HOW DO SOCIAL PARTNERSHIPS CONSTRUCT SOCIAL PROBLEMS?  
A SOCIAL-SYMBOLIC WORK PERSPECTIVE

ÖZGÜ KARAKULAK  
University of Sussex Business School  
Jubilee Building, University of Sussex Brighton, BN1 9SL UK

THOMAS B. LAWRENCE  
Saïd Business School, University of Oxford

INTRODUCTION

In the world of social partnerships, an important puzzle concerns how partners construct the social problems the partnership is intended to address. Social partnerships bring actors from different sectors together to work on a social problem that they cannot solve alone, and to share the risks and responsibilities of doing so (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012; Selsky & Parker, 2005, Waddock, 1989). A key difference between partnerships involves their construction of the social problem. Some partnerships, for instance, might observe high rates of crime committed by young people and construct the problem as nested in complex family lives, education struggles, and employment. In contrast, other partnerships might observe the same problem and construct it more simply as a criminal issue, ignoring the issue’s context and potential complexity. Understanding why partnerships differ in this regard has important implications (Gray & Purdy, 2018; Selsky & Parker, 2010), particularly since the manner in which partners construct a problem significantly influences the ways they approach the issue, the solutions they propose, and their impacts on the society (Lawrence, Dover & Gallagher, 2014; Van Tulder et al., 2016).

To investigate how partnerships construct social problems, we focus on the social-symbolic work of partnership members (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). A social-symbolic work perspective is useful for studying the social construction of social problems for a number of reasons. First, it highlights that the social problems that social partnerships address are themselves social-symbolic objects—created, shaped, and maintained by streams of social-symbolic work. Second, it highlights the construction of social problems by a social partnership and emphasizes that this construction is an active and ongoing process whereby actors generate a collective vision of the issue (Gray, 1989). Third, it contrasts with structural approaches to understanding differences in the construction of the social problems; where structural arguments might assume the meaning of social problems to be fixed, a social-symbolic work lens conceives of the social construction of social problems as dynamic and amenable to change through intentional efforts.

To address this puzzle, we examine two social partnerships with similar characteristics, designed in identical ways, and that targeted gender inequality in Turkey. We found that two forms of social-symbolic work—relational work and practice work— influenced how social partnerships constructed social problems. Our findings suggest extensive (limited) relational work and in-depth (shallow) practice work lead to embedded (disembedded) constructions of social problem and, ultimately, to multi-level (singular) outcomes.

Our study makes three main contributions. First, we show how the process of a particular issue’s social construction unfolds, a process that has been largely overlooked (Lawrence, Dover & Gallagher, 2014; Vestergaard et al, 2020). We show that social problems emerge and evolve alongside partners’ relationships, which make them properties of the partnerships and,
ultimately, influence the partnerships dynamics and outcomes. Our research thus adds to the emerging issue-centric research on social partnerships (Dentoni, Bitzer & Schouten, 2018; Van Tulder & Keen, 2018). Second, we contribute to the social-symbolic work literature by showing how two specific forms of work are interrelated. We demonstrate the lived experienced of social-symbolic work (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca, 2011) and its embodiment. Third, we contribute to research on the management of social partnerships by showing the significance of relational work and providing an alternative view to the more common focus on internal dimensions and partnership characteristics (Kolk, van Tulder & Kostwinder, 2008).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Social Partnerships and Social Problems

Social partnerships tackle diverse social and environmental problems, more broadly named as grand challenges (George et al., 2016). The problems that they address are commonly “ill defined, ambiguous and contested, and feature multilayered interdependencies and complex social dynamics” (Termeer et al, 2015, pp. 680). Given the complexity of the issue and the diversity of partners’ world views (Cloutier & Langley, 2017), not all partnerships observe the issue the same way, which ultimately suggests that a process of social construction is involved (Gray, 1989). On this basis, the process of social construction includes defining what comprises the problem, what its boundaries are, as well as its effect and importance (Lawrence et al., 2014). Throughout this process, partnerships develop their collaborative tackling of the problem and some of the social partnerships might develop a narrow understanding of social problem, treating it independently of the other relevant social factors, whereas another partnership might approach the social problem in a manner that is nested in different social structures and as a complex issue (Dentoni et al., 2018). Therefore, even though partnerships seem very similar to each other, and come about to tackle the same social issue, their social construction of the issue might be different. We argue that examining this difference is important since this process influences every aspect of social partnerships.

The Role of Social-Symbolic Work

The social-symbolic object lies at the core of social-symbolic work and is described as “combinations of discursive, relational and material elements that constitute meaningful patterns in social systems” (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019, pp. 5). For example, employees might work to create a professional identity (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) while organizations might engage in strategy work to change their organizational strategy (Whittington, 2006), whereas labor associations might work to create new institutional standards and practices (Helfen & Sydow, 2013). In these examples, the social-symbolic objects targeted are identity at the individual level, strategy at the organizational level, and practices at the institutional level.

