

Stronger Together: Developing Research Partnerships with Social Impact Organizations

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ABSTRACT

A growing number of Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) academic community members are establishing research partnerships with Social Impact Organizations (SIOs) such as nonprofits, public policy entities, and other societally-focused organizations and initiatives. These relational engagement partnerships with SIOs are vital for TCR researchers because SIOs have deep connections to people and communities where transformative change takes place. We leverage insights from TCR researchers and SIOs engaged in relational engagement partnerships to outline a framework for such partnerships that supports and sustains these collaborations, furthers knowledge creation, and lays the groundwork for social impact. Our goal is to offer a framework for relational engagement partnerships that can propagate within the TCR community, encouraging fruitful collaborations between TCR researchers and SIOs that have the potential to create positive social impact.

Keywords: Transformative Consumer Research, Social Impact, Relational Engagement Research, partnerships, nonprofits

INTRODUCTION

Research relationships between Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) academic researchers and Social Impact Organizations (SIOs) such as nonprofits, public policy entities, and other societally-focused organizations and initiatives often begin with both groups asking parallel questions. For example, researcher Kristin Scott of Minnesota State University, Mankato asks, “Are we studying them, or is this a partnership?” Likewise, SIOs, in the words of Katie Eder of Future Coalition, consider: “Do they want something from us, or do they want to co-create something with us?” A growing number of TCR researchers and SIOs are responding to these formative questions by seeking to work together on research in relational engagement partnerships (Ozanne et al. 2022). SIOs are vital relational engagement partners because their deep and authentic connections to local communities can bridge the gap between research and on-the-ground transformative change. For example, TCR researchers and Hunger Task Force—an anti-hunger SIO in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—have a long-standing relational engagement partnership that has led to both published research articles and positive program outcomes for the organization (Bublitz et al. 2019a, 2019b, 2021). Hunger Task Force submitted these articles—which included key leadership staff as co-authors—as supporting documentation when applying for successful, multi-year grants to expand their Mobile Market. These grant funds resulted in measurable impact, increasing access to healthy and affordable food in Milwaukee’s food deserts. This research also created new frameworks through which to view Hunger Task Force’s marketing strategies around healthy eating and food well-being, benefiting their programs and offering conceptual contributions to the academic literature and practical implications and program ideas to other SIOs.

Yet, while such partnerships can yield meaningful impact, research collaborations can be difficult to create, manage, and sustain (Ribeiro, Braga, and Ferreira 2019). Not all academics and SIOs are aware of the best practices needed to successfully navigate such research

relationships. We leverage insights from interviews with TCR researchers and TCR-affiliated SIO leaders engaged in relational engagement partnerships to outline a framework for supporting high-performing research partnerships that lay the groundwork for social impact. In doing so, we highlight factors, such as a shared focus on mission and values and a commitment to creating impact beyond the partnership that distinguish academic-SIO partnerships from other collaborative relationships. Our framework integrates the experiences of our research participants—TCR researchers and SIO leaders—with insights from related literatures across a variety of disciplines including TCR, marketing, and management. This framework is also informed by our SIO and academic author team’s relational engagement partnerships. We document an adaptable, stepwise process to help researchers and SIOs put this framework into action by engaging in mutually beneficial relational engagement partnerships.

We begin by offering a brief conceptual review of relational engagement. Next, we describe our methodology for understanding relational engagement partnerships which includes interviews with TCR researchers and TCR-affiliated SIO leaders. We then integrate the promising practices of these researchers and SIO leaders engaged in relational engagement partnerships with relevant concepts from TCR, marketing, and associated academic disciplines into a singular framework. We present this framework and introduce three steps for implementing relational engagement partnerships: (1) select partners with purpose, (2) build mutually beneficial relationships, and (3) generate impact via knowledge creation and dissemination. Finally, we offer recommendations for how to support relational engagement partnerships and propose additional research to advance these partnerships.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Relational engagement is a research approach in which academics collaborate directly with relevant non-academic stakeholders “building on their everyday understandings, interests, and expertise” (Ozanne et al. 2017, p. 5). Such stakeholders include nonprofit organizations,

