting mechanism prior to the final decision being made, so they watched to ensure the group actually used that mechanism first. Another example related to one group's agreement to list three options for decisions related to agree, disagree, and disagree but willing to support. Thus, the participant shared they are watching to ensure those options are incorporated.

CI Group Members. Collective impact group participants also emphasized paying attention to how the group went about making the decision as they internalized whether or not

they consider the decision to be community-driven or not. One participant said they "pay attention to how people talk. Did it feel rushed? Did it feel like we took our time and talked through things or are we trying to push results?" They added, "When it feels representative and we take our time, those are the moments I feel the best about the decision we made." Multiple participants also alluded to paying attention to values alignment between how the group made the decisions and how they originally intended to make decisions. For example, one participant said, "In my experience, at the beginning of the process, I'm paying attention to the fact finding and alignment of values." They also noted intentionality in"trying to infuse qualitative and quantitative research at the beginning to show systemic barriers that create those inequities to start the decision-making process." Similarly, another participant said, "Paying attention to values alignment. Developing how the group will make decisions throughout the process and infusing equity into that process." They further noted the need to, "clearly call out how we value those with lived experience and [I'm] watching for people to call out when we don't follow those agreements or attempt to sideline." A different participant focused on the process related to ways in which group members are engaging in discussions related to the decision. They explained, "If I know people's existing relationships, I look to see if people are building off one on another or if there is individual thinking. Also noticing if there are signs of pre-determined coordinated effort."

Other participants noted paying attention to the outcome of the decision when assessing whether or not it was community-driven. For example, one person shared, "When thinking about where resources are going, there are still resources that are being pulled towards areas that are not necessarily driven by what the community says is most important or identifies as their core challenges." Another participant shared how they pay attention to the general intent of the group

in determining whether or not a decision was indeed community-driven. They shared, “I want to be positive because I see many organizations really intentionally inclusive in their approaches and I think it’s growing. It gives me so much hope. [I see] good new energy and leaders who are inclusively diverse.”

Engagement. The second theme for this question can be described as monitoring that all members are actively listening and contributing, with priority placed on community perspective that represents those most impacted by the issue.

Facilitators. Similar to the inclusivity theme, there were elements to this theme centered upon checking to see if certain things were in place to support community-driven decisions. For example, one participant noted, “Often it’s the people who attend the meeting who end up making decisions so there is heavy emphasis on creating conditions to get the most relevant people to the room.” They further explained, “For each logistical decision, we are thinking about who might be unintentionally excluded (e.g., location, time of day).” So in essence, this facilitator’s experience of monitoring whether a decision was community-driven or not included being mindful of who was in the room to participate in the discussion, as well as what mechanisms factored into who attended or not.

Participants also shared the ways in which they pay specific attention to ensuring all group members are able and willing to engage in the decision-making process, including information sharing that happens prior to the actual decision-making. One participant noted, “Throughout all phases of decision-making, not just the voting but also the ideation and the research phases, I’m often thinking about ‘was there diverse input’?” Another participant described why they pay attention to community involvement across stages of the work because

of their experience that, “An equitable decision is made when all youth, family and community drive the work, are involved in the planning and governance and execution.”

Participants also discussed ensuring there is space for people to share their perspectives from multiple vantage points based on the “recognition that a single person often brings multiple perspectives. There’s interest in elevating that within [collective impact] spaces. For example, someone may be a teacher and a parent.” One participant shared they are “monitoring for balance of perspectives throughout the duration of the [collective impact group]” and another participant described they work to be “mindful of who has contributed to the conversation and who has not.” Similarly, another participant described that they pay attention to “who’s speaking, who’s taking up the most space, and who’s consuming the most amount of time during the decision-making process.”

A participant also shared specific ways in which they intervene when they notice that not everyone is engaging or if someone is not being heard by the rest of the group. They said, “A young person may be intimidated in these spaces. They may not be as articulate because they are nervous.” They described that when this happens, “I’ll try to jump in and repeat their position in a way that I understand (and I’ll ask for them to validate) but restating in a way the rest of the group understands.” Another participant shared that they pay particular attention to “When discussion subsides, how are partner organizations responding to what community members said? I’m reading body language to see if they are receptive to those ideas.” Another participant described that they focus on “tending to the interactions happening below the surface. Make sure there are authentic and honest voices that are being shared” as a method for understanding whether community-driven decision-making has actually occurred. They further described that

they are “watching to see if it seems the group is comfortable both affirming and disagreeing with one another and that people can be their authentic selves.”

One participant further elaborated on their experience related to meaningful group engagement as related to whether each group member shows up as their real self. They described the way in which they pay attention to changes in group behavior as part of their assessment of authentic engagement. They noted they watch group members’ behavior because, “Facilitators have relationships with folks in the room and can read nonverbal cues. [I] may watch for when people are showing up in a different way or a lack of participation.”

Although several participants specifically noted the importance of ensuring all group members are engaging as something they monitor, there were some differences related to what happens when conflict arises. One participant called out, “When there is conflict/disagreement about the best way to move forward, it’s ultimately not about consensus and the perspective of folks with lived experience should be elevated to guide the resolution.” The priority of ensuring that folks with lived experience are key drivers of the work was also elevated through another participant’s reflection. They said, “Was community actually part of the conversation and at what point(s)?” They further elaborated, “Because to be honest, unless you are starting your collaborative right by building it with community at the core from the start, you still have a lot of old ways in your thinking and being.” Another participant shared that after decisions are made in the group they check if “at least part of the decision makers are reflective of the context and demographic being addressed.”

CI Group Members. Many of the collective impact group participants also discussed how they pay attention to engagement patterns when determining whether or not a decision is community-driven. That ranged from general noticings such as “whether there was opportunity

for community to be included throughout the process" and "did everyone feel comfortable and connected enough to push back, share different experiences and be their full authentic selves." Another person noted, "some obvious things such as who's speaking in that space. If conversation is driven by particular individuals or organizations that can be an indication of agenda driving the work and if it's at the expense of lived experience." Other participants also shared how they watch for specific engagement patterns based on group members' perspectives. For example, one participant shared how they focus on "noticing if someone who is representative of the demographic is part of conversation. Has there been other information relevant to the community members who are impacted, collected and shared with the group." Another participant shared, "It's common to be some level of group think- happened across various steps (beginning, middle and end). There may be some significant figure heads." They further noted, "Certain individuals have reputations or authoritative type positions and others have less authoritative. Some participants don't hold decision-making positions within their organizations but are very knowledgeable and in touch with the groups that the [group] wanted to impact." They also reflected, "noticed they weren't as comfortable being a voice on behalf of their organization or speaking up in meetings."

Engagement patterns related to contextual changes also surfaced. One participant shared how engagement changed when the group changed logistics due to COVID-19. They said, "I recall having to move to zoom because of the pandemic. That made attendance easier to get more participation, but saw some folks disengage because of the project that was being formed as a result of the work." They explained, "For example, some groups traditionally work with young adults and some work with youth and they didn't see alignment. I felt them participate less." They described the impact by saying, "That's unfortunate because you want full engagement

throughout the process. Even if they were present, they weren't asking as many questions or following up on action steps or assignments." A different participant also shared how they pay attention to engagement patterns that surface in response to logistical context. They said, "[I'm} thinking that it was impacted by things like when were meetings held and what were the engagement processes that were used." They shared a specific example, "We went out of our way to ensure parents and youth were centered in that conversation. But because of the group we pulled together, based on their access to resources, meetings were held mid-day and held virtually because of Covid." They further explained, "But we were solving for people who didn't have [internet] access so it was counterintuitive to hold meetings virtually if we wanted to include them." They also shared, "We were able to bring people in for several conversations but we often or sometimes relied on proxies (e.g., nonprofit leaders) which isn't bad but it's one degree of separation which lowers the percentage in my mind."

Consensus. The third theme for this question can be described as general group agreement with shared understanding and focus on desired result.

Facilitators. This theme focused on whether the group members reached a decision that was a reflection of alignment across what the group collectively thought was best. One participant described how they are "looking for moments of agreement and light bulbs going off. Hearing folks having shared insights and understanding of the issue to know there is a shared problem." Another participant described that they are paying attention to "the extent to which [collective impact] members are expressing alignment/agreement to what is being proposed. Even the language which is not spoken- those who are silent." Another participant described their experience of intentionally focusing on, "Who is taking up a lot of space in the group and what is their positional authority, people monopolizing the decisions, and how are they

potentially influencing the group." They also shared their experience of "attending to when you notice tension that arises in the group, the response that happens is telling. What were the verbals and nonverbals that led us to believe that the decisions sets right with people." They shared examples of verbals being people mumbling under their breath or saying I do not agree but I am okay with it. Nonverbal examples included sighing, checking out, rolling eyes, or getting up and leaving the room. They noted, "tons of nonverbals that happen in a container that you have to be aware of." A different participant noted that they are watching for group consensus but also monitoring if the decision ultimately moves the work forward and creates a sense of resolution about next steps. A different participant shared similar experiences but further expanded they "pause and ask if there are any folks who disagree with the direction." They also noted asking the group about what potential barriers might they run into if they move forward with the decision as a way to understand if there was true consensus across the group or whether some group members held deep reservations even though they agreed.

CI Group Members. Only one participant shared information related to the consensus theme. They described how they specifically pay attention to the notion that, "Though the community may have made a decision, was it a full decision where there was full consensus or did the group just work to get something passed that was in line with the rules."

Frequency of Community-Driven Decision-Making

Participants were asked to estimate the percentage of time (across all types of decisions and all phases of a collective impact group) that they believe the group successfully achieved equitable, community-driven decision-making.

Facilitators. Based on the facilitators' answers, there was a wide range from 5-75% of the time. The average percentage across all participants was 51.3%, indicating that, collectively,

the facilitators experienced equitable community-driven decision- making happening about half of the time. One facilitator commented, “People think they are equitable- the intention of equity and being community-driven is always there, but it doesn’t always happen.” Further, several discussions indicated that follow-up conversations sometimes needed to occur in order to bolster the percentage. Another facilitator noted that the timing of decisions can also play into the likelihood of whether or not the group utilizes effective community-driven decision-making. They shared, “It’s easier for community-driven decision-making to happen earlier in the process because [early decisions] are less consequential. But when it comes time to change institutional practice or changing policy- that’s harder.”

CI Group Members. Participants were also asked the same question. Their answers ranged from 25-100% of the time. The average percentage across the collective impact group participants was 51.6%. In sharing context about their answer, one participant noted they “want to claim a higher percentage but I don’t know that would be accurate.” The person who shared the highest percentage added context by saying, “There hasn’t been an example of when the group hasn’t been willing to infuse community needs into the decision process.” Another participant noted, “[I] think these networks can create success within organizations [because it] puts ideas in people’s heads that they can implement. The collaborative part and having wide buy-in feels more difficult.” They further reflected, “ So these groups have an impact, I just don’t know if they achieve the community-driven decision-making process across all fronts.”

Experience of Being Tasked with Making a Community-Driven Decision

Only the collective impact group participants were asked this question. Their answers fell into three distinct themes related to desiring a broader perspective, personal impact of being in this role, and awareness of group dynamics.

Broadened Perspective. This first theme can be described as a strong inclination to have access to different perspectives in order to contribute to a community-driven decision.

CI Group Members: From a more general perspective appreciating getting to hear different perspectives, one participant described their experience, "It's exciting, even if it can be worrying too. It's always fun because when you are in those rooms you get to hear other people's perspectives and expertise. I like the ability to do those things." A similar sentiment surfaced from a different participant who said, "I'm curious to hear other people's thoughts or experience and listen to what data they think is important. It requires you to trust your peers and requires you to listen and to absorb." Another participant described, "It's helpful to know it from both sides and I can share this experience with my team. Start thinking about things like 'what is the cost to do this project' and thinking through the realities of ideas."

Other participants went on more deeply to describe the importance they equate to accessing perspectives different from their own as they work to make community-driven decisions. One person said, "Really hope we brought everyone we need into the room. It takes time, commitment to get those people in the room." That reflection was shared as the participant was describing what weighed on them most from their experience. Another participant shared how they navigated the difficulty of balancing limited resources, perception of appropriate uses of resources, and truly using community feedback to guide decisions. "When you make a decision you know there's always a need for more so community engagement is so crucial to know what is [the] best way to use the money." They further reflected, "Who knows better about what they need than them (folks with lived experience), but we are also balancing realities of existing resources. Have to be conscious that we have to break the barriers of making decisions for them." A different participant noted, "Something I'm always thinking of is 'is this the right

thing' for someone who has lived in the community with this experience. I think back to times when there were people who made decisions that I didn't have a say in and so I always wonder if it's the right thing to be doing." They further noted, "There's data that helps guide the decision-making. But even so, after the group commits to a specific direction, I always wonder if we've gotten their objective and I hold some skepticism."

The same participant went on to detail their experience of using different perspectives to reconcile varying perspectives between what community members say they need and what national research shows is effective. They said, "In my experience, I've had to work through that skepticism. For example, in groups where the decision is to focus on increased FAFSA completion, I originally thought 'why are we doing this if the students aren't asking for it'." They further explained, "But colleagues helped show me studies showing that increased FAFSA is related to improved college retention. So while I originally thought we were doing too much FAFSA, it started to make sense." They slo noted, "But it didn't completely make me not skeptical because I was thinking about the community we live in." They further reflected, "[The community is] unique and I was trying to reconcile how a specific plan can improve my community when using national level results or guidelines and how that may or may not work for my community."

