THE FUTURE OF NETWORK GOVERNANCE RESEARCH: STRENGTH IN DIVERSITY AND SYNTHESIS

JENNY M. LEWIS

The popularity and scope of network governance research and practice continues to expand from its divergent foundations, assumptions and methodological positions. This paper introduces a symposium of papers on this substantial sub-field by first summarizing the sprawling research endeavour that comprises it. The main theoretical and empirical approaches that have been used to guide it to date are then briefly described, emphasizing recent debates about interpretivism and decentring. Next, it suggests that a robust and interesting future for network governance requires diversity, rather than adherence to a single approach. It is argued that more sophisticated approaches for examining network governance are fashioned through a synthesis of ideas and methods to create an analysis of networks as networks. This is especially the case where some formal analysis of network structure is used in concert with an interpretive examination of action and process. Finally, the papers in the symposium are introduced.

Although network governance research has been growing in magnitude and importance for two decades now, it is rife with disparate typologies and conflicting terminologies. There is no universally accepted understanding of either policy networks, or network governance. The relatively recent meta-analytic literature on network governance (for example, see Sørensen and Torfing 2007) has settled on some coherent definitions. However, there remains less agreement on whether it is merely useful as a metaphor, a method, an analytical tool, or a theory (Börzel 1998). To cover the variety of definitions, classifications, and arguments about the worth of the concept would require an entire scholarly article in itself, which is not the purpose here, and others have provided good overviews elsewhere (for example, see Rhodes 2006). This paper aims to suggest the best path forward for network governance research, by taking stock of its beginnings and contemporary status.

Sørensen and Torfing (2007) make a distinction between two generations of network governance research. The first generation was devoted to establishing that there was something novel about governance networks, and spent time on explaining why they are formed, how they differ from other modes of governance, and how they contribute to effective governance. The second generation sees them as a given which we need to make the best of, and so the salient research questions relate to explaining: their formation, functioning and development; the sources of their failure and success; how they can be regulated (metagovernance); and what the democratic implications of them are. But the next generation of research in this field also needs to concern itself with finding better approaches to examining some important questions about how network governance can be best analysed. What theoretical frameworks will ensure a robust, interesting and productive future for this sub-field? What empirical approaches will provide the most purchase?

In the two sections of the paper that follow, some of the pertinent literature is summarized as a means of beginning to address this paper’s aim of suggesting future directions.
to strengthen the field. In political science and public administration, the network has been most often used metaphorically to describe contemporary government-society interactions, or to describe a shadow structure of interests which affects policy through interconnections. These two lines of inquiry might be labelled as, respectively, network governance and policy networks. But both in the literature, and in practice, policy networks overlap with network governance and governance networks – which some use interchangeably with network governance while others use it to indicate a more deliberate form of governing. A third strand of network analytical inquiry, which has been less used in public administration research and is somewhat easier to separate out, is social network research. Policy networks and network governance are considered together in the next section, then a description of social network analysis follows.

POLICY NETWORKS AND NETWORK GOVERNANCE

The overlap between policy networks and network governance in conceptual and language terms has already been noted. Some regard policy networks as being at the heart of network governance, rather than seeing network governance as focused on different concerns. For example, Damgaard (2006) claimed that there is a common assumption which needs to be challenged, that policy networks result in network governance. Policy networks in this case are defined as a way of organizing stakeholders, while network governance refers to a horizontal form of governing in contrast to hierarchical forms.

Börzel’s (1998) distinction is a useful starting point. She described the policy networks literature as being either about creating a typology of interest intermediation, or about defining a specific form of governance. The first type of policy networks relate to interest intermediation as a specific form of governance to mobilize resources where these are widely dispersed between public and private actors. The second type of policy networks (as a form of governance) is equated with a focus on the changed relationship between state and society. This second type is referred to as network governance in this paper, in line with usage in more recent literature, and the same distinction used as a starting point by Bevir and Richards (2009), whose paper is discussed in detail below.