public policy entities, and social impact initiatives with deep connections to people and communities where transformative change takes place—Social Impact Organizations (SIOs). Relational engagement partnerships between researchers and key stakeholders, including SIOs, are a strategic cornerstone of the TCR movement’s effort to optimize its goal of having measurable, positive impact on people’s well-being (Davis, Ozanne, and Hill 2016). Such partnerships involve collaboration across the many stages of the research process including creating research outputs, making people aware of the research and its findings, and implementing research insights where they are most needed. Relational engagement is rooted in the tenet that we, as researchers, cannot maximize social impact through a one-way flow of information and knowledge from researcher to society. Rather, social impact—and ultimately, transformative change—most often takes place within a complex and multidirectional network of connections that include the people and organizations on the ground in local communities. Further, developing and conducting research in relational engagement partnerships with stakeholders such as SIOs allows scholars an intimate understanding of complex substantive societal issues and provides a ready path for adopting research findings (Ozanne et al. 2017). The relational engagement partnerships forged between researchers and SIOs have the power to move research insights into actions that advance the well-being of people, communities, and society.

We recognize a significant and growing body of research around relational engagement for societal benefit (Bublitz et al. 2019a, 2019b, 2021; Davis and Ozanne 2018, 2019; Ozanne et al. 2017; Parsons et al. 2021; Piacentini et al. 2019; Saatcioglu & Corus 2019; Upadhyaya et al. 2021; Weaver et al. 2019). For example, Upadhyaya et al. (2021) worked with Ascend at the Aspen Institute, a global nonprofit committed to an equitable society, to discover ways of disrupting the generational effects of poverty. In another case, Weaver et al. (2019) worked with an impoverished community in Central America to develop ways nonprofits and communities can engage in mutually beneficial partnerships to alleviate poverty. Our research sheds light on

the relational engagement approach by interviewing academics and SIO leaders engaged in these and other TCR relational engagement partnerships with the goal of developing a framework to encourage and guide the adoption and expansion of these partnerships by more researchers in the TCR community and beyond.

METHODS AND DATA DESCRIPTION

In the relational engagement tradition (Davis and Ozanne 2018; Davis, Ozanne, and Hill 2016; Ozanne et al. 2017), our author team includes an SIO co-author and several academic TCR co-authors. Before beginning our collaborative research, we obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval.¹ We began by interviewing a purposive sample of six TCR researchers and six SIO leaders who had conducted relational engagement research, adopting a multiple case study approach (Alam 2002). Consistent with the relational engagement approach, these TCR researchers and SIO leaders were considered partners in our research process rather than units of observation (Eisenhardt 1989; Ravenswood 2011). The researchers investigate diverse TCR topical domains and the SIO leaders represent multiple nonprofits to provide more generalizable insights (Battistella et al. 2017; Corley 2015), cross-validate the patterns identified (Ravenswood 2011), and ultimately build a framework for creating relational engagement partnerships.

Each academic researcher and SIO leader had extensive experience with research partnerships and all had previously participated in published research articles based on these collaborations. Our research process adhered to Ozanne et al.'s (2017, p. 2) recommendation that “researchers should work with invested stakeholders sharing the power to define problems, create, and use knowledge that can benefit society.” According to Ozanne et al.'s (2022)

¹ The track co-chair, who served as the primary recruiting and interview point of contact, obtained IRB approval with their institution serving as IRB of record. Other team members followed their institutions' IRB policies, with some relying on documented approval by another institution and some requiring review. Each team member completed the IRB training required by their home institution. Our non-academic stakeholder partner also completed IRB training. Approved materials consisted of a description of our research plan including notification that participants would be identified by name in the research, recruiting materials, informed consent documents, and our interview guide.

Typology of Relational Engagement Pathways, this is *Capacity Building* research given that we sought to identify challenges (and more importantly, the strategies and practices to prevent or overcome those challenges) ultimately outlining a framework for successful research collaborations between academics and SIOs.

Our research process followed emerging work outlining abductive research methods (Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2022). We generated our framework for relational engagement partnerships by following an “iterative hypothesize → observe → analyze → organize & prioritize research method” (Janiszewski and van Osselaer 2022, p. 17). Over a period of six months, we collected interview data, analyzed themes from our emerging data, and synthesized best practices with the related literature. As we crafted our framework, we returned to ask clarifying questions of the SIO leaders and academic participants engaged in this project to confirm the patterns observed and refine the conclusions drawn. Together, we developed and refined the framework presented here, leveraging extensive examples and quotes from our participants—identified with their permission in Table 1—to illuminate our framework. Our goal was to develop a framework that encourages intentional and fruitful research collaborations.