Another participant shared their experience as it relates to seeing performative integration of people with lived experiences. They said, "There's some ways that backbone organizations don't have the connection with the community where they trust them enough to show up, so the way the community is brought in is more preformative." They further explained complications they experienced with how different perspectives are infused into the decision-making process and said, "I do understand that there is a risk of going to people with less education, less

experience, less platform and asking them to get their voice and buy-in a way that feels meaningful to the collective." They further noted, "I've seen it work where people go to people with lived experience and take them exactly for what they say and it is out of the scope of the organization and therefore creates mission drift or they ignore the feedback and then it becomes performative." They reflected, "That dance is very hard so they go to community-like entities and people that they trust to be able to speak the backbone organizations' language." Another participant described a similar experience and said, "We bring kids who technically represent [the target audience], but their experiences are not actually representative." They described that the same thing happens with adults too and reflected, "The route to getting invited means you do extra or are connected to people with resources. We just don't always address the real things that people deal with. They further reflected, "[Instead] we address the challenges of the group of people who are having the best version of that experience." These statements demonstrate that participants are mindful of not just gaining community perspectives, but seeking perspectives that are most relevant to the discussion at hand.

Personal Impact. The second theme can be described as the way in which engaging in the process of making a community-driven decision affects the person on an individual level.

CI Group Members. Participants surfaced both the positive and challenging impacts of their experiences being charged with making community-driven decisions, as well as more neutral impacts. For example, several people described the way the experience opened their eyes to what a group process does for determining use of resources that was not just formal leaders and funders could be, as that was their first time in that role. They shared, "It's a huge responsibility and thinking 'oh my' it's not easy. There are fewer resources than what is really needed and this realization put me on the other side of decision-making." They further reflected,

I became more conscious of both sides of responsibility and it showed the need for trust." The weight of the responsibility was described by one participant who said, "It is empowering but at the same time, a huge responsibility to make a good decision that the organizations need. Not normally the type of decision that is on my plate." They also said, "It was a personal experience that put me in another role that was a huge stress in the beginning."

Another participant spoke to the challenge of the role and said, " [It's] disembodying a lot of times because even though I am an organizational partner that's in the trenches doing the work with community members, I still don't feel like I fully represent the community to be able to make decisions for them." They further described that who is considered community "is blurred because my experience doesn't make me the best person to make those decisions. How much do I advocate for the community to be brought in more and how much do I just take on that role?" Another participant shared, "The more responsibility/higher role I have in leadership, I find it very frustrating because leaders and organizations are tasked with pushing needles forward but not always equipped with the ability to truly allow community members to make decisions." They further noted, "It's frustrating and scary. Scary is too big of a word, more like it creates doubt about decisions or if we are putting the right people in leadership. The worry is my biggest feeling." They went on to describe, "The goal is to make decisions on behalf of other people with the community in mind but the people who are representative of the community in the room are shining stars so they don't necessarily represent the average person." They further explained, "There can be token people in the room and I think those are things that can be really hard. It creates burnout." They also described, "It's hard to go into a room where most people look like me and we are making decisions for people with different lived experiences. It's hard to be a leader and think about that truth." They also shared, "Being in a room like that, you want to

make progress so the answer is not to sit out. We don't say that to each other but we all grapple with it."

A different participant spoke to the experience of being initially confused as to their role in the group. They said, "When it first starts, there's a period where I'm just thinking, 'how can what I do help this group, what power do I have, who do I know in order to make sure what I do is helpful'." They further noted, "It takes one or two or three meetings before understanding how I can contribute." Another participant spoke to how their experience helped them to clarify their own role related to challenging their own biases. They said, "One of my biases is that I tend to be highly pragmatic and want to focus on what will be most realistic and effective. When groups go towards a more grassroots approach as opposed to targeted approach, there is value in that too." They further reflected, "My responsibility is to recognize the value in approaches different from my own." They also noted, "As long as I have a chance to share my insights, it's my job to trust that people with lived experience can see aspects of my viewpoint and know why it won't work in ways that I can't see."

One participant connected the difficulty of the process as also relating to the value of the experience. They said, "It's a challenging and long process but it's worthy of your time. Even if outcomes don't happen and nothing comes to be in total, it will push you and your community to be better and more thoughtful in decision-making." They further reflected, "I walk away thinking 'I've never considered that perspective before' and that does influence my perspective outside of the session. Worth it!"

Relationship to Group. The third theme can be described as a focus on awareness of group dynamics (both interpersonal and stage of work) that impact the experience of being asked to make community-driven decisions.

CI Group Members. Some of the group dynamics that surfaced related specifically to trust among the participants. One person shared, "When I wasn't in a leadership position but starting to be invited to conversations, that's when I would notice where trust wasn't always there." They shared an example related to site level versus district level lack of trust and noted, "We couldn't come to a conclusion everyone was happy about because we all had a hand in the issue (i.e.,workforce development) but we didn't all understand what the best outcome would have been." They also described how they experienced the group as working with different sub-populations which also impacted the process. They said, "We were trying to trust each other but had hesitations around each other's organizations and focus area. We didn't agree about the goal as we had different ideas of realistically how many people we can actually impact." They further noted, "Feels like you have to make a ton of relationships to have vulnerable conversations. When you become a sticky wheel, by saying 'we aren't making the actual impact,' people don't feel welcome." They further shared they "have seen other leaders have the path where their longevity was not going to happen at the organization because of speaking up. That can happen at organizational level and in the [collective impact] space." Hence this participant surfaced what it feels like to speak essential truths when trust is not in place.

Other participants spoke to group dynamics that shift depending on where the group is at in the process. One person said, "Early on in the group process, I find myself extremely willing to say 'that's not as good of an idea' as the group decides on what to do." They further reflected, "However, my willingness to speak up goes down significantly after a goal has been set. I think I go from starting out as a blank slate and then start to feel like my contributions become less creative or less interesting." They also noted, "My focus starts to be more informed by necessity and being pragmatic. Thinking that we've spent three months working on this and now if I speak

up, that would make the group pivot." They reflected on the impact with the group and said, "Something like that can ruin morale. It's better to go forward with a decision then rewinding and going back to the drawing board so I don't always speak up for the sake of progress."

Another participant shared their experience based on differences with the sizes of a decision. They shared, "The smaller the task/decision, the smaller the bite and it feels easier to execute. The bigger decision is where some of the negative feelings start to outweigh the excited feelings because you don't know the direction to go." Another person noted they experienced community-driven decision-making as being "harder during later steps of the process." They shared that, "Coming and agreeing on mission and goals for the project was easily done. Everybody agreed and there was consensus on what we wanted to accomplish." They further reflected, "When we got further into details, that is where we see, not necessarily disagreement but people not aligning as heavily because of their organizational mission. Saw lesser levels of engagement as the project went on."

Participants also discussed higher level truths about group decision-making based on their experiences. One person shared it, "can be harder than hierarchical or individual decision-making. There's more work up front to get more lasting results and to ensure the decision you are making is grounded in the experience and challenges by those being impacted." They further noted, "But that additional work is worth it and is critical to equitable decision-making. It is important to do that without being patronizing and trying to apply your decision-making to their experience, which takes intentionality."

A different participant shared that from their experience, they are seeing broader shifts in how groups engage with one another in collective impact spaces. They said, "Working ten years in the community, I have seen changes in the last few years. We were being used to justify how

the service is provided so that people can say they are inclusive and care about this community." They further reflected, "But in the last few years, it feels different. Seeing strategies to really listen to the community and seeing that people truly want to know what other people's knowledge and experience is."

Research Question 2: What Elements Hinder Community-Driven Decision- Making?

This research question consists of two different interview questions that focus on general barriers, power dynamics, and interpersonal relationships that stakeholders experience as impacting community-driven decisions within collective impact groups.

Barriers to Community-Driven Decision-Making

When asked to describe the barriers that impeded groups from successfully engaging in equitable community-driven decision-making, six themes surfaced that include structural conditions, external expectations, effective facilitation, group member interactions, competing priorities, and limited power. All the answers below reflect responses from collective impact facilitators only, as collective impact participants were not asked this specific question in order to allow time for other relevant questions.

Structural Conditions. The first theme can be described as aspects of how, when, and where the group meets throughout the duration of the work that impacts the group's ability to have representative voices present for every decision.

Facilitators: Responses included elements that impact the ability of representative perspectives to be included throughout the duration of the collective impact group's work. Some elements specifically centered on logistical decisions that impact the ability of group members to attend the group sessions. This included details such as when, where, and how group members meet. One participant shared that determining these types of logistics can be difficult because,

“time and availability of community members does not align with practitioners.” Another participant elaborated on this experience: “Many practitioners work more standard working hours because of tasks that need to be completed outside of facilitating sessions. That schedule doesn’t necessarily align to when community members are available.” They elaborated, “So facilitators end up working evenings, lunch breaks or weekends to accommodate those schedules which means they sometimes end up working 10 hour days and that leads to burnout.” They also shared, “May need to rethink how we program work day schedules for facilitators to align with community availability.” That experience shows there might not be an obvious choice that will work for all group members and the facilitators. Thus, there is an element of equity infused into the decision of when and how the group meets, because someone will likely have to be burdened more than others.

Other elements made linkage between regular attendance and the impact on the process the group uses for forward movement. One participant specifically noted that there is difficulty when new members join the group because, “If you're fresh to the table, newer folks might feel like, oh, it takes me a minute to jump in.” Another participant made a related comment, “When new people join, it’s sort of like a family thing where, like I can talk about my family but nobody outside of my family can, right. You band together.” They further reflected, “I think it’s that similar sort of approach when you’re the new person on the block. Sense that you can’t come in questioning things. I’m not saying this literally happens all the time, but I have seen it happen.”

There was also an impact noted for existing members who are not able to attend every session. A participant shared, “Not every member is able to attend every session which can disrupt the flow. You have to take time to catch people up.” Another participant similarly noted, “When people are coming and going from the group, that can change dynamics tremendously.”

A different participant expanded on that experience by sharing, “Some relationships are with the person and not the organization so relationships don’t alway translate when people leave.”

Other aspects of structural conditions related to when the community was invited to be part of the group. Participants elevated that even early decisions about establishing the group and who to invite benefit from community-driven decision-making, but those decisions may occur prior to the group being formed and having an established format for making decisions. One participant explained, “In my experience, decisions have sometimes already been made and it’s a formality to engage the community or bring them into the conversation when it’s already in process, ¾ the way through.” They further explained that in their experience that happens because, “Sometimes it's the lack of backbone organization and/or facilitator knowing how to truly involve community members from the start. There’s a lack of authentic relationships being built with community members to be able to engage them from the beginning.”

External expectations. The second theme can be described as pressure created by external stakeholders that can negatively impact the timeline, process, and outcomes of the group's work.

Facilitators. Some of the external expectations centered around time constraints that are imposed by external stakeholders, such as funders. Those constraints were noted as being disruptive because they created a false sense of urgency through imposing “pace and pressure for speed.” One participant noted specifically that those types of time constraints can be at odds with core values explaining the reality that, “Infusing equity slows down the process.”

This theme also centered around expectations of where the work will lead. Participants shared that sometimes the direction of the collective impact group is different than the desire of external stakeholders, and that can create conflict. Sometimes these expectations are tied to

resources needed for the work to continue as referenced by one participant who said there is "funding pressure about when outcomes are expected and what those outcomes should look like." Another participant further explained that impact from multiple vantage points noting, "Deadlines and sense of urgency for the work can disrupt really using community-driven decision-making. That's my experience across any collective impact group- either as a participant or as a facilitator." Another participant shared that time constraints can impact relationship building among the group members as, "funder timelines [can lead to] rushing through trust and relationship building."

Ineffective Facilitation. The third theme can be described as the need for a facilitator's willingness and ability to help ensure the group remains clear about purpose and process of the work throughout each stage, as well as willingness and ability to help the group navigate barriers that arise.

Facilitators. Aspects of effective facilitation arose related to the importance of collective impact participants and other community members having an awareness of both the purpose of the group and the purpose of community-driven decision-making. A participant explained, "It's like there's still that lack of trust or maybe just even that understanding of what it is you're doing or trying to do." They further shared, "I mean my organization has been around here in our city for a few years, seven years or so, but there are still some people that have no clue what it is we do." Another participant noted a barrier being "lack of clarity around the ultimate goal. In my experience, when I didn't have a clear vision of the long term impact of community-driven decisions, it was hard to communicate progress to my own organization and to my funders." Specific to understanding the purpose and prioritization of community-driven decision-making, a participant explained, "If community-driven decision-making isn't named in the process that can

be problematic." They noted that they, "Encourage people to use the spectrum that Strive has or something similar. Have a framework in place that is agreed upon by the community you are working with. That's an idea to help close that gap."

Participants further expanded on their experience of needing the facilitator to more effectively build capacity of the group members. They shared, "Facilitators have access to lots of training, but when you bring those tools into collective impact spaces, sometimes that's the first time people have utilized them." They elaborated further, "So there's a need to support them [facilitators] not only using them, but understanding their purpose and being patient as people get used to using new tools." They also noted it's "helpful to build capacity for lead partners in action teams to develop different tiers of leadership and share learnings so that more than the facilitator knows the tactics." They concluded, "Having facilitators be the keeper of the space doesn't work, it needs to be shared learning and shared ownership."

Participants also described the importance of facilitators helping groups effectively create and follow processes that enable them to successfully work through conflict that can arise in decision-making. A participant described that groups "need a facilitator who feels comfortable navigating the challenges that arise. It's not always pretty, not everyone agrees. [Need] a facilitator who has the stamina to run meetings around those types of dynamics." They further described, "Having a nimble facilitator who shows up to make everyone feel included in the space, [so they feel] that they have a voice and can contribute to what the group is doing." They also shared, "Being able to add context to make jargon be understandable to folks who don't have the same background knowledge. A facilitator is such a key in seeing the outcomes."

One participant shared their experience of dealing with power dynamics related to not being sure how to address community leaders in the group who held distinct formalized power

but were not hearing the other perspectives in the room. They shared, “I didn’t feel comfortable to tell her what she was missing. I dropped seeds and she wasn’t picking up what I was dropping.” They further described, “I’m wrestling with how to give unsolicited feedback and make her hear some of things that she’s currently not hearing because I don’t want to go through another round and have the same barriers.”

Another aspect of facilitation was raised related to needs for ongoing facilitator support and training. One participant explained, “This is such hard work and we need a network for folks to reach out to each other and have open ways to connect with each other.” They further reflected, “That can happen through communities of practice, but people in this line of work need to be able to access each other and tools and professional resources and have access to social emotional support.” They also shared, “It can be lonely and frustrating otherwise. People don’t know where to start, they just need guidance. They think they are doing it and they aren’t, they just need guidance.” Another participant shared the need for “support for facilitators and ensuring they know what to do when they see barriers arise. There is training available or facilitators can be part of a community of practice, but not everyone has access to those resources.”

Finally, one facilitator shared how there’s a need for different types of facilitation skills at different parts of the group work because different types of challenges arise. They explained, “It’s easier for community-driven decision-making to happen earlier in the process because they are less consequential. But when it comes time to change institutional practice or changing policy, that’s harder.” They shared an example, “In one collective impact group, the community members had innovative ideas and suggestions for ways to improve access to information about a community service. However, the institution shut it down and said they don’t have capacity.”

They shared, “As a facilitator, I had to have separate conversations with both groups to unpack whether the barriers were true barriers or related to mental models.” They explained, “It took a lot of one-on-one conversations from different stakeholders, because they weren’t ready to have those conversations as a group.”

Group Member Interactions. The fourth theme can be described as disruptions to authentic group engagement related to lack of genuine respect for differing opinions/experiences and/or lack of self-awareness.

Facilitators. Dynamics between group members and the way they interact with one another was also a theme from the conversations. One participant shared a description of a neutral type of impact related to real or perceived knowledge differences that exist. They said, “If your title is Director of Early Childcare and we are talking about early child care, there's a natural inclination for folks to turn and say like, hey, so and so, could you please explain this to me?” This experience lends itself towards understanding group tendencies to prioritize the perspectives of people with more formalized experience.

Other participants stressed the challenges that can arise when participants are not truly open to integrating others’ ideas and experiences into their own understanding. A participant describes the following scenario, "Sometimes people in power aren’t always listening to those on the ground for whatever reason.” They reflected, “ [It’s] fascinating and surprising because it’s someone who is part of the work and has been in different key positions yet that person could not see what others were seeing as likely challenges.” They noted, “They have the passion for the work but so passionate that they weren't asking community members for their insights. That comes from an entitled space.” They noted, “Good intentions are not enough. Need to make sure you are hearing the voices of others.” They went on to share, “There’s a lot of people in

leadership positions that are very detached from the work- there needs to be very intentional relationship building and trust to be able to integrate other perspectives." They concluded, "When things have worked, it's because trust from system leaders to trust that community members are valuable assets is important. The reverse is necessary too, trust that systems leaders can be effective allies in this space."

A third element of this theme relates to the engagement of group members and when their true feelings are not always elevated in the space. For example, one participant noted, "Some people don't agree but don't say anything." Another participant focused on varying degrees of engagement that are impacted by each member's proximity to the idea. They described a scenario, "Some ideas/decisions aren't relevant for all partners, so they don't really weigh in because they don't care." They further shared that when that situation occurs, they want to keep them engaged, so they "help them make indirect connections using effective questions." Questioning whether feedback would make a difference was also raised by a participant who said, "There's a sense that when you are new to the group, you think 'let me not say anything because I know they're still going to make this decision." They also shared that there can be a sense that, "People are still going to be inclined to go this way even if I say something different." Regardless of the reason that drives collective impact members to not fully engage or share their thoughts/opinions, these participants considered it to be a barrier to groups achieving a community-driven decision.

A fourth element related to self-awareness was elevated as a barrier that can contribute to how group members engage in the decision-making process. "When participants or facilitators haven't done the 'me work,' they don't always know their blindspots, thus making it hard to truly root the work in equity." They further noted, "Need constant review of blindspots because

we don't realize that we make decisions using our bias. We think we are being equitable but we are not, so we need to be mindful of checking ourselves as we go." They also shared one way they have experienced overcoming this barrier is through "building equity journeys into the process and giving the network opportunity to learn the history of inequities so they can define equity for themselves. Need to understand how racial equity does or does not impact our decision-making." Another person shared, "Sometimes we get ahead of ourselves. With building trust and relationships, we rush through that process and jump to making decisions together. In some spaces, we need to repair harm that has been done in the community first. But that time isn't always allotted."

Competing Priorities. The fifth theme can be described as having conflicting interests or limited resources that influence group members' individual contributions to the group.

Facilitators. Context from participants related to the theme of competing priorities falls into both external and internal components. One person shared a general experience where, "Sometimes people have their own goals and agenda and lose sight of the big picture." Facilitators also called out the reality that sometimes participants are "wanting to get things done fast. [There are] other deadlines people have to attend to which makes them feel like they need to do this work quickly." They further shared that it "happens in regard to how tapped into the work people are and impacts how present they are for the work and that can change dynamics." They also noted that the differences in what brings people to the space can impact the way they engage. For example, one participant noted that groups are often "relying on work to happen in between meetings. Not everyone is compensated for the work they are asked to do in between the meetings which can impact whether or not it's prioritized."

One discussion also raised examples of hesitancy to share ideas with one another. They

said, “Sometimes it can feel counterintuitive for people to share good ideas because they feel like someone will steal them. And actually that typically doesn’t happen.” They elaborated, “What happens is they introduce it into the space and other people add to it and make it even more innovative and cooler and better.” Another participant shared the sentiment that even when collaboration is valued by the group, there still tends to be issues related to feeling the need to compete for resources. They shared, “I see people lock arms more and see them understand the value and benefits of collaborating whether that’s just project to project or thinking about joint funding.” They further described, “But there’s still inherent competition that exists around ‘I want my program and my organization to look great.’ We want to get funding, right.” They reflected, “There are all these things that still have to happen. And I think sometimes that can get in the way of people fully giving themselves to the collaborative effort.”

At the internal level, one participant called out serving one’s egos as being a barrier and specifically noted multiple levels of ego that can be disruptive, including “ego of the group, of partner organizations, of the facilitator.” Another aspect related to being able to support work-life balance while also being active in the collective impact group. One participant noted the experience of it being difficult to have “time to refresh AND stay committed when life pulls you away.” Another participant shared a sense of experiencing conflicting values related to wanting to create solutions for people who are being harmed by the disparity and also wanted to approach the work in ways that allow time for creating sustainable solutions. One participant explained, “While the importance of the issues should push people to rush in some ways, there’s also the process of what people need to get to the goal. [Those] conflicting values within the process can prevent consistent community-driven decision-making.”

Limited Power. The sixth theme can be described as societal or organizational limitations that impact ability to make and carry out decisions in alignment with community needs/desires as planned.

Facilitators. At an organizational level, one participant explained, "I keep hearing from partners all the time, even though we get approval from top leadership, what type of approval is it?" They further elaborated, "Approval to participate or commitment from the institution that if we send you there and the group decides to do this, then we as an organization will be willing to make that change." They reflected, "There ends up being a multi-level approval process that goes outside of the group because of what is described above." In essence, this implies that there are experiences where regardless of what a collective impact group decides, that does not mean the decision is final because external approval is needed in order for the decision truly to be put into action. Another aspect of external power blockades was described by a participant who shared, "Structural racism creates a space where there is a difference in power. That is very real." They elaborated, "You come into the space with the expectation that there are group decisions being made, but you go out in the world and it's still fundamentally racist. Those power dynamics exist in the way our society is organized." They further described that in their experience it is one of the biggest barriers and shared, "It's always a piece of it. Even if a decision is made in the room, with what level of certainty can the group say it's going to be played out as decided once they are outside the room?" Another participant added, "Social and political challenges impact ability to do the equity work. [There are] larger forces challenging the ethos of keeping equity at the center of the work." They shared an example focused on language. They explained, "Some people could lose their job or lose social capital in their communities because it's so polarized. This also requires ability and willingness to look at data to see the hard truths."

Power Dynamics

As noted above, power dynamics specifically surfaced in two conversations about barriers in general. However, when the researcher specifically asked about the impact of interpersonal relationships and/or power dynamics on group decision-making, numerous examples surfaced across most facilitator conversations and all six group members elevated at least one power dynamic. One facilitator noted, “Yes, it happens everywhere and happens even when you are in this space.” However, not every interviewee experienced power dynamics as being problems they have faced. One facilitator explained, “Don’t think there are power dynamics with the current group. Don’t use name tags so people don’t always know one another’s titles. All there as professionals so not really a power dynamic.” They further explained they have no indication from feedback forms that participants are experiencing power dynamics. They said, “[We] ask questions that would give opportunity for people to share concerns. That is reviewed by me and co-facilitators. We go through the whole thing together so there are multiple perspectives seeing those results.” For those research participants that did experience power dynamics, there are three themes that include power differentials, pre-existing relationships, and responses to individual identities/presentation of self.

Power Differentials. The first theme can be described as whether real or not, different levels of authority associated with a person or an organization's access to resources, education, experience and/or role.

Facilitators. The theme of power differentials includes both real and perceived differences between group members' individual or organizational access to resources (e.g., funding, networks of other key decision makers). One participant specifically describes those resources, “[There are] power dynamics related to who has access to resources (money) and who

is a decision-maker outside of the collective impact group that can impact the outcome of the group." Another participant noted, "The organization tied to funding gets an advantage in some ways and it does influence the timeline, who's at the table, what's funded, and how much is funded." They further explained, "Those that are doing the convening are those that are most responsive and responsible for who's funding the convening. Convening and recruiting takes time, resources, training and assets. When funders fund, they have requirements (timewise)." Beyond access to resources, other aspects of one's affiliation were also listed as creating power dynamics. For example, one person described their experience of seeing both "real and perceived power differences related to different sized organizations represented, funders represented, and parents in the room versus young people in the same room." Another facilitator elevated the existence of "competition and/or competing agendas among partners in the space. We address it by naming it but calling attention to the different expectations in this particular space." They also shared, "In the nonprofit space, although people collaborate more, there's still this inherent competition to get funding and have your programs looking great."

Further, at an individual level, examples surfaced such as, "Depending on the sector, it could go to education level like does this person have a Ph.D. in this field?" They further described a less formal dynamic based on role and or perceived expertise. They said, "I think the example that comes to mind where it shows up most is school based. The principal may have a lot more power in those conversations compared to parents."

Some facets of different power levels represented more practical distinctions such as, "Sometimes it's about what the decision means for different people. It seems like whoever is implementing the idea automatically gets additional power." Another participant echoed that sentiment when noting there is "disproportionate influence for those that are actually

implementing the idea versus those that are decision-makers but not actually going to implement."

The impact of power differentials was not only reserved to relationships among collective impact group members, but also was relevant for those group members in relation to the backbone organization and associated facilitators. This is evidenced by the comment, "As a backbone organization, we also hold power in these spaces. For example, it can play out in how notes are synthesized and when the backbone pushes the group to move forward with making a decision." In specifically acknowledging the power dynamic that surfaces with the facilitator, one participant described "the power that people assign to a facilitator. [Group members] ask you questions as though you are the expert. Just being in front of the room changes how people see you. Societal expectations come into the room." They further explained the "need to do intentional work to illustrate that it's not the automatic structure of how this is going to work. This is different than what we are socialized to do (eg: school)."

CI Group Members. There were a variety of dimensions related to power differentials that arose among the interviewees. One participant shared aspects of power that erupt based on languages utilized in the space. They said, "In my dream world, my main desire would be [a group that is] multicultural and multilingual. Sometimes people want to go but don't understand English enough to participate. We shouldn't expect everyone to speak English, that's a power dynamic itself."

Another participant shared how their pattern of participation changed once they felt that their voice was not making a difference in the outcome compared to other voices in the space. They shared, "When I first stepped into my current role, my first review included feedback that 'you don't speak up very often'." They elaborated, "But I started to become quiet because I

could tell I would say things and it felt like they weren't being considered in the final decision. It can quiet leaders who are thinking about these things."