As many have already written in scholarly articles on network governance, society has become increasingly fragmented, complex and dynamic (Kooiman 2003; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004). New forms of governance have been created to address new governing challenges in a world where few things can be clearly separated in meaningful ways. Network governance seems to be both the right metaphor to describe the increasing fragmentation, the growth of problems that are ill-defined and which span boundaries, and the resulting dynamics of interconnection that define contemporary governance and policy-making, and to signal a set of governing responses to this changed environment.

In short, network governance rests on a recognition that policy is the result of governing processes that are not fully controlled by governments. Policy-making occurs through interactive forms of governing that involve many actors from different spheres. It relies on negotiation between various actors whose interactions give rise to a relatively stable pattern of policy-making that constitutes a mode of coordination (Mayntz 1993). A form of governance that rests on interpendency, negotiation and trust is required to cope with changes in how governments and societies interact. Politicians and bureaucrats have embraced network governance as a means for dealing with contemporary governing
issues, as is demonstrated by the rapid proliferation of new governance arrangements which reflect this – at least rhetorically – such as partnerships.

The rise and rise of network governance in the real world of public administration has seen a corresponding increase in network governance research and publications. Powell (1990) was one of the first to argue that networks were not some hybrid form of organization, resting on a continuum somewhere between markets and hierarchies, but were instead a distinct organizational form. Considerable time and energy has since been spent on delineating the characteristics of networks as a mode of governance, and it is not the intention to revisit this well travelled territory here, but simply to note that it exists (see, for example Thompson et al. 1991; Considine and Lewis 1999, 2003; Thompson 2003; Sørensen and Torfing 2007).

Sørensen and Torfing (2007) provide a useful encapsulation of governance networks as: a relatively stable horizontal articulation of interdependent actors; who interact through negotiations which take place within a framework that is self-regulating (within limits); and which contributes to the production of public purpose. Their definition encompasses those of other authors in this field, and has utility for this paper in signalling both policy networks (interest intermediation) and network governance (a particular governance form) concerns.

While network governance has come to be seen as a suitable response to contemporary policy problems, it only works effectively if these networks function well. This important point has stimulated research on the management of governance networks particularly by scholars in the Netherlands (for example, see Kickert et al. 1997; Koppenjan and Klijn 2004), and in the USA (for example, see Mandell 2001; Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Agranoff 2007). Researchers interested in the management of networks emphasize how states can best manage the many actors now involved in governing, when these actors are to a substantial extent autonomous and self-governing. Some have specialized in defining frameworks to evaluate network effectiveness (for example, see Milward and Provan 1998; Provan and Milward 2001) and network effectiveness in relation to different structures and management roles (Provan and Kenis 2008).

As noted earlier, policy networks have tended to be central for Anglo scholars, who conceived of them as a model of relations through interest intermediation in a given sector (Börzel 1998). Benson’s (1982) definition of policy networks, which cast them as a cluster of organizations connected to each other by resource dependencies, was important to early British work. The edited volume of Marsh and Rhodes (1992) paralleled interest in the US on sub-governments by Jordan (1990) and others, who followed Freeman (1955, p. 11) in defining a sub-system as: ‘the patterns of interactions of participants, or actors, involved in making decisions in a special area of public policy...’ (cited in Rhodes and Marsh 1992, p. 5).

Early publications on policy networks generated interest and a sizeable amount of research, mainly situated at the meso-level, and providing an alternative to macro-level attempts to formulate a general model of relationships between government and interest groups. This meso-level focus on organizational rather than personal relationships fed into ongoing research that contained many classifications of networks and lists of attributes that defined policy network types and distinguished them from each other (see, for example, Wilks and Wright 1987; Rhodes 1988; Atkinson and Coleman 1992; Marsh and Rhodes 1992).
SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

The US literature on policy networks began with a greater concentration on the micro-level, dealing with interpersonal relations between individuals rather than structural relations between organizations. Some of the early British literature was also focused more at the interpersonal level in line with the US literature (for example, see Richardson and Jordan 1979), but more were influenced by the European literature on interorganizational relations (Rhodes and Marsh 1992). Some emphasized interpersonal relations as key, and social network analysis was used in a few policy network studies. However, its impact was not major, and Rhodes and Marsh (1992, p. 22) argued that: ‘To pursue micro-level analysis in order to explore personal networks will provide a wealth of detail but make it increasingly difficult to generalize about policy networks’.

