

How Nonprofits Make Sense of Corporate Volunteering: Explaining Different Forms of Nonprofit-Business Collaboration

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Abstract

Corporate volunteering (CV) is an increasingly common type of nonprofit-business collaboration and can take various forms, and its benefits for the business partner are well studied. The benefits for the nonprofit partner, however, are less evident and often questioned. This study investigates why nonprofits engage in and how they make sense of CV collaborations, building on the concepts of sensemaking and cognitive frames. Drawing on interviews with staff in nonprofit organizations, we reveal that decisions about CV collaborations usually go beyond the resources acquired through CV itself. We identify three different CV frames and show how they lead to different types of partnerships, hereby challenging the assumption that more integrative partnerships are superior to philanthropic ones. Our results show that depending on the frame used, different perceptions of the distribution of power between the nonprofit and the business partner exist, addressing the crucial role of how nonprofit organizations position themselves in such partnerships.

Keywords

corporate volunteering, nonprofit-business collaboration, sensemaking, cognitive frames

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Corporate volunteering (CV) denotes a rather new and increasingly common form of nonprofit-business collaboration (e.g., Gautier & Pache, 2015; Haski-Leventhal et al., 2010; Roza et al., 2017; Samuel et al., 2012), where a corporation offers the time and skills of its employees to a nonprofit organization (Meijs & Van der Voort, 2004). CV projects are very diverse, ranging from hands-on projects, in which corporate volunteers contribute their time and manpower (e.g., maintenance activities such as painting walls) to skill-based projects, in which corporate volunteers bring in their specific professional skills and knowledge (Roza et al., 2017). Part of the reason why CV and nonprofit-business collaboration, in general, have gained widespread attention are claims that they bring beneficial outcomes for all partners involved (e.g., Quirk, 1998; Tuffrey, 2003). Moreover, it is believed that the more integrative such a collaboration is, with missions and people merging into more collective action, the more benefits can be accumulated (Austin, 2000). Up to now, most research on CV has focused on the business perspective. Although several scholars have investigated why corporations engage in such collaborations (e.g., Gautier & Pache, 2015; Rodell et al., 2016), the experiences of the nonprofit partner have been neglected, and some researchers cast doubt on whether for nonprofit organizations such partnerships are beneficial at all (Allen, 2003; Cook & Burchell, 2018; Samuel et al., 2013). Overall, we are left puzzled with the question why nonprofit organizations engage in CV, and if they do, why they do so in different ways.

In this study, we use the theoretical concepts of cognitive frames and sensemaking to answer this conundrum. Based on semistructured interviews with persons responsible for CV in 15 nonprofit organizations, we examine the rationales and assumptions of nonprofits regarding CV (captured through cognitive frames) and link those to sensemaking processes in organizations.

The study makes three main contributions: First, we identify three different CV-frames nonprofits employ to make sense of CV partnerships. We show that depending on which frame an organization applies, the type of collaboration largely differs. Our framework thus goes beyond current studies, by systematically explaining how different frames of CV lead to very different types of CV partnerships. Second, our results question the widespread assumption about nonprofit-business collaborations that more integrative partnerships are the gold standard compared with transactional or philanthropic ones. Rather, we show that integrative partnerships are hard to implement and often not considered attractive by the nonprofit. The study also has a notable practical contribution: across interviews, our results provide evidence that in CV collaborations, the distribution of power between the nonprofit and corporate partner is less about actual, but more about perceived power differences, having a large impact on the CV decision of nonprofits. This points to the important role of strategic positioning of nonprofits in such collaborations.

Understanding CV Engagement From the Perspective of Nonprofit Organizations

There have been few studies dealing with CV from the nonprofit perspective, and those that do so often borrow ideas from literature on cross-sectoral collaborations (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a, 2012b; Selsky & Parker, 2005). Both, literature on

cross-sectoral collaborations in general and CV in particular, see value creation, that is “the transitory and enduring benefits relative to the costs that are generated due to the interaction of the collaborators and that accrue to organizations, (. . .) and society” (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b, p. 945), as the ultimate *raison d’être* for engaging in such partnerships. Thus the realm of value creation is located either on the internal, organizational level or on the external, societal level (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b; Selsky & Parker, 2005).

The few empirical studies specifically broaching why nonprofits engage in CV stress that nonprofits can gain benefits from the following organizational-level factors: additional manpower, knowledge transfer, the possibility to spread their mission or access to additional corporate resources (see Allen, 2003; Caligiuri et al., 2013; Samuel et al., 2013). Shachar et al. (2018) bring in a more holistic perspective, arguing that CV is not so much about the direct resources or benefits created through CV, but can be seen as an opportunity for ensuring access to long term, indirect resources, such as networks as a basis for future projects or socializing corporate volunteers to eventually become regular volunteers. At the same time, empirical research suggests that CV can be difficult for nonprofits, e.g., when the partnering business does not interact with the nonprofit in meaningful ways, when suitable tasks for corporate volunteers are hard to find or when the volunteers bring in generic resources rather than specific ones (Allen, 2003; Cook & Burchell, 2018; Samuel et al., 2013). Some researchers also question if partnerships are beneficial at all for the nonprofit (Cook & Burchell, 2018; Schiller & Almog-Bar, 2013).

Current research finds that especially smaller nonprofits that are particularly affected by limited resources have difficulties in reaping the benefits of collaborative ties (Foster & Meinhard, 2002; Roza et al., 2017). This is the case because a lack of resources creates an unequal distribution of power and maneuvers nonprofits in a weaker position, in which they are not seen as attractive collaboration partners (Bouchard & Raufflet, 2019), and often happy that they receive something at all (Roza et al., 2017).

How a nonprofit might benefit from a partnership also depends on the level and intensity of interaction between the collaboration partners. According to Austin and Seitanidi (2012a), the types of collaboration form a continuum from one-directional philanthropic relationships, through two-directional transactional ones, to more integrative relationships. Along the continuum, the level of engagement by the partners, the relevance of the collaboration to the partners’ missions, the scope of resources exchanged, as well as the strategic importance of the partnership gradually become more important. Moreover, the type of collaboration is said to develop, with the integrative one being the golden standard of collaboration all partners strive for (Austin, 2000).

