

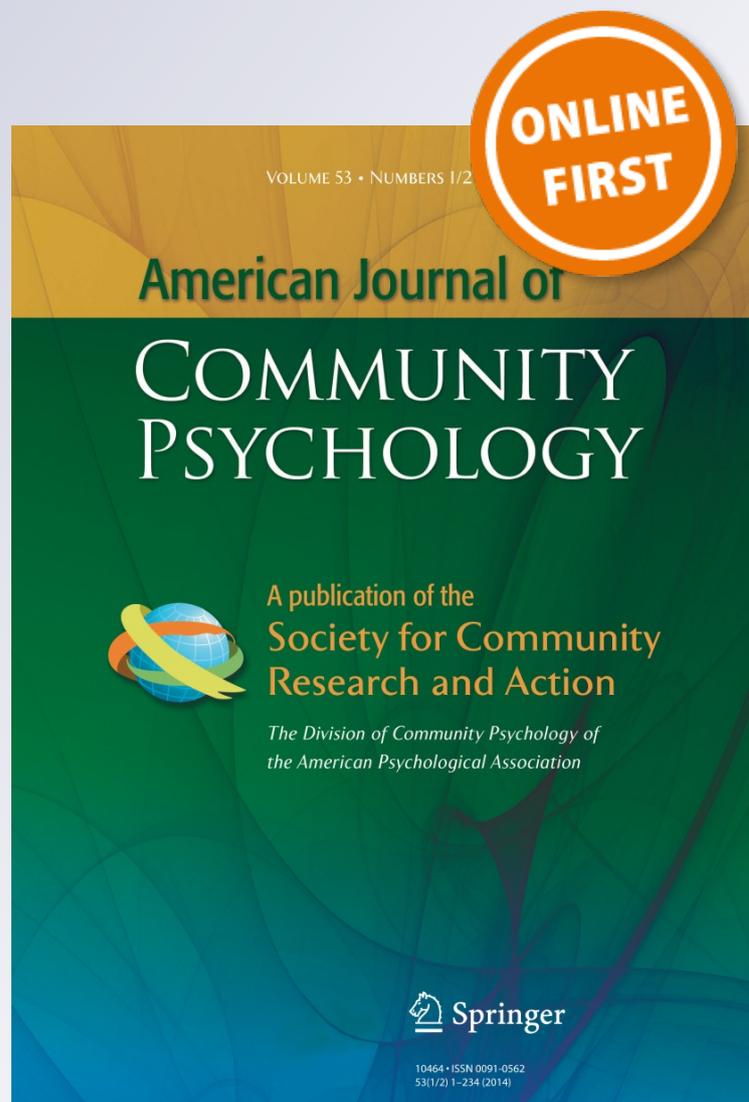
Miami Thrives: Weaving a Poverty Reduction Coalition

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Miami Thrives: Weaving a Poverty Reduction Coalition

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Abstract In an environment where community based organizations are asked to do increasingly more to alleviate the effects of complex social problems, networks and coalitions are becoming the answer for increasing scale, efficiency, coordination, and most importantly, social impact. This paper highlights the formation of a poverty reduction coalition in south Florida. Our case study approach chronicles a developing coalition in Miami-Dade County and the role of one organization acting as lead to the initiative. Drawing on interviews with lead organization staff, participant observation field notes, network mapping and analysis of documents and artifacts from the initiative, we analyze the local organizational context and illuminate important processes associated with supporting a developing coalition. Findings offer a picture of the interorganizational relationships in the community using social network analysis and identify the organizational capacity factors that contribute to and inhibit the formation of a cohesive and effective coalition in this context. This study also highlights the utility of an action research approach to organizational learning about coalition-building in such a way that informs decision making.

Keywords Networks · Coalitions · Collective impact · Organizational capacity · Organizational empowerment · Poverty

The views expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the views of the Kresge Foundation.

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Introduction

Given the complexity of social problems and the unrelenting pressure to reduce the cost of creating and implementing solutions in the context of limited resources, networks offer a way to weave together or create capacities that can achieve greater impact (Plastrik and Taylor 2006). Unfortunately, community based organizations too often operate using an isolated impact approach. This traditional approach is oriented toward finding and funding a solution contained within a single organization, with the hope that the most effective organizations will grow or replicate to extend their impact more widely (Kania and Kramer 2010). As such, nonprofits try to invent independent solutions to major social problems, often working at odds or competing with each other and increasing the resources required to make meaningful progress. But it is becoming clearer that high impact organizations “work with and through other organizations—and they have much more impact than if they acted alone” (Crutchfield and Grant 2007, p. 108). Building this type of collaborative capacity requires a focus on the relationships between organizations and the creation of a shared purpose, shared objectives, and collective power. Weaving a cohesive network with a shared purpose where there is none requires building relationships, skills, resources, and enabling structures to assemble and coordinate the specific elements necessary for collective learning and action. Some suggest the multifaceted work of weaving a network requires a separate organization and staff with a very specific set of skills to serve as the lead for the entire initiative (Hanleybrown et al. 2012; Kania and Kramer 2010).