The importance of individual compared with organizational links within a network was one of the key unanswered questions posed by Marsh and Rhodes in the conclusion to their book. They claimed that both institutional and interpersonal links were best seen as constraints and resources which can affect exchange in a network, and that which is more important is an empirical question. Few of the contributors to this 1992 volume stressed interpersonal links, and the main thrust of policy network and network governance research that followed on from this was interorganizational. Public administration and political science research has continued to examine power in networks, the effectiveness of network governance arrangements, and the democratic implications of network governance. Meanwhile, scholars focused on interpersonal networks searched for better explanations of networks between individual actors through more robust models that could capture network structures and characteristics.

Some notable exceptions in political science (Lauman and Knoke 1987; Knoke 1990; and others) explicitly concentrated on interpersonal connections and made use of the theories and methodological approaches that are central to sociologists interested in connections and network structures. In the last decade, the concerns of political science and public administration, centred on the power issues that accompany network governance, have been more frequently combined with social network analysis, centred on analysing the social structure of networks. Some have argued for better use of social network analysis (SNA) in public administration (for example, see O’Toole 1997). Others have incorporated SNA concepts and methods into public management analyses (see, for example, O’Toole and Meier 2004; Meir and O’Toole 2005), examinations of governmental innovation (for example, see Considine and Lewis 2007), analysing networks of influence in particular policy sectors (for example, see Lewis 2006), and evaluating partnerships as a type of governance network (Lewis et al. 2008; Pope and Lewis 2008).

Shifting the focus of networks to individuals is a launching point from which to reconsider network governance research in more empirical and structural ways. It can also increase the precision of describing networks, whether they are used as a framing metaphor, a means for guiding analysis, or a method of data collection. In sociology, concentrated efforts have been made to address the concept of networks theoretically and empirically. The now famous distinction between strong and weak ties made by Granovetter (1973) is probably the best known example of a network concept, but a large number have been developed (see, for example, Degenne and Forse 1999; Carrington et al. 2005). Empirical sociologists have worked on mapping connections between actors with sociograms, and establishing formulae for measuring particular network characteristics, in line with these network concepts. These concepts and measures have not often been
called into service in addressing network governance concerns (see Lewis 2010 for one exception) but certainly have the potential to be more widely employed.

Social network analysis (SNA) emerged as a substantial interdisciplinary sub-field with the establishment of journals such as *Social Networks* in the late 1970s, the publication of books on SNA concepts and how they can be measured and modelled (Wasserman and Faust 1994; Carrington et al. 2005) and the proliferation of computer programmes to aid network analysis. All of these developments have made SNA increasingly accessible in more fields of inquiry.

**THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL APPROACHES**

This brief overview of some of the different approaches to network governance research points to numerous disciplinary forebears. Organization theory was important in shifting the view of organizations from seeing them as closed systems to open systems, where interorganizational exchange matters and generates stable patterns of negotiation (see, for example, Benson 1978). Political theory moved beyond corporatism and neocorporatism, to instead study and classify different kinds of policy networks (for example, see Marsh and Rhodes 1992). A major breakthrough came from policy analysis, where theorists concluded that policy was more efficient if the key actors were involved in the policy process (Sørensen and Torfing 2007). This, along with new methods that showed the value of mapping the contribution of various actors to a policy output, provided the impetus for further research on network governance.

To date, research in the field has tended to follow some major paths. The network has most often been used as a metaphor to describe interests within a particular policy sector or as a specific means of governing, rather than as a model or an empirical approach to analysing networks. Dowding (1995) criticized the concept of policy networks for this reason, claiming that it is merely metaphorical rather than explanatory, and argued it should instead go beyond typology to examine causality. He argued for an approach based on rational action and analysis that is more quantitative – in other words, for a micro level focus on actors rather than structures.

Sørensen and Torfing’s (2007) description of the research field as combining political studies (institutions, power and decision making) with sociological studies (culture, communication and social control) and organizational studies (cognitive frames, learning and resource exchange), provides a neat summary of the disciplinary contributions that underpin it. More importantly, this also provides a useful means for thinking about future directions in the field.

In relation to methods, Börzel (1998) distinguished between the policy networks literature on the basis of whether the analysis was quantitative or qualitative. She argued that the quantitative approach to networks equates to social structural analysis (a reference to SNA), while the qualitative approach is less focused on the structure of interactions between actors and more focused on the content of the interactions using interviews and content and discourse analysis. This distinction does reflect what has often occurred in the field, but emphasizing either structure or action is not the only means of conducting analysis. Indeed, moving beyond this unhelpful divide between structure/agency and quantitative/qualitative is where the most promising future for network governance research lies, as this paper goes on to argue. More theoretically sophisticated models of networks emphasize both, even though analysis has generally focused either on one or the other.
While network governance research has tended toward the metaphorical and has rarely engaged in empirical work that treats networks as if they are networks and then attempts to measure them as such (Lewis 2010), it is by no means completely bogged down with time-honoured definitions, established approaches and ‘must apply’ methods. This openness is a strength which should not be cast aside lightly. One edited volume that explicitly sets out to lay bare the many methods that can be used to address network governance questions, and the challenges associated with them (Bogason and Zølner 2007) stands out as an attempt to map the diversity of approaches. Before moving on to consider the future of network governance research, some recent debates that have had an impact on political science and public administration in general, but also network governance in particular, are reviewed.

Interpretivism and decentring governance
A symposium on interpretivism in political science by Finlayson et al. (2004) provides some helpful insights into theories and methods and where they are taking the discipline. That symposium defined it in this way: ‘To decentre is to highlight the diversity of an aggregate concept by unpacking the actual and contingent beliefs and actions of those individuals who fall under it’ (Bevir and Rhodes 2004, p. 131).

Bevir and Rhodes (2003), in their book, Interpreting British Government, stressed the significance of traditions in shaping actions, while seeing those traditions as being shaped and reshaped by people’s actions. Their interpretive approach amounts to one that is interested both in individuals and their beliefs, and the aggregate social context that influences them, which they call traditions. They claim that this resolves the theoretical problems of positivism by decentring institutions and therefore, allows for more agency by individual actors. They also claim that ethnographic methods are the best way to get behind the surface of official accounts and provide richness and depth by allowing those involved to explain the meaning of their actions.

Dowding (2004), in the same symposium, counters that this will at best provide only partial explanations which may be seriously misleading if they are not balanced by other kinds of data. Also in that symposium, Hay (2004) points out that their interpretivism can be placed within the broader ideational/constructivist turn, but argues that there is no need to turn completely away from explanation. Hay goes on to defend social constructivism as capable of according a causal role to ideas in an explanatory but post-positivist political analysis. He provides a detailed exposition of the purchase that can be gained through such an analysis elsewhere (for example, see Hay 2002).

Bevir and Rhodes (2004) claim in their reply that they want to focus on interpretations of others interpretations of the world and that they don’t favour any particular methods. Yet in various places in their response they disclose their preferences clearly when they: ‘insist that such data be treated as evidence of people’s beliefs, rather than as a variable in objectified models, norms or categories’ (p. 157). They go on to state that: ‘Models, typologies and correlations can do explanatory work only if they are unpacked as narratives’ (p. 158); and that they want to distance themselves from political science that seeks: ‘to avoid interpreting meanings or beliefs by appeal to models, typologies or correlations’ (p. 161).

A decentred approach to policy networks is described by Bevir and Richards (2009) as an alternative to the study of networks as either interest intermediation, governance, or management, which focuses on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings. It is described as being able to draw attention
to: ‘the meanings that inform the actions of the people involved’ (Bevir and Richards 2009, p. 7). They claim that modern ‘empiricist’ approaches to networks focus on objective characteristics, stress the relationship of the size of networks to policy outcomes and the strategies used to steer them.

Decentring explores how networks are constructed by individuals to create meanings in action, and so it highlights the importance of beliefs, meanings, traditions and discourses. In summary: ‘Current approaches reduce the diversity of networks and network governance to a logic of modernization, institutional norms, or a set of classifications or correlations across policy networks’ (Bevir and Richards 2009, p. 8), the effect of which is a taming of the chaotic pattern of rule based on conflict between many actors. In contrast, decentring is said to provide the answer as it encourages a view of networks as they are made and remade by individuals acting on their beliefs against the background of traditions, where the facts are constructed by the individuals as narratives, and so networks are the sum of the stories of participants and observers.

