

# SEARCHING FOR NEW DIRECTIONS: Social Network Analysis and the Institutional Jewish Community

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*Social network analysis examines the relations that occur and those that do not exist among actors in an institution, system, or community. Using this new research approach yields valuable information about laypeople's involvement in voluntary activities, patterns of giving among donors, and relationships among federated and nonfederated agencies. It reveals new aspects of institutional dynamics of pivotal importance to strategic planning.*

During the past two decades many scholars and practitioners within the Jewish community have invested intensive efforts in exploring ways to enhance voluntary involvement in Jewish communal institutions and in strengthening the potential for cooperative function of the Jewish community as a whole. As these elements are vital to the continuity of the Jewish community and its ability to achieve its goals, one of the primary challenges has been the establishment of methods to expand the existing knowledge about patterns of members' volunteering within institutions and the forms of coordination among these organizations. The purpose of this article is to introduce *social network analysis* as a valuable means of enhancing the understanding of both intra- and inter-organizational levels of the Jewish community.

Although network concepts and methods of social research have undergone dramatic growth during recent years, this approach has been neglected by researchers of the Jewish community. In contrast, studies of participation and volunteering in the Jewish community have been primarily macro-oriented, focusing on socioeconomic and sociodemographic dimensions of the community. This approach has produced important information about the demography of various Jewish communities (Andron, 1984; Elazar, 1982; Huberman, 1988; Phillips, 1985), the profile of individuals in various categories of affiliation and involve-

ment (Berger & Tobin, 1989; Huberman, 1985, 1987), and issues of Jewish identity and identification among members within the community (Kleinman, 1991; Lazerwitz, 1978; Silverstein, 1985; Winter, 1989). Insufficient attention has been given, however, to micro-level analysis, such as of internal structures within individual institutions. Similarly, inter-organizational aspects of the community's function have received only limited attention, which has consisted primarily of abstract statements about the need for cooperation among the various segments of the community. A chief reason for these gaps was the lack of effective methodological instruments to analyze those issues.

This article presents a new conceptual framework and some operative strategies as a basis for the study of Jewish institutions from both an internal perspective and an inter-institutional perspective. The social network approach reveals new aspects of the institutional dynamics that should be pivotal for decision makers within the Jewish community. Social network analysis is not offered as a substitute approach to the traditional methods of investigation common among researchers of the Jewish community, but rather as an equally important, complementary approach, without which the scope of studies will be limited, partial, and therefore misleading.

The discussion below should be viewed as a preliminary introduction to key con-

cepts and methods of social network analysis and their applicability to Jewish communal settings. Further elaborations of this topic and related implications are to follow.

### **SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS— CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS**

The origins of social network analysis lie in the social psychology of groups and its subsequent development in sociological and social anthropological studies of factories and communities.

The concept of *network* refers generally to a specific type of relation linking a defined set of persons, objects, or events (Mitchell, 1969). The same set of actors may have different types of relations (e.g., kinship, social, professional, religious, etc.) and thus be a part of different dimensions of networks. In this sense, relations and linkages between interacting units in a given social system are the building blocks of network analysis.

Social network analysis considers both the relations that occur and those that do not exist among the actors in the network. The configuration of present and absent ties among the network actors reveals a specific network structure. In their description of types of networks, Knoke and Kulinski (1982, p. 12) assert that "structures vary dramatically in form, from the isolated structure in which no actor is connected to any other actor, to the saturated structure in which every actor is directly linked to every other individual. More typical of real networks are various intermediate structures in which some actors are more extensively connected among themselves than the others." The detection of these structures and interpretation of variations among them are key tasks in social network analysis.

Yet, network analysis offers a greater contribution than the mere identification of links among actors. The location of actors in the network and the structure of their relations have potential implications for the behaviors, attitudes, and perceptions of both the individual units and the system as a

whole. Thus, the exploration of relational patterns in the network and its various structural features may suggest important insights regarding the dynamics of social systems.

Relations among actors have two basic aspects: content and form (Knoke & Kulinski, 1982). The *content* of relations refers to the substantive type of linkages existing among the studied units. Relations may be of different types, such as relations of transaction (Laumann et al., 1978), information (Granovetter, 1974), communication (Lin, 1975), sentiment (Hallinan, 1974), and power (Cook & Emerson, 1978). In some networks, the ties among the actors are not of one distinct type, but rather of two or more types. These multiplexed networks require the investigation of the different dimensions to obtain a comprehensive picture of the network. The relational *form* refers to the properties of the links between pairs of actors, such as the strength and reciprocity of these ties. The forms of relations are independent of any specific contents.

Three levels of analysis are essential for the understanding of social networks. The *actor level* (egocentric network) focuses on the individual actor, all others with whom it has relations, and the relations among them. The individual actor can be described, therefore, by the features of his or her ties to the other actors, e.g., their centrality. A "higher" level of analysis is the *dyad*, formed by a pair of actors. The primary attention in this level is given to such parameters as symmetry, reciprocity, strength, multiplexity, and direct versus indirect ties, often in an effort to explain variations in dyadic relations as a function of joint characteristics of the pair, i.e., their similarity). Finally, the focus of the *system analysis level* (also known as global, sociocentric, or complete network) is to obtain information about the patterning of ties among all actors and the various positions in the network. This information may describe the density, centralization, connectivity, clustering, and hierarchy within the net-

work, thus indicating degrees of cohesion, integration, subgroupings, and other aspects of the system as a whole. These various levels and the way they are embedded in one another stress the role of social network analysis in bridging between the micro- and the macro-orders of social systems.

Social network analysis is not limited only to the exploration of concrete relations among individuals. It can also examine the links among small groups, organizations, neighborhoods, cities, political parties, states, and units of many other social systems. According to Wasserman and Faust (1994), actors in social systems are regarded as interdependent units (rather than independent, autonomous units), and the linkages among them are channels for transfer of material and nonmaterial resources. Structure, in this context, is conceptualized as lasting patterns of relations among actors.

This brief overview of social networks reveals the potential contribution of this analytical approach in situations in which the relational aspect is critical to the attainment of the collectivity's or the organization's goals. An examination of the myriad network of relations linking an association's members to one another is likely to yield a comprehensive picture of underlying processes, structural principles, the internal topology of the association, and thus its potentials, opportunities, and constraints for members' contributions in the form of time and/or money.

#### **SOCIAL NETWORKS ANALYSIS AND JEWISH COMMUNAL INSTITUTIONS**

The wide range of Jewish communal institutions and their multidimensional relations form a complex environment of ties and actions. The understanding of this interconnected setting of social, educational, service, religious, and funding institutions within the Jewish community can be enriched by employing social network techniques. In this section, I introduce briefly some of the ways through which structural

analysis may provide critical information to decision makers on the intra- and inter-organizational levels. Each of these levels of analysis reflects a concern for different aspects of the organizational capacities and community's potentiality in reaching its goals. As with all research, the focus and scope of applied social network studies should be defined in advance by the pertinent decision makers based on their community's needs and aspirations.

Generally, by conducting short and very simple surveys (or interviews) of the institution's membership or examining interagency interactions, executives of Jewish agencies and community's leaders may obtain rich information about the various networks in which volunteers (in the case of an intra-agency study) or organizations (in the case of an interagency study) are involved. Specifically, research on members' involvement in voluntary activities may focus on the organizational network of lay people, their friendship and kinship network, and other networks pertinent to the particular population under study. Likewise, the study of interorganizational relations may concentrate on various dimensions of the network, such as the financial, service, programmatic, and support links among the agencies in the community.

#### **Intraorganizational Level**

The ability of leaders of Jewish institutions to recruit and involve members is a key factor in obtaining their goals and advancing their performance. Jewish communal agencies rely on lay people as the vital source of human resources behind their operations. Berger (1991) recognizes the value of increasing attention to the internal environment of Jewish institutions. A major aspect of his discussion is the central role of social networks, friendship circles, and interpersonal links in influencing participation in Jewish communal organizations and thus as a recommended future research direction.

Some scholars have applied social network analysis in studying mobilization and

participation in voluntary activities. Several studies have shown that the number and strength of social network ties that connect group members to each other and to non-members affect the decision of group members to participate in collective action (McAdam, 1986; McPherson et al., 1992; Snow et al., 1980). Other works have pointed out that certain network features, such as density and centralization, may assist in predicting the potential participation of individuals (Marwell et al., 1988). Researchers have also stressed the impact of individuals' affiliation to different networks on their participation and activism (Galaskiewicz, 1979; Gould, 1991, 1993; Marsden & Laumann, 1977).

A primary contribution of social network analysis may be in illuminating fundamental patterns and principles of **members' involvement** in voluntary activities of the agency. The outcomes of network analysis, in this context, may include the description of internal structural characteristics of the agency under study. Do the lay people participate in certain types of committees or have a diverse range of interest and involvement? Who are the prominent lay leaders in the network? Who are the disconnected members in the network, some of whom may have a strong potential to join voluntary action? What are the links among volunteers in the network in terms of their strength, reciprocity, multiplexity, and other characteristics of such ties? What are the patterns of communication among lay people, as well as between them and staff members, e.g., the frequency, content, channels of communication, etc.? What are the effects of intimacy, intensity, and duration of volunteers' interpersonal relationships on their patterns of volunteering? Do they tend to join certain committees for social reasons or for other considerations? What are the existing social clustering and cliques among lay people, and what are the impact of these subgroupings on the "professional" preferences, priorities, and participation of these lay people? What are the connections among the personal attributes of lay people,

the form of their involvement, and their individual interests in the agency's goals? Finally, how do the various global features, such as the density (cohesion) and centralization of the network, influence its effectiveness?

The availability of such data enables communal leaders to identify the individuals or subgroups in the agency who have the optimal structural access to either mobilize new potential volunteers or to expand the role of active volunteers to support other critical voluntary areas. For example, revealing patterns of concentration of lay people in particular committees or tasks may assist in learning about their actual preferences and behavioral inclinations and consequently may help in outlining their advancement within the agency to other assignments, roles, and positions. Alternatively, uncovering structural obstacles within the network, such as the absence of contacts of certain lay people, may point to structural solutions, which are likely to evoke a spirit of volunteerism among these lay people and thus potentially lead to emerging involvement. Isolated members within the network, for example, may be activated simply by the initiation of connections by one or more of the active members in the network, who are structurally located in close proximity to the target of mobilization.

The ability to obtain this extensive information opens a wide range of strategic possibilities in the context of mobilization and participation of lay people. Such data may benefit executives of Jewish community agencies in four principal ways: (1) *recruitment* of new lay people to join ad hoc or standing committees and/or participate in other forms of voluntary action in the agency; (2) *retention* of active lay people, reassuring their continual involvement in their present voluntary capacities; (3) *expansion* of lay people's scope of roles and responsibilities within the agency; and (4) *activation* of members to support large-scale endeavors and agency-wide events. The familiarity of the executive echelon of

the agency with the various properties of members' networks enables therefore the design and implementation of strategic plans to solicit, maintain, and expand members' participation in the agency. The value of the social network approach to this critical sphere of Jewish agencies is distinctive.

An additional organizational sphere relates to **financial contributions** toward its operation. Techniques similar to those used in exploring participation and volunteering may be applied to donations. Specifically, the type and extent of relationships among contributors, the "distance" of certain donors from others, the reachability of certain donors by lay people and staff members, designated targets of volunteers' donations, and the volume and frequency of giving are all essential factors in designing preferred paths for approaching donors within or outside the agency. For fund-raising purposes, network information is valuable not only in constructing campaigns and committees but also in developing honorary guest lists, donors' clubs, sponsors groups, and similar bodies of contributors. Repetitive patterns of giving among donors, for example, are key data in determining potential directions of fund-raising campaigns. Studying simultaneously both the financial and nonfinancial contributions of community members may present a more comprehensive picture of the voluntary audience and thus will serve as a resource for strategic planning.

Obtaining networks' measurements of a given agency provides also a basis for **comparative analysis** among different agencies and institutions. A comparative analysis may allow leaders of less successful institutions to identify and adapt structural principles that enhance the functioning of similar institutions in other locations. Rather than developing theoretical mechanisms that seem reasonable and effective, it is more promising to copy effective patterns of cooperation among lay people or between lay and staff (after modification, per the agency's specific needs), as the success of these arrangements has already been proven. Similarly, comparative analysis of

networks may allow certain Jewish federations to employ effective solicitation and allocation principles that have been proven as powerful by federations in other communities.

Social network analysis provides a map of the interconnection within the agency and, as such, serves as a guiding instrument to leaders and decision makers in their efforts to maximize the productivity of their agencies.

#### **Interorganizational Perspective**

Van de Ven and Ferry (1980, p. 299) define an interorganizational network as the "total pattern of interrelationships among a cluster of organizations that are meshed together in a social system to attain collective and self-interest goals, or to resolve specific problems in a target population." In spite of some theoretical problems embedded in this definition, its relevancy to the joint organizational effort of Jewish communal agencies is obvious. Institutions within the Jewish community are linked to one another in different types of relations in an effort to accomplish common goals, as well as specific organizational objectives within the Jewish community. These cooperative actions and strategic relations are key for the future success of the institutional Jewish community.

Social network analyses can provide extensive information about coordinated activities of different organizations in the network (or the lack of such coordination), the content of these cooperative ventures, and the communication patterns in such collaborations. Such interactions are key in understanding the forms of action, inter-agency arrangements, and the dynamics of a given community and its various institutional units in coping with environmental pressures and situational constraints. Both the presence and absence of interorganizational links are critical in this regard.

Network analysis of the interorganizational arena is also an important source of information about **resource interdependency** (Pfeffer, 1981) and **exchange rela-**

tionships among the units in the network. The number of ties that agencies have with other Jewish agencies (and whenever pertinent, with other non-Jewish agencies) may serve as a way to determine the prominence or centrality of institutions in the community. Simultaneously, the type and formation of these relations may shed light on the ways in which agencies obtain and exchange resources. In other words, such analysis generates data about the flow of various resources, such as information, funds, and expertise, among institutions in the community. In addition, several network measures, such as centrality, structural equivalence, and cliques of agencies within the network, may point to potential strategic development for particular agencies, as well as the community as a whole.

Analysis of interorganizational connections is essential for understanding some key issues about the function of the community in different areas of operation, including service provision, fund raising, marketing, support, and similar functions.

As with the intraorganizational level, the exploration of critical information in the interorganizational level provides a unique opportunity for comparative analysis. As many communities have similar agencies, services, and financial resources, structural comparisons can assist the less effective communities in utilizing the experience and proven patterns of success of more effective communities. Although rare studies have been conducted as a means to obtain information on particular institutions with excellent reputations, such efforts are not made on the community level, especially not on the basis of social network analysis.

#### **THE SOCIAL NETWORK APPROACH IN PRACTICE: TWO EMPIRICAL EXAMPLES**

Although the primary purpose of this article is to offer a conceptual introduction to the social network method in the context of Jewish communal institutions, this section focuses on the empirical use of this method

in community research. This brief presentation of empirical studies that employ network analysis is offered for the purpose of illuminating the potential application of this method. Although the ideas behind these studies may be regarded as obvious, the emphasis in this section is on the form of questions, the techniques of data collection used in such studies, and the practical value of research findings.

In a classic research project, Galaskiewicz (1978) studied the exchange networks of organizations in a local American community. The primary assumption of the study was that organizations interact with one another through the exchange of certain resources (money, information, and moral support) and that the aggregate of these dyadic exchanges creates community-wide, institutional networks. The purpose of the research was to describe the interorganizational transactions of money, information, and support and to explore their effect on community-related decision making.

The researchers compiled a list of organizations from directories, phone books, and interviews with local informants and then identified the highest-ranking executive officer in each agency, asking him or her to act as the spokesperson for the organization. An interview was conducted with each respondent, during which the list of organizations was handed to them and a series of questions were asked to determine the relations of the respondent's organization with the other organizations.

Typical questions in the questionnaires were: "Which organizations on this list does (your organization) rely upon for information regarding community affairs (or other matters that might affect your organization)?" "To which organizations on this list would (your organization) be likely to pass on important information concerning community affairs (or other matters that might affect them)?" "To which organizations on this list does (your organization) give (substantial) funds as payment for services rendered or goods received, loans or donations?" "Which organizations on this

list would your organization feel a special duty to stand behind in times of trouble; that is, to which organizations would your organization give support?"; and "Which organizations on this list would be likely to come to your organization's support in time of trouble?". These types of questions reveal the nature of the financial, information, and support relationships among the organizations in the given community.

The analysis of the responses in the study suggested various patterns of exchange networks. For example, it was found that organizational functions have an independent effect on the centrality of these organizations in the community. That is, whereas community decision-making bodies, voluntary associations, mass media, and law firms tend to be more central in the information network, industries and financial institutions are more central in the money network, and human service organizations are more central in the support network. In all networks, wealthier and larger organizations tend to be more dominant than others in community affairs. Yet, Galaskiewicz shows that it is the organizations' centrality in the network—the number of links to other organizations, the extent of an organization's role as a mediator among organizations, and the like—and not their resources or interests that explains their activation on issues.

Similarly, a proximity analysis of the data demonstrated that organizational elites employ different calculi when interacting via different media and thus generate different clustering (grouping) within the networks. Specifically, when exchanging information, decision makers tend to seek out organizations on the basis of the activities in which they are engaged. Conversely, when engaged in financial transactions, decision makers consider the auspices of the other organizations in their field. Finally, when establishing support linkages, organizational elites are more interested in the social values of the other organizational elites.

In the context of Jewish communities, such and similar analyses may be valuable

in learning about the fabric of relationships among the various Jewish institutions in different network dimensions in any given Jewish community. But even more importantly, this type of data may serve as a primary source for applied recommendations and strategic guidelines for specific agencies and the community as a whole. Generating such knowledge is essential, for example, in enabling better cooperation among different organizational actors (e.g., federations, foundations, JCCs, synagogues, educational institutions, Jewish media, etc.), enhancing their joint action, developing ways to activate groups in the community more effectively, and improving communication, information dissemination, transfer of resources, and other key functional aspects among Jewish agencies.

In an earlier, similar research on community influence systems, Laumann and Pappi (1976) examined, in addition to inter-organizational relations, certain dimensions of the interpersonal networks in a German community in an effort to enhance the understanding of involvement in community affairs. The methods of data collection were similar to those of Galaskiewicz, and the type of questions the researchers used in order to obtain the interpersonal data included items such as: "Would you please indicate the three persons from the list with whom you most frequently meet socially (privately)?" "And when you think of your best friends in (the community) and the surrounding area, would you include the aforementioned persons (all three?, two of them?, one of them?, none?)" "Could you please indicate the three persons from our list with whom you have the closest business or professional contact?" and "Could you please indicate the three persons with whom you most frequently discuss community affairs?"

The analysis of respondents' answers enabled the researchers to identify various types of groupings of key members within the community and to uncover the patterns and characteristics of the relationships among these individuals. This information,

coupled with other related data, helped the researchers explore the control of certain members and groups in the network over basic communal resources, their connections with influentials outside the community, their influence over particular population subgroups, and their expert knowledge in particular areas of communal interest. Laumann and Pappi found, for example, that *similar* positions in the community tend to cluster—that is, to be close to one another—as a function of the higher density of their social ties relative to those with more dissimilar positions. Thus, the more dissimilar two positions are in the status, interests, attitudes, beliefs, and behavior of their incumbents, the lesser are their consensual relationships. The authors also reported that the influential structure is highly integrated since almost every influential can reach and be reached in each of the three networks by every other influential in the community.

In practice, this type of information can serve as a basic source for applied action plans. For example, by identifying the shortest paths to inactive members and specific connections within agency's membership (or between members of different agencies), practitioners can develop more effective outreach and recruitment programs. Similarly, by discovering personal contacts to potential donors, or by exploring the access to resources available in a given community, professional staff may design more productive solicitation plans and fund-raising campaigns.

#### **POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES AND OBSTACLES**

Implementation of social network analysis in Jewish communal agencies and communities generates some important opportunities for the future growth of these institutions. These analyses provide comprehensive and rich information regarding these systems, whether the focus is on the internal participation (involvement of volunteers in a given agency) or the community at large

(based on the interconnectedness of community's units). Analysis of social networks may reveal effective ways of operation; maximize the potential for participation, cooperation, and integration within the studied systems; advance organizational and communal abilities to solicit support of specific target populations; and enhance not only the available generic information about communal dynamics but also the preferred paths of actions in coping with various community challenges. Further, network analysis points to effective strategic directions for the decision makers.

Along with these opportunities for growth and greater effectiveness, Jewish communities are likely to face some key obstacles and constraints in applying social network analysis. Most obstacles are likely to relate to typical anxieties that accompany the implementation of new research instruments or the possible exploration of new and undesirable information. An initial set of concerns may relate to political considerations. Some of the needed data, especially on the interorganizational level, may be perceived by leadership as sensitive or confidential. Many agencies would not share information that relates to their exchanges with other agencies in order to avoid unnecessary exposure of their resource bases and the nature of their transactions. Furthermore, social network analysis may generate results that will undermine the self-perception of certain agencies regarding their positions (or relative influence) in the community, thus raising some resistance to welcoming this new set of methods.

Intraorganizational network analysis may raise similar concerns. As the identity of respondents needs to be revealed in order to construct accurate topologies of the social networks within the agency, lay people and/or staff members may resist providing certain information to prevent exposure of what they regard as personal. In both the intra- and interorganizational cases, comparative analyses may generate some resistance as well, because they may point out effective versus less effective institutions or



communities. The familiarity of participants within the Jewish community with other individuals and organizations, not only on the local level but often also on the national level, is likely to prevent the engagement of participants in processes that may expose their relative weaknesses.

A reverse psychological problem may be the confidence of top decision makers regarding the extent of their knowledge of many of the network parameters. In other words, senior staff members often hold the illusion that they have a comprehensive familiarity with their membership, the patterns of participation or financial contributions of their lay people, the ties and interconnectedness among their supporters, and other relational aspects that are essential to the understanding of the dynamics of their constituency. Yet, as knowledgeable as senior staff and lay leaders are, the institutional and communal environments are too complex for them to rely only on their observations in making key decisions. Only a systematic investigation is capable of providing detailed data of various dimensions on which to determine future actions. In this regard, network techniques may be an effective method of inquiry as they are likely to expose pivotal unknown features and processes within a particular agency or the community as a whole.

In addition to the psychological obstacles, there are a set of practical challenges of which the reader should be aware. For example, missing data in social network analysis are crucial, as missing respondents mean also the absence of these respondents' personal networks (relationships with others), which consequently affects the structural measures of a given social system. Furthermore, conducting research of this kind requires a knowledgeable scholar who is familiar with social network methods, their implementation, and the interpretation of the results they generate.

Various types of solutions may be available for overcoming these psychological and technical challenges. Furthermore, the benefits of using social network analysis are

greater than the obstacles and costs they generate. The employment of social network measures can add a valuable view of Jewish community institutions, their relationships, potentials, and constraints. The contribution of structural analysis, with its rich multidimensional data about the dynamics of Jewish institutions, is critical, especially considering the growing scope of challenges Jewish communal services face and the rather limited type of methods that scholars and practitioners use in obtaining information and learning about these problems. Only an openness to new methods, a consistent search for new type of information, greater sophistication in concepts and techniques, and courage to face these trends can lead to advantageous change and desirable progress. Social network analysis has proven its value in various sociological domains and seems to be a promising, challenging, and refreshing future approach for the institutional Jewish community.

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