



Applying affiliation social network analysis to understand interfaith groups



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ABSTRACT

This study applies affiliation social network analysis to understand how interfaith groups provide resources to other community groups and link interfaith group members to resources for local community change. Based on a sample of 88 interfaith groups from across the U.S., affiliation social network analysis pictures show distinct patterns in how interfaith groups share resources with community groups and link members to community resources. Overall, results show how interfaith groups may be empowering community settings that provide resources and link members to other resources in the interest of community change. These findings imply that interfaith groups may be part of the social fabric within communities that hold potential to be partners and contributors of resources to promote community change efforts. Limitations and directions for future research also are discussed.

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Aplicación del análisis de redes sociales de afiliación para comprender los grupos interreligiosos

RESUMEN

Este estudio se basa en el análisis de redes de afiliación para comprender cómo los grupos interreligiosos proporcionan recursos a otros grupos comunitarios y vinculan a los miembros de los grupos interreligiosos con los recursos de cambio comunitario. Sobre la base de 88 grupos interreligiosos de Estados Unidos, las imágenes del análisis de redes sociales de afiliación muestran diferentes patrones en la manera en que los grupos interreligiosos comparten recursos con los grupos comunitarios y vinculan a sus miembros con los recursos comunitarios. En general, los resultados muestran cómo los grupos interreligiosos pueden empoderar los contextos comunitarios que proporcionan recursos y vinculan a los miembros con otros recursos a favor del cambio comunitario. Los resultados implican que los grupos interreligiosos pueden ser parte del tejido social en comunidad con potencial para ser socios y colaboradores en la promoción del cambio comunitario. También discutimos las limitaciones y las posibilidades de investigación futura.

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Scholars in community psychology, sociology, and organizational studies are keenly interested in how citizens and groups organize to address local community issues, inequality, and injustice. Whether through community organizing (Christens & Speer,

2011; Speer & Hughey, 1995), specific community-based organizations (Wandersman & Florin, 2000), or coalitions (Allen, 2005), there are many avenues for citizens to advocate for change. One specific area of study examines the role of religion and religious organizations in larger efforts for community change. For example, national organizations such as the Industrial Areas Foundation (Alinsky, 1989; Orenstein & Hercules, 2007) and the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (Speer et al., 2003) recruit and train

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religious leaders in strategies for community organizing with the goal of returning these leaders to their local community to create networks of congregations to organize for influence and power (Wood & Warren, 2002). Other case study research focuses on grass-roots religious partnerships that form to address specific issues such as the environment (Feldman & Moseley, 2003), labor issues (Bobo, 2003), health disparities (Kaplan et al., 2009), education (Quezada, 2003; Todd, 2012), or multiple issues at the same time (McCormack, 2013). Many of these groups are interfaith in nature with representation across religious traditions and with the goals of promoting religious understanding while also working for community change (Fulton & Wood, 2012; Patel, 2007). Clearly, research is needed to better understand how interfaith groups may be one type of community-based organization involved in local change.

In the current study we draw from empowering community settings as a framework for understanding the positive potential of interfaith groups to be organizations involved in community change. Maton and colleagues (Maton, 2008; Maton & Brodsky, 2011; Maton & Salem, 1995) describe empowering community settings as those that both promote the process of individual empowerment and result in a tangible increase in desired resources or a decrease in societal marginalization for oppressed groups. Central to empowering community settings theory is the idea that settings may exert external influence in the local community, such as by partnering with or providing tangible resources to other community-based organizations (Maton, 2008). Thus, one way interfaith groups may be involved in change efforts is in sharing organizational resources with other community-based organizations focused on local change initiatives. Indeed, case study research with two interfaith groups showed how groups shared economic, knowledge, and volunteer resources with other community-based organizations to contribute to community service projects and larger efforts for systemic change (Todd, 2012). In the current study, we use affiliation social network analysis to examine patterns in how interfaith groups share resources with religious and non-religious community-based organizations, revealing how resource sharing may be one way in which interfaith groups contribute to efforts for local community change.