Other participants shared instances of differential power in the space that they felt was appropriate. For example, one person said, "On one hand, I feel like the most experienced or highest ranking position often seems like the perspective that we all go with, which makes sense. Their expertise is relevant." Another participant spoke to how they intentionally ceded power. They explained that they, "have had to take a step back and realize my program is not a program that saves lives. [That] factors into decision-making about what's best for the community when contributing to group decisions."

Another participant explained how in their experience, they saw power differentials evolve over time. They shared, "As the project evolves, you see some of that power shift. At the beginning, there are more powerful voices that are more closely aligned to what the project is going to do." They further reflected, "From my experience, those that were new to being collaborative partners didn't have a strong sense of belonging so that had to mature over time. Their participation was lacking at the beginning but did develop. It takes time."

One participant elaborated on how power differentials play out differently in small group versus large group discussion. They reflected, "Are you saying it at your table or are you saying it to everyone? In [collective impact groups] people do tend to be more open but there's still a sense of pre-existing relationships impacting what people will say/share." They added, "People want to see results and the pressure of getting at least some results can impact how people approach decision-making in those spaces."

A different participant shared power differentials that they experience between the backbone organization that is convening/facilitating the collective impact group and the

participants of the group. They explained, “The assumption of the backbone organization being the expert comes into play even for myself of how willing I am to challenge things. I assume they know what they are talking about more than me because they are the convener.” They also noted, “Without it being upfront that we are on equal footing, it can definitely impact decision-making.”

Another participant shared that in their experience, power differentials are common. They said, “[I] see this frequently, especially when doing equity based work with a community that has been marginalized or oppressed.” They shared, “All of the power dynamics of the existing oppression come into the conversation and there’s a need to intentionally give space or power to those individuals who often don’t get it.”

Another example of power differentials disrupting community-driven decision-making focused on organizational power. A participant shared that in one collective impact space they noticed, “A lot of groups were vying for funding for projects. In the final stages of the funding package being developed, the process went from all voices should be heard to playing out to what city councilors/the mayor wanted.” They further reflected, “It became a negotiation about the [city leaders] own preferences. I saw large funders pushing for specific projects be given more leeway and have their projects funded at a higher level.” They also noted, “Groups that have time or resources for deeper planning have more credence and credibility and were given preference compared to community-driven projects that don’t have resources.” They further noted, “When this happens, [it feels] heartbreaking and frustrating. When you see the collapse or clear demonstration of uses of power in this space, it’s almost as if it makes the underlying systemic dynamics visible.” They concluded, “It takes it from the realm of unspoken to spoken.”

Finally, one participant spoke to their experience of seeing current leaders work to live up to expectations of being a leader. They explained, “A lot of leaders feel that they have the responsibility to maintain some sort of public facing appearance and to keep everybody happy. That power dynamic does stop the right decision.”

Pre-existing Relationships. The second theme can be described as relationships that have been cultivated at both the individual or organizational level prior to the start of the collective impact group that impact how members interact with one another within the group.

Facilitators. Participants shared a variety of ways in which pre-existing relationships can serve as barriers to effective community-driven decision-making. One participant noted, “There's a lot of interpersonal relationships, people have interacted with each other outside of our [collective impact groups], hopefully, positively.” They continued, “But sometimes they don't have a great working relationship and there's tension in the room or someone feels really strongly about their idea and they don't feel the need to give space to other people, while sharing that thought.” This experience was shared in relation to when people’s level of comfort and familiarity with one another may change their approach to seeking feedback (i.e., they are so comfortable with one another that they overlook the notion that someone might see it differently).

Another participant called out how those pre-existing relationships can sometimes shift how decisions are actually made. “Relationships are important for everyone in the group. But when there are pre-existing relationships outside of the collective impact group, which is almost always a reality, there is the risk of decisions being made outside of the [session] container.” It’s plausible to assume that means discussion outside of the group sessions may influence members in ways that are unseen during the sessions.

One example shared elevated dynamics based on different roles and previous interactions. A participant described, “We have school staff and parents as part of the same group. Each side had come into the space not having a positive experience with each other previously so there were certain assumptions. That made things a little uncomfortable.” They further shared how they “had to invest more time bringing up a common goal and convincing them there is a way to find middle ground.” Another participant shared, “For me as facilitator, I had assumptions that certain people’s participation in the group is an indicator that they are willing to be open. However, I learned that’s not always true.” They reflected, “When I got to the solutioning phase, some people had strong feelings about things and so navigating that was tricky as well.”

Pre-existing relationships were described as impacting both those who have them and those that enter into the collective impact space without them. For example, one participant noted, “Those that don’t have pre-existing relationships may feel more pressure especially if they have an opinion different from the rest of the group.” Another participant shared their experience of working with new group participants and how it feels for them. They described, “Can feel like you are thrown in with the wolves if you show up and everyone else seems to know each other.” One participant went on to explain that there can be opportunities with new folks entering the collective impact group, but sometimes that opportunity can be lost when pre-existing relationships among current members disrupt the new member from feeling connected. A participant explained, “When a new person enters space, sometimes existing members feel protective over the criticism that new folks may bring. That brings out some groupthink.” They further shared, “[I] continue to push people’s thinking about what it means to make new folks entering the space be free to share different thoughts to disrupt groupthink.”

Further, pre-existing relationships were not limited to individual interactions, but could also be present at an organizational or even sector level. For instance one participant explained, "Certain sectors blame other sectors. [I] had to step in and address the tension. Gave space to sit in the tension, called out passion by all parties and that it doesn't feel good but this is what change feels like." They also shared how they "adopted the norm that growth is uncomfortable and if there is an issue, we are going to address it together. We all worked to create the systems that exist today, so we all need to be part of changing it." A similar example was shared when a participant discussed pre-existing bias that comes into the space. They said, "There is sometimes bias between secondary and post-secondary education providers that include disagreements about who is part of the problem and who is not." They also noted how it "can also play out the other direction as they sometimes also have pre-existing alliances from previous work together." Another participant noted how pre-existing sector identity influenced the decision making process in their experience. They shared, "Sometimes those pre-existing relationships can lead to groupthink. Groupthink happens when folks are from the same sector [compared to] when there are cross-sector groups." They described, "In those meetings, it turns into a complaint fest. When we have diverse groups, folks are less likely to move into that space. I think the thing that solves that is making sure you have diverse voices." Those pre-existing organizational relationships also surface in relation to the backbone organization too. One person explained their experience, "People felt a way because the backbone gets all the money to do the work, why is the backbone leading this space. They may not like the backbone or the actual facilitator." They also noted they have experienced people "bringing up grudges from 10 or 15 years ago. Wish I would have asked, 'Is your dislike for this organization/person greater than the opportunity to do something different'?"

Another unique element within this theory surfaced related to people's pre-existing relationships with the concept of power. A participant noted, there's a "history of relationships with people in power and how things have previously worked. Changing those dynamics to include community authority can be difficult because of ego or mental models." They further noted, "All these excuses can come up for not wanting to change the way things are done to accommodate others." A different participant also raised the notion that a pre-existing relationship with one's own power entered into the group space. They shared, "It's clear that some of the participants did not feel comfortable to be their authentic self due to whatever is happening at their home organizations." They noted, "That can negatively impact some of the work in the [collective impact group] because it leads to lack of true participation."

The participants agreed that pre-existing relationships are almost always relevant, as one person described, "People know each other from the community. It's not a huge population. Their methods of interaction and dynamics enter into the space as well." However, some participants did raise that pre-existing relationships and interpersonal relationships in general are not always a problematic dynamic within groups. One participant called out that perspective distinctly by saying, "Interpersonal relationships can sometimes be good or can sometimes hold groups back." Another participant elaborated on their experience with the positive aspects of pre-existing relationships when they noted, "In some ways, it does not stifle equitable community engagement. In a smaller, more intimate city, you know somebody that knows somebody to help make connections to help move the work forward."

CI Group Members. One person explained, "[There are] certain individuals or organizations that historically have partnered and worked on projects together and those that haven't. Naturally they tend to work better together if they have a previous history of working

together." They noted, "Those that don't have the alliance already may feel that they are not part of the group. Needs to be intentionality to make them feel welcome and part of the group from the onset." They further elaborated that the impact of interactions outside of the group space "becomes tough when for instance, you have professional relationships and you might think that your disagreement may impact that professional relationship." They also noted that it happens in personal relationships too and explained, "Perhaps disagreement in that space may impact that relationship in a negative way. In those cases, when you start to feel that threat may be there, you might be less inclined to share or be as open." Another person shared that from their experience, they think pre-existing relationships, "can inform who is invited in the first place. For example, you might not invite someone you dislike." Another participant shared that as it relates to the impact of pre-existing relationships on effective community-driven decision-making, "It's more that I've seen the reverse where the lack of concrete relationships building impacts decision-making." They also described, "There are ways where people hear of a person or an organization's reputation and then take their word and work as true and make decisions/trust feedback without a feedback loop or line of accountability."

Another participant spoke to the reality they experienced when funders are part of the group. They said, "Funder and organizational relationships further complicate it because you want the [project] to be funded. Funders have friends at state or local levels that can influence decisions." They further reflected, "That tension leads to some groups who end up going for low-hanging fruit, and it creates missed opportunities." Essentially this person was elevating that it can be easier to just move towards solutions that are in favor among those in power because you know they are likely to be funded.

Identities/Presentation of Self. The second theme can be described as aspects of the way

one is perceived based on things such as communication style, age, race, and/or gender.

Facilitators. This theme arose in two separate conversations and elements focused both on personal identities (e.g., one's racial identity), as well as personality traits. In regard to racial identity, the comments shared specifically highlighted how whiteness can impact a group's decision-making process. One participant shared, "Often in these spaces the group as a whole ends up attending to white people feeling sensitive or uncomfortable about certain conversations." They also described, "When you feed into that, it can be disruptive to the work and make other people in the group feel frustrated and disconnected." They further explained, "White shame can also be a barrier to progress. Facilitators and the group need to be able to root out anti-blackness when it shows up." The second component related to personality traits focused on communication tactics used in shared space. The participant commented, "do see some people who are vocal and some people who are less vocal."

CI Group Members. One participant shared that from their experience, personal identity does impact how groups make decisions. They explained, "Typically being one of the younger directors in the room, I normally would say that people with more time on their resume tend to get more of the say in how things go, which isn't negative or positive." They continued, "Sometimes I appreciate it. But sometimes the more experience someone has weighs on how the decisions play out." The participant balanced that observation with how they view organizational leaders and their ability to understand the plight of community members who are directly impacted by disparities. "Lately, I've been thinking about the power dynamic of getting higher up in decision-making power in organizations can translate to losing the direct connection to the community members." This reflection shows how one's role may either make people more or less likely to make assumptions about their perspectives.

Another aspect of personal identity related to gender and was explained that, “Being a woman, my male colleagues will say the same things I said and there will be different responses to them saying it.” Another participant referenced language as being an element that can disrupt effective community-driven decision-making. They shared, “When there are multi-language participants, we need to be more considerate to be inclusive and reduce prejudice or bias.” They also shared experiences where, “Sometimes assumptions are made about people’s experiences such as having social security or having an ID. Assumptions about people’s realities can create power dynamics and make people feel less welcome or feel different.”

Competing Priorities. The third theme can be described as varying demands at an individual level (e.g., volunteer vs. paid staff participant) or at the organizational level (partners in space are competing for grants outside of the collective impact space that are at odds with the group's mission). This may also include one’s ego.

Facilitators. As it relates to the particular question about if and how power dynamics and interpersonal relationships might serve as barriers to collective impact group decision-making, one participant summed it up by saying, “Sometimes [group members] have their own goals and agenda and lose sight of the big picture.” Another participant further noted the existence of “competition and/or competing agendas among partners in the space.” Another participant surfaced a reality related to the different paths in which group members become part of the group. They noted differences specifically related to whether “someone is there as a volunteer versus is required to be there for their job. It can be less of a priority to move work forward when it’s professional versus personal. That can slow work down again.”

CI Group Members. Two comments fell into this theme. A participant shared, “A lot of leaders feel that they have the responsibility to maintain some sort of public facing appearance-

to keep everybody happy and that power dynamic does stop the right decision." Another person elevated logistical aspects of competing priorities that can disrupt community-driven decision-making. They said, "Even recognizing what it takes to show up at meetings. Certain people have more disadvantages that can make it harder to attend."

Research Question 3: What Factors Promote Community-Driven Decision- Making?

This research question consists of a single interview question focused on identifying specific tools and practices that stakeholders have experienced as being helpful in supporting groups to make community-driven decisions.

Tools/Processes to Support Community-Driven Decision- Making

This question generated comments that fell into five distinct themes including alignment, relationship builders, retention, engagement, and inclusivity. Notably, every interview participant listed multiple tools they have experienced as helping to cultivate conditions to support community-driven decision-making.

Alignment. The first theme can be described as a group that has a shared identity, purpose, and processes related to their overall mission.

Facilitators. One aspect of the alignment theme focused on ensuring the group had a shared identity and shared purpose. One participant noted the importance of "reiteration that we are doing this together and the value of including diverse perspectives." Another participant shared their approach to creating a shared purpose by "giving each individual a chance to share their contribution and investment in the work" as a way to showcase each person's distinct connection to the group purpose. One participant summed up the goal of the group purpose by helping groups to realize, "We are all here to do the same thing." Another participant noted their approach through "reminding people that this is not personal and we are here for a shared

purpose and reminding them of the intentional push for collaboration and that the expectation is they will be engaging with one another throughout the process." Several participants shared the value of discussions that are intended to proactively address potential barriers. One participant described the value of naming and addressing power dynamics at the onset of the group. They noted, "Allowing groups to determine how they want to address those things prior to them being a problem. [It] sets the tone for what you intend the space to be, that everyone has equal power and say."

A related aspect of shared purpose focused on shared understanding of what is meant by community. A participant explained, "We use community in a very all inclusive way which is good but it also sometimes needs to be narrowly defined." They further explained, "All lived experience is important and welcome, but if we are trying to be community-driven, who is being impacted right now is a key question to think about [when deciding] who to include." They clarified, "don't want it to be a hierarchy or foster this notion of 'your experience is not as valid as mine,' but need to keep in mind who is going to be most impacted now. That should guide who you are inviting." They also noted that in their experience there are still uncertainties about what level of defining a community is most appropriate. For example, should groups specify geographically by saying they are looking for representatives from certain schools or neighborhoods. They further explained the need to "be more specific but also open to what we consider to be lived experience. We can sometimes get down a rabbit hole about who is qualified. Need to recognize that sometimes people are organizational partners and have lived experience." As demonstrated through the comments, community can mean so many different things; thus, it creates an opportunity to use tools to specifically think through what community and what representation means for the group's purposes.

Creation and use of group working agreements also surfaced as a key element of group alignment. One participant noted, "establishing and living up to community agreements generated by the group" as a tool used in their experience. There was emphasis by multiple participants related to both the creation and utilization of these agreements. These agreements also centered on ensuring the group feels empowered as experts by specifically noting, "reminding people that this is not personal, we are here for a shared purpose and reminding them of the intentional push for collaboration." Further, multiple participants shared the experience of supporting groups to create group agreements that specifically outline how they want to make decisions together and what they will do when they encounter challenges that require gathering perspectives outside of what is available within the group. One participant shared their experience of needing a group agreement that helps "challenge thinking of what we normally do as being meaningful community engagement. Collective impact goes beyond just the existence of the groups themselves, but really asking hard questions such as 'what are we accomplishing and how is there shared decision-making'." The participant further elaborated how these agreements help create shared expectations by noting it's "helpful to empower folks to understand their goals, not every council has the goal of utilizing shared power. We need to encourage each other to authentically call out our goals so people aren't confused."

CI Group Members. Several participants focused on the alignment of values across the group, as well as how the group will go about living up to those values. One person shared that there needs to be "clarity on how to be accountable to being a part of the space by creating space and time to imagine what it looks like to carry out decisions." They also noted, "Not everyone feels like they have the time or autonomy to do tasks outside of regular workflow." They further expanded on the importance of having alignment about how a decision will likely play out in

reality through having “halfway reflection points of what a decision actually looks like could impact what decisions are actually made.” Another person said, “First thing is, there has to be safety for conflict and disagreement and a shared understanding that we are all here to embrace that which requires us to all know each other.” They further explained, “That established community norm will lead to me being comfortable saying ‘hey I disagree with this’ or ‘I need to speak to this’ or asking others when I see them being quiet.” Another person shared their experience:

> “The first two steps are developing shared values and ideally a process that is clear about how you address this challenge in general and agreement on how you will make decisions. You can always pull back to agreements and do a gut check that the group is following the agreed upon process so that the process doesn’t change just because someone gets frustrated. Asking the group, have we followed the process and does this align with our values even if you don’t like the decision the group made. There’s a benefit in judging outcomes/decisions based on those values and creating checkpoints for doing so. I'd want to highlight that process is subordinate to values. Sometimes, the process you created initially may create conflicts with your values (i.e., the timeline you created doesn't allow for meaningful input from those most impacted, or you realize you need an additional layer of research to truly get at the root cause of the problem). In those cases, you should always be willing to adjust the process to ensure you remain in line with your values.”

Another aspect of alignment focused on clarity in what is meant by equity in these spaces. One participant shared the following:

> "One of your core values has to be equitable solutions, not just equal solutions. Have to be intentional about trying to solve the worst problem first or at least direct resources there. In many decision-making processes, I think people struggle with building equitable solutions, so it's critical to build a foundation of what equity means early in the conversation and develop a shared value around why you're pursuing equitable solutions. Our social and cultural conversations focus strongly on the concept of fairness, and for many people being "fair" tends to drive them toward "equal" solutions, where everyone receives the same thing. If you're only looking at a snapshot in time, equitable solutions can feel less fair than equal solutions. That's why it's critical to provide the historical and systemic context behind the issue you're trying to address. See that building equitable solutions now through targeting resources most strongly to where the challenge is the greatest is actually the fairest approach to addressing historical wrongs and creating an equal access to opportunity."

In addition to clarifying what is meant by equity, the point was raised about the need to define community as a mechanism for living up to equitable values. Specifically, a participant noted that it is "important to answer, what do we mean by community and those that are experiencing the most inequitable outcomes? Developers and elected officials are community too but aren't the ones being most impacted."

Other aspects of alignment related to participants' experience in ensuring all group members have access to the same information. They specifically expressed the importance of "level setting in terms of context, so that the group feels comfortable that everyone is informed with the same information for whatever decision is being made. For example, if it's data, does everyone know and have access to the data that may shape decisions." Another participant

highlighted the value of ongoing level setting related to information sharing. They noted, "Certain individuals roll off, for example change jobs or have a traumatic life experience, and so the organizations reassign someone to participate in the [collective impact group]." They further shared, "When that happens there needs to be a new level setting and information sharing to get them caught up 'singing from the same hymnal'."

Relationship Builders. The second theme can be described as interpersonal connectivity and trust among group members.

Facilitators. One participant shared their vantage point of relationship building from a foundational standpoint. They noted, "[I'm] thinking about gathering as part of the foundation of the work. People grow in relationships. Honoring people's humanity makes people more willing to work together and do hard things." However, instead of prioritizing that part of the work, they further explained that from their experience in the field, groups are "more on the technical side and focused on data and being task-oriented." Another participant shared, "We use the word community but are we really a community? Have to spend time and keep spending time removing barriers. We sometimes downplay the building of community." They also said, "If people don't know each other and trust is not established, that impacts collaboration. [In my experience] it's 60% relationships, 40% doing the work. Without it, they don't feel comfortable giving feedback and taking action together."

Connectivity and trust surfaced as key tools in relation to relationships between group members and relationships between the facilitators and group members. One participant explained the impact of successful relationship building based on their experience. "We would get people to show up to spaces they typically wouldn't come to and they would literally say, 'I'm showing up because you asked me and I know you're going to be holding that space'."

They reflected, “That should be the culture of the organization and the work, that we show up because this collaborative is about relationships. That’s key and it’s stuff that people see as mushy work or the soft work or the work you can’t quantify, but I would say it’s the most important work.” They also said, “You get people to show up, to bring their data, to have more honest conversations because they feel connected and feel like you’re seeing them beyond the work.”

Participants listed several specifical tools to help with supporting relationship building including icebreakers, one-to-one or small group conversations and team building activities. Some of these tools also intentionally extended beyond group meeting time. For example, one participant noted the value of hosting social hours for the group where there is “no agenda, [we] just spend time with each other.”

Additionally, some participants specifically called out the importance of using tools to help cultivate trust. A participant shared that they use journey mapping as a tool and described, “used it with a group that was using comparative suffering. This activity helped the group to connect around similar experiences/feelings and created a place of trust and connection.” Another participant shared their experience of using “power mapping so that everyone understands who is in the room and what influence each person has in the room.”

Another relevant part of this theme centered on the “continuous focus on building relationships and trust and it’s not a one or two time thing.” Another participant shared having a similar experience and said, “Relationship building and trust building, we think about this statically. Start first meeting with ice breakers but don’t carry that kind of activity through for other meetings.” They shared, “A foundation of gathering is that we’re continuing to work on our relationships. You’re not just working on it at the beginning and then doing nothing else for

the entire time you're together." They went on to explain how they've experienced long term investment in relationship building being relevant. They said, "Who you were as a partner three years ago is very different from who you are right now and there might be a change in your role or perspective." They provided an example that when someone becomes a parent or experiences a major life event, it might shift how they show up in the space. They further noted, "So I'm honoring people's humanity and always thinking about the relational components. But that's honestly how you move people because you have relationships with them."

CI Group Members. One overall aspect of relationship building was described by a participant who described why relationships have to be built. They explained, "If we are coming to the table transactionally, as in this is what I bring to this issue and this is what you bring, then it gets to who is right and who is wrong which gets in the way of true healing and growth." They also said, "It pits ideas against each other and doesn't align our shared values. We need to see that we're all humans trying to do the best we can with what we have. That humanity's a space to embrace one another."

Other participants shared specific tools that can help build connectivity and a sense of comfort sharing with one another. Based on their experience, one person explained the value of, "doing status check on whether group members felt accepted, heard, had a sense of belonging with the group, and felt ownership over the process. Can't assume that it's being done without asking." They further noted, "There has to be a mechanism for checking on each individual to see how they are experiencing the process. See if they are feeling safe in the group. If not, develop strategies to help foster that." Another person shared facilitator tools that have been effective with the group based on their experience. They reflected, "It's easier to participate when facilitators take the time to ask the group, what is the way you feel comfortable expressing

yourself and sharing your thoughts." They also said, "In these spaces there are sometimes emotionally hard conversations and having time to address the emotion is important. When the facilitator changes the subject before emotion is addressed it's disruptive." Another participant built upon the same notion of the importance of addressing the emotional labor involved in the work. They said, "Acknowledge the feelings that can rise. Helping people build trust to have those emotions in front of one another will make people more comfortable with one another."

Finally, one participant highlighted building connections through learning about the nuances of one another's cultures so as not to misinterpret someone's behavior. They shared how cultural differences can impact interactions. They shared an experience from a meeting where, "People were serving food and some people declined to eat because they were worried about how many hours the food had been sitting without refrigeration or declined because they saw people touching food with their hands." They explained, "Have to learn not to be offended or [not to] take it personally because those people are thinking about safety issues, but if you don't understand why they said no, it can impact relationships." Another person shared a framework they have found to be particularly helpful. They said, "The restorative justice model creates space for how we are going to talk about this with passion without losing sight of everyone's humanity at the table."

Retention. The third theme can be described as activities, incentives, or discussion topics that help members want to continue their involvement.

Facilitators. One aspect of this theme simply focused on being in tune with the experience of the group participants. One facilitator described the importance of getting direct feedback from participants. They said, "It doesn't have to be a 30 minute survey. [I just want to know] was there something you wanted to share in the meeting space but you didn't and why."

They explained, “helps to understand if group dynamics get in the way of the structure of the meeting.” Ultimately, this type of feedback can help the facilitator monitor engagement across group members, which provides opportunity to intervene before a member fully disengages.

Other aspects of this theme focused on proactively thinking of ways to keep people wanting to continue with the group. Based on the experience of the facilitators, this happens in a multitude of ways. One participant shared that they provide compensation for people who are not paid to be in the space by an employer as a way to ensure that all group members are paid for their time in one way or another. Another participant focused on ensuring there is clear value to being a part of the group beyond compensation, such as ensuring there are opportunities for making deep community connections and access to professional development that span beyond the group meetings. More specifically they share the following:

> “One benefit of the group is the ability to build relationships with each other. Some organizations are so big that they don’t see each other outside of this meeting even though they are part of the same organization. So it helps bring people together. Between institutions, helps bridge deeper connections. They might have known each other before but they are now working together in new ways. The goal is to leave with the feeling that we are working towards something. Having those initial relationships helped foster deeper relationships with the group and beyond.”

Similarly, another participant shared, “People see this as something outside of their day job so it could be helpful for participants to understand their engagement as an opportunity to learn skills and develop relationships that support them beyond the [collective impact] space.” They also noted that it is, “specifically helpful to elevate this is practice and building capacity for the community to engage in collective problem solving through collaboration.” These

experiences help highlight opportunities to maximize the opportunities for learning and relationship building that spans beyond the session and also ensure the participants are aware of that value.

CI Group Members. Tools that surfaced in this theme related to helping the group feel less overwhelmed through explicitly, "Recognize taking bite-size pieces at [a time] and cannot tackle everything at once." Another person shared ways to help group members stay connected to the work through hosting lunch- and- learns in between sessions that "keeps the work fresh." They explained, "Time in between sessions makes people forget what happened and who was there, so this is a way to help them stay connected." Another participant shared, "In my experience, it seemed the goal which was putting together a program happened, but the program was supposed to achieve a higher level goal and move the needle on post-secondary credential attainment." They reflected, "After the project was done, there was no follow-up in terms of what were the results of the project and how that can be scaled or modified." They also said, "It's necessary to call out the true impact of the decisions. When we didn't have that, the group no longer met. The work continued in pockets but not as a collaborative group."

Engagement. The fourth theme can be described as tools that address harmful conflict, power dynamics and/or distractions that may otherwise impede active engagement.

Facilitators. This theme arose across all the conversations with facilitators and spanned a wide range of subcategories. One aspect focused on ensuring that there is equal value given to all perspectives and ideas. Based on these facilitators' experiences, this can happen through processes such as charting everyone's ideas as the group members are talking. One participant elaborated on the way in which they "capture all ideas in a single space regardless of the idea." Another participant spoke of the experience of "demonstrating as a facilitator that I respect and

honor all contributions, like acknowledging everyone, not dismissing ideas, and engaging people in various ways other than whole group conversation." Another participant shared how they are "always thinking about the temperature of what's happening and how to regulate the temperature. [You] don't want it so low that people are checked out of the work, and also don't want to overwhelm them." A different participant elaborated on their experience of working to ensure they truly value all perspectives regardless of how they are shared. They spoke to the importance of the "facilitator genuinely appreciating varying perspectives regardless of how it's delivered. Personally, I don't like rudeness and I have had to work on that as a facilitator- dealing with people who are rude and disrupting a meeting."

There were also experiences shared that focused on disrupting dynamics that may prevent members from engaging authentically. For example, one participant explained their experience of working to create a safe space through reiterating the need for confidentiality and specifically calling out, "We won't be sharing what you learn about other organizations strengths/weaknesses outside the space." A different participant shared their experience of recognizing the need to specifically focus on making new members feel connected and able to contribute. They noted their goal is to ensure that when new people are brought into the group, "what they are offering, even if it's counter to what the group either thinks or what they've done or said, there's still room for conversation versus allowing the group to immediately shut it down."

Similarly, some experiences related to being intentional in breaking down power dynamics. For example, one participant explained they, "direct industry experts to share ideas after hearing from other collective impact members first." A different participant noted, "promoting the idea of leaving titles at the door, but doesn't apply to all situations," as another tool used in their experience. One participant shared how they "spend time to ask questions or

focus the conversation on people who are speaking up that do challenge the status quo." One participant described the following:

> "Naming and addressing power dynamics up front because I think that a lot of people just believe that we know it's there but if we don't say anything it will just work itself out. As a group, we want to figure out how to work through that as much as possible, because we don't want power dynamics to get in the way of everybody having equal footing and equal voice in this space. And I think having that type of conversation upfront, which is not an easy conversation because you are naming the thing that people hold on to and don't really ever name, but it immediately sets the tone for what you intend the space to be, which is that every person has as much voice and power in this space as the mayor would have if they were here."

When it does appear that a power dynamic has surfaced and negatively impacted a group member from engaging, a facilitator shared their experience. They said, "As a facilitator, it's important to spend time on that person and to protect people who are holding opinions different from the group. Often times they are holding something that's not being named." Another participant shared a similar experience where they, "sometimes use follow-up conversations with folks outside of the meeting to really understand where they stand on various discussions/decisions." They elaborated, "After the meeting, if someone expresses they disagreed or are unclear and didn't want to say anything, will have a one-on-one meeting with them to identify where confusion is at and do best to clarify." They also noted that they recognize that as the facilitator they "don't have authority to change group decisions, but can set up meetings with other participants. I know when to escalate something past myself as facilitator."

Another aspect is related to supporting members in being fully present in the meeting. One participant shared their approach by, ”creating space for mindfulness at the beginning and encouraging group members to gather thoughts or transition from the last place you were.” Another participant shared their experience of creating intentional time for reflection. They said, “I don’t think people go into meeting spaces and don’t want to do meaningful work. But there are so many things happening that people fall into a trap. Intentionality is really important.” They further explained their experience of needing people to make time to step back and be reflective because, “You have so many things happening but we immediately debrief after every meeting, as much as possible.” They noted that doing allows them to “get thoughts out while fresh and before forgotten. Have dedicated time to be reflective otherwise the reflection doesn’t happen.”

Conflict management also surfaced in this theme and included both prevention and productive resolution. Facilitators shared their experiences here as “spending time talking about how the conflict is making people feel” and “being able to intervene and sometimes mediate as needed. For example, being able to pause and name what’s happening, asking the group to check-in with what’s going on and what they need.” Another participant emphasized their approach to supporting productive conflict through elevating to the groups that the goal is to “disagree with ideas, not the person.”

A different element of this theme is related to ways in which members may unintentionally influence one another’s thinking. A participant shared, “There is groupthink sometimes. If there’s a group and they’ve been working together for two years and meeting consistently on a monthly basis, there’s eventually going to be some groupthink that happens.” They continued, “It’s just a natural thing, right. So I need to continue thinking about how to push people’s thinking and make sure that we aren’t getting groupthink.” They further noted, “do that

by having everyone anonymously submit their response, then collect those responses and put it out to the group to have a conversation around it." Similarly, a participant highlighted use of facilitation and described the need for "neutral facilitation, good facilitation design, pre-planning and design of session. Actually do a lot of planning on how you are going to get people to engage." They also noted, "With design, having people within the session own the work and they aren't looking to the facilitator to give answers."

Thinking about how the group members influence each other also included how the facilitator may influence the group. One participant noted, "There has to be intentionality around who is facilitating. When I as a white woman am not the best person to facilitate, I need to step back." They also noted, "That's the case with gender too. Multiple people facilitating is helpful because then you have multiple people in the space who can attend to the group and raise issues the primary facilitators may not see." They further shared, "It's also important to show there is equal footing (among facilitators) regardless of title among the backbone. The reality is we are human and not infallible even with the best intentions. And we have blind spots."

A final aspect of this theme related to experiences of using tools to support group members in using the space as a learning environment. This included integrating tools that help the group navigate new ways of making sense of data and acting upon it. This was done through using tools that help teams understand strategic processes to guide solution development such as factor validation. One participant spoke about using empathy interviews. They said,

> "There were assumptions made so we decided to test some of those assumptions. Some things came out that affirmed conversation points such as certain populations were struggling in high school. That process called out that school is not meaningful to many of the students. Stories pointed to how these students were working hard and struggling

with family dynamics and thinking through how school might not help them. Having the data took out emotion and gave everyone something to look at. It wasn't personal because there wasn't one person saying it. [It] was shown by the data."

Another participant elevated their reality of seeing a need for a multi-pronged learning environment including group members learning about the topic the group is looking to address and learning about how to effectively engage in the group itself. They shared their experience related to seeing a need to embrace ongoing learning and development opportunities. They said, "It's not enough to say 'I've been in education for 26 years and that's why I'm well suited for the work.' Also need to support what it means to truly engage in collective approaches."

CI Group Members. On a broad level, one person shared the value in directly addressing power dynamics. They said, "If you can, elevate conversation about power dynamics in the room and structure meetings to minimize those dynamics by acknowledging the focus on disrupting them." Related to creating space for people to share their ideas via more private mechanisms, participants shared how they value, "having some form of anonymity when it comes to making decisions. When anonymous, the group is more likely to share their opinions more frequently or loudly." Another participant shared,

> "There's also a need to minimize the power of structural institutions. For example, when working on an affordable housing strategy, I knew there were key perspectives that had to be included (developers, social service and residents and experience of those people [going through] houselessness) and that there would be both real and perceived knowledge of the system. We created separate committees so each group could express their perspectives freely and outside of those power dynamics, then brought the committees together to learn from one another and finalize the strategy together."

Other participants spoke to their needs in order to be fully engaged in the group and subsequent decision-making processes. One person shared, “I want there to be real shared learning, to focus on building shared values in the early stages and openness for participants to learn from one another.” They further explained, “When the group is talking about more superficial symptoms that can be frustrating for me. That doesn’t apply to crisis situations where people need to be safe and survive a crisis.” They also said, “Frustration or dismissal of structural issues as too hard to address, unwillingness to address those issues are at play can make it hard to participate in these spaces.” Another participant said,

> “One truth is you have to be a fully engaged participant to get the most out of it. Having everyone on board is necessary and it’s more than just attending meetings and filling a seat. Really rolling up sleeves, being fully engaged, attentive, collaborative and following through on commitments. To have everyone doing that and saying they believe in this mission and the goals and the approach, then and only then will you get the most out of [collective impact groups].”

One aspect of this theme focused on why it is important to create authentic engagement that allows space for disagreement. A participant explained, “When you aim for consensus, you’ve often watered down the solution to make it palatable, which sometimes means it’s not effective.” The reflected, “There needs to be processes that allow disagreement to take place and might need processes that don't require consensus.” They also noted that from their experience it’s most important that everyone can be part of the process and “feel heard even if their preferences aren’t actually built into the final decision and they are clear about why the path chosen was chosen (e.g., transparency about how different factors were weighed).”

Finally, one participant focused on the experience of someone participating in the group because they have experienced a traumatic experience. The participant explained it's important to be mindful about what is bringing the group together and how that impacts the group. They shared an example, "If it's about domestic violence prevention, nobody wants to be there and say it's happening in their lives. Need to be good listeners with each interaction in the community." That sentiment elevates a differential emotional burden that exists for participants who are speaking from their personal experience versus participants who do not have the same burden in the space.

Inclusivity. The fifth and final theme can be described as the creation of working spaces that allows everyone to engage across a broad spectrum of communication and processing styles, while supporting learning and creative problem solving.

Facilitators. This theme centered around creating an environment that is responsive to a wide variety of learning and communication needs and preferences. For example, several participants shared experiences of supporting the need for varying processing speeds by setting up scaffolded time for thinking and sharing. One participant specifically noted use of "individual processing time prior to group discussions" and another noted using "small group discussion prior to full group discussion." These tactics can help participants have multiple ways of organizing their thoughts before contributing to a discussion that leads to a decision.

Similarly, multiple participants noted intentionality in helping group members feel connected prior to asking them to engage in more serious conversation. One participant shared using "warm-up questions at a small table to support vulnerability," and another participant said they are intentional in using "options for the first contribution, written and spoken to help ease people into contribution without pressure."

Some participants shared using mechanisms that allowed the idea to be shared separate from the person's identity. One participant elaborated on their experience of creating opportunities for group members to contribute anonymously first and then comment on one another's anonymous contributions. They shared, "When we took away their names and they were actually able to share their perspectives without fear of any sort of retaliation and then maybe pretend like they didn't make that post or comment on somebody else's idea." They further noted, "It helped to build trust around safety to challenge the status quo. When you don't have the safety to challenge the status quo, you really are inhibited in innovation." Other participants shared using similar approaches, including use of anonymous polling and through using gallery walks where people can provide written feedback on ideas as they read through posters on the wall.

There were experiences shared related to helping group members overcome general barriers. For example, one participant emphasized, "Framing learning around continuous improvement, creating opportunities to test, learn, and iterate. The focus is about learning and using it to improve versus being absolute." Similarly, another participant noted they intentionally, "model and name not knowing the correct answer and naming it at the onset of the work." One participant further explained, "Guide people through processes. Acknowledge that there are assumptions and bias but help them look at what's in front of them and focus on the goal."

Other tools related to helping group members expand their thinking. Specifically, one participant shared that they use exercises from design thinking as a way to cultivate creative thinking that is "outside the box." A different facilitator shared the importance of ensuring that the group can understand data shared with them. They noted the need to, "Integrate tools that

help them navigate new ways of making sense of data and acting upon it. Use tools that help teams understand how and why we get to the point of identifying solutions." Another participant shared that sometimes people are blocked by real or perceived barriers to the work and that addressing those barriers is necessary in order for them to fully participate. For example, "You have pragmatic people, before they do anything they are thinking about where the money is. That can impede some decisions. If possible to show the money up front, might change willingness to lean into different ideas."

Finally, one participant spoke to their experience of ensuring there is accessible language used in order to cultivate inclusivity. They said, "As folks in backbone spaces, we can do our due diligence to make sure people show up to spaces equipped to engage in conversation." They elaborated, "A facilitator needs to be able to sense when too much jargon is being used and add context so that it's understandable to others who may not have that same background knowledge."

CI Group Members. Making sure each person is caught up and/or refreshed on progress surfaced through one participant sharing that from their experience, at the "beginning of every new session, needs to be a recap of what was done, what decisions were made and why. Helps level set and provides context on what the group is going to help think through next." Another person shared that it helps to ground participants by reminding them of the focus for each session and, specifically, "Breaking work down into smaller pieces with a reminder that we don't have to solve the world today, focus on this piece now and then will focus on the next pieces." This also related to another participant who shared ways to ensure everyone is equipped to participate when they have the same information. They noted, "Giving everyone the same baseline information and access to community leaders in the room. Getting to hear those perspectives and

being able to have conversations with community members." They further reflected that having the same base level of information ensures, "Everyone starts on the same page. Everyone is more open and ready because there's no 'do they know more than I know.' When that's in place, those conversations tend to go really well." Another person noted the value in having someone assigned to consolidate the information as another tool to ensure the group is able to engage. They explained, "Having someone consolidate everyone's thoughts because we are not creating anything if everyone shares thoughts but it's not consolidated. Helps to have someone who is observing do the consolidation to make sense of what is being said."

In regard to a welcoming environment, one participant shared that feeling included goes beyond the words that are spoken. They described,

> "There are a few things that make me feel welcome to be part of the conversation. Some of that relates to the environment. Creating a welcoming environment makes a difference with actions both saying it and showing it. Even think about food as a connector because it's attached to emotion and culture. When there's food that's familiar to me, it makes me feel more comfortable. Also think about when groups provide child care it's not necessarily about the cost of child care but people want their kids to be safe and be near them. Sometimes we don't prioritize those things but they make a huge difference. They can drive a conversation and encourage people to feel comfortable sharing. It means a lot in the dynamics for how the group adjusts the schedules to meet community member needs because it shows their presence is needed."