 Insert Table 1 Here

FRAMEWORK FOR RELATIONAL ENGAGEMENT PARTNERSHIPS

Extant frameworks for studying collaboration recommend that those entering partnerships consider several stages— antecedents to collaboration, the process of collaboration, and the outcomes of the work done in the process stage (Wood and Gray 1991). Our framework, reported in this section, builds on these stages. It includes an adaptable, three-step process for developing relational engagement partnerships: (1) select partners with purpose, (2) build mutually beneficial relationships, and (3) generate impact via knowledge creation and dissemination (depicted in Figure 1). In what follows, we describe each of the steps of the

framework in greater detail and explore how the processes and practices they encompass are critical to relational engagement partnerships. We interweave the experiences and practices of our participants—TCR researchers and SIO leaders—with findings from TCR, marketing, management, and other related literatures. In the sections that follow, we identify TCR academic participants with the notation (A) and SIO participants with the notation (S).

Insert Figure 1 Here

Select Partners with Purpose

The extant literature on partnerships (e.g., Austin and Seitanidi 2012; Ribeiro et al. 2019; Seitanidi and Crane 2009) identifies finding and selecting the right partner as a critical factor for success. This is because partner choice affects trust and communication in a relationship, which ultimately impacts the success and effectiveness of partnerships (Atouba and Shumate 2020). Several elements emerged as critical when selecting relational engagement partners: create community connections; align your purpose, vision, and values; adopt a service orientation; and cultivate transparency and mutual trust. We examine each in turn.

Create Community Connections.

When establishing new initiatives, organizations tend to select partners they know and with whom they have an existing relationship (Alves Nunes Köppel and Stazic 2021; Seitanidi and Crane 2009). Existing relationships provide a basis for growth while reducing uncertainty (Austin and Seitanidi 2012; Seitanidi and Crane 2009). Building on an existing connection or relationship may increase success by ensuring that partners understand not only each other's needs and objectives, but also their strengths and weaknesses (Atouba and Shumate 2020; Hunt, Lambe, and Wittmann 2002; Ribeiro et al. 2019). Consistent with the literature, both our academic and SIO participants indicated that their relational engagement partnerships often grew out of existing relationships—in many cases professional, but sometimes personal—for example,

when academics became involved in volunteer work. Todd Weaver (A) described the origin of relational engagement partnerships by noting that “collaboration begins outside of academics. It begins because you’re passionate about the cause. Then you see an opportunity to bring it into the classroom.” These initial personal and teaching connections, over time, can evolve and grow to include research. According to Staci Croom-Raley (S), “You’re more inclined to work with a partner who knows you and who you know.”

Partners often get to know each other through pilot projects. These projects offer a smaller, relatively short-term commitment. For example, Mentor Dida (S) suggests that partners “try a six-month commitment. . . and then once they feel they are strategically aligned, that will open up” more opportunities. Rika Houston (A) advised:

After a couple semesters of working on student projects, an SIO establishes the trust and sense of relationship between the faculty and the organization, which opens up the larger relationship that benefits them both.

Researchers should foster community connections to identify potential SIO collaborators for relational engagement partnerships.

Align your Purpose, Vision, and Values.

Divergent expectations and differences in organizational culture are key barriers for interorganizational partnerships, particularly university-society research collaborations (Kezar 2011; Olsson et al. 2021; Selsky and Parker 2005). The literature is rife with research discussing the importance of aligning values, objectives, mission, vision, and level of commitment to forge successful partnerships (e.g., Alves Nunes Köppel and Stazic 2021; Atouba and Shumate 2015; Barroso-Mendez et al. 2016). Our participants expressed these same concerns. Staci Croom-Raley (S) reflected on partner selection, “I’d look to see that their goal in the research is aligned with our mission and who we’re trying to serve.” Katie Eder (S) explained, “I want to know that they [academics] understand the work that I’m doing before I work with them.” Diana Wells (S) broadened the concept of purpose and mission alignment, pointing out, “We look for alignment

across students, administrators, and leaders who see value in changemaking... We choose partners who share and appreciate our vision.” According to Todd Weaver (A):

To choose an organization to work with, it’s important that there’s an alignment of values. I try to understand what the organization is trying to do—are they legitimately interested in making impact? Are they interested in working with academics or students?

The extant literature exploring the drivers of successful collaboration also highlights the importance of values alignment between partners (Erakovich and Anderson 2013; Ospina and Saz-Carranza 2010). In line with this body of work, our participants suggested that shared values between SIO and academic partners are key in addressing the needs of each partner in the research relationship.

Adopt a Service Orientation.

More generally, our academic and SIO participants bring a service orientation, “a set of attitudes and behaviors that affects the quality of the interaction between ... the staff of any organization and its customers” to their relational engagement partnerships (Hogan, Hogan, and Busch 1984, 167). These attitudes and behaviors include helpfulness, kindness, sociability, and cooperation, as well as curiosity (Hogan, Hogan, and Busch 1984)—all of which lead to improved team performance (Yoon, Choi, and Park 2007). Chris Blocker (A) described looking for partners who “are curious and are looking for new ways to do things.” Marjorie Sims (S) emphasized the necessity of “willingness on the part of researcher to do their own learning and evaluation of their beliefs.” When researchers and SIOs adopt a service orientation, they lay the groundwork for smooth working partnerships, which promotes trust.

Cultivate Transparency and Mutual Trust.

Trust is critical to partnership success as it is the basis of good relationships (Morgan and Hunt 1994) and, according to Katie Eder (S), “Relationships are the foundation of good partnerships.” The decision to trust is based on the positive expectation that a relationship partner’s integrity, ability, and/or benevolence (White 2005) will mitigate vulnerabilities,

resulting in positive outcomes (McKnight, Cummings, and Chervanys 1998; Simpson 2007). Importantly, *mutual trust* requires that partners believe the other(s) will act in ways that prioritize the strength of the relationship and the desired outcome(s) over their self-interests (Simpson, 2007, Kramer and Carnevale 2001). According to Mark Mulder (A), mutual trust “helps when things go wrong and [facilitates] ideation about how to solve” challenges that arise within partnerships. Marjorie Sims (S) described how her trust of Rika Houston (A) was pivotal to their research partnership:

I have known Rika for years and that trust was critical to starting our TCR project together. We provided a lot of data, and I had to trust they [the research team members, who included Rika] would give it back in a form we could use—that is, it wasn't extractive.

SIOs build trust within a community by displaying a commitment to that community, being part of the community, over a long period of time (Patrick et al. 2019). When researchers partner authentically with SIOs, this trust may transfer to the researcher, who is seen as a surrogate of the SIO, thereby enabling a richer source of information and understanding. However, there can be a risk for SIOs entering these relationships. In describing a negative experience working with an academic partner, Katie Eder (S) explained, “I have to have trust they will treat those [my] partners with humility and respect because I'm making that introduction and it's my [and my organization's] reputation on the line.” Indeed, the role of trust may be particularly important in these partnerships as SIOs have their own goals, which includes serving clients and community members. Thus, the network of stakeholders is potentially broader in relational engagement research partnerships.

According to Fredrickson (2021), “Positive emotions like trust, curiosity, confidence, and inspiration broaden the mind. We become more open-minded, resilient, motivated, and persistent.” These characteristics assist academic and SIO partners as they embark on the second stage in our framework, building mutually beneficial relationships.

Build Mutually Beneficial Relationships

After research partners have been identified, the process of building mutually beneficial relationships begins. A mutually beneficial relationship allows each partner to achieve their individual goals while collaborating to pursue the project's larger purpose and vision. The key elements in developing these relationships include: build your team; gather the necessary resources; listen actively; commit to the co-creation process; and agree on project scope and desired outcomes. We begin with building your team.

Build Your Team.

Cross-functional teams capitalize on each person's unique skills and diverse experiences, which results in more innovative problem solving (Jang 2017). According to Chris Blocker (A), the ideal cross-functional relational engagement team would include people with diverse skill sets: a project manager with emotional intelligence, a task manager to follow-up, a "money person," and a communications specialist to spread the message about the research. Chris indicated that such a team should bring together "like-hearted, but different-minded people who can reach some degree of complementarity with their paradigms, methods, and questions in order to be productive." Beyond these roles, successful relational engagement teams also include people with the requisite project-related skills including designing and analyzing research studies. Related research indicates that some roles, for example, managing community relationships, are best done by SIOs rather than researchers (Stoecker 2003). Delizonna (2017, p. 2) further advises that the "highest-performing teams have one thing in common: psychological safety [which] allows for moderate risk-taking, speaking your mind, creativity...the types of behavior that lead to market breakthroughs." Thus, teams with mutual trust are more likely to be better prepared for high-performing collaborative research partnerships.

