



Leadership networks in Catholic parishes: Implications for implementation research in health



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 26 May 2014

Received in revised form

3 October 2014

Accepted 6 October 2014

Available online 7 October 2014

Keywords:

USA

Leadership networks

Evidence-based interventions

Social network analysis

Faith-based organizations

ABSTRACT

Through two case studies of Catholic parishes in Massachusetts, this study explores the implications of *leader-centered* versus *distributed* leadership in Catholic parishes for the implementation of evidence-based health interventions. The two parishes involved in the study differ from each other in several ways. In the first, parishioners are less engaged in leadership activities at the decision-making level in the parish. A small group of lay volunteers work with the parish priest and other ordained leaders on parish activities. In the second parish, a large and active lay volunteer leadership have forged an organizational structure that allows more independence from the pastor's direct oversight. In this parish, lay volunteer leaders are the prime drivers of organizational programs and events. In 2012–2013, three types of networks were assessed at each parish: discussion, collaboration, and outside-of-parish ties. The contrasts between each parish include differences in density of collaboration, in frequency of discussion, and network centrality of the respective parish priests. We further identified key actors in the network structures at each parish. We discuss the implications of these findings for understanding organizational capacity in the context of health program implementation.

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1. Introduction

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are effective settings for the delivery of health promotion programs for several reasons, including that they represent a community structure that is present in almost all locations. They afford access to diverse audiences, are composed of established social networks, and place a high value on altruism and volunteerism (Campbell et al., 2007; Klesges et al., 2005; Voorhees et al., 1996). Catholic parishes, in particular, may be important sites for outreach to Latinos since just under 60% of Latinos in the USA identify as Catholic (Ospino, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2014). Structurally, the Catholic Church is organized in a hierarchical order following leadership models inspired by religious convictions (e.g., ordination, consecration). However, this leadership structure is often complemented in local parishes by

other forms of leadership that emerge in response to particular circumstances and needs. Leadership structures must be considered when designing and implementing health programs (Emmons et al., 2012). For example, necessary groundwork prior to the implementation of interventions in faith-based organizations ideally involves cultivation of relationships along a chain of authority, beginning with bishops and their staff at the diocesan level (Allen et al., submitted for publication). A parish must be understood in terms of the various ways in which overall traditional leadership structures are adapted according to local norms and characteristics of individual parishes. In understanding organizational characteristics for the development of faith-based health programs, program planners/practitioners must account for the specific dynamics of relationships among leaders of the parish.

Social network analysis (SNA) provides a useful model for understanding organizational structure. Rather than view an organization merely as a hierarchy of roles and positions, SNA attends to sets of relationships – cutting across roles and positions – which describe the actuality of actions and interactions in an organization.

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Networks can cut across formal leadership delineations and describe the various channels by which information, influence, responsibility, and support are mobilized in an organization. Networks can also reflect the formal structures in place, to the extent that these structures limit or facilitate interactions, social tie formation, and relationship-building.

Through the application of theory and methods in SNA, this study examines the network of relationships among formal and informal leaders in two parishes in the northeast USA. Leadership networks differ in how information circulates within, the extent to which they depend on key actors for implementing change, the density of contact among network members, or the extent to which tasks are distributed evenly among members (Hoppe and Reinelt, 2010). In this regard, we find that *leader-centered* versus *distributed* leadership frameworks are useful in understanding how characteristics of individual parish leaders interact with aspects of the organizational environment in which they operate.

Distributed leadership (DL) relates to the way that organizational leadership and management is accomplished by those in formal and informal roles alike (Gronn, 2002; Mehra et al., 2006; Spillane et al., 2004). The DL concept is particularly useful for understanding leadership processes in hierarchical organizations like Catholic parishes (Coopman and Meidlinger, 2000), whose pre-determined organizational structures have clearly delineated chains of authority. In these parishes, the pastor is ultimately responsible for all official decisions related to parish life (e.g., worship, administration, outreach). However, the DL framework calls attention to the parallel – sometimes informal – organizational structures that also exert significant influence on the day-to-day workings of the parish. Thus, within a given parish, individuals and teams, consisting predominantly of volunteers, lead at multiple levels. As we will show, the two parishes in this study vary in the extent to which members are encouraged and/or equipped to exercise initiative and leadership within their sphere of influence. Following the DL framework, our aim is to look beyond individual leaders and their roles or qualities, and foreground *interactions* among both formal and informal leaders (Hoppe and Reinelt, 2010).

Our application of theory and methods from the field of SNA looks at how an organization's network points to the *structural* significance – rather than, for example, role-based or symbolic leadership – of individual members. The organizational structure of Catholic parishes typically consists of ordained and lay leaders. Ordained leaders include the parish pastor, part-time priests, and deacons, all who provide worship leadership and pastoral care, among other duties. A lay leader is a baptized person who puts her/his gifts to the service of the faith community. Most lay leaders are volunteers. But some lay leaders are hired in parishes to oversee pastoral and administrative responsibilities. In what follows, we distinguish between formal and informal leaders. Formal leaders include ordained clergy and lay staff in paid positions. Informal leaders are lay members of the parish who provide leadership on a volunteer basis. Two Catholic parishes' organizational environments will be systematically examined using SNA to situate leaders' roles, positions, and influence within the parishes' broader leadership networks. SNA will also make it possible to identify individuals who play key roles as mediators, connectors, or opinion-leaders within church structures, making it possible to understand their potential influence for the adoption and implementation of EBIs for health promotion.

2. Methods

The study proceeded in three phases at two northeast USA Catholic parishes: Sacred Heart and Holy Cross. Pseudonyms have been used for all names to protect the identities of individual

parishes and their leaders. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Each phase in the study was carried out separately at each parish at different points in time. Data collection at Sacred Heart took place in the summer of 2012 and at Holy Cross in the spring of 2013. In the first phase, ethnographic observations were conducted at leader meetings and during Mass to establish contacts at the two parishes. These two parishes were selected from a pool of parishes that, at the time of this study, were candidates to participate in a larger, parent study that aimed to understand the resources required by Latino churches to implement EBIs for cancer control. Building on this knowledge, the research team developed an organizational-level intervention enabling parish leaders to adopt, implement and sustain EBIs in their parish. Sacred Heart and Holy Cross were selected because of their shared neighborhood characteristics and contrasting histories. For example, preliminary observations at each parish revealed differences in the levels of leadership engagement among parish leaders. Additionally, members of our research team had pre-existing contacts there, which facilitated initial entry to conduct this study.

In the second phase, a list of formal and informal leaders was compiled by reviewing personnel listings on parish websites, observations at parish events, and confirmatory interviews with key respondents who were highly active in and knowledgeable about their respective parishes. In addition to asking key respondents about other leaders at their parishes, we interviewed them about their definitions of leadership within the context of their work and about aspects of their parishes' organizational cultures and histories.

In the third and final phase, parish leaders were administered roster surveys (Borgatti and Molina, 2005). The roster surveys consisted of the list of leaders compiled in the second phase. Thus, leaders were asked to evaluate their ties to other leaders on a list that they themselves were on. For example, if an organization has 25 leaders, each of the 25 would indicate Yes/No if they have a relationship with each of the other 24 people on the roster. At Sacred Heart, 36 leaders appeared in the roster, with 23 at Holy Cross. The roster survey asked respondents to evaluate three types of relationships: 1) communication about parish matters: "Have you discussed parish matters with this person?" and if "Yes", "How often do you discuss parish matters with her/him". The response options were, "Daily", "Weekly", "Monthly", and "Annually"; 2) collaboration on parish projects and activities: "Have you worked with this person on parish events or programs?"; and 3) relationships outside of the parish: "Do you have a relationship with this person beyond parish-related activities?". Initially, we visited both parishes in person and approached parish leaders about participation in the survey. Leaders who we were unable to reach in person were contacted by email or phone. The key informants who participated in earlier phases of the research assisted in contacting parish leaders who had not responded to emails, calls, or visits.

Network statistics were calculated using Ucinet (Borgatti et al., 2002) and network visuals were generated with Visione (Brandes and Wagner, 2013).

3. Results

3.1. Case study 1: Sacred Heart

3.1.1. Ethnographic context

Sacred Heart sits in a large and highly diverse neighborhood with a total congregation of approximately 450 parishioners, 75% of whom participate in Spanish Masses. Established early in the twentieth century, for decades Sacred Heart remained strongly rooted in the spirituality of a religious order. Beginning in the

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