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Framing Network Style Interactions in Local Governance: Three Narratives

By Gary S. Marshall, with Eric Buske

Networks are the medium through which we exchange information, resources and influence with each other; they have momentous consequences on our lives. They enable us to transcend individual limitations by joining with others to solve common problems and develop innovations. Conversely, networks make us more vulnerable to intended and unintended actions of others; they can amplify, distort, and accelerate the consequences of our interactions, thus making the world far more uncertain and dangerous (Cumings as cited in Chisholm, p. xvii).

Introduction

Since the mid 1990's there has been a proliferation of writing about the network model of organization. This reflects the broader dynamic of the shift within the public sector from questions of government to governance of which networks are a central organizing mechanism. Networks, proponents claim, are more effective than single organizations because they require public and private organizations to coordinate and integrate the funding, service delivery, and regulatory processes (Scott 1985; Provan & Milward 1995). As a result, fragmentation and duplication of services are assumed to decrease, while client outcomes are thought to increase through improved accessibility and continuity of service delivery (Rosenheck *et al.* 1998).

In the U.S., public management research has increasingly focused on the study of networks as a central research theme. In doing so, it has sought to use the study of networks as a means to maintain a tradition of positivist research (Dubnick 1999; Agranoff & McGuire 2001). To this end,

networks have been understood as new instruments of organizational rationality. The instrumental focus will likely remain central to public management network research in the U.S. (Berry *et al.* 2004). In contrast, the European tradition (Bogason 2000, 2005; Kickert, Klijn & Koppenjan 1997; Sørensen & Torfing 2005) sees a discussion of both social theory and democratic theory as integral to a comprehensive framework of democratic network governance.

Peter Bogason's work is of particular importance on this point. His analysis of institutional change to Danish local government and the implications of these changes for democratic governance give a crucial roadmap for operating within what he calls 'new forms of fragmentation' (2005: 23) or the administrative 'gray zone' (Sørensen 2002). Effective administrative action requires steering among and between the state, the market and civil society. Hence a problem arises in theorizing about how to manage effectively and democratically within such a fluid context. Bogason notes that traditional aggregative and integrative theories of democracy and newer deliberative theories of democracy are all predicated upon clear distinctions between state, the market and civil society. He suggests that:

These [sectoral barriers] are difficult to maintain as separate spheres of contemporary society. So instead of taking this relatively static analytical position, we may have to understand how democracy is constructed and reconstructed, not as a process of maintaining some popular sovereignty but as processes of solving local problems requiring some type of collaborative activity ... At the local level, then, we must identify problematics that require collective action in some form, and ask ourselves how procedures for such action are established and maintained, how resources are allocated, and how positions are formed and filled. This is an approach within institutional analysis but without a presupposition that any particular value of (liberal) politics, local solidarity of civil society, or market forces must have precedence over the other (Bogason 2005: 36).

Bogason's insight here is crucial. That is, new forms of governance – albeit fragmented – must be democratic and must be workable. Such a perspective is doubly important for the American context with its overt instrumental and technicist orientation. In effect, what Bogason suggests is to tackle the problem inductively. That is, in post welfare state public administration one must ask: What is the type of problem to be solved?

What is the framework for collective practice? How can the practice remain democratic?

Empirical Applications: The Omaha Cases

In support of such a logic of inquiry, we have employed a qualitative research approach, conducting interviews with eight public administrators. The interview questions addressed five general areas of administrative practice: (1) administrative function: formal and informal; (2) organizational structure and organizational practices; (3) conflicts and contradictions experienced in the completion of workplace responsibilities; (4) coping strategies for resolving conflicts and contradictions; and (5) resource allocation and democratic accountability. The theoretical framework guiding our research accepts Bogason's premise that the broad rubric of institutional analysis can be helpful in assessing dynamic conditions at the local level to determine the unique collective arrangements that are manifest.

In this chapter, an analysis of three of the eight interviews is presented. Rather than use the term case, the term narrative is used forthwith. Researchers often use the phrase 'case narrative' (Flyvbjerg 2001) and it is in this tradition that we employ the term narrative. By narrative, we refer to the detailing of a series of events that reflect the complexities and contradictions of real life (Flyvbjerg 2001: 84). What follows are three narratives of administrators who have, as a result of shifts in public administrative practices, found themselves moving, to varying degrees, from traditional governmental organizing frameworks, to network governance style settings.