One person shared their experience as it relates to feeling motivated to contribute to the group. They said,

"From a motivational side, I need to feel that I bring a valuable perspective and/or that I have the ability to do something about it. There have been instances where my perspective is not the one that should be voiced and instead should be hearing from those with direct experiences. So then I'm looking for opportunities in the space to use my voice specifically to support other voices being elevated. Most often play the person who doesn't have the lived experience in the room, so for me the critical piece is to come first as a listener and a learner. So it's really important for me to be quiet in those spaces initially and ask lots of questions with the goal of seeking to understand the experiences of those with lived experience is critical. I typically think of my role in that as what resources do I have access to or what knowledge of processes do I have (e.g.,budget) that can help us navigate towards a solution more effectively. If there are not spaces for those voices to be heard, then it's just a bunch of people sitting around in a boardroom making executive decisions."

Summary of Results

The themes that arose across each research question often had similarities (Table 8). For example, it's clear to see that interpersonal interactions among group members surface across all three questions via themes such as consensus of the group, engagement, pre-existing relationships, and relationship builders. Also, process-related aspects of how the group goes about collaboratively doing the work also surface across all three questions via themes such as intentional processes utilized, inclusive processes, group structural conditions, and alignment.

Table 8

Themes that developed related to each research question

Research Question	Themes	Example Quote
1) How do key stakeholders (facilitators and participants) experience the community-driven decision-making process?	What are they noticing? Consensus of the group Diverse Representation Intentional Processes Utilized Engagement What is the impact? Broadened Perspective Personal Impact Relationship to Group	"Who from the community's voice is being uplifted and valued? Did the community feel informed and equipped enough to have input in the decision - feeling informed can even just be knowing what other solutions are out there."
2) Based on their experience, what elements hinder community-driven decision-making?	Group Structural Conditions External Expectations Type and Quality of Facilitation Competing Priorities Limited Power Perceived Power Differential Pre-existing Relationships Individual Identities/Personalities	"History of relationships with people in power and how things have previously worked. Changing those dynamics to include community authority can be difficult- can be ego or mental models. All these excuses can come up for not wanting to change the way things are done to accommodate others."
3) Based on their experience, what elements support community-driven decision-making?	Alignment Relationship Builders Retention Engagement Inclusivity	"Having the appropriate people in the room to be part of the decision-making process and having processes in place to support the group in making community driven decisions."

Based on themes that arose across participant interviews, it appears that both collective impact facilitators and collective impact participants within this study share a similar understanding of what community-driven decision-making is and how to know if it is occurring. However, there are some key discrepancies that arise related to whether community-driven

decision-making equates to full group consensus or whether it should lean more towards the perspectives of members in the group who have relevant lived experience. That becomes pertinent when the group is divided about which decision is best and has to determine what processes should be used to overcome the division.

The themes also demonstrate that there may be a wide variety of facets that impact a collective impact group's ability to successfully engage in community-driven decision-making that span from the logistical structure of the group, to group member dynamics, to how the facilitator supports inclusive engagement, and to external influence. There is also emphasis placed on not only who is involved in the decision-making process, but also how the decision-making process is conducted. Specifically, the importance of using agreed upon processes surfaced across multiple sub questions as something that is elevated based on these facilitator's experiences.

Based on insights from both facilitators and participants, there are a wide variety of tools available and utilized to help support barriers that may impede effective community-driven decision- making; however, even with those tools in use, the participants collectively estimated that groups are successful in making community-driven decisions only about half of the time. Their collective insights and experiences demonstrate interactions with some barriers that may be within the locus of control of the group (e.g., disrupting harmful power dynamics) as well as barriers that may be beyond the locus of control of the group (e.g, imposed timelines).

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

On average, both the collective impact facilitators and the collective impact participants estimated that community-driven decision-making occurs about 51% of the time based on their experience. This chapter focuses on making sense of the empirical results through the literature on equitable decision-making and psychological safety. Three knowledge claims are advanced and supported by the data. Those knowledge claims are then discussed through the lens of practical application. Finally, this chapter identifies key limitations to the data, as well as outlines ideas for future research.

Shared Power is Contingent Upon Clear Definitions of Equity and Community

As noted in the literature review, community power involves shifting decision-making authority to ensure that people who are directly impacted by a disparity have a say in how the disparity is resolved (White et al., 2019) and is recognized as being a vital tool for equity in collective impact (Kania et al., 2022). However, even when groups enter into working spaces with the goal to integrate community power, it proves to be a complex endeavor that can be interpreted in various ways. Based on the data collected in this study, there seems to be a need for groups to create applied definitions of equity and community in order for the group to effectively engage in community-driven decision-making.

Based on the evidence in this study, there is a collective understanding that community-driven decision-making relates to having shared power among collective impact group members. It also was collectively acknowledged that ensuring there are people with lived experience represented in the group, was also a vital component to community-driven decision-making. However, there was not shared agreement within or across either group about how to apply equity to community-driven decision-making. While some interviewees

conceptualized community-driven decision-making as focusing on consensus from the full group, other interviewees specifically indicated that when there was disagreement within the group, consensus was not the best strategy to achieve community-driven decision-making. Rather, some research participants elevated that based on their experience, the voices of those with lived experience should be prioritized in comparison to group members without lived experience. Relatedly, the data showed variance in how people experience consensus in groups. Some people experienced that as an indication of equitable and inclusive processes. Others experienced it as a compromise that leads to "watered down solutions." By clearly defining equity as it relates to the context of the specific collective impact group, it helps to create aligned expectations on how it will manifest in the decision-making process.

Further, it is equally important that community be clearly defined by the group. That includes not only defining what lived experience is pertinent for the group, but the multiple facets of lived experience that are most appropriate. For example, does the group want someone with lived experience who is currently facing the problem that the group is trying to solve or someone who has historically faced it, or would the group benefit from both perspectives. In addition, breaking down the different types of community representation will be helpful as there seems to be confusion about when or if an organizational partner is considered part of the community in these spaces, as they have professional lived experience.

Overall, clarity in how the group defines equity and community ultimately impacts how they put shared power in action. That then informs the processes needed to support effective community-driven decision-making. Ultimately, it creates a practical pathway for putting values into action.

Barriers to Community-Driven Decision-Making are Threats to Psychological Safety

As noted in the literature review, Edmundson (1999) describes psychological safety existing when group members feel free to be their authentic selves and not fearing consequences when they share contrary beliefs, questions or concerns. Based on the data collected in this study, power dynamics, disruptive pre-existing relationships, groupthink, competing priorities, and external pressures related to timelines and expectations for types of solutions that will be pursued were all elevated as barriers to community-driven decision-making. Each of the barriers described by research participants ultimately holds the potential to impact whether someone is willing to share dissenting opinions, questions or feedback. Thus, the barriers to community-driven decision-making can be understood as threats to psychological safety.

Timothy Clark (2020) has identified four distinct dimensions of psychological safety including inclusion safety, learner safety, contributor safety, and challenger safety. Those dimensions align not only to many of the barriers participants identified as getting in the way of effective community-driven decision-making, but also align to themes related to effective tools and practices. Organizing barriers and tools into the four dimensions provides an opportunity to ensure there is investment in elevating psychological safety across each dimension, thereby increasing the likelihood that psychological safety permeates the group's collective culture (Clark, 2020).

Overall, psychological safety has been shown not only to be a critical factor for team success, but also to be a prerequisite to other critical factors including dependability, structure and clarity, meaning and impact of the work (Rozovsky, 2015). Using psychological safety as a lens to understand the experiences shared by collective impact stakeholders, not only helps to support the themes that were developed but it also provides a potential guide for cultivating a

necessary working environment within collective impact groups.

Facilitator and Group Members Roles are Intrinsically Linked

Facilitators and group members hold distinct roles related to ensuring decisions are community-driven. Group members are charged with actually making the decision, whereas facilitators are charged with ensuring the group is equipped and empowered to make community-driven decisions. However, these differences in roles actually cultivate a need for extensive cooperation, communication, and vulnerability between facilitators and group members. Based on the experiences shared from the research participants, there is often the tendency to focus on the needs of cultivating psychological safety for the group members. However, the intrinsic link between group members and facilitators suggests it is equally important to ensure the facilitators also experience a sense of psychological safety. Research on psychological safety shows that when group members experience an elevated sense of psychological safety, it corresponds to higher levels of collaboration and information sharing (Mogård et al., 2022). Thus, in thinking about the facilitator as a member of the group, just with a different role, it creates opportunities to be intentional in ensuring the environment meets the needs of everyone involved to support effective collaboration and authentic feedback exchanges.

Additionally, despite holding different roles, many similarities arose between facilitator and group members' experiences. Although not planned, results from both the facilitators and the collective impact group members participants were similar enough that they all fell into the same themes across each of the interview questions. There was a great deal of similarity in regard to the barriers they experienced, the tools they found to be most helpful, and the shared experiences of the weight that comes with the responsibility of ensuring the group decisions actually meet the needs of the community. Both groups elevated the need to recognize and effectively respond to

barriers that arise, which requires self-awareness, willingness to learn from other perspectives, and ability to engage in potentially difficult conversations. This also aligns with psychological safety literature which posits a positive correlation between presence of vulnerability and perception of psychological safety (Mane, 2019).

Overall, research on psychological safety has shown that positive relationships between group members and group leaders can increase the perception of psychological safety (Kahn,1990) and impact the perception of group expectations (Edmondson, 2004). Recognizing both the cooperation required to create environments that cultivate community-driven decision-making, as well as the way in which all parties need to be able to candidly share information with one another supports the notion of needing to ensure that all parties involved experience psychological safety.

Implications on Practice

Although not intended to be prescriptive, the following section identifies opportunities for ways in which collective impact practitioners can use this information to shape their work going forward.

Reasons to Connect

These results likely validate questions, concerns and conversations that practitioners have already considered. As one research participant noted, this can be hard work and it can be lonely work. Further, through the experiences shared, the relational aspects of the work are vital to effective decision-making. Thus, these experiences offer opportunities for facilitators and group members to better understand the experience of other collective impact practitioners, which may help them feel validated in their own experiences. It also may provide insights that help them think through how they can show up differently to meet the needs of their group colleagues.

Equally important, it also creates the opportunity to use the results as a starting point for a discussion that allows existing groups to candidly address ways in which they can bolster psychological safety and integrate relevant tools that will help them more consistently make effective community-driven decisions.

Cultivating Clarity

At a network level, these results create opportunities for groups to think about what facets of this work need to be further clarified and/or refined in order to maximize use of community-driven decision-making. For example, based on the variance that arose in how the research participants defined community-driven decision-making, it may be helpful to prioritize modeling conversations and making use of tools that can help groups more precisely define community driven decision-making and learn to monitor whether it occurred in a more uniform way. Even if there is no alignment at a network level, there is opportunity for individual facilitators to ensure there is shared understanding within the collective impact groups they lead. The focus on identifying how to monitor whether community-driven decision-making occurred relates to the notion of being able to evaluate the processes used within the group. That further aligns with Park and Preskill's (2014) recommendation to also include formative evaluation metrics in building out understanding about the impact of the group's work.

Examination of Evolving Needs

The experiences shared in the interviews also validate that stakeholders experience community-driven decision-making differently throughout different stages of the work. Some of this likely relates to the different types of decisions that are made at different stages of the work. For example, initial decisions often relate to establishing work agreements and that has a different impact than later decisions about how resources will be utilized. Knowing this reality

can support facilitators to think through when different decision-making tools may be more helpful for different types of decisions.

In addition to different types of decisions, as a collective impact group gets deeper into the work, it also means they move through different phases of connecting with one another as teammates. Research on group development suggests five distinct phases of group formation including forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning (Tuckman & Jenson, 1977). Understanding group dynamics from that lens can guide facilitators in structuring activities to support relationship building based upon the current stage of team development.

Deeper Intentionality with Integration of Community Members

Experiences showed that even when there are people with lived experience who are part of the group, that in and of itself does not ensure that community-driven decision-making is occurring. The data collected elevate the need to ensure that infusion of lived experience is timely, ongoing, and not performative. Further, this research elevates the need to support collective impact groups in being able to more strategically identify group members with lived experience by guiding the group through identifying the multiple aspects of lived experience that would need to be included in order to truly be representative.

Beyond Collective Impact

While this research focused specifically on stakeholders within collective impact groups, some of the insights gained may be applicable to other groups that also utilize cross-sector partnerships and integration of individuals with lived experience. For example, when hosting community listening sessions or pulling together advisory groups that are asked to make community-driven decisions, it may be helpful to integrate some of the insights related to what it means for everyone to feel included and what tools can promote candid sharing.

Limitations

One limitation to this study relates to Part 2 participants. During the given timespan, the researcher was unable to identify a collective impact participant who solely identified as having a lived experience perspective as opposed to having both an organizational and lived experience perspective. This perspective may have added nuance to existing themes and/or elevated additional themes.