This praxis-oriented paper highlights the formation of an emerging poverty reduction coalition in south Florida. This case chronicles a coalition building initiative in Miami-

Dade County and the role of one organization acting as lead organization to the emerging network. Utilizing an action research approach, our research team works alongside a community-based organization as participant conceptualizers and critical friends to apply network and collaboration theory to network building in real time while simultaneously learning from our collective attempt at social innovation. While literature exists identifying some of the factors that contribute to successful collaboration and effective networks (cf. Foster-Fishman et al. 2001; Granner and Sharpe 2004; Nowell 2009) significantly less attention has been paid to the organizational capacity and organizational empowerment (OE) processes associated with a lead organization charged with forming a network for social change. In their research on intra, inter, and extra levels of OE, Peterson and Zimmerman (2004) stress the need to understand how organizational processes influence outcomes across the three components.

Specifically, this paper seeks to highlight: (1) the intraorganizational and interorganizational factors related to the capacity of the lead organization to weave a network and support the formative stages of coalition development; and (2) the utility of action research as a strategy for organizational learning about coalition-building in such a way that informs decision making. Drawing on interviews with lead organization staff, participant observation field notes, network mapping and analysis of documents and artifacts from the initiative, we report on the first 2 years of the development of Miami Thrives Network (MTN). Through sharing this critical case we contribute to the knowledge base examining the formative stages of community coalition development, while exploring theories of organizational capacity and OE. In addition, we highlight the important role of action research in generating useful knowledge for action in coalition-building.

Background

Anti-poverty Networks

Cross-sectoral coalitions and networks have emerged as a powerful force for mobilizing actors from the public, private, and voluntary sectors to address entrenched social issues (Jones et al. 1997). Complex problems such as poverty have causes and effects that are extremely difficult to identify and model. Moreover, these issues consist of multiple, overlapping, interconnected subsets of problems that cut across multiple levels of analysis, policy domains and levels of government (Bryson and Crosby 2005; Weber and Khademan 2008). This cross-cutting characteristic means that social concerns such as poverty are inextricably linked to other social issues, such as education, health care,

environmental justice, and mental illness to name a few. Complex problems involve not only a large number of variables, but those variables are interrelated in a dynamic and ever-changing manner, generating “a constantly shifting set of issues and challenges” (Leviton-Reid 2008, p. 35). Networks, coalitions, alliances and other forms of interorganizational collaboration are seen as more effective strategies for building power to affect the broader systems and policy change needed to reduce the causes of poverty. The basic assumption is that an interorganizational coalition can mobilize and have a greater impact on change processes than could be achieved by organizations acting alone (Taschereau and Bolger 2007).

While most would agree that a collaborative or networked approach to effecting change is conducive to challenging issues such as poverty, previous literature suggests that these networked efforts are difficult to establish and sustain (Wandersman et al. 1997). As such, significant attention has been directed at better understanding how interorganizational approaches develop. Characterized in diverse literatures by a variety of names (e.g., production networks, community collaboratives, interorganizational alliances, community coalitions, partnerships, coordinating councils), a growing body of research has emerged that attempts to conceptualize the early stages of how these entities develop.

One of the most consistently identified factors influencing the development of collective or networked approaches to social problems is the importance of existing relationships. Butterfoss and Kegler (2009) posit a stage-wise model to describe the development of community coalitions. Within this framework, the initial “formation stage” is focused on either the creation of a new collaborative entity or reconstitution of an existing collaborative into a more formal structure. Formation usually begins when a lead agency with community ties brings together key stakeholders in recruiting a group of community organization partners to initiate a coalition focusing on a social issue of concern (Butterfoss et al. 2006). Thus, these entities often develop because of the motivations and efforts of a core group of people who have developed relationships and trust over time and therefore had some pre-existing social capital on which they could build (Taschereau and Bolger 2007).

In their research on the development of coalitions for youth violence prevention, Bess et al. (2011) similarly observed that in the early stages, coalition participation emerged out of an existing network of well-formed relationships. Basic tasks in the formation stage include convening a core group of coalition members, typically with a strong and shared interest in the mission of the coalition (Butterfoss and Kegler 2009; Florin et al. 2000). The perception of shared goals in particular has been cited as

important in galvanizing initial participation (Knobe and Wood 1981; Norris 2001) and contributing to the coalition's capacity for systems change (Nowell 2009). Important core group tasks that take place in the formation stage therefore include the establishment of an organizational structure and processes that guide coalition functioning in communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution (Florin et al. 1993; Kegler et al. 2010).

Gray (1989) describes this formative stage as the "problem setting phase". In this phase, stakeholders are convened that ideally represent a wide variety of the community, are perceived as being legitimate stakeholders, and identify that their actions are dependent upon the actions of each other. A first step may be to simply better understand the existing relationships, centers of power, intersecting issues and levers for change among all of these parties (Krebs and Holley 2006). As part of forming a network, stakeholders must agree that their shared goals are important enough to outweigh the costs of such a collaborative effort. Bess et al. (2011) remind us that coalitions are embedded in, and bound to, broader networks of local organizations and that these ongoing interorganizational relations may positively or negatively influence the formation and structure of emergent coalitions. Gray (1989) also stresses the importance of a legitimate and skilled convener with process capacity that is given authority to have the role of convener.

Collaborative Capacity, OE and the Lead Organization

The need for a skilled convener with existing relationships within a community and strong process capacity is a persistent theme across the collaboration, network, and collective impact literatures. A convening agency must have sufficient organizational capacity, experience, commitment, leadership, and vision to form and build an effective coalition (Butterfoss and Kegler 2009). Kegler et al. (2010) found that collaboration history was an important factor in selecting the lead organization and that their network connections were instrumental in creating the core group or founding members of the network. McGuire (2002) characterizes these lead organization activities as: identify and bring in the people, organizations and resources needed (activation); generate agreement on network structure, operating rules, principles, and values (framing); induce and maintain commitment to the network (mobilizing); and facilitate relationships among participants and create an environment conducive to productive interaction (synthesizing). Lead organizations require the capacity to connect across organizational, sectoral, cultural and geographical boundaries, guide vision and strategy, foster a collective sense of identity, and create a separate holding environment for knowledge sharing, innovation, and development

of collective action (Taschereau and Bolger 2007; Turner et al. 2012). When lead organizations are unable to deliver because of insufficient organizational capacity, the costs borne by the other participating organizations may be too great (Chaskin et al. 2001). While the recent literatures on networks, coalitions, and collective impact raise the importance of a lead organization in supporting collaborative activity and collective action, it's not clear what specific capacities are needed or how organizational capacity needs may differ with regards to the initial stage of forming a network versus supporting and sustaining a network in later stages of development.

Zimmerman's (2000) construction of empowerment at the organizational level of analysis provides a helpful conceptual and evaluative tool for organizations attempting to build coalitions and change communities. Zimmerman (2000), Gerschick et al. (1990), and Swift and Levin (1987) made the distinction between empowering organizations (produce empowerment for its members) and empowered organizations (empowered to influence the larger system). Peterson and Zimmerman (2004) further develop the theory of empowered organizations by making the distinction between intraorganizational, interorganizational, and extraorganizational empowerment. The intraorganizational component of OE includes characteristics that we normally associate with organizational capacity: the quality of the internal structure and functioning of organizations. Interorganizational empowerment refers to the relationships, transactions, and collaboration across organizations. The extraorganizational component of OE refers to an organization's ability to affect broader systems. Influencing policy and practice, creating alternative settings, and deploying organizational resources in the community would be considered extraorganizational outcomes of an empowered organization or collaboration.

The intersection of intraorganizational and interorganizational empowerment is a central concern in the current study. The intraorganizational component of OE represents the internal structure, capacity, and functioning of organizations that may be key for interorganizational goal achievement and extraorganizational outcomes (Peterson and Zimmerman 2004). Thus, the question remains, what OE processes and structures support or inhibit the lead organization's ability to bring partner organizations together to collaborate and work towards a common goal?

Building an Anti-poverty Coalition in Miami

The Need for a Coalition: The Miami Context

Miami, Florida is a global city shaped by continuous migration, economic booms and busts, destructive tropical

storms, and low confidence in political leadership. Miami is also a place where diverse social groups, immigration, poverty, and inequality create an intense need for economic and social supports. Miami-Dade County has the second-highest income inequality of any large county in the country. Of the 25 largest counties in the country, Miami-Dade has a Gini index of .503.¹ From this group, only New York County, New York (Manhattan) has a higher Gini index (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). In the state of Florida, 22.6 % of more than 18.6 million residents can be qualified as poor, in deep poverty or near poverty (Bustamante and Unterberger 2013). In fact, the poverty rates in Florida have all risen continuously between the years 2007 and 2011.

These tremendous challenges highlight the need for collaboration within and across sectors, but for a variety of reasons, Miami has had limited success in creating and sustaining collaborative, interorganizational, and cross-sector solutions to complex community challenges. Miami has also been characterized as having very low civic engagement indicators. The Census Bureau's Current Population Survey identified Miami as last, or close to last, on four key indicators among 50 major cities: voting, volunteering, donating, and participation in community meetings (National Conference on Citizenship 2010).

The Lead Organization: Catalyst Miami

Catalyst Miami (CM), formerly Human Services Coalition of Dade County, Inc., was founded in 1996 to serve as the anti-poverty civic engagement hub for Miami-Dade County and in that time, has developed significant relationships and learning partnerships related to building prosperity in the Miami community. In the past few years, leadership at CM has been positioning the organization as a community convener, facilitator, network weaver, and lead organization for a range of civic initiatives. They recognized a gap in local organizational capabilities to convene and facilitate collaborative processes and have been working to build their organizational capacity to lead, articulate issues, generate consensus, and mobilize constituencies. In the fall of 2011, they received a 3-year grant from the Kresge Foundation to support and strengthen a community coalition of nonprofit organizations and their constituents to effectively address root causes of poverty in Miami. The initiative was named The MTN and the work to form the network began in early 2012.

¹ Gini index is a measure of inequality where 0 represents perfect equality and 1 implies perfect inequality.

Brief Project History and Timeline

In the first year of the project, the focus was on planning, building relationships with potential coalition members and leaders, and settling on a mission for the coalition. In early 2012, CM staff met frequently to learn about networks and network weaving and to develop a strategy for enlisting "founding members" of the coalition to share leadership. They hosted a small stakeholders meeting in the spring of 2012 with representatives from fifteen community based organizations to announce the launch of the coalition, discuss pressing community concerns, and learn about the various efforts of the attending organizations. CM project staff followed this meeting with a series of dialogue circles with early adopters—organizations already engaged in reducing poverty and with whom they have worked in the past. These dialogues with 80 people representing 30 different community organizations had a primary focus on building relationships, generating community buy-in, and building a shared understanding of the importance of collective action.

Early in 2013, CM convened a MTN leadership discussion to recruit a group of individuals from local organizations to actively shape the coalition's priorities and strategies. Based on this discussion, representatives from four organizations agreed to serve in this executive committee role, which came to be known as the "Network Stewards". The MTN Stewards met bi-weekly with CM staff. They launched a MTN Facebook page for broader network communications and a MTN Stewards Facebook group to serve as a leadership hub for discussion and resource sharing. The Stewards created vision and mission statements for MTN:

Vision Miami Thrives is a strong network of informed change agents working together to understand constituent power and create a movement in which our community challenges the root causes of poverty and creates social and economic equity.

Mission MTN serves as the gateway for connecting social service providers in creating constituent engagement through leadership development and education within Miami-Dade County.

Throughout the early stages of the MTN initiative, CM was undergoing a transition period of staff changes and organizational restructuring. As the formation of the network stewards began to reflect a more stable state for the initiative, both members of CM and the specific individuals comprising the executive committee began to request increased participation of the current research team. This core group of individuals were specifically interested in learning more about network theory in order to compare their own experiences and developments with what has

been described in the literature. In addition, the desire to collect data about the local context in order to guide the Network Stewards decision-making became increasingly apparent.

Current Study

Utilizing an action research approach, we assisted the coalition in understanding and developing the collaboration and documented the specific role of one organization acting as lead organization. As participant-observers, we were particularly interested in positioning CM's experience taking on the role of lead organization within the broader research on OE and coalition development and subsequently use this information to help shape action. Two primary methods of inquiry were used to achieve this aim. First, social network analysis (SNA) was used for the purpose of understanding the existing interorganizational relationships characterizing the local context. Second, interviews with individual actors from the lead organization were used to help understand the salient factors that facilitated and hindered the planning and development of the MTN. Findings from each of these two distinct methods of inquiry were then presented to members of the lead organization and utilized in discussions related to the next steps for the initiative. A description of each of these approaches and corresponding results will be outlined separately before discussing a synthesis of our findings. Additionally, we report on the impact of presenting findings to the network stewards on the initiative and describe overarching implications for theory and practice.

Method

Data Collection and Procedures

Social Network Analysis Survey

After approximately 1 year of internal planning of the MTN initiative, CM staff sought to begin defining and outlining the boundaries of the local network of organizations related to poverty reduction and economic security. CM staff created a list of local organizations that had some focus on this type of work. We then created an online survey reflecting this list in order to assess the level of interorganizational communication taking place across the current network. Respondents were asked to choose descriptive categories that best reflected their organization's frequency of communication over the past 6 months with each of the organizations outlined on the survey. Possible responses reflected six levels of communication ranging from 1 (don't communicate) to 6 (daily communication).

The survey link was disseminated to representatives from each of the identified organizations providing us with relational information for a total of 57 local organizations. Responses from organizations were averaged to create a single numeric representation of communication between two organizations. Interorganizational data were entered into a software package NodeXL version 1.0.1.229 for windows (Smith et al. 2010). Analyses provided us with several network measures including overall network density and multiple indicators of centrality in order to describe the lead organization's relative position within the network.

The primary purpose of SNA was the creation of a network map to graphically depict the structure of interorganizational communication. In order to simplify this complex relational information so that it might be of use to the lead organization, we limited our focus to only "regular" communication. We operationalized regular communication as any of the three highest possible levels of communication identified by the survey including "once per month", "once per week", and "daily" communication between organizations. This allowed us to create a visual map of the communication patterns taking place across the network as a whole. In order to increase the practical value of the maps in facilitating CM's efforts as lead organization, the Harel–Koren fast multiscale algorithm (Harel and Koren 2002) was utilized to minimize line crossings and increase the general readability of the map.

Qualitative Interviews

In order to gain a deep understanding of the lead organization participants' experiences of the planning, development, and formation of the MTN, the research team conducted nine semi-structured interviews with a range of CM staff approximately 1 year and 3 months after the project was initiated. CM staff members with any level of involvement, connection, or history with the initiative participated in the interview process. Interviewee levels of connection to the project ranged from the CEO/founder of the organization and writer of the grant proposal to temporary service personnel who had recently begun working with the organization and the initiative. Interpretive phenomenological analysis (Larkin et al. 2006; Smith and Osborn 2003) of interview transcripts was employed to obtain an understanding of the lead organization members' experiences during the planning phase and initial formation phase of the MTN in an attempt to make sense of the role of CM in building the coalition. Interpretive phenomenological analysis is a qualitative approach that involves detailed examination of a participant's personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an event (Smith and Osborn 2003).

Members of our research team have been full and active participants in the project since the beginning. On average, we have been meeting with the planning team at CM bi-weekly with more frequent phone and email communications. We have been collaborators in the project, interested and invested in the process, and have joined with them to plan and implement network building strategies. All interactions with the organization, including ongoing meetings and interactions with staff, were documented as field notes and prepared for analysis. Documents that were generated during the process were also reviewed. These included historical documents, emails, memos, meeting agendas and minutes, reports, grant proposals, strategic planning documents, and newsletters.

Results

Social Network Analysis

SNA was used for measuring and understanding the relationships between organizations with a shared focus on reducing poverty within this local context. The collected data regarding interorganizational relationships were used to visualize and, to a lesser degree, quantify communication. The central purpose of using SNA in these early stages of coalition formation was to help the lead organization understand the current state of the network and use this information to target their action. We were specifically interested in assessing the level of communication taking place between organizations because a substantial body of network literature highlights the importance of existing relationships in developing networks (Butterfoss and Keger 2009; Bess et al. 2011). Regular communication has been identified as one of the most fundamental indicators of interorganizational relationship strength within a network (Plastrik and Taylor 2006).

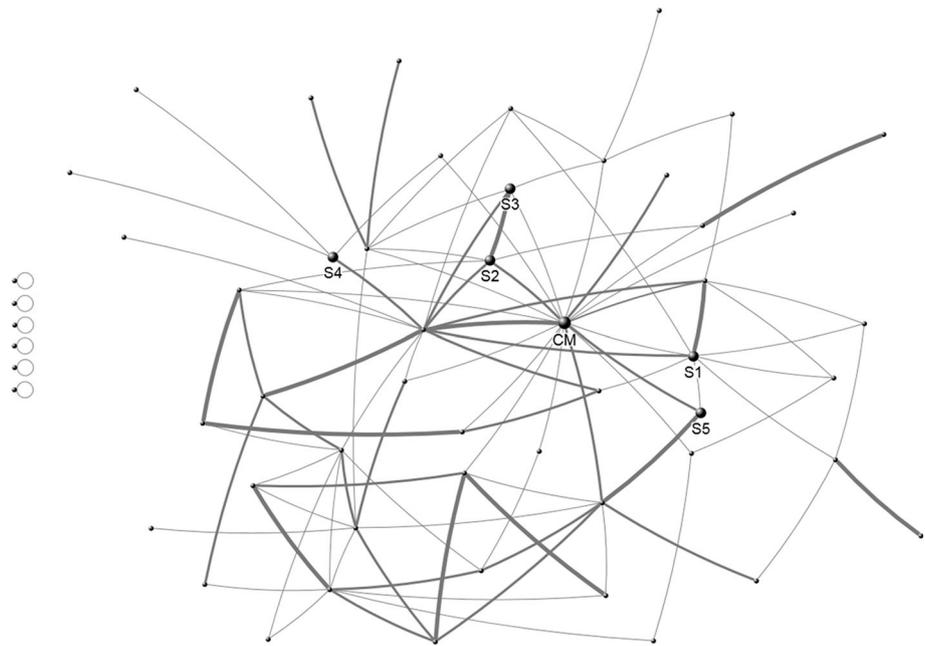
SNA offers a variety of indices that speak to the current state of the network as a whole. For example, network density is a measure ranging between zero and one, and is the ratio of the total number of existing organizational ties divided by the maximum number of possible ties in the network (Quatman and Chelladurai 2008). Whereas values approaching one represent a dense network characterized by the majority of organizations having communication ties with one another, values closer to zero represent a more diffuse communication network. Our analysis indicated that the density of the network was approximately .07. Although the size of the observed network was rather large, this index reveals that the vast majority of anti-poverty organizations contacted within the local context do not engage in regular communication with one another. In fact, our

findings indicate that on average, the organizations within the observed network regularly communicate with fewer than four of the other organizations identified on our survey. Coleman (1988) suggested that the extent to which network actors are connected to each other in a network is related to overall interorganizational trust in the network.

In addition to providing information about the network in general, SNA allowed us to explore CM's unique position relative to the other antipoverty organizations. Centrality measures are used to describe the prominence of an individual organization within a network (Lusher et al. 2010). Our findings indicate that of all the identified organizations, CM can be considered the most central actor in terms of communication. SNA offers a number of indicators that can help refine an understanding of this central position. For instance, CM has the highest number of direct links (degrees) to other organizations compared to all other organizations in the network. Second, CM was also identified as the top organization in terms of betweenness, or the extent to which it serves as a necessary link between non-communicating organizations (Freeman 1979). Third, CM was ranked highest in terms of network closeness, having the shortest averaged geodesic distance to all other organizations in the network. Finally, eigenvector centrality measures of importance rank CM first based on having the most direct connections with the other organizations in the network that reflect a high number of organizational ties. Thus, based on a variety of indices, SNA identified the relatively central position of CM as a communication hub during the initial stages of the coalition's formation.

Although the quantitative findings of the SNA speak to characteristics of the overall network and CM's relatively central position within it, visually depicting this information in the form of a network map makes these characteristics more perceptible. Figure 1 presents a map illustrating the structure of communication across the network as indicated by the respondent organizations. The map depicts the positions of CM as well as the organizations identified as network stewards of the MTN initiative (Fig. 1). In the figure, organizations are represented by the nodes and communication is represented by the ties between nodes. Thicker lines indicate more frequent communication exchanges between organizations. As shown, communication across the network does indeed appear to be diffuse with several nodes on the periphery having relatively few connections to the other organizations represented in the network map. Six organizations failed to be characterized as engaging in at least monthly communication with the other organizations in the network, and these organizations are depicted in the map as being disconnected from network.

Fig. 1 Baseline anti-poverty network map including CM and MTN Stewards



Qualitative Analysis

Throughout the interview process, interviewees were asked to discuss and describe network developments over time and researchers tracked critical events and key milestones. Particular attention was paid to uncovering intraorganizational factors that influenced network planning, development, and formation. The analysis of qualitative data revealed two overarching themes that captured the essence of lead organization members' experiences during the planning and development of the MTN. The findings discussed below are therefore divided into two sections representing these areas of interest. Due to space limitations, we briefly describe each theme and provide select quotes in support.

Factors that Facilitate the Coalition Formation Process

Relational Approach

Interviewees consistently indicated that they perceived CM's historical and current focus on relationship building as foundational to the identified successes. A shared sentiment was that CM was therefore well-positioned to be a convener around social justice issues in south Florida.

I think that in some ways we're very appropriately suited to this sort of work, because I do think the organization and [CEO's] tentacles reach far and wide in the community. I mean the dialogues that I've participated in or read the notes from it was amazing how many of these organizations have a history with us that I wasn't aware of. Cause it might

have been from 10 to 12 years ago. Or how many of these organizations we played a hand in their genesis.

Throughout the planning and development phase of the network, CM engaged a broad range of individuals and organizations through stakeholder meetings and dialogues. Interviewees saw these activities as critical components in promoting the MTN concept and building relationships that would be pivotal to the formation of a working network. The dialogues were described as strategic conversations with key stakeholders and were thoughtfully developed and implemented to strengthen existing relationships and create individual and organizational buy-in.

In general, all of the interviewees described many positive characteristics of CM and some of those strengths were perceived as being critical relational factors necessary for playing the role of a lead organization for this initiative. Words and phrases such as "good conveners", "good facilitators", and "relationship builders" were often used to describe the organization and justify their somewhat self-appointed role as lead organization for this initiative. Thus, CM staff felt that because of the history of the organization and the depth and breadth of relationships in the community, they were well situated to take on the role of a lead organization for this effort.

Factors that Hinder the Coalition Formation Process

Intraorganizational Capacity

Many of the interviewees expressed general concerns about their organization's capacity to effectively play the role of

lead organization. One organizational capacity area of particular concern was structural. In an attempt to integrate this project with other programmatic areas of the organization, it muddled the ability to differentiate this project from other programs and balance competing demands for staff time. CM staff expressed frustration and concern about the additional workload this initiative had created for them and the organization. Participants spoke of the lack of clarity around their roles and responsibilities related to the initiative. Not only did they feel overwhelmed by the additional work, many were unsure as to what they were supposed to be doing and how to actually do it. Additionally, for the first year, no staff person was solely dedicated to this project and leadership was often changing because of staff turnover. Participants felt that the lack of consistent, fully dedicated project leadership personnel with decision-making authority resulted in a loss of continuity, a loss of knowledge about the project and its activities, and increased levels of stress and frustration.

Closely related to organizational structure issues described above, are capacity challenges related to organizational systems for managing a complex initiative such as this.

Participants mentioned the lack of consistent and systematic methods for project management, communication, documenting and archiving activities, decisions, tasks, and actions as being key inhibitors of progress. While CM has recently implemented a social intranet platform in their organization they struggle with staff adoption of the platform and as a result, the system has not been used for this initiative. And even though they created a MTN Stewards Facebook group to aid the work of the Stewards, the group has not been utilized or maintained to a degree that contributes to group resource sharing and action planning.

Another key organizational capacity challenge for CM is that people working directly on the project have *limited coalition-building knowledge and experience* among current staff assigned to the project. It was clear that there was a shared sense that they might be in a little over their heads.

I think that part of the issue might be that a lot of us don't really understand how to get from A to B...because a lot of the staff don't have a background in organizing or policy or community psychology. So a lot of the stuff we're learning on the ground. We're also very confused. We don't know what we're necessarily doing.

Lastly, participants articulated a concern about their inability to effectively guide collective process. For example, interviewees commented on their frustration with the ineffective use of meeting time, lack of progress between meetings, and a sense that the group was perpetually starting over.

The process was so long and terrible. We did the same thing over and over and over, till seriously one time—and I'm still embarrassed to this day that, you know, but I was like “[expletive] that, I'm not doing it...I'm not doing this again. I've done it three times.” And when they asked me for it one more time when I showed up...I was like “I'm sorry, I didn't do the homework, because I've done it three times, and all you had to do was pull out your notes from the last time you asked me this, except you don't have notes”. So we kept doing the same thing over and over and over again.

Sharing Results with CM Staff and Network Stewards

Following our analysis of the SNA, interviews, field notes, and documents, our research team held a meeting with CM staff to report our analysis and do some joint sense-making. First, the research team met with the Network Stewards group and some CM staff to discuss the SNA. One week later, the research team met with CM staff to review and discuss the findings from the staff interviews.

The primary purpose of applying SNA and creating a baseline network map was to obtain information regarding the current state of the informal antipoverty network as a means of facilitating the planning and development of the MTN initiative. The network map depicting the organizational labels was presented to the CM staff and the MTN stewards who made several observations about the structure of the network that were not immediately apparent based on our analysis of communication frequency. Upon encountering the map, several Stewards were able to make sense of the apparent clusters of organizations as being grouped by a shared focus. For instance, one steward observed that housing organizations, service providers, and community organizers seemed to be one factor characterizing the organizations creating the apparent hubs across the network. In addition, another Steward further refined the understanding of connected organizations in identifying shared client demographics and geographic location as being two likely factors explaining the connections and disconnections across the network.

Based on these observations and reactions, two important decisions were made regarding the future development of the MTN initiative. First, it was agreed that individual members from the organizations identified as hubs within the network map should be invited to join the MTN Stewards group. Second, the group also came to the realization that rather than spend any additional time attempting to create new projects, they would instead begin focusing their efforts on supporting existing initiatives taking place within the hub organizations and attempt to

connect organizations on the periphery to these efforts. As of the writing of this paper, CM is adding nine social justice organizations as partners to the network, formalizing their leadership “table” (committee) to shape and guide the collective work, and secured supplemental funding to resource the effort more adequately.

Results from interviews were presented to and discussed with CM staff leading the MTN initiative. While some of the more negative findings were hard for staff at CM to receive at first, there was shared agreement on the overarching themes. CM staff discussed the importance of increasing their process and project management capacities to match their strengths in the relational domain. CM staff moved quickly into thinking about how to address the capacity challenges so as to better serve the goals of the network. Shortly after this discussion, CM did two things to respond to the findings and help strengthen their ability to lead the MTN. First, they hired a new community organizer and rearranged some staff positions to clarify roles and responsibilities related to the project. As part of this reorganization, they also began to engage in more reflective discussions about the larger purpose of the MTN and its connection to the broader mission of the organization. Second, they invited in national consultants to help them build their process skills and collaborative capacity. This rapid capacity-building response to timely feedback is helping them to build on their relational capabilities to reignite the development of the MTN.

Discussion

In considering our findings across the SNA and qualitative interviews, it is clear that in this case, success in the early stage of coalition formation depends heavily on the intra-organizational capacity of the lead organization. In this section, we’ll discuss insights related to the lead organization’s balance of relational and organizational capacities. This case suggests that while it is necessary for the lead organization to have existing relationships and social capital in the community, without sufficient intraorganizational capacity, they may be unable to deliver on their coalition-building role. Furthermore, this case demonstrates how action research with a university partner generates useful information that can help identify strengths and challenges in order to take action to build organizational and coalition capacity in real time.

Coalition-Building and the Empowered Lead Organization

Based on the map highlighting the potential for greater levels of cohesion across the network and Catalyt’s

relatively central position, the SNA suggests that CM is one of the best positioned actors to take on the role of the lead organization. Additionally, the interviews with CM staff reveal that they perceive their depth and breadth of community relationships to be a considerable interorganizational asset; one that further positions them to act as lead organization to the MTN. The convergence of these two findings related to existing linkages between organizations and a relational approach to organizing the coalition provides some evidence of CM’s interorganizational empowerment (Peterson and Zimmerman 2004). They are well connected in the network, have a history of engaging in collaborative activity in the community, and understand the need to build trusting relationships before collaborative action can begin.

On the other hand, based on performance to date in the project and the perspectives of CM staff involved in the MTN, some intraorganizational capacity limitations create barriers for CM in effectively enacting this lead roll. One way we can understand these limitations is to utilize Maton and Salem’s (1995; Maton 2008) interrelated OE concepts of “group-based belief system” and “opportunity role structure”. A group-based belief system refers to an organization’s shared ideology and values and shapes structures, norms and practices. It encompasses a view of staff and their needs, abilities, and potential to achieve organizational goals. The culture at CM is demonstrably strengths-based and organizational members are seen as resources and agents of change. Relatedly, opportunity role structure includes the arrangement of organizational positions or roles that provide opportunities for staff to take on tasks and build their competencies. CM exemplifies this feature in the way that they are willing to thrust staff members into challenging roles in which they can learn and grow. While these are key features of empowering organizations, and both characteristics of CM, this case demonstrates that in the absence of adequate training, mentorship, and supports, organizational members—and by extension, the organization as a whole—cannot be fully empowered to effectively guide the development of an interorganizational coalition.

Lack of capacity in intraorganizational processes affects processes and outcomes at the interorganizational level and ultimately affects the extraorganizational capacity of the coalition to establish, develop, and take community action. One could imagine as well that no adequate level of intraorganizational capacity can balance out a lack of substantive existing relationships at the interorganizational level. This highlights cross-level implications and the interdependent nature of OE (Peterson and Zimmerman 2004). The empowered lead organization in the early stages of coalition building is one that has sufficient intraorganizational and interorganizational capacity. While the

structural and systems capacity deficits highlighted at CM are clearly intraorganizational-level capacity challenges, the lack of network-building knowledge and experience and limitations in ability to facilitate collective process also reflects gaps in knowledge and skills at the individual level. CM may simply not currently have the right human resources at this time to effectively play the role of lead organization for such an endeavor. Working with CM to expose and reflect on these gaps was a process of resource identification (McCarthy and Zald 1977) that prompted them to provide needed training for staff and hire an experienced community organizer to take the lead role on this project.

We know that an effective coalition requires sufficient structure that provides clear roles and procedures, and task focus (Florin et al. 2000). To help coalitions get there, lead organizations need adequate organizational systems, and structures, information, communication, and technology capabilities, and knowledgeable and skilled leaders to weave, support, and build capacity of the coalition. Leading an effort to form an anti-poverty coalition requires far different individual and organizational capacities than it does to run a community program. As our research shows, having sufficient capacity also means that the lead organization has a clear and shared understanding of the purpose of the coalition they are attempting to form. Unless the lead organization leaders can articulate the values, purpose, and goals of the effort in terms understandable and compelling to their staff and the broader community, people may view the effort with confusion, cynicism or even suspicion. This finding supports previous research on coalitions and collaborations that suggest effective network leadership is critical to the process (Alexander et al. 2001; Butterfoss and Kegler 2009; Chaskin et al. 2001; Gray 1989) and that this may even be more critical in the formation stage.

Action Research as Lead Organization Development Strategy

Action research is a way to link reflection and theory with practice by the researcher working together with practitioners (Huzzard et al. 2010). It is important for community psychologists to support the efforts of local organizations through these types of partnerships (Maton 2008). Our role as researchers, doing research on coalition-building development processes and not on specific solutions—for example, the best way to select initial organizational participants in the coalition—had initially been viewed with some skepticism by CM staff and the MTN Stewards. While we provided some ideas for “best practices” based on the literature, we were frequently looked to for specific answers to questions that were best uncovered through the

collaborative action research process. Over time, as we collected data and processed information collaboratively, CM staff began to see the value in this type of action research partnership and took a more active role in using research for action. Grounding our feedback to the members of the initiative within the coalition development and OE literature was essential to figuring out what the challenges were and what needed to be done. Their willingness to share experiences and to reflect on development processes and activities opened up opportunities for process evaluation in real time and infused active learning into their core activities—a feature of an empowering community setting (Maton 2008). In this way, this case indicates that it takes time to build trust and to take on new roles in relationships in an act of action research collaboration.

It was clear in this project that the act of mapping existing interorganizational relationships and reviewing the network map with CM staff opened up new thinking and possibilities for action. CM leaders were able to see where their organization fits within the structure of the network, and how other organizations are communicating with each other in the network. Helping create an understanding of how the existing informal network is structured provided a practical understanding of how the network currently looks, where the hubs of activity are, and how the network might be strengthened. In the context of low-cohesion, coalition formation should focus on existing hubs of activity in the organizational field—in this case poverty reduction. This required mapping the network to better understand the existing relationships and centers of power. In this case, network stewards came to the leadership table based on their existing relationship with CM, not necessarily because of their position as existing hubs of activity in the realm of poverty reduction. The Network Stewards group was formed based on the “who is ready to play” criterion as opposed to a thoughtful and strategic approach based on an analysis of existing network power centers. Network analysis can provide lead organizations with an important facilitative tool that can assist them in their efforts to form and build stronger networks (Provan et al. 2005). Joint analysis of SNA and other forms of data collection can help create informed decision-making processes, which are characteristic of successful and capable lead organizations.

Limitations

Some limitations of the current study are worth noting. One important limitation is that this study focuses on just a single case. As a result, some of the characteristics of the lead organization and our associated findings may not be readily transferable to different types of organizations,

coalitions, or contexts. Another limitation is that the current study focused primarily on the vantage point and experiences of CM, which influenced aspects of our findings. For example, only an intraorganizational perspective is offered related to the role and capacities of CM in forming the MTN. Interviewing members of the broader network would have allowed a deeper understanding of CM's capabilities and perceived legitimacy as a lead organization. Additionally, CM staff's role in selecting the other organizations that would come to define the boundaries of our network analysis was likely a factor in CM ultimately being identified as the most central actor in the network. Given these issues, gaining multiple perspectives on the development of the MTN and CM's role was encouraged for the second phase of data collection, including participation from persons living in poverty. It is also important to note that our focus on CM as an organization and their position within the network limited our ability to attend to the broader institutional and community contextual factors influencing CM and the development of the initiative. Like many nonprofit organizations today, CM is tasked with attending to ever-increasing human and community needs with ever-decreasing resources. This resource-poor environment certainly takes its toll on any organization's capacity to lead complex community change processes. Finally, it is worth acknowledging that although we've been focused in this paper on network development and leadership, the MTN's goal is not just to establish a network. They want to reduce poverty in south Florida. To even begin to collectively exert influence on poverty, the network will need to engage in empowering extraorganizational processes—collective action in partnership with those living in poverty—to affect the entrenched systems, policies, and discourse sustaining poverty in the community. Thus, these aspects of our research focus and of the stage of the coalition's development precluded our ability to assess outcomes related to poverty reduction.

Conclusion

Applying SNA and qualitative methods proved useful in enhancing collective understandings of both the network context of the MTN initiative and CM as a lead organization. It is important to note that when viewed separately, these two distinct sources of information produced somewhat discordant information. Whereas SNA provided a picture of the network that indicated CM was well suited to take on the role of lead organization, the qualitative analysis helped reveal a number of important intraorganizational factors that are hindering their ability to do so effectively. Through synthesizing this information, we were able to better understand the importance of the lead

organization as well as illuminate factors that can exert a positive influence on the MTN initiative. More specifically, by engaging as action research partners and co-learners with CM and the MTN stewards, we were able to position the effort within the literature on coalition development and OE in order to inform potential next steps toward achieving the goal of a more cohesive network working together to reduce poverty in south Florida.

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