Maton (2008) also notes that empowering community settings may create a radiating impact if participation within the setting results in access to resources that individual group members can use for activism. From a social network perspective, interfaith groups may serve as hubs to network members to other resources for activism. For example, Todd (2012) showed that the primary function of one interfaith group was for formal and informal networking where people connected one another to specific resources for community activism such as political leaders, volunteers, and other local experts. Such connection to resources through participation in an interfaith group shows how groups may create bridging social capital that (a) connects people from different groups through the interfaith group and (b) helps members link one another to other resources outside of the group. Indeed, scholars define bridging capital as connections across heterogeneous groups, often that lead to increased access to desired resources (Brisson, 2009; Perkins, Hughey, & Speer, 2002; Putnam, 2000). Inherent in their composition (people coming together from different religious congregations and traditions), interfaith groups provide a setting to encourage bridging connections. Therefore, in the current study we examine how interfaith groups serve to connect members to other resources in the community to better understand how the group may help to foster this type of bridging social capital.

To examine study questions we use affiliation social network analysis. Such analysis uses affiliation data where *actors* report attendance, membership, or some type of relational tie with

an *event* (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Examples of affiliation data are as follows: (a) elite women's attendance at social events (Borgatti & Everett, 1997; Davis, Gardner, & Gardner, 1941), (b) membership on corporate boards (Lester & Cannella, 2006), and (c) community organizations that participate (or not) in different community projects (Mische & Pattison, 2000). Typically, affiliation data are analyzed to understand a system of social relations in a bounded community (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). For example, when two women report attending the same social event in their community, it often is assumed they had an opportunity to form a social tie (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011).

In contrast, the focus of affiliation analysis can be on the collection of events to understand how an actor identifies with a set of events (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). In the current study, we take the latter approach and focus on patterns of how interfaith groups report on how they (a) provide resources to other community groups and (b) connect members to community resources. We consider the interfaith groups as "actors" and other community organizations and community resources types of "events." Because there are likely a limited number of interfaith groups in a given community, this approach is not about social relations among interfaith groups in the same community, but rather shows the various ways interfaith groups may serve to (a) provide resources to other community organizations, and (b) bridge members to other community resources. For example, different interfaith groups may share resources with different sets of community partners. Moreover, if the interfaith group links members to other community resources, this may be a form of bridging capital where members are linked to resources due to their participation in the group. Thus, the use of affiliation analysis in this study is not to examine social relations within the same community, but instead is used to examine patterns in how interfaith groups provide resources to other community groups and furthermore how interfaith groups may help to bridge members to community resources.

Affiliation social network data may be analyzed in different ways. One direct and powerful analytic approach is to create a *social network picture* that displays all interfaith groups and shows links between the group and other community groups or other community resources (Borgatti & Everett, 1997; Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). Such a picture has potential to reveal different patterns of how interfaith groups share resources with other community groups (e.g., do interfaith groups only share resources with religious congregations or also with other secular and governmental organizations?) and how interfaith groups may link people to different patterns of resources (e.g., do some groups link to a broad set of resources or to certain types of resources?). This type of picture also shows both (a) interfaith groups and (b) other community groups or community resources in an integrated visual display. These pictures provide unique information beyond simple frequencies as they show distinct patterns across the entire set of links. In addition, pictures of *co-identification* may be examined to see if interfaith groups tend to provide resources to pairs of community organizations or to bridge members to pairs of community resources. This may be important to understand how interfaith groups share resources with certain sets of community organizations or may help to create bridging links for members to distinct sets of community resources. Together, these pictures provide an intuitive visual display of how interfaith groups share resources with other community organizations and link members to resources.

Present study

The current study applies affiliation social network analysis to understand how interfaith groups may provide resources to other community groups and link members to other community

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