From the perspective of social-symbolic work, social problems are understood as social-symbolic objects. Thus, social issues in the partnership context are shaped by the purposeful everyday work of the partnership members. It also highlights the situatedness of the object and work and its effects (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019). Considering the complexity of the social issues, work lens helps to focus on the interrelatedness of these dimensions and unpack the complexity in detail. Thus, in this research we ask: How does social-symbolic work influence the
way in which partnership members construct the social problem? How does the problem construction affect the outcomes of the social partnerships?

METHODS AND DATA

This study employed a comparative case study design (Eisenhardt, 1989) and we study two cases of social partnerships (both founded by one NGO and one business partner) addressing gender inequality in Turkey. Gender inequality is one of the most prevalent social problems that exists in Turkey. Even though Turkey is a high-ranking, middle-income country with the 18th largest economy in the world, Turkey has a notable gender gap. In this respect, it is ranked 130th out of 153 countries in the 2020 World Economic Forum report: Global Gender Gap Index (2020). Overall, the partnerships’ length (4 years) and the partnership’s national and activity scope, partners’ characteristics, partnerships’ organization and increased shared responsibility between partners made these two cases comparable. Overall, we conducted 47 interviews with partnership members between August 2015 and December. These interviews were helpful in gaining more deep understanding of the partner relationships and their construction of the issue. We also analyzed 456 pages of organizational and archival documents. The first author also attended 6 partnership activities (microcredit distribution, payment delivery, etc.) in MESLEK and observed seven partnership activities (student training, teacher training, etc.) in TAHSIL to understand how partnership engaged with beneficiaries and how partnership activities were implemented in the field. These observation data were particularly helpful to acquiring an understanding of the participants’ experience of the work in the field, and partner relations.

FINDINGS

Social Construction of the Problem

Our first main finding was that the social construction of the problem differed significantly between MESLEK and TAHSIL. On this basis, we found that MESLEK constructed the social problem in terms of what we call a disembedded phenomenon which overlooked the complex, interrelated social structures and cultural context that created, and consistently influenced the problem. In contrast, TAHSIL constructed the social problem in terms of what we call an embedded phenomenon, where partnership considered the multilayered interdependencies of social structures and complex societal and cultural dynamics surrounding the problem.

**MESLEK’s approach: Social construction of social problem as disembedded.** Partners aimed to “increase the number of women entrepreneurs in the country” (partnership brochure) “to create equal opportunities for entrepreneur women” (newspaper article, 2014). To do so, they decided to “support women from low-income families to start a new job or grow their business” (newspaper article, 2012). As these excerpts suggest, the partner’s construction of the problem conveyed the problem as being somehow unique to some specific segment of the population, due to a lack of financial means, which was easily fixable.

**TAHSIL’s approach: Social construction of social problem as embedded.** In TAHSIL, the social construction of the problem quickly became embedded and continued to evolve in that direction throughout the course of the partnership. Although the main issue that partners wanted
to address was a lack of female engineers, the way they socially constructed the issue was significantly different than MESLEK. For TAHSIL, the problem was not merely an issue of a lack of women engineers in the country. Instead, it was the stereotypes and traditional gender roles that prevented women from aspiring to become engineers. This was expressed in partnership brochures, which read as:

“Due to traditional gender roles, engineering is perceived to fit men more than women, and these roles and stereotypes recommend women to work where they can contain their care responsibilities at home and prompt them think they cannot be successful in these profession… This partnership aims to encourage women to work in this area and to decrease prejudices and anxiety driven from gender roles.”

The Role of Social-Symbolic Work

In exploring how the two partnerships came to construct the social problem differently, even though they seemed to start from relatively similar initial positions, we found two types of social-symbolic work – relational work and practice work – were influential. The three forms of relational work that we identified were (i) getting to know the partner to build a relationship, (ii) managing tensions caused by differences, and (iii) opening up new avenues to nurture relationships. Our findings illustrated that extensive relational work happened between partners in TAHSIL, compared to the limited relational work in MESLEK. The two forms of practice work for disrupting practices we observed were: (i) eliminating barriers, (ii) engaging other stakeholders to create awareness.

Although both partnerships engaged in forms of practice work that could be grouped under 2 broad categories, the partners’ social construction of the problem shaped the practice work. MESLEK’s disembedded construction of the social problem led to shallow practice work, whereas TAHSIL’s embedded construction of the social problem led to in-depth practice work.

MESLEK engaging in limited relational work. Partners in MESLEK engaged in limited relational work, which was restricted to maintaining partnership activities solely, rather than specifically building a long-lasting sustainable relationship or getting to know the partner. For example, partners’ communication was shallow although quite frequent, mostly one-directional and took the form of directives from the company to the NGO. These kinds of aloof attitudes widened the gap between partners, thereby causing misunderstandings and prevented full cooperation.

