



Exploring relationships among organizational capacity, collaboration, and network change



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ABSTRACT

Is the collaborative activity of organizations in a network associated with the capacity of individual organizations? How might the structure of collaborative activity and the location of high capacity organizations in a network be related to the network's overall ability to influence community conditions? This article explores these questions among 23 local organizations providing women and new mothers with health care, advocacy, and other services in a single US city. Changes in the interorganizational network of collaborations are depicted in four time periods spanning 12 years and analyzed over time using both whole network and local network measures. Organizational attributes associated with dimensions of organizational learning and organizational effectiveness are examined in relation to interorganizational network changes over time. Results indicate that more adaptable organizations and those with higher capacity were not necessarily central in the network. Overall, findings suggest that increases in cohesion across a structurally diffuse network, relatively well dispersed high capacity organizations, and strategic relational investments may have influenced the reduction in health disparities for infants and expecting mothers. Although community-level interventions often focus on building a strong, central group of high capacity organizations, these findings suggest a need to also take into account the strategic action of a range of individual organizations, their local networks, and how they may advance change in the broader network over time.

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Exploración de las relaciones entre la capacidad organizativa, la colaboración y los cambios en la red

RESUMEN

¿Se asocia la actividad de colaboración de las organizaciones en una red con la capacidad de las organizaciones individuales? ¿Cómo se relaciona la estructura de la actividad de colaboración y la ubicación de organizaciones de alta capacidad en una red con la capacidad global de la red para influir en las condiciones de la comunidad? Este artículo explora dichas cuestiones con 23 organizaciones locales que proporcionan servicios de salud y otras prestaciones a mujeres y madres primerizas en una única ciudad de los Estados Unidos. Los cambios en la red interorganizativa de colaboración se representan en cuatro periodos a lo largo de 12 años y se analizan a lo largo del tiempo utilizando medidas de la red completa y de la red local. Los atributos organizativos asociados con las dimensiones de aprendizaje y efectividad organizacional se examinaron en relación con los cambios en la red interorganizativa a lo largo del tiempo. Los resultados mostraron que las organizaciones más adaptables y aquellas con mayor capacidad no eran necesariamente centrales en la red. En general, los resultados sugieren que el aumento de la cohesión en una red estructuralmente difusa, las organizaciones con altas capacidades relativamente dispersas, y las inversiones relacionales estratégicas pueden haber influido en la reducción de las desigualdades de salud de los bebés y las mujeres embarazadas. Aunque las intervenciones comunitarias con frecuencia se centran en la construcción de un grupo central fuerte de organizaciones con grandes capacidades, estos

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resultados sugieren la necesidad de tomar también en consideración las acciones estratégicas de una serie de organizaciones individuales y sus redes locales, y cómo pueden promover el cambio en la red más amplia a lo largo del tiempo.

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Introduction

As in many parts of the industrialized world, provision of social and community services has become more decentralized in the U.S. as the budgets and responsibilities of government agencies have eroded (Milward & Provan, 2000). Private and, in particular, non-profit organizations are increasingly engaged in service provision and community interventions. These organizations often compete for governmental and philanthropic funds to provide these services and interventions. Thus, while the decentralization of social and community services may drive innovation and efficiency in some facets of local systems, it has also increased complexity and fragmentation in organizational systems, as well as increasing the incentives for organizations to compete with each other rather than to collaborate (Frumkin, 2002; Nowell & Foster-Fishman, 2011). Scholars have noted the lack of mutual awareness and coordination in local organizational systems as detriments to these systems' ability to successfully address community problems (Evans, Rosen, Kasten, & Moore, 2014). This context helps to explain the great interest among practitioners and scholars of community interventions in models for achieving better alignment and coordination in local organizational systems (Christens & Inzeo, 2015).

Considering populations of organizations in a community as networks can help us understand or improve the implementation of community interventions. A network perspective on organizations emphasizes the relational links between them alongside the attributes of particular organizations (Neal & Christens, 2014). Individual organizations may be effective or ineffective at achieving narrower organizational goals, but network dynamics including collaborations, referrals, and information exchanges between organizations can play a key role in systems' ability to provide holistic service and effective community interventions (Evans et al., 2014; Foster-Fishman, Salem, Allen, & Fahrback, 2001). Additionally, organizations that innovate or engage in learning behaviors aren't isolated; their capacity to influence outcomes at a community level or magnify impact across a population can be related to their position in the organizational network.

Studies of organizational effectiveness and organizational networks have most often focused on formalized coalitions or other forms of interagency alliances in local communities (e.g., Bess, Speer, & Perkins, 2012; Kegler & Swan, 2012). Governmental and foundation initiatives over the last 25 years have spurred the formation and evaluation of local community coalitions. One prominent example is the *Communities that Care* (CTC) program begun in the early 1990s with support from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). With support from CTC, local coalitions of organizations established boards or stakeholders and coordinated proactive work toward reducing risk factors for youth in local institutions and environments. Durable effects of the CTC interventions within the networks of local organizations have been detected, with local organizational leaders reporting greater effectiveness in prevention activities (Rhew, Brown, Hawkins, & Briney, 2013). Several other large-scale efforts have employed approaches to interventions in local organizational networks to address community, educational, and public health issues (Christens & Inzeo, 2015). Some studies have taken a network perspective on coalition functioning and have identified particular network structures and features as being conducive to effectiveness

(Feinberg, Riggs, & Greenberg, 2005). Other studies have focused on the impact of coalition participation on organizational capacity (Kegler, Norton, & Aronson, 2008; Nowell & Foster-Fishman, 2011).

In the context of complex and dynamic inter-organizational ecologies, local organizations need to have the capacity to harness resources, opportunities and knowledge to effectuate collaborative partnerships. Such internal organizational capacity involves both sensitivity to the environment and the ability to adapt on the basis of new information (Crutchfield & Grant, 2007). Organizational adaptability has been the focus of studies on learning processes and the development of knowledge in organizations (Argyris & Schön, 1992; Senge, 1990). Such adaptability has also included the ability to fundamentally reorient theories of action and change of an organization (Bess, Perkins, & McCown, 2011; Evans, Hanlin, & Prilleltensky, 2010). Several attempts have been made to capture characteristics of organizational capacity by assessing multiple dimensions of organizational learning and connecting them to measures of organizational performance (Yang, Watkins, & Marsick, 2004; Song, Joo, & Chermak, 2009). For example, a model developed by Yang, Watkins, and Marsick (2004) identifies seven dimensions of a learning organization, (1) continuous learning, (2) dialog and inquiry, (3) team learning, and (4) staff empowerment, which are considered at the individual level. At an organizational level, the model identifies, (5) efforts to establish and embed learning into the organizational system (embedded system), (6) global thinking and actions to connect the organization to external systems (system connection), and (7) the provision of strategic leadership.

Taking a network perspective prompts the question: how are organizational characteristics such as these dimensions of learning situated in relationships? This organizational network perspective is similar to the notion of economic embeddedness, in which economic ties are considered in the context of, and therefore are influenced by, social ties (Granovetter, 1985). Network approaches have contributed to understanding organizational learning and effectiveness by providing ways to analyze the interaction effects between network structures, such as strong small world ties with diverse others, and organizational attributes, such as preexisting collaborative endeavors and acquisition of knowledge (Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doerr, 1996). Burt (1993) identified organizational effectiveness as a function of the density of an organizations network, or the strength and number of interconnected ties among immediately surrounding organizations, and degree, or the number of ties that a single organization maintains. In Burt's study, high density was negatively related to performance, while high degree was positively related. This finding provides an example of negative effects of network constraint on organizational effectiveness, suggesting that a tension can exist between the benefits of strong ties among a group of organizations that foster trust and nurture interdependence, and the fact that such interdependence creates restrictions on an organization's capacity to adapt to its environment and its freedom to transform learning into action.

Learning across an entire population of interconnected organizations can be amplified by organizational characteristics. Some organizational characteristics and behaviors are infectious. For example, diffusion of practices and the spread of innovation across a network have been found to be dependent on the learning capacity

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