Gather the Necessary Resources.

It is vital that academic researchers recognize the financial pressures SIOs face, which in many instances may be greater than those facing for-profit businesses. That's because SIOs operate in an increasingly competitive funding environment (Smith, Cronley, and Barr 2012) with revenue typically coming from government grants, donations, and sponsorships. Conversely, SIO leadership may not understand the challenges academic researchers face to obtain funding. According to Mentor Dida (S), given the prestige of academic institutions, there may be an assumption that academics have abundant resources; an upfront discussion of this issue may alleviate such misperceptions. Staci Croom-Raley (S) takes this a step further and imagines academic-SIO grant partnerships:

One of the things that we haven't done that I think is probably right around the corner for us is going after funding together, actually putting joint applications together.

Mark Mulder (A) described the typical relational engagement resource situation as having:

...less resources than we need to be able to do what we want to do, but let's find a way to do it together, and that's usually some type of collaborative funding or grants.

Listen Actively.

Clear, consistent communication involving active listening is key to building strong partner and stakeholder relationships (Ulmer 2001). Research from marketing identifies three critical dimensions of active listening: (1) sensing (e.g., paying attention not only to what someone is saying, but also to what they are not saying, and understanding what they are feeling), (2) processing what is being said (e.g., taking notes to ensure you will remember and keep track of key points, and summarizing points of agreement and disagreement), and (3) responding (e.g., providing assurances with verbal and non-verbal cues and by asking questions to demonstrate that you understand and are receptive to the speakers' ideas) (Drollinger, Comer, and Warrington 2006). When it comes to effective listening, Jonathan Hansen (S) noted that:

We often get so ingrained in the work that we do on a day-to-day basis that a new perspective can shift an entire organization's strategic plan or strategy. So, listening to

those new ways and being open to partnering with an academic institution or research group is really invaluable.

Mark Mulder (A) described how listening helps him to resist the temptation to recommend solutions too early in the collaborative process:

There might be some thoughts or ideas in the back of the mind but it's really a collaboration and a conversation to see what might happen. And throughout that process I'm always listening.

By practicing active listening, partners not only come to better understand each other's point of view, but also feel valued and respected, which is critical to building long-term, mutually beneficial research partnerships.

Commit to the Co-creation Process.

The benefits of co-creation are well established in marketing. Engagement in co-creation with a sense of autonomy and competence yields enjoyment (Dahl and Moreau 2007) and leads to increased valuation of co-created output (Norton, Mochon, and Ariely 2012). Co-creation engenders buy-in, commitment, and ownership of ideas, ensuring all collaborators make significant contributions to the research endeavor. Mentor Dida (S) explains:

Whatever process we pitched to [our University partners], in the end, it didn't work because they wanted to also bring it and shift it...so then it became a co-creative process. And in doing so, they started owning the process too, and....that's really helpful.

The process of co-creation often begins early in the SIO and academic relationship. Katie Eder (S) explained, "During the initial conversation, if they [the academic partner] wants us just to participate in their thing, this is not co-creating together." Our SIO participants indicated that they look for partnership opportunities where co-creation is possible and offers value to their organization. Diana Wells (S) highlighted the importance of co-creation: "The most wonderful collaborations are when you find yourself building things together you didn't imagine—the impact of these results brings an added dimension of being more than the sum of the parts."

Agree on Project Scope and Desired Outcomes.

Before a research project begins in earnest, the academic and SIO partners need to clearly understand and reach agreement on the scope of the project and the commitment each is making to its execution. Such agreements can be relatively informal or spelled out in legal contracts. Some SIOs may be accustomed to formal agreements such as memoranda of understanding (MOU) that outline mutual goals as well as each partner's roles and responsibilities. Marjorie Sims (S) described using MOUs for collaborative research to "clearly articulate the scope of work, responsibilities of each partner, and how long it will take." Staci Croom-Raley (S) advised formalizing the research goals and plan, noting that:

It's important for the collaborators to be very clear about what their roles and commitments will be to the research project. They should invest the time to discuss, debate, and come to an agreement on what they are willing to contribute and in what way they may have conflicts of interest. It's best to have all these things clearly understood right from the beginning.

For researchers, the IRB process enables the partners to document their research scope and plan of work. Chris Blocker (A) described how the IRB process can add value by setting the parameters of the project, along with expectations of work allocation and partner responsibilities. Thus, all partners share a clear understanding of the project's scope and potential outcomes at the outset of the project, which helps avoid misunderstandings or disappointments as the project progresses. This brings us to the third step in our framework, generating impact via knowledge creation and dissemination.

Generate Impact via Knowledge Creation and Dissemination

As academic and SIO relational engagement partners work collaboratively toward mutually beneficial outcomes, it is critical that they establish practices for disseminating the knowledge they create. This stage of the relational engagement partnership framework is visible in terms of its outputs (i.e., the research product) and vital to creating social impact. Consider, for example, the practice advocated by Marjorie Sims (S) who stressed the importance of "leaving something behind," such as a process or a framework to help the SIO to attain its goals

and better support the communities it serves. Our academic informants indicated that their leave-behinds included blueprints for improved SIO marketing and communications, problem analyses, websites for client feedback, and public presentations that build the visibility of the SIO and recognition for its work. For this reason, both our SIO and academic participants acknowledge the importance of up-front planning for this phase, which begins when selecting partners. In this section, we elaborate on what our SIO and academic participants identify as the critical factors in successfully generating impact via knowledge creation and dissemination: achieve mutually beneficial outcomes; generate impact beyond the SIO-academic dyad; share successes; and extend and grow the partnership.

Achieve Mutually Beneficial Outcomes.

As academic and SIO partners may have both individual and joint research goals, it is important to carve out meaningful outcomes for each partner through discussion and shared understanding. SIOs, especially those that have not partnered previously with academics, might seek partnerships that provide data and associated insights related to the efficiency of processes, internal or community needs, or the effectiveness of services provided (Desrosiers and Kim 2019). Academics, on the other hand, are more likely to focus on uncovering generalizable knowledge, the likes of which is found in academic journals and conference presentations. Acknowledging the academic goal to publish research, Kristin Scott (A) described her own rationale for working with SIOs to “make the world a better place,” noting that the potential to drive social change and create impact can be achieved not only through academic publication but also via actionable insights and guidance provided to an SIO partner.

Commitment to a social impact mission also underscores our SIO participants’ appreciation for the outcomes of academic research; though a particular finding may not always directly affect their own organization, it may have broader impact for the communities the SIO serves and the ideas the SIO promotes. Diana Wells (S) shares her perspective that:

Universities are where ideas are generated, debated, and disseminated ... [they] connect our social entrepreneurs' ideas to the people and places that can help their ideas spread. Successful social entrepreneurs ... want to get their solutions into the hands of the people who will most quickly benefit from them.

Such insights demonstrate a commitment by both the SIO and academic partners to the societal issues the relational engagement partners seek to address, rather than merely a focus on operational outcomes—though these may be beneficial as well. That said, there are ways to generate higher-level knowledge as well as offer more tangible lessons. Marjorie Sims (S) speaks to the idea of “translating” work for SIOs so that higher-level frameworks might be communicated as strategic directions or actionable plans for the SIO (e.g., summary documents, white papers, etc.). She advises that “in terms of writing [we need to be] sure that what we've written up is accessible.”

Insights from our participants reveal that not all outcomes and rewards are anticipated at the start of a partnership. Jonathan Hansen (S) speaks to the benefit of seeing organizational issues through a “new lens” via his ongoing work with TCR academic researchers, stating:

When you can add those unique partners that bring in additional elements of media awareness or a different way of evaluating your program ... that's when you can start to do some really cool things with your collaborations.

From the perspective of our academic participants, there is agreement regarding the unanticipated personal fulfillment they receive from working with SIOs on collaborative research. As the TCR research community grows, researchers are beginning to seek out these kinds of engaged scholarship experiences. Shikha Upadhyaya (A) explains:

My internal motivation and what I was drawn to was more TCR-type of research focusing on consumer well-being and poverty. So, getting accepted at Wyoming was exciting as I knew about their sustainability-oriented PhD program. Interacting with professors there and their openness in letting me pursue some of these interests in the form of academic research was really, really exciting for me.

Generate Impact Beyond the SIO-Academic Dyad.

The outcomes of academic research partnerships can lead to increased credibility with community and societal stakeholders, expanded funding opportunities, and potential policy changes consistent with the partners' shared societal goals (Desrosiers and Kim 2019). SIOs also value the innate outcomes of research arising from academic and SIO partnerships because research projects often uncover and validate best practices. However, the benefits extend beyond the mutual transfer of information between two parties. In the words of Diana Wells (S), research can help “bring visibility to ideas and builds evidence for our theory of change.”