The narratives presented reflect the changes occurring in Omaha, Nebraska, USA, a municipal region of approximately 350,000 citizens, as its public administrative structures move from government to governance. Three law enforcement administrators are profiled: Joe, Don and Mike. The profiles follow the approach developed by Sørensen (2002) in a major Danish study on administrative reform in the municipality of Skanderborg. In her Skanderborg study, Sørensen demonstrated how new forms of governance create role tensions for administrators and new dilemmas for democratic practice. Below are the three Omaha narratives, followed by a more detailed analysis.

Case #1 Joe

Joe is the Law Enforcement and Community Coordinator for the United States Attorney's office in Omaha. He has been in his position at the U.S. Attorney's office for the past 15 years. Joe answers directly to the United States Attorney (USA) in Nebraska.

When Joe was first hired 15 years ago, his title was just Law Enforcement Coordinator. The name change is indicative of an evolution in Department of Justice (DOJ) strategy over the past 15 years. The position originated with Joe and initially involved the oversight of the disbursement of DOJ dollars to local law enforcement agencies. The move since then has been towards more community-based prevention and outreach programs.

Today Joe specifically coordinates law enforcement agencies and community groups in the implementation of DOJ programs dealing with terrorism, gun violence, and youth outreach. A portion of Joe's coordination duties consists of forming and directing steering committees. These steering committees are utilized by the USA's office to determine how DOJ's funds are spent. The steering committees are usually a mix of community members, law enforcement, academics and Crime Commission members.

There are DOJ guidelines that mandate a certain percentage of funding go to law enforcement and a certain percentage to community outreach. Beyond these guidelines, there is tremendous amount discretion how the monies are distributed and which strategies are funded. The allocation of the funds is important beyond simple fiscal decisions. There are usually several hundred thousand dollars at stake with considerable discretion in how they are allocated. How the money is meted out endorses and gives life to the programs it funds, and often kills programs that are not funded.

In addition, Joe represents the USA's office in community outreach programs. The focus of these programs is youth violence prevention. The USA's office arranges intervention meetings with known youthful gang members and other troubled youth. Joe also works within the community on Victim Impact statements. These statements are solicited from neighborhoods that have been impacted by gang activity or drug dealing. None of these programs existed when Joe started 15 years ago.

Joe's network consists of local and federal law enforcement agencies, non-profit organizations (such as the Girl Scouts, the Chicano Awareness Center, and others), and community members. Conflict arises within the network when there is competition for funds. This conflict is usually be-

tween various community groups or non-profits that want to fund their programs. There is also occasional conflict between the law enforcement agencies vying for the same dollars. To a lesser extent, there is conflict at times (over dollars or strategies) between the law enforcement agencies and the community groups.

Joe copes with the funding and strategy conflicts that arise within his network through compromise, debate, and a determination on how organized and how prepared the submitting group or non-profit is. The ultimate decision is often made through consensus, with the process being led by Joe. On the rare occasion that conflict can not be resolved through the above measures, Joe has to fall into the role of a classic public administrator and use his authority (as an agent of the U.S. Attorney) and dictate the resolution.

The determination of who participates in Joe's network generally depends on the nature of the project being worked on. Joe acknowledges that many of the same community members (particularly those that are unaffiliated with formal organizations) serve on steering committees repeatedly. This appears to be a combination of initial citizen interest and then 'learning the ropes' of the participatory process. The same is true of certain non-profit organizations. Repeated service and familiarity result in community members and organizations being invited back when a new program or funds are initiated. This appears to lead to a situation where the same circle of people represents the 'community' in many of the decision making processes. From Joe's perspective this creates an efficient system because of the institutional knowledge within the network.

Case #2: Don

Don is a police detective who works in the Domestic Violence Unit. He has been with the Omaha Police Department (OPD) for about twenty years and has worked in the Domestic Violence Unit since its inception seven years ago. The Domestic Violence Unit investigates crimes involving assaults between parties involved in relationships. It also investigates other crimes involving persons in relationships such as vandalism, threats, or stalking. The Unit is co-housed with the County and City Victim/Witness groups (non-profit advocacy groups for victims of domestic crimes). Although a component of the OPD, the development of the Domestic Violence Unit grew from a network formed to address the growing (or at least more publicly visible) problem of domestic violence in the

city. The network that tries to address domestic violence and provided the impetus for this unit is the Domestic Violence Coordinating Council (DVCC). The DVCC is made up of the OPD, County Attorney's Office, the YWCA, Catholic Charities, the Courts, and others interested in the problem of domestic violence. The DVCC meets on a monthly basis and helps provide a united strategy for dealing with domestic violence in the city.

The concept of the DVCC and the Domestic Violence Unit reflects a significant shift away from the way things had always been done. Twenty years ago the police department only dealt with the most severe cases of domestic violence. As the problem came into the public consciousness the OPD began to pursue newer approaches such as victimless prosecution (domestic violence victims frequently refuse to cooperate with prosecution). However the OPD and the other groups continued to work in uncoordinated isolation. Prior to the DVCC and the Domestic Violence Unit the OPD split domestic violence investigation between investigative units by crime types (assaults investigated by Homicide, vandalism by Burglary, etc.).

Don is a line worker in the network that includes the Domestic Violence Unit. His role as a public administrator has changed since the development of this network primarily by the 'case sharing' that occurs. Prior to the establishment of the Domestic Violence Unit, Don worked his cases by himself with little or no communication with advocacy groups such as the YWCA. Don would work his case until he felt he had enough to make an arrest, presented it through the 'system' for prosecution, and been done with it. In today's network environment, Don may have contact during the course of his investigation with an advocate from the YWCA or Catholic Charities, and the prosecutors from the County Attorney's Office. Don also knows the Court is willing to hear a victimless domestic violence prosecution (where the victim refuses to cooperate). A victim of domestic violence will have the opportunity to have their case referred to a counseling group from the very first stages of the investigation.

Don receives his cases (the victims he serves) primarily through Police crime reports. However he also does get some referrals through some of the advocacy groups he works with. Don's caseload is very heavy and he can receive 30 to 50 new cases a month.

Conflict within the network for Don is routine and happens frequently. The conflict, in Don's view, typically stems from expectations of the members of the network who are primarily in an advocacy role. When this kind of conflict occurs, over a well known case in the community for example, Don finds that he resorts to the norms of the police profession in his responses. Such a circumstance, in fact, enacts the shadow of hierarchy, to which we referred earlier.

Don's coping mechanisms are usually communication and explanation.

The communication occurs in an informal manner via the telephone or in person. Usually it involves a legal explanation or Don sharing his past experience with a particular victim (in seven years Don has had many of the same victims). When communication or explanation between Don and his peers in other network agencies does not resolve the conflict, it becomes the responsibility of Don's superiors to take the conflict to the broader DVCC.

Case #3: Mike

Mike directed the Child/Victim Sex Unit for five and one half years, and was integral to the establishment of Project Harmony. Project Harmony is a community based network which includes Project Harmony staff, the Omaha Police Department, the County Attorney's Office, Child Protective Services (CPS), and an extensive array of non-profit service providers. The mission of the Project Harmony is 'to protect children by providing community-based, integrated, comprehensive and coordinated child abuse assessment and investigation in a centralized location' (www.projectharmony.com). Because, Mike worked as a detective in the Youth Services Unit (the predecessor of Project Harmony) for three and one half years, he has a unique perspective.

Mike sees the formation of Project Harmony as a 'change in philosophy' in the handling of child abuse cases. Prior to Project Harmony, a victim of child abuse would encounter a level of bureaucratic inertia, often having to explain over and over, the circumstance of the abuse event(s). Under Project Harmony, many of the agencies, including the police are co-located in one building. This decreases the administrative burden on the part of the victim and related parties.

Mike has a significant leadership role in this network and his role change as a public administrator is significant under the network model.

In a classic police administrator role, the Unit Commander directs the activities of the detectives under his or her command. This includes case management and a classic hierarchical paramilitary command structure. Under the network model Mike has similar management responsibilities but case decisions are often made in a consensus environment. He says the biggest difference because of the network is the communication and sharing of resources that exist across the network. He notes: 'The strength of the network is that there are various agencies providing their services under one roof.'

This is also the source of much of the conflict. While these various agencies all have the welfare of children as their primary mission, there are different philosophies as to how to best achieve child welfare. OPD serves as an investigating agency that takes enforcement action when the case allows it to. OPD also makes decisions regarding the placement of abused children with agencies such as the Child Protective Service. Hospitals operate with varying degrees of advocacy depending on the training and philosophy of the staff. Other organizations believe the education is the correct route to take in dealing with abuse situations. Most conflict arises in cases where there is ambiguity about the circumstances of the abuse event. In clear abuse cases there is usually little conflict.

Mike's first coping mechanism was communication between the agencies. They had monthly meetings where the managers of the Project Harmony agencies meet to discuss cases. These meetings would involve the review of critical cases from the previous month. If there had been disagreement it was often resolved then. These administrators also worked to make sure their various policies did not conflict with each other or the mission of the network. On a day to day level, line workers within the network dealt with much of the conflict. Usually conflict did not come to Mike's level day to day unless there had been failure at the lower levels.

The second coping mechanism was the formation of alliances within the network according to philosophy. These alliances would affect day to day decisions and decisions at the network board level. The dangers of alliances within the network are obviously the threat to the network and 'group think' within the alliance (defeating the purpose of the network).

The other conflict Mike had within his job as commander of the Child Victim/Sex Unit was between his role in Project Harmony and his role in the Domestic Violence Coordinating Council (discussed in Don's interview above). This conflict arose because the philosophies of the two net-

works were different. Both networks operated under the philosophy of combining services for victims. DVCC's focus was on the mother and violence she faced. Project Harmony's focus was on the children. The difference is that Project Harmony advocates the removal of children and the prosecution of mothers if the evidence supports it, even if she is also a victim. DVCC tends to view the mother primarily as another victim and advocates keeping the family in tact if it is best for the mother. In addition to a difference in philosophies, both groups compete for the same grant dollars. Mike's coping with this conflict family consisted of trying to balance the OPD's approach to both networks.

Mike dealt with any conflict he felt between his role in these networks and his role in the OPD by keeping communication open between himself and his Captain and would seek guidance when there was conflict. Mike also enjoyed a considerable amount of autonomy in his commander role so conflict was kept to a minimum.

Framing the Organizing Style of the Three Narratives

The narratives above have some commonalities and some distinct elements to them. In terms of institutional design, all three cases depict horizontal coordination among relatively autonomous entities that have been purposively brought together. And, even though these three cases are called network structures by their participants, they have most of the characteristics found in so-called horizontal self-coordinating entities (Scharpf 1994). Having acknowledged this point, these cases might be placed in different points along a spectrum between operating in the shadow of hierarchy on the one hand, as in the case of Joe with the U.S. Attorney's Office, and operating in a strongly interconnected fashion, on the other, as in the case of Mike with Project Harmony.

In the following section we offer two levels of analysis. First, we propose an organizing framework for each of the three narratives. We draw upon the work of Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan (1997: 181-88) to do so. Second, to further clarify the differences between the frameworks, and provide an opportunity to analyze the organizational dynamics of each, the analysis is organized according to three key elements of democratic practice: implementation, mediation, and participation.

Joe, the Instrumentalist

Joe relies heavily on the resources and authority he has at his disposal. In that regard, the special role of government is readily employed by him in his interactions. Thus in the range of committees, commissions and organizational configurations with which he is involved, the U.S. Attorney's Office, with Joe as its representative, often acts as a principal with other entities serving as agents in a subordinate role. Given this particular constellation, one can analyze Joe's situation using three elements: implementation, mediation, and participation.

Joe's approach to implementation is instrumentalist. That is, it maintains 'the fundamental assumption of one 'steering' actor who exercises goal-oriented influence on other actors – target groups' (Kickert, Klijn & Koppenjan 1997: 183). The primary steering mechanism used is funding and it is very effective. As pointed out in the narrative, programs and in many cases the non-profit entity that delivers it, live or die based on funding decisions by Joe's office. Mediation between entities is grounded mostly in compromise with, in extreme cases, Joe asserting the ultimate authority of his agency. Lastly, participation is democratic but in many ways it is pro forma. The dynamic of the so-called professional citizen is evident. Joe, perhaps not maliciously, but certainly with some intentionality, limits the entry of unknown actors and as such limits democratic participation.

Joe has adapted to the decentralized, multi-sectoral service delivery environment without the yielding power and authority tied to his agency. In his view, he remains a steward of the public interest and holds himself and his agency accountable in a way that is consistent with the aggregative view of democratic administrative practice. He does so through a strategy by which a principal government entity chooses to engage with public, private and non-profit partners. It is a cooperative venture but it is not by definition a network wherein that each entity within the network cannot survive without the link to the other entities. While this approach creates more goal-directed behaviour it has its pitfalls. As Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan point out 'not enough attention is given to the interests and goals of others, which can result in the deterioration of relations between actors and the loss of commitment to a collective approach to problem solving' (1997: 184). In addition, it defies the broad critique of government which brought on the governance phenomenon. Namely, the need for a collaborative process for arriving at the public interest and fur-

ther, an awareness of the interdependence among service delivery entities, despite power inequities.

Don, the Interactionist

If we consider the same three elements: implementation, mediation and participation, Don, the detective in the domestic violence unit, has a different profile than Joe. In terms of implementation he is more interactionist than instrumental is his efforts. Although still part of a traditional government agency, the OPD, his unit was deliberately embedded in a constellation of other organizations all working on behalf of a common goal. As a result, we have not a focal organization as was the case with Joe and U.S. Attorney's Office, but a series of organizations interacting with one another, exercising mutual influence, with the intention of collectively reducing domestic violence.

As reported in the case, major blockages recur due to divergent organizational cultures. Successful implementation can only occur if adjustments are made among the actors within the DVCC. Mediation of conflict then is central to effective collective action. Conflict reduction in this environment is hampered by divergences in organizational identity and organizational practices. Don describes this dynamic as faulty communication and strives to improve communication between organizations within the DVCC. The DVCC although not truly a network, is horizontally based and is defined by a lack of hierarchy. In such a space, the type of mediation required is a brokering of interests as there is no overriding institutional framework that might dictate a different form of mediation. However, such forms of mediation do not address fundamental differences in orientation. Don, for example, reports his frustration with the 'advocacy' orientation of some organizations within the DVCC. Other organizations might object to the 'lock'em up' orientation of the police department which impedes a family systems approach to dealing with domestic violence issues.

Participation reflects a dynamic pluralism wherein the groups involved may not all share the same orientation toward the problem of domestic violence, but are willing to interact through brokering and mutual adjustment. Hence, as opposed to Case #1, participation is expected, accepted and is understood by all to be central to a successful outcome. Innovative practices have also influenced participation. As Don noted, in situations where a victim of domestic violence is afraid of testifying for

fear of reprisal, prosecution of a case may still move ahead. The role of the courts is also a dimension for consideration. A decision by the courts, viz., the willingness to hear victimless cases, can either aid or deter participation. Hence a consideration in this case is the hidden power of the courts in a seemingly horizontal configuration of actors with equal capacity for mutual adjustment.

Mike, the Institutionalist

The third narrative is of Mike, the senior law enforcement official who works on cases of child abuse for the Omaha Police Department as part of Project Harmony. Project Harmony comes closest to a network in the full sense of the definition (Sørensen & Torfing 2003). Further, the network was initiated not by a government entity, but by a well known actor within the policy community who in 'bottom-up' fashion brought together other actors and formed a network with the common objective of addressing the issue of child abuse. Reflecting once again upon the elements of implementation, mediation and participation, it is evident that Project Harmony is more of a social institution in its own right. The strength of an institutionalist orientation is that is that when it comes to implementation, it is neither overly purposive, nor indifferent to the underlying social bond that holds a social institution together. As a result, the subtleties of solving cases of child abuse do not get lost the bureaucratic machinery of the instrumentalist perspective, nor in the bargaining mentality of the interactionist perspective.

As Mike noted, prior to the establishment of Project Harmony, victims of child abuse were often shuffled from agency to agency all the while obliged to retell the circumstances of their case time and again. Such a framework embarrassed the victims, albeit unintentionally, led to mistakes in processing and case prosecution and increased infighting among relevant agencies. Since the establishment of Project Harmony, Mike's role has changed. The expectations for him to act in the narrow interest of the OPD have diminished and the incentives for him to act in coordination with other institutional partners have increased. It is clear that those incentives are the result of socially constructed norms and arrangements rather than means-end operating agreements or interest based brokered relationships.

The institutionalist dynamic is evident in the approach to mediating conflict and communication among members of Project Harmony. Like,

the previous narrative, there are also divergences in organizational culture among organizations. However, there is a social glue, perhaps as a result of the appreciation of the social capital implicit within the network, that casts a more facilitative ethos to the mediation of differences within Project Harmony. Hence, rather than there being a contest of wills between the advocacy types and the law enforcement types, Mike's narrative suggests that there each sees the possibility of learning from the other. While debates may remain, the fact that Project Harmony is a social institution creates a different kind of bond among members.

When framing participation in this case, it is important to consider the previous level of infighting among agencies regarding cases of child abuse. Such infighting was primarily the result of fears about accountability and concern for protection of the victim which often had the unintended effect of isolating relevant agencies from one another. Hence participation in this case is concerned with shared practices and valuing the victim of abuse in a more authentic, sensitive and less paternalistic manner. In this regard participation is most successful when trust occurs within the network. Such trust leads to innovative practices and openness in dialogue and deliberation about the child abuse cases.

Conclusion: Adding it all Together

The aim of this chapter is to point the way toward a more robust view of network organizing in the U.S. context. We began by establishing the predominance of the instrumental view within the U.S. public management literature. It is argued that U.S. researchers can learn from the European tradition which sees administrative practice and democratic practice as interwoven as democratic network governance.

Using the work of Kickert, Klijn and Koppenjan, we were able to name the different strategies underlying each of the Omaha narratives. Consistent with the work of Sørensen and Torfing, were able to elucidate the conflicts and coping strategies that administrators use to deal with the new institutional frameworks in which they find themselves. Finally, following Bogason's insights, we can consider the further ways of organizing that are democratic and that reflect on the specifics of collective action at the local level.

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