Multiplexity and strategic alliances: The relational embeddedness of coalitions in social movement organisational fields

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ABSTRACT

While scholars have embraced the notion of social movements as networks, there has been little empirical exploration of the emergence of coalitions within these multilayered systems. Here I explore the role of overlapping relations in alliance formation amongst a group of 55 health-related professional social movement organisations mobilised against austerity. Using cross-sectional bivariate exponential random graph models, I find dependencies between digital proxies for alliance, shared allies, information exchange, positive nomination and offline colobbying activity at the dyadic, degree and triadic levels. Cross-network associations indicate that multiplexity plays a non-trivial role in the formation of alliances and, more generally, social movement organisational fields, necessitating increased attention from scholars of social movements.

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1. Introduction

Historically, movement scholarship and lay discourse around social change have suffered from a tendency to treat social movements as single, unified entities. While it is a matter of convenience to refer to whole movements as "the" movement, this obfuscates their internal processes (Meyer and Corrigall-Brown, 2005; see also Touraine, 1981; Melucci, 1996). In reality, movements are amalgamations, phenomena that are comprised of "internally differentiated actors operating within complex social settings..." (Rucht, 2004, p. 197). Of these actors, Social Movement Organisations (SMOs) are united by various relations, among which alliances — an ad-hoc and largely informal type of "means oriented" cooperation (Tarrow, 2005, p. 163) understood to exist anytime two or more SMOs work together around a common task (van Dyke and McCammon, 2010) — is only one.[1] Scholars taking a network perspective (c.f. Diani, 2015; Mische, 2008; Wang and Soule, 2012; see Diani and McAdam, 2003 for a review) have successfully

argued against holist thinking and lobbied for the more appropriate conceptualisation of movements as a constellation of both SMOs[2] and individual activists. However, since Gould's (1991) classic exploration of overlapping ties among insurgents in the 1871 Paris Commune, there has been little further acknowledgement of co-occurring relations in social movements, particularly amongst SMOs.[3] Given the range of ways through which these organisations may be simultaneously directly and indirectly tied, my concern here is the scant systematic and empirical exploration of the role of concurrent relations in the establishment of alliances between these strategic actors.

Here I focus on the structure of alliance networks between SMOs and my principal empirical task is to uncover the degree to which co-occurring relations help explain their emergence. In the most basic sense, social systems may be conceived of as a number of heterogeneous actors tied together via a broad range of social and economic relations. The ties that bind any two actors are diverse, representing, for example, positive feelings/affirmation (friendship, love, affiliation), communication/information exchange, the exchange of goods and capital (trade) or behavioural interaction

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[1] Broadly, alliances between SMOs range from those that are informal and largely ad-hoc to fusion via mergers (c.f. Cornfield and McCammon, 2010). While this heuristic is problematised in light of new relations that are digital in nature (e.g. hyperlinks between SMO webpages), they provide a tractable framework for theorisation. Note that for the purposes of this work, "coalition relationships" refers to the entirety of this relational spectrum.

[2] I use Zald and Ash's (1966) classic definition of social movement organisations as organisations with goals aimed at changing society. These organisations ultimately wish to restructure society and/or the state of individuals or maintain the status quo as opposed to only existing to offer a regular service, such as in bureaucratic organisations.

[3] Diani (2003, p. 314), Baldassarri and Diani (2007), and McAdam and Paulsen (1993) are notable exceptions.
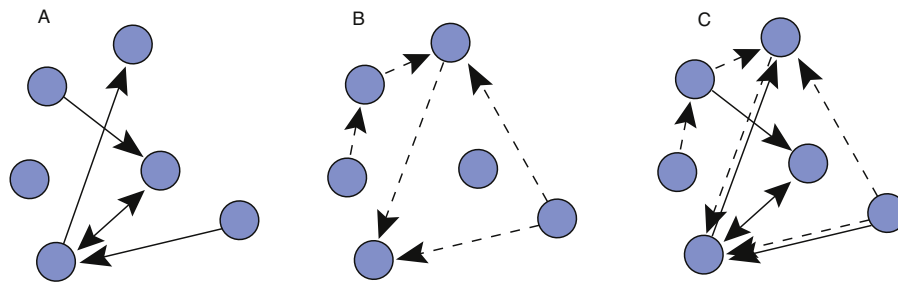
Fig. 1. Slices of a multilayered network. Simplex view of relationship one (A), simplex view of relationship two (B), and multiplex view of both relationships (C).

(cooperation or punishment). Each of these relational contexts may constitute individual networks, however, they all influence one another — each acting as a constraint or an enablement. Thus, society is characterised by "the superposition of its constitutive socio-economic networks" (Szell et al., 2010, p. 13636). This superposition is called multiplexity (Fig. 1).[4]

In light of this superposition, I ask in what ways and to what degree is alliance formation governed by multiplexity? To answer this question I draw from work in organisational studies to explore multiplex network configurations as key determinants of alliances in social movement organisational fields[5] — populations of interdependent SMOs oriented towards a similar set of issues who are tied together in a network structure chiefly dependent upon patterns of domination and cooperation, information exchange and mutual awareness (Minkoff and McCarthy, 2005). Maintaining that contemporary accounts of multiplexity within social movement scholarship must move beyond simple acknowledgement to forge an explanatory understanding of the role of co-occurring ties, I argue that: (a) alliances between SMOs and the other relational contexts within which these actors are embedded (e.g., information exchange, positive nomination, tactical advice giving, project collaboration) are characterised by manifold interdependencies; and thus (b) to avoid the biased understanding of social systems that comes with simplex (i.e., single relation) analyses, alliance formation must be investigated alongside concurrent ties. Here multiplexity is treated as given, using it as a tool for unravelling the puzzle of emergence. This positions the alliance network as the dependent variable to be explained.

Nevertheless, multiplexity is not the sole determinant of alliance. In addition to social ties a number of other factors have been linked to coalition formation. Broadly, these include the (in)congruence of ideology/interest (Croteau and Hicks, 2003), contender perceptions (Kadivar, 2013) and socio-political threat (McCammon and Campbell, 2002).[6] Recast within classical movement theories, these factors address issues around political opportunity structure (Kriesi, 2004), resource mobilisation (Jenkins, 1983), and collective identity/frame alignment (Benford and Snow, 2000). Owing to classic treatment of movements as singular and/or homogenous entities, scholars focusing

on coalition relations have traditionally analysed the importance of these factors at the level of the individual organisation, e.g., traits such as resources, age and ideology, as opposed to the interplay of these attributes and structure. While the acknowledgement of exogenous, non-network, properties helps relax quite strong assumptions about self-organisation in social systems, understanding of the formation of social relations is limited when dependencies at the structural level, orders increasingly higher than individual actors, are unaccounted for. Thus my goal is not to suggest that social ties alone are adequate for the complete exposition of the processes which govern the formation of alliances between SMOs. Instead, I simply seek to empirically demonstrate that there are complex, multiplex dependencies at the level of the network which movement scholars focused on alliance formation have yet to address.

The empirical context chosen for the exploration of these ideas is the forging of online alliances, in the form of hyperlinks (see Park et al., 2004; Pitt et al., 2006; Rogers and Marres, 2000), between the websites of professional SMOs. The world has seen the proliferation of collective actions with notable Internet dimensions in recent years. While the degree of political and democratic efficacy afforded through use of the Internet is still hotly debated, contemporary instances of collective action necessitate a focus on the role of the Internet in facilitating relations which bind political actors (c.f. González-Bailón et al., 2011) and thus comprise, in part, the structure of social movement organisational fields in an information society (Garrett, 2006). Lest I unduly suggest equivalence between traditional movement alliances, with their expectation of the investment of material and symbolic resources and their ability to facilitate long-term commitment, and online alliances, which are informal and asymmetric whilst intrinsically imposing no immediate obligations for those involved, the nature of hyperlinks relative to traditional social movement alliances must be addressed.

In crafting my understanding of online alliance I draw heavily from Rogers (2013), viewing the network constituted by hyperlinks as representative of an associational space.[7] Importantly, this space is constructed via organisations' purposive creation of hyperlinks to signify with whom or what they wish to be affiliated (see Lusher and Ackland, 2011; Pilny and Shumate, 2012; Shumate and Lipp, 2008; Weber, 2012). In these systems of representational communication (Shumate, 2012) the acts of making, not making, or removing hyperlinks are political in that they have implications for the construction of organisational reputation. Hyperlinks serve as doors from one website to another through which users traverse, and make sense of, the structure of the Web. The opening and closing of these digital pathways by SMOs may facilitate the construction

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[4] Multiplex relations are also known as multirelational, multimodal, multivariate and multistranded in the social sciences.

[5] Note that in the most holistic sense, organisational fields include both the focal actors of interest, here SMOs, and those other organisations they routinely interact with, such as governmental agencies and opposing groups, in addition to grassroots organisations. Here I only explore relations between SMOs, using the phrase social movement organisational fields to distinguish populations of only SMOs from the larger set of actors work in this area typically addresses. Additionally, I do not give treatment to configurations of individuals and SMOs as populations of SMOs represent a unique aspect of movements which require inquiry into processes that are supra-individual (Zald and McCarthy, 1980). In this regard, social movement organisational fields may be viewed as equivalent to social movement industries (McCarthy and Zald, 1977). However, here the notion of field is favoured due to its more explicit connotation of relational processes (see DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

[6] See van Dyke and McCammon (2010) for a review of these and other factors.

[7] The original notion of an associational space or "issue network" includes hyperlinks between social actors and inanimate objects (e.g., a hyperlink from an organisational website to a specific webpage such as the Wikipedia entry on flat organisational forms). Here, I only consider direct hyperlinks between organisational actors as they position themselves next to one another. Ackland (2013, p. 82) provides an overview of different disciplinary perspectives on hyperlinks.