Future Research

In addition to further studies that address the limitation outlined above, this research helps to identify opportunities for ongoing research that could translate into more usable information for collective impact stakeholders. For example, frequencies for the number of conversations in which a theme arose are included as additional context in the Appendix (Appendix A, B, C). Again, these are not intended to be an indicator for the value or prevalence of a theme, but rather a starting point for understanding when certain themes are more or less common. Future research could use these categories to build a survey and more effectively understand which themes are most and least common. Also, it would be helpful to know if there are differences in experience based on one's identity. Thus, future researchers could choose an approach that focuses on a higher number of participants so that facets of their experience related to community-driven decision making can be disaggregated. Specifically, it would be helpful to know what tools are most effective when a group is composed of a majority of organizational partners versus lived experience partners and vice versa. Similarly, when there is a minority of group members based on any type of identities (eg: age, gender, race, sexual identity, geographic alignment), it would also be helpful to know if there is a difference in what tools and processes are more effective than others. Further, it would be helpful to have more information related to

the context in which various tools are most helpful, especially broken down by stage of team formation, stage of group work (ie.- understanding the problem versus allocating resources), and level of existing psychological safety among the group.

Additionally, findings about the percentage of decisions that are successfully community driven are preliminary at best. If a researcher was interested in validating that percentage, it would be helpful to do so with a broader and more representative sample size. Future researchers may want to consider utilizing a grounded theory approach which would help create a conceptual theory that may provide clarity, shared language, and a framework for an effective community driven decision-making process.

Final Overview

As described by Social Innovation Generation, "Systems change is about shifting the conditions that are holding the problem in place," (Kania et al., 2018, pg 2). That sentiment holds true in thinking about the collective impact group being both a system itself, as well as a lever of a broader community system based on the area of focus (eg: education, criminal justice, health, workforce development etc). Thus, through an equity lens, the way in which the group operates is just as important as the outcomes the group obtains. This sentiment was reflected by multiple participants directly, but also is amplified by the general experiences shared.

Overall, this research elevated the perspectives of collective impact group stakeholders related to their experiences with making community-driven decisions. Not only did it elevate eighteen unique experiences, but it also created the opportunity to understand patterns that exist across multiple experiences. These experiences validated a need for clarity on how community-driven decisions are defined and monitored. The experiences further reflect the complexity and emotional burden that goes into making community-driven decisions for both

facilitators and group members. Further, despite holding different roles in collective impact groups, these findings begin to show where there is alignment in how facilitators and group members experience the community- driven decision-making process, as well as where there are key differences. Finally, as is often the case with research intended to drive action, the study also unfolds new questions and opportunities for additional research. Overall, one research participant's wisdom best encapsulates a call to action, “Collective impact goes beyond just the existence of the groups themselves, but really asking hard questions such as what are we accomplishing and how is there shared decision-making?”

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

This is a screenshot of the codebook which depicts how excerpts were organized into themes and tracked based on the session in which they surfaced.

A	B	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
Session	**Excerpts related to barriers that impact decision-making**	**Themes**	**Session in Which Code was discussed**							
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Depending on the sector, it could go to education level like does this person have a Phd in this field like you mentioned? And then I also think there's just this general expert, non expert, dynamic and I think the example that coming to mind where it shows up most is school based specific. The principle or the principle may have like a lot more power in those conversations compared to parents.	**Perceived power differential :** whether real or not, different levels of authority associated with a person or organizations access to resouiderces, education, experience; also related to roles in people who would be in charge of implementing a decision have more say	x	x		x	x	x	x	x
1	Sometimes it's about what the decision means for different people. It seems like whoever is implementing the idea automatically gets additional power.	**Pre-existing relationships:** these relationships can be at the individual or organizational level; include both positive and negative types of relationships; sometimes spills over into external engagement outside of sessions; also includes impact of people who are not part of those pre-existing relationships and may feel isolated, left out	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
1	As a backbone organization, also hold power in these spaces. For example, it can play out in how notes are synthesized and when the backbone pushes the group to move forward with making a decision.	**Individual identities/personalities:** aspects of the way one is perceived based on communication style, race			x	x				
1	"There's a lot of interpersonal relationships, people have interacted with each other outside of our cans, hopefully, positively. Sometimes they don't have a great working relationship and there's tension, in the room or I've seen it where someone feels really strongly. About their idea, and they don't feel the need to give space to other people, while they're sharing that thought."	**Competing Priorities:** at an individual level (eg: volunteer vs paid staff participant) or at the organizational level (partners in space are competing for grants outside of the collective impact space); may also include ego		x			x			x

Appendix B

This table shows the number of conversations in which each theme arose among facilitators (fac) and group members (GM) related to "How do key stakeholders (facilitators and group members) experience the community-driven decision-making process." It also shows the percentage of conversations in which the theme arose across facilitator and group member conversations combined.

Interview Question	**Theme**	**Description**	**Number of conversations in which the theme arose**		
			Fac. (n=8)	GM (n=6)	Total (n=14)
How do you define equitable, community-driven decision-making?	Collaborative	The group as a whole drives the forward movement of the group action taken	4	2	42.9%
	Diverse Representation	Inclusion of wide variety of perspectives such as professional and personal lived experience, positive and negatively impacted folks, and people/agencies beyond existing relationships to the backbone organization	6	4	71.4%
	Inclusive Processes	Steps taken to cultivate inclusive engagement, shared decision-making and transparency	4	5	64.3%
How do you determine if an equitable, community-driven decision was made within a collective impact group?	Engagement	All members are actively listening and contributing, with priority placed on community perspective that represents those most impacted by the issue	6	5	78.6%
	Consensus	General group agreement with shared understanding and focus on desired result	5	1	42.9%
	Intentional Processes	Consistent use of agreed upon protocols related to how the group communications and engages in the decision-making process that leads to shared purpose	7	3	71.4%
Can you tell me what it's like from your perspective to participate in the decision-making process?	Broadened Perspective	Strong inclination to have access to different perspectives in order to contribute to a community-driven decision	NA	4	66.7%
	Personal Impact	The way in which engaging in the process of making a community-driven decision affects the person at an individual level.	NA	6	100%
	Relationship to Group	A focus on awareness of group dynamics (both interpersonal and stage of work) that impact the experience of being asked to make community-driven decisions.	NA	5	83.3%

Appendix C

This table shows the number of conversations in which each theme arose among facilitators (fac) and group members (GM) related to "What elements hinder community-driven decision-making." It also shows the total percentage of conversations in which the theme arose across facilitator and group member conversations combined.

Interview Question	**Theme**	**Description**	**Number of conversations in which theme arose**		
			Fac. (n=8)	GM (n=6)	Total (n=14)
What barriers get in the way of this outcome?	Group Structural Conditions	Aspects of how, when and where the group meets throughout the duration of the work that impacts ability to have representative voices present for every decision	7	NA	87.5%
	External Expectations	Pressure created by external stakeholders that can negatively impact the timeline, process and outcomes of the group's work	3	NA	37.5%
	Type and Quality of Facilitation	A facilitator's willingness and ability to help ensure the group remains clear about purpose and process of the work throughout each stage, as well helping the group navigate barriers that arise	6	NA	75%
	Group Member Interactions	Disruptions to authentic group engagement related to lack of genuine respect for differing opinions/experiences and/or lack of self-awareness	6	NA	75%
	Competing Priorities	Having conflicting interests or limited resources that influence group members contributions to the group	5	NA	62.5%
	Limited Power	Societal or organizational limitations that impact ability to make and carry out decisions as planned	3	NA	37.5%
Are there power dynamics or interpersonal relationships that impact the way the group ultimately makes decisions?	Perceived Power Differential	Whether real or not, different levels of authority associated with a person or organization's access to resources, education, experience	7	6	78.6%
	Pre-existing Relationships	These relationships (or lack of) can be at the individual or organizational level; include both positive and negative types of relationships; sometimes spills over into external engagement outside of sessions	8	4	85.7%
	Individual Identities and Personalities	Aspects of the way one is perceived based on things such as communication style, race, gender.	3	2	35.7%

Appendix D

This table shows the number of conversations in which each theme arose among facilitators (fac) and group members (GM) related to "What factors promote community-driven decision-making." It also shows the total percentage of conversations in which the theme arose across facilitator and group member conversations combined.

Interview Question	**Theme**	**Description**	**Number of conversations in which the theme arose**		
			Fac. (n=8)	GM (n=6)	Total (n=14)
What tools/processes would you recommend to support more consistent community-driven decision-making?	Alignment	A group that has a shared identified, purpose and processes related to their overall mission	8	4	85.7%
	Relationship Builders	Interpersonal connectivity and trust among group members	5	4	64.3%
	Retention	Activities, incentives or discussion topics that help members want to continue their involvement	5	3	57.1%
	Engagement	Tools that address harmful conflict, power dynamics and/or distractions that may otherwise impede active engagement	8	4	85.7%
	Inclusivity	Creation of working spaces that allows everyone to engage across a broad spectrum of communication and processing styles, while supporting learning and creative problem solving	6	5	78.6%

Appendix E

Data Collection Protocols

Focus Group Protocol

Introduction: Thank you again for everyone making time to be here. I'm so genuinely excited for an opportunity to learn from all of you about your experiences related to helping facilitate community-driven decisions in Collaborative Action Networks. As a reminder, I am a doctoral student (but also a fellow CAN facilitator) who has repeatedly read about the importance of community-driven decision-making as a tool for equity within CAN spaces. However, there's little information available about the best ways to support that happening given CAN's are often composed of diverse participants. Thus my research is aiming to explore potential barriers as well as practical solutions that can be used to elevate community-driven decision-making. I am committed to ensuring you all have access to the findings from this study so that you can use it within your work (should you find it helpful).

You have all signed the consent form, but I want to pause to ensure there are no pending questions or concerns you'd like to discuss before we move forward with our group discussion. You are welcome to speak aloud now or you can put your question/comment in a private chat.

I do want to call attention to the fact that this session is being recorded. I'll be using the transcript to identify themes that arise across experiences shared in the focus group. Because you are sharing your experiences in a group format, I want to remind folks that there is the expectation that we maintain confidentiality, meaning nothing shared in this space should be repeated outside of this conversation outside of discussing aggregated themes that do not identify the person who shared.

Following this conversation, I will be working to identify themes across the conversation and will be sharing those back with you all. You don't have to do anything with that information if you don't want to/have time. However, it's important to me to create an opportunity for you to verify that I've accurately synthesized your experiences.

The format for today is that I have five questions that I'm hoping we discuss. I'll put those in the chat. However, this is truly a conversation so I may include some follow-up questions as well. For this conversation, you are welcome to keep your video on or off, whatever is most comfortable to you.

For the first two questions, I'm going to give you time to think independently for about 3 minutes. Please feel free to share your answers in the chat box and we'll begin the discussion from there.

- How do you determine if an equitable, community-driven decision was made?
- How often do you think this occurs within CANs you've facilitated?
- What barriers get in the way of this outcome?
- Are there power dynamics or interpersonal relationships that impact the way the group ultimately makes decisions when there is conflict/varying perspectives? Please describe.

For this last question, I'm going to ask you all to brainstorm tools/processes that you would recommend to support more consistent community-driven decision-making. We are going to categorize ideas based on building one of the following: inclusivity, safety to learn, safety to contribute, and safety to challenge the status quo.

Individual Interviews Protocol

Introduction: Thank you again for everyone making time to be here. I'm so genuinely excited for an opportunity to learn from you about your experiences as a participant within community-driven decisions in Collaborative Action Networks. As a reminder, I am a doctoral student (but also a CAN facilitator) who has repeatedly read about the importance of community-driven decision making as a tool for equity within CAN spaces. However, there's little information available about the best ways to support that happening given CAN's are often composed of diverse participants. Thus my research is aiming to explore potential barriers as well as practical solutions that can be used to elevate community-driven decision-making. I am committed to ensuring all participants have access to the findings from this study so that you can use it within your work (should you find it helpful).

You have signed the consent form, but I want to pause to ensure there are no pending questions or concerns you'd like to discuss before we move forward with our discussion.

I do want to call attention to the fact that this session is being recorded. I'll be using the transcript to identify themes that arise across experiences shared within these interviews. Following this conversation, I will be working to identify themes across the conversation and will be sharing those back with you. You don't have to do anything with that information if you don't want to/have time. However, it's important to me to create an opportunity for you to verify that I've accurately synthesized your experiences.

The format for today is that I have six questions that I'm hoping we discuss. I'll put those in the chat. However, this is truly a conversation so I may include some follow-up

questions as well. For this conversation, you are welcome to keep your video on or off, whatever is most comfortable to you.

- Can you please share your gender and racial identity? Also, in the CAN space, do you think of yourself as being a community member or an organizational representative?
- Can you tell me what it's like from your perspective to participate in the decision-making process? Do you feel heard? Understood?
- Can you describe a time where power dynamics within a CAN have impeded your psychological safety? If so, please describe.
- Do you think any part of your identity impacts your experience in this space? Please explain.
- Are there power dynamics or interpersonal relationships that impact the way the group ultimately makes decisions when there is conflict/varying perspectives? Please describe.

For this last question, I'm going to ask you to brainstorm tools/processes that you would recommend to support more consistent community-driven decision-making. We are going to categorize ideas based on building one of the following: inclusivity, safety to learn, safety to contribute, and safety to challenge the status quo.

Appendix F



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: August 31, 2023 **IRB#:** 16320

Principal Investigator: Lauren M King

Approval Date: 08/31/2023

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Decision-Making Protocols in Collaborative Action Networks: A Key to Disrupting Harmful Power Dynamics

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board