In a nutshell, current research suggests factors such as the size or intensity of engagement in the partnership that might affect the extent of benefits. However, we do not know how different nonprofits proceed in their CV decisions and weigh costs and benefits related to CV and how this might lead to different types of partnership. The concepts of cognitive frames and sensemaking, that we elaborate on in the next section, help us to capture the various motivations and beliefs about CV (CV frames) and which types of CV decisions (sensemaking process) will result from this.

Theoretical Basis: Cognitive Frames and Sensemaking

The theoretical stance taken in this article leans on the assumption that organizations are “interpretation systems” (Daft & Weick, 1984, p. 284), which are constantly making sense of their environment, and in doing so, constructing it. Thus, sensemaking is central to organizing. We apply a sensemaking perspective that considers cognitions and actions to be closely linked. Particularly in situations where organizational members are surrounded by novel and ambiguous information, cognitive frames act as reference points for sensemaking (Hahn et al., 2014; Weick, 1995) and consequently influence decision-making in organizations. The key theoretical concepts to guide our ensuing empirical analysis are thus cognitive frames and sensemaking.

Cognitive frames are knowledge structures, images about certain issues that support actors in organizing incoming information. They are templates that are crucial for generating meaning out of information from the environment (Walsh, 1995, p. 281). In addition, the frame helps to reduce complexity and ambiguity (Dutton & Jackson, 1987). Drawing on a particular frame leads to forming certain expectations and making hypotheses about what is feasible and useful. This is what Goffman (1974) refers to as the inferential nature of a frame. In short, the frame provides a vantage point for actors to interpret a situation. When different frames are activated, this will result in different interpretations of an issue.

Sensemaking then is the process of connecting a particular cue to a particular frame: “Frames tend to be past moments of socialization and cues tend to be present moments of experience. If a relation between the two moments [can be constructed], meaning is created” (Weick, 1995, p. 111). Once a particular cue emerges, the cue becomes attributed to a broader framework, enabling people or organizations to create meaning, “to construct, filter, . . . create facticity . . . and render the subjective into something more tangible” (Weick, 1995, p. 14), which is the very process of sensemaking, of making the surrounding environment intelligible.

For our ensuing empirical analysis, it will be helpful to further differentiate between different steps of the sensemaking process, as this supports us in analyzing systematically and in detecting differences in how CV decisions continuously evolve. As Daft and Weick (1984) and Thomas et al. (1993) have argued, sensemaking can be understood as a process of three interrelated and continuously recurring steps: *Noticing* refers to what information is recognized by organizational members, as there is always more information available than can be attended to, so attention is necessarily selective. In most instances, information will be noticed that is in line with an organization’s existing cognitive frame(s). Thus, the particular perceptual community actors are involved in direct the norms of attention and what they will notice (Zerubavel, 2006). Noticing in organizations differs with respect to the scope of information considered in the process of information gathering and the effort invested in this process (Hahn et al., 2014).

Interpretation means making a judgment on this information, depending on the frame that the organization draws on. In other words, interpretation means translating information into knowledge, and constructing an understanding of the environment.

Finally, *response* means taking action based on the interpretation. This process can be understood as cyclical, as responses may have repercussions on frames (Weick et al., 2005). Thus, people continually construct the environment and frames they face.

Sensemaking is often constructed as an individual level concept, with individuals drawing on and making sense out of frames that result from their histories and experiences in different contexts (Hahn et al., 2014; Walsh, 1995; Weick, 1995). Although individuals in organizations come and go, organizations themselves retain certain knowledge, values and norms over time (Daft & Weick, 1984; Moch & Bartunek, 1990). This is similar to how Selsky and Parker (2010, p. 24), who deal with sensemaking within cross-sector partnerships, conceptualize so-called partnership platforms “that managers use to envision a partnership project in a certain way.” We are interested in precisely this common stock of knowledge and values about CV and analyze how organizational members draw on frames that are predominant in an organization at a certain point in time. Organizational members become committed to such frames through interlinked acts of communication and socialization (March & Simon, 1958, p. 152) and thus over time, it is likely that they will develop not necessarily congruent but shared ideas about how certain things should work. As nonprofit organizations tend to recruit employees that are close to their values and worldviews (Brown & Yoshioka, 2003; Watson & Abzug, 2016), it is likely that individuals are committed to organizational frames from the beginning on.

Applying these theoretical considerations to the phenomenon of CV suggests that different cognitive frames concerning CV will lead to variation in sensemaking and in decisions regarding CV.

Method

We conducted our empirical analysis on the basis of interviews with employees responsible for CV in nonprofit organizations.

The sample consists of nonprofit organizations located in Vienna/Austria that have been engaging in CV for at least 3 years. Nonprofits that meet this criterion were identified by searching online CV platforms and conducting Google searches. From these potentially relevant nonprofits, we selected 15 organizations following the strategy of maximal variation (Patton, 2014). The main concern for this purposive sampling was to include nonprofits of varying sizes and with varying CV experience. We also sought to vary nonprofits' field of activity as well as the assignment of volunteers to either skill-based or hands-on tasks (Gentile, 2012). Our sample was purposefully diverse, as we were interested in capturing the breadth of CV arrangements in the nonprofit sector and focus on the commonalities and differences between different nonprofits.

Table 1 provides an overview of our sample. It displays that nonprofits have been engaged in CV between 3 and 14 years and have between <30 and >5,000 paid employees, reflecting nonprofits' diversity with regard to the respective dimensions.

If we consider sensemaking about CV as the frame-inferred meaning creation and corresponding actions (Weick, 1995), then interviews with employees responsible for CV can help us to elicit rich verbal accounts of this sensemaking and the underlying frames.

Table I. Characteristics of the Nonprofits in the Sample and Frame Predominantly Applied.

Nonprofit	Field of activity	Number of paid employees	Predominate involvement of corporate volunteers	CV experience in years	Typical example of corporate volunteers' involvement talked about in the interviews	Frame pre-dominantly applied
A	Emergency relief	> 5.000	Hands-on	10	Supporting socially disadvantaged children with their homework on a regular base	Market-based
B	Social services	> 1.000	Hands-on	4	Building a parking place for bikes, repairing bikes, and cleaning the garden in the refugee shelter	Resource-dependent
C	Social services	> 100	Hands-on	14	Accompanying a trip (e.g., to the zoo, football) with residents suffering from dementia and in need of one-to-one assistance	Idealistic
D	Social services	> 5.000	Hands-on	5	Building a garden with pavilion and rolled grass in the backyard of the shelter for homeless people	Market-based
E	Social services	> 5.000	Hands-on	6	Accompanying a trip with residents of an elderly care home	Market-based
F	Social services	> 1.000	Hands-on	5	Teaching children and youngsters math in a community center on a weekly basis	Resource-dependent
G	Human rights	< 30	Hands-on	3	Support with data entry in the nonprofits' office on a weekly base over a period of 5 months	Resource-dependent
H	Vocational rehabilitation	< 30	Skill-based	4	Consultation and implementation of a PR strategy for the nonprofit by a PR agency	Market-based
I	Education	< 30	Skill-based	5	Legal and fiscal counseling to update the associations' statutes by an accountant	Market-based
J	Social services therapeutic care to children	< 30	Skill-based	10	Development and implementation of an image campaign by an advertising agency	Resource-dependent
K	Vocational rehabilitation to the handicapped	< 30	Skill-based	5	Support in preparing and organizing a press conference by a PR agency	Market-based
L	Refugee assistance	< 30	Skill-based	5	Creating a user-friendly website based on the new CI design by a software company	Resource-dependent
M	Elderly care	> 1.000	Skill-based	7	Consultation, know-how transfer and implementation of a social media strategy for clients aged 50-plus by a software company	Idealistic
N	Child welfare	< 30	Skill-based	5	Consulting in public relations and strategic communication by a PR agency	Resource-dependent
O	Animal protection	< 30	Skill-based	6	Support with the layout of the nonprofits' magazine by a graphic design agency	Resource-dependent

Note. CV = corporate volunteering.

Interviews were conducted with the person in charge of CV collaborations in spring 2017. In the vast majority of organizations, a single person was responsible for CV collaborations. In most cases, interviewees were female (11 out of 15 interviewees) and the head of either the department of fundraising, marketing, public relations, or business collaborations. Interviews were semistructured and we applied a funnel-like structure, starting with general questions on CV, e.g., the types of projects the nonprofit is involved in and the relevance of CV within the organization. We then invited the respondent to think of typical CV projects that were conducted recently and to describe major decisions, challenges, and responsibilities related to these projects, from the preinitiation stage onward. In addition, we let them talk more explicitly about the rationales for engaging in such partnerships, the expectations related to it, and their characterization of the profit partner in the partnership, to identify the underlying frame(s) each organization holds. All questions had an organizational focus, addressing interviewees as key informants (Ivanova-Gongne & Törnroos, 2017), who were chosen due to their specific role or knowledge about CV. As key informants, the focus was not put on their personal motivations related to CV but on how the organization interprets and copes with the topic. The interviews lasted between 45 and 80 min and were recorded and fully transcribed.

Data analysis involved inductive as well as more theory-driven interpretation of the data (Orton, 1997). To ensure reliability, the content and categories were discussed among the two authors after each step of coding until a common understanding of the categories was developed. NVivo was used to facilitate coding.

Data analysis involved four steps: First, we separately read each interview and inductively coded all passages that dealt with arguments and descriptions of how decisions in CV are made. In a second step, we used the concept of stages of sensemaking by Daft and Weick (1984) as a sensitizing concept and coded passages relating to each of the three stages into separate categories. All passages relating to the initiation of the CV partnership, and more specifically text relating to whether the nonprofit actively initiated the partnership or passively waited for a profit partner to approach them, and the scope of information that is considered in the initial phase (narrow vs. broad), were subsumed under the code *noticing potential CV partners*. The code *interpreting potential CV collaborations* includes passages in which interviewees speak about the evaluation of benefits and costs of the partnership and how nonprofit organizations perceive the distribution of power and control within the partnership. The third category comprises *responses regarding CV collaborations*. It captures passages in which we get informed about the particular arrangement of the partnership, including aspects such as the extent of professionalization of CV structures and the level of standardization of CV projects. These two steps were undertaken coding single interviews, one by one.

In a third step, we coded thematically comparable passages from different interviews together and formed subcategories on the emerging topics at each sensemaking stage. Table 2 displays the resulting coding scheme. In a fourth step, we paid particular attention to arguments provided for why the nonprofit is involved in a particular CV collaboration, to explicit and tacit expectations related to this collaboration, and to passages in which the business partner is characterized, aiming to discern the underlying frame a nonprofit refers to in its process of sensemaking. We first looked into the commonalities and then

Table 2. Coding Scheme Following the Three Stages of the Sensemaking Process.

Major categories: stages of sensemaking	Subcategories	Characteristics
Noticing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Way of searching and approaching a potential CV partner 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactive versus more passive approach Broad versus narrow information scope
Interpretation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dimensions of cost–benefit evaluation Resources accrued through the partnership Realm of value creation Temporal dimension of cost–benefit evaluation Perception of distribution of power Perception of power within the partnership Perceived control over terms of the partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct resources (time, expertise) versus indirect resources (donations in kind or cash) Internal, organizational versus external value creation Short-term versus long-term value creation High versus low power of the nonprofit partner High versus low control of terms of the partnership
Response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professionalization of structures and process to handle CV collaborations Standardization/pre-definition of CV projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High versus low degree of professionalization of handling CV collaborations Key-ready versus tailor made

Note. CV = corporate volunteering.

at differences between different groups of nonprofit organizations (e.g., large vs. small nonprofits or nonprofits engaged in hands-on vs. skill-based projects). All frames and corresponding sensemaking processes were derived inductively from the interviews. In the last step, we compared our results with existing literature about different types of partnerships (Austin, 2000; Austin & Seitanidi, 2012a; Selsky & Parker, 2005). We constantly checked our evolving coding scheme for coherence and adapted it accordingly, until a stable scheme resulted (Hennink et al., 2017).

In what follows, we will present our results, demonstrating how different CV frames, thus particular understandings about what CV is, lead to particular ways of making sense of CV.

Results: Explaining CV Decisions by Linking the Process of Sensemaking With Frames

We identified three different frames underlying nonprofits’ process of sensemaking about CV. Each of them provides insight into the underlying rationale of

the collaboration and for this very reason we labeled them the *market-based*, the *resource-dependent*, and the *idealistic frame*. These underlying rationales refer to the broad understanding of the meaning a partnership has for the nonprofit, which acts as a filtering mechanism for sensemaking.

Market-Based Frame

The market-based frame perceives CV as a professional and market-based interaction. A typical characteristic of this frame is the use of words and phrases related to the market sphere, such as “supply and demand” or “monetary exchange,” and thus the language is very similar to how businesses would speak about a seller–customer relationship. The frame reminds us about the debate of the marketization of the nonprofit sector (cf. Maier et al., 2016).

Out of our sample of 15 nonprofits, 6 organizations make use of a market-based frame. Among them are the three largest nonprofits of our sample with more than 5,000 employees each and three small nonprofits with <30 employees.

Noticing. Overall, organizations drawing on this frame use a rather passive instead of an active approach for searching for CV partners. This might be because nonprofits perceive corporations as professional partners who profit from the collaboration, and thus they receive enough requests anyway. Another argument for not approaching a corporate partner actively is that corporate volunteers would not rank among the most important stakeholders (in contrast to, for instance, donors) and therefore no specific (human) resources are dedicated to it: “we actively search for corporation partners, yes. But active searches for corporate volunteers, no” (Organization E). An exception to this common pattern is skill-based project, e.g., if the nonprofit is in need of a specific professional service such as a new homepage or a PR campaign: “For this particular project we searched for a top-tier PR-agency, who is compatible with what we do” (Organization H).

Organizations drawing on the market-based frame often have a clear and rather narrow focus in mind when initiating a new partnership, thus they would primarily absorb information that relates to the specific resources corporate partners can potentially bring into the relationship: “We always keep an eye on whether potential projects can really create value for our organization. This is vital for deciding which projects we would further pursue and which ones we would dismiss straight away” (Organization E).

Interpretation. In the interpretation stage, what stands out for the market-based frame is that the evaluation of what nonprofits put into the relationship and what they will get out of it—the cost–benefit evaluation—needs to be positive to consider an engagement. In this evaluation, nonprofits take account of benefits accrued through direct resources (time and expertise of volunteers) as well as indirect resources (e.g., access to networks or donations) and compare them to the cost incurred through the partnership (e.g., for matching partners, material needs, or extra work for relationship management). Although there is consensus that costs deriving from such partnerships are

high, nonprofits drawing on the market-based frame would only engage in a partnership if the cost–benefit evaluation is positive in the short term:

Some projects failed, where we declined a CV request, because what the company wanted to offer did not meet a direct need in our organization. It is not enough to just get manpower. Rather we need specific things; otherwise it is too time-consuming for us. (Organization K).

What is more, the positive cost–benefit evaluation needs to be reached on the level of the organization, with broader external benefits for society at large put in the background. One organization for example argues: “In all areas we work in, we have to create benefits for our clients. If this is possible through the integration of corporate volunteers, then we will gladly do it.” (Organization A).

Moreover, our interviews show that whether to engage in a potential partnership or not is strongly influenced by a nonprofit’s interpretation of the distribution of power in the partnership and more specifically the extent of control within the partnership and whether it can set or at least change the terms of the partnership (e.g., content, duration, extent of CV partnership). Nonprofits drawing on the market-based frame are very self-confident in this term, because they perceive to have something valuable to offer:

I think we are very decisive in determining the terms of collaborations. (. . .) Corporations realize that we are a professionally operating nonprofit (. . .). What they get in return for our professionalism, however, has a prize. Corporations’ leeway to decide how the partnerships will look like is limited since we have to protect our clients (Organization D).

This quote also demonstrates that for nonprofits drawing on the market-based frame a transactional partnership often fits best since more integrative partnerships would reduce their scope in stipulating the terms of the partnership, which they consider crucial to safeguard the needs of their clients.

One nonprofit, for instance, would only engage in a partnership if the corporate partner pays for the necessary equipment, as otherwise the partnership would be evaluated as unfavorable. “We only offer CV in combination with financial support. This means, if corporations want to make a CV day, they have to pay for the travel cost of our clients and their own employees” (Organization E).

In a less visible way, having or staying in control can also mean that the nonprofit very consciously acts as if it were a paying partner: “We expect our business-partners to treat us like any other customers they have, otherwise a collaboration does not make sense” (Organization K). What is important here is the perceived power position and acting as if it were a payment-based partnership, which, in many cases, actually prevents nonprofits from being forced into a defensive or inferior position within the partnership. Interestingly, we found a substantial number of small organizations in our sample that expressed this view. For instance, a small nonprofit working with refugees received a large number of requests for CV collaboration because it has been “non-profit of the month” at a very popular broadcasting station.

Response. In the response stage, the resulting CV activities are characterized by a high degree of professionalization. By professionalization of CV, we mean that either human resources are specifically dedicated to handle CV projects or that structured CV processes are in place. Half of the nonprofits taking the market-based perspective have a special department or more frequently an employee responsible for CV. They argue that once one deals with professional counterparts, one needs to offer professional structures in return. Often, CV positions are located at a very high level within the organization, frequently located directly under the management board, in the department for fundraising or corporate relations. Furthermore, they often apply structured CV processes, including trainings or guidelines within the nonprofit on how to communicate with the corporate partner. In place are also clear criteria stipulating which collaborations to exclude, for instance, businesses engaged in alcohol, tobacco, arms, or child labor. Even though the three small nonprofits in our sample that apply this frame cannot afford their own CV departments, their approach to CV is still professional. For instance, one of the small organizations has very clear and structured processes in place of how to prepare a partnership:

We put much energy in the preparation stage and reflect about how much time the project will require, what one can contribute and the potential partner can expect from us and openly talk about these things with the partner. (Organization K).

What is more, the CV projects these organizations engage in, and particularly their hands-on projects, are often predefined. In some cases, nonprofits even offer a CV ‘product catalogue’: “We send the catalogue. Then usually two or three emails go back and forth, and then the CV-project takes place” (Organization D). Such key-ready CV products minimize nonprofits’ costs of coordination and can be implemented at very short notice.

Resource-Dependent Frame

According to this frame, CV is a possibility to acquire much-needed resources, such as money, manpower, expertise, or reputation. This frame sees the corporation as a resource provider and the nonprofit as a petitioner who is dependent on the resources. We call it the resource-dependent frame because the rationales put forward resemble arguments from resource-dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Accordingly, organizations who lack critical resources and are exposed to an uncertain environment have to collaborate with actors who might provide them with the needed resources (see Selsky & Parker, 2005, 2010), which often causes problems of how to reconcile resource needs while maintaining autonomy.

A resource-dependent frame is applied by seven organizations in our sample. Among them are two larger nonprofits that do not have much experience with business collaborations as well as five small nonprofits.

Noticing. Organizations drawing on the resource-dependent frame often use a passive approach when searching for CV partners, but their argumentation is the opposite of those using the market-based frame. Their perceived inferior power position makes them

feel vulnerable and exposed to all kinds of inquiries regarding CV: “They got in touch with us; we can say that for all our CV-partners (. . .). When a corporation decides to help us, we normally accept” (Organization O). The interviewees also argue that CV projects are not approached more actively due to their (human) resource scarcity. This is also true for skill-based CV projects. Organizations would accept skill-based CV offers from corporations, even if they cannot think of an immediate need for the offered services: “A law firm approached us. We couldn’t think of anything specific. We thought the services a law firm is offering can always be somehow useful for us” (Organization N).

Relatedly, in the noticing stage, rather unfocused and superficial information gathering about the corporate partner is characteristic for organizations drawing on the resource-dependent frame: “We were too busy warding off bankruptcy. When this chapter is over, we will have more free resources to filter CV projects in a more focused way” (Organization O).

Interpretation. When it comes to evaluating the costs and benefits of a CV project, nonprofits talk mostly about the costs incurred: “This project was extremely expensive. Because they did not bring any material with them, they were just here. We also had to provide food for them” (Organization G); and particularly how hard it is to handle the costs, given the perceived vulnerability of the organization itself.

In contrast, benefits derived from such a partnership are either not talked about at all or are rather marginal. Thus, even though the cost–benefit evaluation might be negative, rejecting the collaboration often is no option. This makes one wonder why nonprofit organizations drawing on the resource-dependent frame engage in CV at all when cost–benefit evaluations are unfavorable in the short term. The answer to this question seems to lie in the temporal dimension of sensemaking. Long-term aspirations about what might happen in the future compensate for unfavorable cost-benefit evaluations in the here and now: “If a CV project succeeds, we can continue [with the partnership]. They could advance from CV partners to financial donors.” (Organization N)

Needless to say, nonprofits referring to this frame do not feel to have any resources they could give to the corporate partner in return. This puts them in a position where it is hard to shape the terms of the partnership. This becomes visible by nonprofits that feel that it is necessary to be grateful and humble: “Sometimes interlocutors are so high in the hierarchy, so important, that you wouldn’t dare mention certain things [our costs]” (Organization B). Given their (perceived) inferior position in the partnership, a more integrative type of partnership is not seen as feasible for nonprofits or would put them in a situation in which they have to compromise mission-related resources.

Response. Nonprofits adopting the resource-dependent frame typically engage in unstandardized, not pre-defined CV projects. Projects are tailored to the needs of the business partner:

Corporate partners often want to start CV promptly. They believe that we have many projects just waiting for them to come and help for one day. In the end you have to tailor the projects to their particular needs (Organization B).

As regards the assignment of corporate volunteers to either hands-on or skill-based tasks, we did not find any pattern, suggesting that these nonprofits assume that they can not be selective and have to accept any offer.

Moreover, the process of handling CV is usually not highly professionalized, with CV projects mostly happening spontaneously and no staff dedicated specifically to CV. Some nonprofits drawing on a resource-dependent frame argue that this is not their free choice and in fact, they would like to put more resources into CV, precisely to escape this relationship of dependence, but resource scarcity hinders them from doing so.

Idealistic Frame

The idealistic frame portrays the partnership between the nonprofit organization and the corporation as a collaboration between equal partners. The corporate partner is perceived as a trustworthy collaborator for bringing forward large-scale goals, such as raising awareness for a certain topic or advancing a particular social issue among volunteers and broader groups of stakeholders. We call this frame an idealistic one because of the particular societal values expected and the collaboration process associated with it. Much of the literature on cross-sectoral partnerships, while not referring explicitly to frames, has such a frame in mind when outlining the ideal state of cross-sector collaborations (Austin, 2000; Selsky & Parker, 2010). Among the nonprofits in our sample, only two refer to an idealistic frame. Both are medium in size and have long-standing experience with CV collaborations.

Noticing. From an idealistic-frame perspective, when it comes to the noticing stage, personal networks and previous contact with CV partners play a vital role. Known partners with whom an organization has a long-term, trust-based relationship are particularly important, as this quotation demonstrates: “Our approach is to take advantage of personal relationships, to look where do we know people. Where do we already have established relationships?” (Organization M). In some cases, the nonprofit partner takes the initiative for the project, in other cases the corporate partner. In addition, compared with those nonprofits that rely on the other two frames, organizations that rely on the idealistic frame do not limit information gathering to instrumental factors. Instead, they search for information more holistically, give more space to intuition and whether or not they have a good feeling about working together: “the marketing manager and I just had a relationship. And this was the important thing, because in fact there were many question marks concerning how we could collaborate” (Organization C).

Interpretation. Therefore, at the interpretation stage, immediate cost–benefit considerations at the level of the organization are taken into account, but the evaluation goes beyond this. For instance, one interviewee argues that CV helps to raise awareness about the situation of old people:

After the corporate volunteer experience, volunteers will go home and tell others what they did, what they experienced. For instance, old people who were very withdrawn at the

beginning, and then they went to the zoo, and suddenly they showed emotion. This is an experience that remains. (. . .) It is a bit of awareness raising for me. (Organization C).

Thus, nonprofits take their evaluation process beyond the organizational level and add more externally oriented values for the wider community or society to their calculation. Given the nature of such values (e.g., awareness raising for the needs and challenges of refugees), long-term evaluations are of high importance. Nonprofits drawing on the idealistic frame, in contrast to those referring to the resource-dependent frame, are well aware that they have something valuable to offer in return. Regarding terms of the partnership, rule setting is not seen as solely in the hand of the nonprofit organization or the corporation; listening to the partner and cooperative rule-setting become more important: “As I knew the collaboration partner for a long time, I knew the project would generate value for both sides. (. . .) We sat on one table and planned together. Both sides made clear what their expectations were” (Organization M).

Response. The responses of nonprofits drawing on the idealistic frame differ from those of the market-based frame as the projects are not predefined. Although nonprofits have typical examples of CV projects they can offer, they do not have a list of prepared projects. Sometimes actors with very different beliefs are chosen because the need to change their consciousness is the very reason why the nonprofit engages in a partnership: “I do not have fear of contact with the pharmaceutical industry. The fact that they are interested in people with multiple sclerosis because they are so far away from the real people, is reason enough to work with them and introduce them to how we deal with the topic” (Organization C). This kind of collaboration is also more time-consuming. Nonprofits explicitly dedicate human resources to deal with CV and have a structured process for how to handle CV requests and a strategy in place for dealing with CV requests.

Figure 1 summarizes and compares the key distinguishing characteristics related to each of the three frames. Although noticing and interpretation delineate the rather hidden parts of the sensemaking process, mainly invisible to outsiders, the concrete actions related to CV happening at the response stage of sensemaking are the more visible part of this process. Figure 2 provides representative quotes for each distinguishing characteristic in Figure 1, presented along with the three frames.

Discussion and Conclusion

The point of departure for this study was the attempt to shed light on why and how nonprofit organizations engage in CV, sometimes even in situations where empirical evidence questions nonprofits’ benefits from collaboration (Roza et al., 2017; Samuel et al., 2013). Previous research on CV leaves one puzzled by this question as it almost exclusively investigates the corporations’ perspective (Rodell et al., 2016), while very little is known about the nonprofits’ viewpoint (Allen, 2003; Harris, 2012). To address this, we have built on the concept of cognitive frames and sensemaking and analyzed

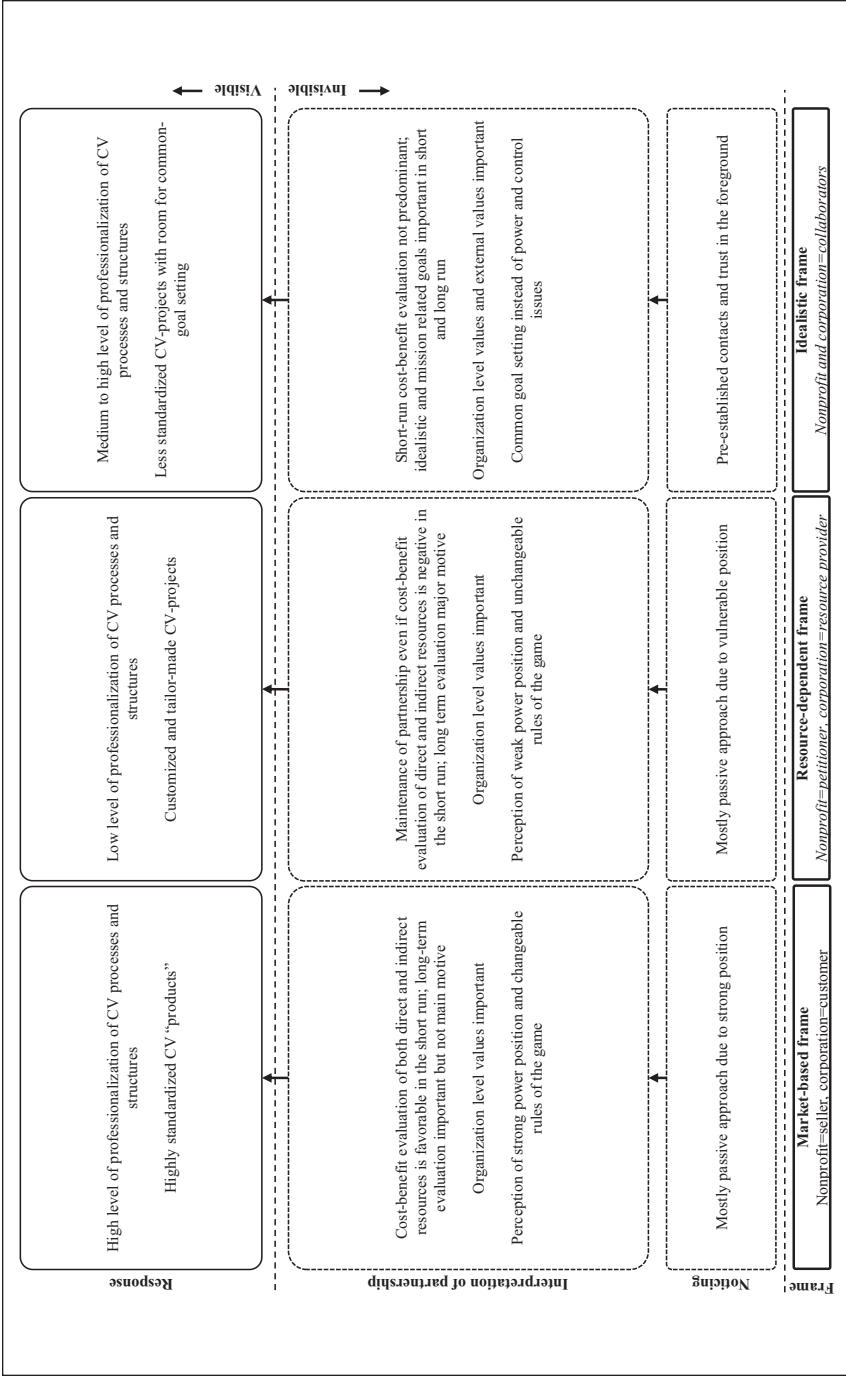


Figure 1. Sensemaking processes related to the three CV frames.
 Note. CV = corporate volunteering.

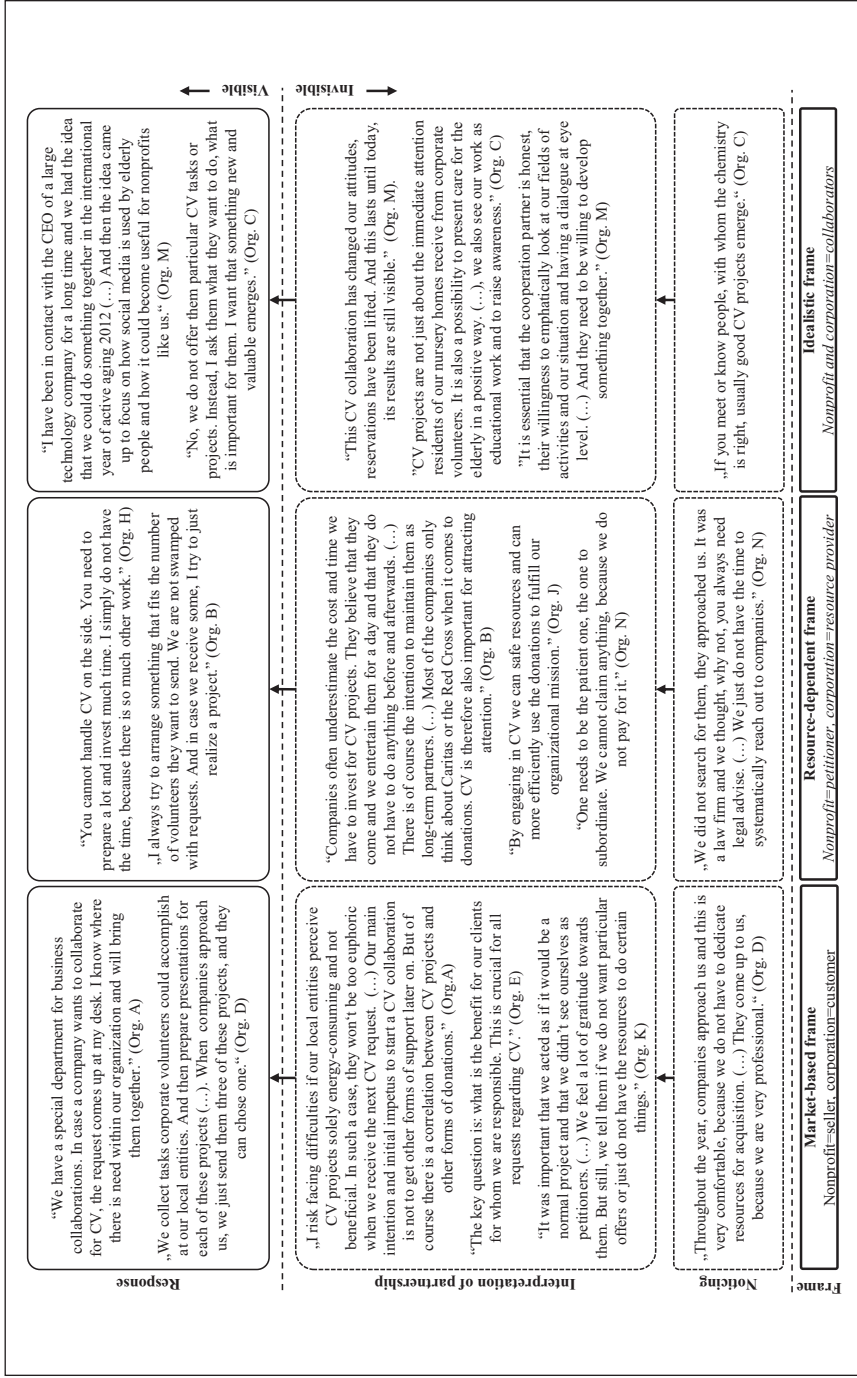


Figure 2. Verbatim examples for the sensemaking process related to the three frames (based on the dimensions of Figure 1).

interviews on nonprofits' experiences with CV. This enabled us to identify three distinct CV frames and resultant types of CV collaborations.

Nonprofits applying a market-based frame see CV as a bi-directional exchange of resources among professional partners and perceive themselves in an equal or even superior power position relative to the corporation, and thus the resultant type of partnership resembles a transactional one (Austin, 2000). They thus develop standardized and directly instrumental CV projects. Nonprofits applying a resource-dependent frame, in contrast, perceive themselves to be in an inferior position toward corporate partners. This leads to CV projects that are tailored to the needs of the corporate partner, characterized by a one-directional exchange of resources, resembling philanthropic partnerships (Austin, 2000). Nonprofits applying an idealistic frame think of CV as involving themselves and the corporate partner on an equal footing, and serving primarily the purpose of creating benefits beyond the nonprofit itself. This results in tailor-made projects with integrated value for nonprofit organizations as well as corporate partners, thus integrative partnerships (Austin, 2000).

The findings of this study put nonprofits' CV decisions in a wider context as they show that nonprofits' considerations of whether to engage in a partnership or not go beyond the immediate time and/or the expertise corporate volunteers contribute. Instead, no matter what frame nonprofit organizations refer to, all nonprofits have broader considerations in mind. We found that these particularly relate to three dimensions that are considered for evaluating the cost and benefits of a collaboration: (a) the resources accrued through the partnership (weighing of direct and indirect resources), (b) the realm of value creation (weighing of internal organizational and external community or societal values) and (c) the temporal dimension (weighing of current and future value). Depending on the frame used, a different variant of these three dimensions is decisive.

In terms of the resources accrued through the partnership, we found one overarching pattern: No matter what frame nonprofits draw on, the time and expertise of corporate volunteers usually is not considered valuable enough to set up a partnership. Instead, CV is often regarded as a door-opener for obtaining indirect resources, with contributions in kind or money mentioned as the most valuable ones. The realm of value creation beyond the organizational level is particularly relevant for the idealistic frame, where larger scale, external values are added to their calculation. The third dimension adds nuance to the two other dimensions as temporal considerations help to explain why in some instances nonprofits involve in collaborations even though they are obviously not favorable in the short run. Particularly with regard to the resource-dependent and idealistic frame, we find many instances in our results where scenarios about the future, instead of past experiences, act as the major driving force for partnership decisions in the here and now. Our initial question of why some nonprofits engage in partnerships that do not seem beneficial at first glance can only be answered by considering such temporal aspects.

Overall, these three dimensions imply that if we want to understand why and how nonprofit organizations engage in a CV partnership, we have to consider CV as a broader decision involving the resources accrued, the realm of value creation, and the

temporal dimension, whose evaluation varies depending on the frame used. These results contribute to quests in nonprofit-business collaboration research to better understand “what expectation of benefits are held by NPOs (. . .) and what do they gain and what do they lose from such relationships” (Harris, 2012, p. 897). Our results add to this literature by showing how these dimensions actually play out in nonprofits and how they are interrelated and weighted by different nonprofits in the decision-making process.

Our results also add new insights into the broader literature on different types of nonprofit-business collaborations. As described above, the three frames we find correspond to the three partnership types identified by Austin (2000) and add nuance to them by elucidating the underlying CV decisions (sensemaking processes) related to each. Opposite to Austin, we question the assumption that more integrative types of partnerships are necessarily superior to transactional or philanthropic ones, and in our specific case that using an idealistic frame is more worthwhile compared with a market-based or resource-dependence frame. In contrast to philanthropic or transactional partnerships, more integrative partnership, i.e., partnerships in which missions and people merge into collective action and common goal attainment is in the foreground, are believed to accumulate more benefits: “Unilateral flows or parallel exchanges can create value, but combining resources can co-create greater value” (Austin & Seitanidi, 2012b, p. 736). Our results do not support such a universal claim as we instead found that the type of partnership that is seen as most useful for the nonprofit depends on the frame deployed. Organizations arguing from a market-based perspective often see a transactional relationship, in which they have control of the terms of the partnership and are not as closely entangled with the business partner, as most beneficial for fulfilling their purpose. The six nonprofits in our sample drawing on this frame are either very large organizations or small ones with a lot of collaboration experience. This implies that organizations that have the resources to invest in more integrative partnerships might find it more beneficial to do otherwise. Furthermore, almost half of the nonprofits in our sample (7 out of 15) engage in philanthropic types of partnerships, and they do so because they think that they do not have anything valuable to offer to the business partner in return. Under such circumstances, entering a more integrative partnership is either not possible from a resource perspective or would steal away important resources the organization needs to fulfill its primary mission. In fact, only two nonprofits in our sample achieve an integrative partnership. Although such a partnership is often described as the most desirable type of collaboration, it is obviously also the most challenging one.

Our results also hold important practical implications referring to the distribution of power between the partners involved in a partnership; a topic relevant for any type of nonprofit-business collaboration (e.g., den Hond et al., 2015; Schiller & Almog-Bar, 2013). We found that organizations arguing from the market-based perspective are very aware that they have “something valuable to give” to the corporation, and thus they feel in an equally strong power position. Nonprofits deploying the resource-dependent frame, in contrast, do not perceive they have anything valuable to give in return, ending up in a relationship where one gives and the other one receives. Whether

a nonprofit is in a strong or weak power position particularly manifests itself in its perception of having control over the terms of the partnership. For instance, this could mean that the nonprofit demands a certain prize for a CV event, dictates the place, time, and content, or simply rejects the request—in contrast to those nonprofits, which feel they have to take whatever offer they can get.

Contrary to existing research, suggesting that the level of power corresponds with the actual size of the nonprofit organization (Foster & Meinhard, 2002; Roza et al., 2017), our results clearly show that it is not necessarily a nonprofits' size that guides actors' decisions but perceived power position. We understand perceived power position as the rather subjective assessment of how great the possibilities of an organization are to shape the partnership, which can, but must not necessarily have to correspond to the actual power position. Actual power position refers to the structural position that a partner has in such a partnership based on the size and financial resources of the organizations involved. In fact, in our sample, three rather small organizations that were founded recently acted from a market-based perspective. One of them argued that they approach the partnership as if they are a paying partner and thereby free themselves from the feeling of being too pushy. For practical purposes, this implies that while it is impossible for a nonprofit to change its structural position in the short and medium term, pro-active and strategic positioning of the nonprofit within a partnership (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2014), in which the nonprofit highlights its own brand, capabilities, or strengths can actually compensate for resource scarcity. It can empower nonprofits and help them shift from the resource-dependent frame to one of the other two frames. This is all the more important because empirical evidence shows that a power imbalance, actual or perceived, leads to loss of trust, engagement, and satisfaction with the partnership (Ashman, 2001).

Our study also has limitations. Although the sample covers a wide variety of different nonprofit organizations, the size and composition of the sample warrant mention. Although we found stable patterns across the organizations in our sample, conducting a study with a broader sample would allow to analyze in more depth how organizational characteristics (e.g., size, type of projects, field involved in) influence CV decisions. Moreover, the idealistic frame, with only two organizations in our sample drawing on this frame, requires further refinement and testing. Beyond that, instead of interviewing those persons responsible for CV and how they draw on organizational frames, it would be interesting to additionally look into the interaction processes between different actors in the organization when continuously constructing such frames (Kaplan, 2011).

Our results certainly need to be tested further, and we encourage researchers to further scrutinize the axiomatic assumption in partnership research that states that idealistic partnerships are the ones to strive for and to take the necessities and resources of the nonprofit into account. At the same time, future research should put more emphasis on nonprofits that have successfully implemented philanthropic or transactional partnerships. First empirical studies addressing these issues demonstrate that it might be “more worthwhile for the [nonprofit] organization to conduct traditional philanthropic and transactional collaborations” (Schiller & Almog-Bar, 2013, p. 943). Therefore, the recommendations

often found in practitioners' literature that integrative types of collaborations are the most preferable should be regarded with caution. While this claim might hold true when assessing the "social value generated by the collaboration" (Austin, 2000, p. 77), it does not necessarily hold true from a practical nonprofits' perspective.

We also would be curious to find out whether differences in the results could be revealed in countries with a larger and more established CV scene. Finally, while our study provides valuable insights into CV decisions from the often-neglected perspective of the nonprofit side, future studies should include both nonprofits and corporations in their sample to look more closely into their interaction. Such a viewpoint would provide a more nuanced picture of the normative claim that CV brings about a win-win situation.

To conclude, this study makes clear that CV decisions from a nonprofit perspective form part of an array of broader partnership considerations that take indirect resources, different realms of value creation and time horizons into account. It suggests that it is frame-dependent how CV partnerships will look like and questions whether higher level, more integrative types of partnerships are generally more beneficial for the nonprofit organization.

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