Published research is often valuable to SIOs because it establishes third-party credibility from a respected source. Mentor Dida (S) remarked that through academic publications, “People get to see results. It gives credibility.” In addition, many SIOs appreciate the metrics associated with published academic research. Dida emphasized that these metrics help SIOs demonstrate success: “This [our program] is doing things. Look!” He explained that the metrics can define future direction for an organization: “Everything is metric related...it gives us clarity.”

Published research also helps both academics and SIOs obtain stakeholder support and funding. Jonathan Hansen (S) tells the story of HTF receiving a federal grant for hunger relief. HTF included several published research articles focused on HTF programs in the grant proposal:

One of the great success stories is that we were able to add those articles to our USDA grant proposal as supporting documentation for the Mobile Market, which was a pilot project...I am confident that was something that distinguished our proposal from other food bank proposals.

SIOs and academics can also leverage published research to bring about policy change. According to Chris Blocker (A), “The highest levels of impact may be when you are engaged with audiences that have the ability to make broad-scale policy changes.” These connections may be due to the stature associated with a research publication, or from the extended networks of the academics and SIOs involved in a partnership. Todd Weaver (A) suggests that academics “have

connections to people who might be policymakers.” Likewise, SIOs have connections with policymakers, and these networks enhance the ability to promote impact beyond the SIO-academic dyad.

Share Successes via the Megaphone.

Beyond metrics, funding, and policy, most SIOs and academics want to communicate the outcomes of their research to provide more exposure for its social impact implications. Mentor Dida (S) termed this communication mechanism a “megaphone,” a way to transmit information to key communities and stakeholders outside the dyad. In other words, many SIOs and academics hope that their mutual relationship will amplify their voices and allow their research insights to reach the appropriate target audiences. The megaphone amplifies the voice of the relational engagement partnership, initially by exhausting the marketing reach of each partner; however, these channels may be limited. According to Diana Wells (S), “Sometimes, we can move ideas across geography because of our global network, but we seek help from partners for marketing.” Given that few academics or SIOs have significant reach via their individual megaphones, in many instances an additional partner is needed to widely disseminate research outcomes.

Clearly, relational engagement partners seek to reach audiences and stakeholders beyond the dyad’s networks. This can happen broadly through mainstream news media, blogs, and social media. It can also happen through more targeted channels. For example, Staci Croom-Raley (S) identified the National Governors Association as a target for research on community literacy; Katie Eder (S) mentioned books, stories and podcasts with activist professors like Hahrie Han for outcomes around mobilizing people for climate action; and Mentor Dida (S) imagined third-person partnerships with celebrities such as Chef Gordon Ramsey to promote food research insights. According to Mentor, “The higher the influencer, the bigger the megaphone.”

Extend and Grow the Partnership.

As Marjorie Sims (S) noted, successful collaborative partnerships tend to “evolve” into longer-term and increasingly productive relationships. For instance, TCR researchers partnered with HTF initially to develop a conceptual model of hunger as it relates to food well-being (Bublitz et al. 2019b). Follow-up inquiries explored best practices for enhancing food access at the local level as well as additional work that considers how the COVID-19 crisis exposed vulnerabilities in food access for those experiencing hunger (Bublitz et al. 2019a, 2020). Jonathan Hansen (S) acknowledged that longer-term research partnerships “elevate” the impact of outcomes. On the academic side, there is agreement as well on the nature of successful SIO-academic partnerships. Rika Houston (A) notes, “It’s not a short ride, it’s a long-term investment.”

In fact, the TCR movement is guided by a process or cycle of relational engagement (described in Davis and Ozanne 2018) that acknowledges an elevation of the research outputs. This cycle begins with building capacity, a stage at which researchers build a team with the help of an organizational partner and work to develop a conceptual framework that explores a TCR topic. Next comes the stage of theory development, wherein the research team collects data to explore and tests a theory. The last stage of the model relates to the implementation of a solution; here the findings from the prior stages are applied in a real-world setting, scalable opportunities are explored, and success is measured (Ozanne et al. 2022). It is our hope that in leveraging insights from TCR researchers and SIO leaders our framework will support relational engagement collaborations and generate knowledge that has social impact.