TAHSIL engaging in extensive relational work. We found that relational work was carried out more extensively in TAHSIL compared to MESLEK. Our informants frequently underlined that they “handled this [partnership] process very well, through open communication” (Q5). This frequent and sincere communication allowed partners to see each other as equals and gave them enough comfort to “surrender themselves to the partner.” (Q5) In cases of conflict, they chose to look for a way to overcome it, rather than running away from it. Furthermore, partners’ cooperation in the field was instrumental in building sustainable relationships. They were not only implementing partnership activities during these frequent and intense field trips, but they also involved in some leisure activities (sightseeing, shopping, going to restaurants together, etc.) where they enjoyed their spare time out of work together. During these times, they had the opportunity to strengthen their relations with their partners. This was also a time for personal reflection for company employees and one-on-one discussions with NGO members. Overall, extensive relational work seemed to bridge the gap between partners coming from “different worlds” (Q4) and helped them to build relationships. In addition, as a result of
extensive relational work, positive emotions were created between partners and it paved the way for partners to engage in deep conversation and discussions about what the problem their partnership was addressing, and the boundaries involved.

*MESLEK engaging shallow practice work.* MESLEK aimed to influence the practices that prevented women from realizing their entrepreneurial capacities. On this basis, the first form of work undertaken was to eliminate the barriers that prevent women from becoming entrepreneurs. For instance, the partnership’s principal activity was to provide the necessary economic means by providing them with micro-credit loans. The second form of practice work involved engaging other stakeholders to create awareness around the issue of women entrepreneurs in the country. On this basis, the company financed a lot of advertisements, “organized press conferences with the participation of celebrities” (X13), as well as airing advertisements on national TV channels. However, unlike TAHSIL, the company did not involve their employees all that much. This was expressed by a Finance specialist, with a bit of disappointment, who said: “I don’t think it was well advertised” and the CSR project specialist also confessed: “I don’t know why, but the employees didn’t embrace the project.”

*TAHSIL engaging in in-depth practice work.* Unlike the work undertaken by MESLEK, TAHSIL engaged in in-depth practice work, which targeted the practices that prevented women from becoming engineers. The main partnership work in this respect involved educating high school students. A group of partnership team members travelled extensively, all around Turkey, to deliver training specially designed for the partnership. After each session, partnership members were sitting together to discuss what went wrong and right, and reported that to the NGO and company headquarter, which later influenced the partnership’s perception of the issue. One important component of this work was to show role models to eliminate gender biases. On this basis, female engineers from the company were asked to give a 30-minute presentation on their engineering journey and what they did daily; this stressed the partnership’s main message: professions have no gender. This role also took on a great deal of meaning for company volunteers, given that they had faced their fair share of prejudices in their lives. They also engaged in similar activities in terms of engaging other stakeholders to create awareness like MESLEK.

**Partnership Outcomes**

Our second research strand also asks how the issue’s social construction influences partnership outcomes. We found that MESLEK’s impact was singular and led to incremental changes at the organizational level, primarily within the NGO. In contrast, we found that TAHSIL delivered a multi-level outcome. It led to transformation for individuals by changing their approach to gender issues and for organizations by putting new rules and criteria in place. In addition, the partnership triggered some field-level changes, such as the creation of new organizations, new education programs, and new partnerships with the same approach.

**DISCUSSION**

This paper’s aim is to better understand how social-symbolic work shapes the way in which partnerships socially construct the social problems they aim to address and how this, in turn, influences the outcomes of such partnerships. Our study suggests that relational work and practice work are influential in this process. To conclude, we discuss implications of our study for three broad areas: (i) the social construction of social problems; (ii) social-symbolic work;
and (iii) the management of social partnerships. First, this study builds on previous research on social partnerships (Gray, 1989; Selsky & Parker, 2010) and social innovation (Lawrence et al., 2014; Loseke, 2010) that has begun to acknowledge the socially constructed nature of social problems, by showing that social problems are dynamic, emergent properties of those partnerships. Our findings show that the social construction of social problems is a continuous process that evolves as partnerships develop through partners’ practical actions and the ways that they relate to one another. Second, while previous writing on social-symbolic work has suggested a set of strategies through which different forms of work might interact (Lawrence & Phillips, 2019), we show how forms of work can affect each other through the experience of people engaging in them. In our study, relational work and practice work influenced each other through the experience of engaging in each form of work, as well as through the social-symbolic objects they affected. Thus, our study builds on the emerging focus on the lived experience of social-symbolic work (Creed, Taylor & Hudson, 2020; Lawrence et al., 2011) emphasizing social-symbolic work as embodied and human work. Third, research into social partnerships has tended to focus on internal partnership characteristics (Kolk et al, 2008; Vestergaard et al., 2020) and has only recently started to consider the relational dimension (Le Ber & Branzei, 2010). We extend this line of research by making relational work (Zelizer, 2012) a focus of partnership scholars’ attention. Our study has highlighted partnerships members’ actions, rather than design elements such as governance, contracts, and partner choices, thereby challenging a long-standing assumption in social partnership research that partner compatibility at the outset is the key issue for successful partnerships.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHORS