

Cliques as structures and practices - shaping boundaries and outcomes in Roma policy networks

The health, social, educational, and economic conditions for the Roma population remain 'Europe's biggest societal problem' (The Economist, 2012). The EU acknowledges that they face extreme poverty and complex social and economic problems. The Roma 'problem' is highly complex. Romania has received a great deal of policy attention and significant funding. For example between 2007 and 2013, the country was entitled to apply for 19.7 billion Euros from the EU. Yet progress is slow; it is debated whether Romania's government and organizations are capable to access the funds (EurActiv.ro, 2012).

The notion of networks and collaborative working are favoured in this public policy domain. The premise of this study is that the policy field could also be usefully analysed using theories, frameworks and approaches from public management and organization studies, which themselves need further development. Particularly bottom up created networks cultivate effective control processes to monitor and regulate their performance. Research is only at the beginning and it needs more studies to develop and confirm these ideas (Raab and Kenis, 2009): 'collectivities can only be successful if collective goods are produced that form an infrastructure that can be used for individual and collective purposes' (Raab and Kenis, 2009, p. 207).

Little is known about network development as a process, for example: 'how whole network structures evolve over time and how or if these multilateral relationships are managed' (Provan et al., 2007, p. 489). This gap is even deeper in less studied contexts such as the Roma context/network. If we accept that network working is important in achieving effective delivery of public policy objectives (Hartley et al., 2002), then attention should be paid to the role of sub-groups within the network and their impact.

Conversely, empirical investigation of Roma networks can offer valuable insights to enrich or elaborate public management theory. Roma networks are unusual compared to settings typically studied in academic public management research because of the duality between old and new practices, either inherited from the communist regime or newly learnt. This combined with the scale and the complexity of the policy problem being addressed provides a rich empirical setting.

The sampling was purposive: cases relevant for the research were selected. Due to the restricted number of cases we aimed to make a point, focusing on cases that reproduce and enlarge theory 'by filling conceptual categories' (Eisenhardt, 1989, p. 537) on 'particularisation, not generalisation... uniqueness' (Stake, 1995, p. 8) to 'enhance understanding' (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 248):

'The more studies are based on theoretical sampling, the more effective should future theoretical sampling and comparative analyses become – provided researchers write about their strategies and techniques' (Glaser and Strauss, 2009, p. 77) .

It is important to include Eastern European studies and to broaden the context of research with less exploited areas. Often referred at 'Eastern Europe' or 'The Other Europe', more research is needed to develop cross-national comparisons (Pridham, 2002, p. 76). But they provide a useful empirical setting by showing different practices among the cases, which have the merit of empirical generalizability of the results (Tsang, 2013). The results help reveal how things are done in complex settings in practice.

This paper reports a study of three regional networks of organizations involved in developing and delivering health and education services to Roma people in Romania. The approach provided a holistic view of each network, and ‘drilled down’ to consider how network outcomes were achieved. Our iterative, abductive analysis of practices adopted in Roma policy networks in Romania highlighted the importance of cliques in explaining outcomes, as identified by Provan and Sebastian (1998), and the role of ‘entrepreneurs’ in their formation and working.

Cliques are sub-groups of organizations within policy networks which lead change, organise, and deliver services for Roma. Provan and Sebastian (1998) conducted a study of network performance which found that in delivering health services using a clique is more effective than a whole network. This was a ground breaking study in that it covered whole networks and rigorous measurement of performance and clique integration.

Provan et al. (2007) review shows that whole network research is still rare; it presents particular and significant challenges in terms of access and resources. Not only research of whole networks is rare. There is also very little prior research in organization studies which deploys the notion of cliques, let alone focuses on this topic. This paper presents findings on the formation, role and impact of cliques on Roma policy networks. It shows everyday use of the term clique, but also its connotations of power and elites which is absent from Provan and Sebastian’s (1988) view. Recognising this helps to differentiate between ‘closed’ cliques and ‘open’ alliances.

Significantly, by contrasting the three cases, we show that both cliques and alliances can help to deliver public policy network objectives, but that cliques can also lead to failure to improve health and education of Roma people in a region. Both the focal topic (cliques as practice as well as structure) and the empirical setting fit well with the sub-theme call, as it presents new and old practices adopted by entrepreneurs while implementing social policies.

Dacin et al. (2010) highlight the importance of studying entrepreneurs in diverse contexts and to look at why some practices are quickly embraced by them, while others are not. We deploy the concept of social/institutional entrepreneur to analyse how key actors influence clique/alliance formation and working. In Roma networks, entrepreneurs have different practices than those presented in the current literature, which has significant implications for policy and practice. Two types of entrepreneurs become obvious: the ‘old generation’ of entrepreneurs, part of a clique who made things happen by strategically building a team of professionals in key administrative positions and the ‘new generation’ of entrepreneurs, part of an alliance who made things happen by strategically building a team of professionals from NGOs.

This paper presents findings from a wider study which addressed the research question “*How do network practices and structures shape outcomes in the Roma network implementing social policies in Romania?*” Early analysis demonstrated the importance of cliques in explaining network outcomes, and the role of entrepreneurs in cliques and alliances. We therefore returned to the literature to inform further analysis of the data. This paper presents the findings of this second stage of the study, identifying, elaborating and critically reviewing the concept of cliques. The focal question is “*What is the role of the Roma cliques in policy implementation in Romania?*”

Our objectives are three-fold: to review the field of cliques and entrepreneurs; propose and evaluate new features of the current understanding of cliques and entrepreneurs; discuss the implications for theory and practice.