DISCUSSION

Relational engagement partnerships are vital to creating social impact as they connect TCR researchers with SIOs that work with people in communities where societal challenges exist and ultimately need to be addressed. This research offers several contributions to the efforts of TCR researchers and SIOs seeking to engage in relational engagement partnerships that lay

the groundwork for transformative social impact. To begin, we contribute a strategic framework for building relational engagement partnerships. This framework is meant to act as a guide that can be modified and adapted to fit the needs of researchers and SIOs as they develop their own such partnerships within diverse communities and in response to varied social causes. As challenges arise—for example, a poor initial experience with a partner or misaligned goals that lead partners to have different priorities—the strategies and practices included in our framework offer ways to pivot toward greater success. This framework offers a stepwise, three-stage process for relational engagement partnerships that includes selecting partners with purpose, building mutually beneficial relationships, and generating impact via knowledge creation and dissemination.

Academic research, particularly published academic articles, can be a vital prompt to push forward difficult conversations, change hearts and minds, create essential programming, and advance policy and legal changes relevant to pressing social issues. Staci Croom-Raley (S) noted that published academic articles are influential saying, “You can’t put a value on putting that paper [published academic research] in front of a Congressional delegation, funders, and school districts; it influences people with the ability to impact our stakeholders for generations.” Yet, such academic research frequently remains locked away within the ivory tower, isolated on the pages of academic journals, and inaccessible to the SIOs and the people and communities who might benefit from it. Relational engagement partnerships bridge the divide, linking academic research with the SIOs who serve communities where such findings can be put into action and impact people’s lives. Our research offers a path for more academics to build bridges between research and social impact by establishing relational engagement partnerships which lay the groundwork for social impact.

This research also contributes to the relational engagement literature by highlighting the need for partnerships to include a person or organizational partner who serves as a megaphone

for the research and its findings. The megaphone is responsible for strategic communication of the research findings to key audiences—social impact organizations, public policy entities, and individuals—who might best implement and benefit from the findings. In our research, we found that both our SIO and academic participants looked to each other to fill this megaphone role and that disappointment ensued when neither party had the expertise or networks to do so. The megaphone role is critical to bridging the divide between academic research and the creation of broad social impact as well as ensuring satisfaction and continued partnerships between SIOs and academics. We call on TCR leadership to develop and support a systematic communication process for the megaphone role to help researchers amplify the reach and impact of TCR research that appears on the pages of our academic journals.

Throughout this paper, we outline a process for building successful relational engagement research partnerships. However, more systematic research advancing the collective efforts of researchers and SIOs engaged in these partnerships is needed to understand how to maximize their positive social impact, including ways researchers and SIOs can measure their successes and impact. As Bublitz et al. (2019b, 363) suggest, such measurements should reflect individual, community, and societal outcomes and involve “both individual and community-based quantitative and qualitative measures.” Much more research by TCR researchers and the broader academic community is needed to explore relational engagement partnerships, design ways to measure social impact, and create more pathways for research to have positive transformative social impact. We highlight some of the future research possibilities in Online Appendix A. Finally, we call on TCR and other academic researchers to partner with SIOs and engage in relational engagement partnerships. We are stronger together.

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Table 1: TCR Academic (A) and SIO (S) Research Participants

Name	Organization	Website
Chris P. Blocker (A)	Colorado State University	www.biz.colostate.edu/about/directory/colostate-cblocker
Staci Croom-Raley (S)	Children’s Equity Coalition	www.childrens-equity.org
Mentor Dida (S)	Consultant: U.S. General Services Administration, U.S. State Department, and Ashoka	www.mentordida.com
Katie Eder (S)	Future Coalition	www.futurecoalition.org
Jonathan Hansen (S)	Hunger Task Force	www.hungertaskforce.org
Rika Houston (A)	California State University– Los Angeles.	www.calstatela.edu/business/facultyprofiles/rika-houston
Mark Mulder (A)	Pacific Lutheran University	www.plu.edu/busa/staff/mark-mulder
Kristin Scott (A)	Minnesota State University, Mankato	cob.mnsu.edu/about/faculty-and-staff/marketing--intl-business/kristin-scott
Marjorie Sims (S)	ASCEND at the Aspen Institute	https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/
Shikha Upadhyaya (A)	California State University– Los Angeles	www.calstatela.edu/business/facultyprofiles/shikha-upadhyaya
Todd Weaver (A)	Point University	www.point.edu/about/faculty/todd-weaver
Diana Wells (S)	Ashoka	www.ashoka.org/en-us

Figure 1: Framework for Relational Engagement Partnerships