Ethnography is championed as the method of choice by Bevir and Richards (2009), to overcome what they claim is the general positivism of approaches to policy networks. They want to challenge the privileging of institutions which fixes the actions of individual actors, and focus instead on institutions as products of those actions. Ethnography and textual analysis can be used to explore the beliefs and actions of those involved in policy networks, and the important thing is to stress the interpretation of the meanings and functions of action. This, they assert, gets below the surface of official accounts, allowing interviewees to explain the meaning of their actions.

A decentred approach challenges managerialism, markets and contracts as well as predictive social science, by arguing that: ‘there is no essentialist account of networks that can be used to produce causal generalizations and to legitimate advice to policy-makers’ (Bevir and Richards 2009, p. 13) They also argue that there is no single tool kit that policy makers can use to steer networks. These points make perfect sense. A decentred approach implies there is no comprehensive account of network governance, and any thoughtful researcher would subscribe to this view. It is plain to see that patterns of rule arise as the products of the diverse actions informed by actors’ beliefs. But actions and beliefs cannot tell the whole story. Policy certainly arises from interactions between actors in networks, but the structure of these networks matters a great deal since they shape who interacts with whom. Network governance is the stories people tell, their rituals and their routines. Still, networks are surely more than stories. A complete rejection of the importance of network structure ensures that the analysis will be less sophisticated than it might be.

In taking a fundamentalist position on decentring, much is given away because of either an abhorrence of prediction and models, or a deliberate misunderstanding of what constructivist social science can offer – including causal explanations. This stance against particular approaches and methods reveals Bevir and Richards’ ontological and epistemological assumptions and empirical preferences. The nature of the world is all about the actors, what we can know about them is their beliefs, and how we can know it is confined to the actors own interpretations. This world view and position on what we can know discloses that their central interest is actors, not structures. Further, their stance on other methods which are seen as ‘positivist’ lacks insight, because: ‘… the empirical is simply amenable to a multitude of different interpretations informed by a multitude of competing ontologies. Different ontologies may – and do – draw sustenance from the same empirical evidence…’ (Hay 2009, p. 263).
Bevir and Richards (2009) seem keen to establish decentring as the only right way to progress network governance research, and they champion ethnography as the best methodology. What is at stake in this decentring is a deliberate narrowing of ontologies (the nature of the world) and epistemologies (what we can know about it) and even methodologies (how can we know it). Decentring is held up as the correct way to understand the nature of the world and to circumscribe what we can know about it. This is a wrong and unnecessarily limiting turn in thinking about the future of network governance research. Why should all other approaches be closed down in advance of deciding what we can/would like to know about network governance? Why limit methodology so dramatically, without regard to which questions are important? The remainder of this paper advocates a more open approach.

THE FUTURE OF NETWORK GOVERNANCE RESEARCH

Anthropology and sociology offer different ways of addressing analytical problems in political science and public administration, which can increase the richness of the future of this sub-field. In a paper that examines how networks have been deployed as method, metaphor and form within anthropology and sociology, Knox et al. (2006) demonstrate the potential to re-engage in different traditions of network thinking afforded by growing interest in them as a form of social analysis. SNA certainly can claim to have the best developed set of mathematical concepts, methods, and specialized software for analysis, which allows for a comprehensive mapping of social relations. Knox et al. (2006) applaud SNA’s emphasis on social structure instead of the more standard invididualistic methods that assume the independence of actors. However they also express reservations that it too can be individualized and used in a highly reductionist manner.

Anthropology has taken a different route, exploring networks as a means for explaining culture. Networks have been used as a method of analysis rather than data collection (Mitchell 1974, cited in Knox et al. 2006), which is more akin to the majority of network governance research. Yet there have been those who have argued for the value of networks in anthropology from the beginning of the rise of SNA. Indeed, a contribution outlining the benefits of the formal social structures that are able to be mapped with the new sophistication of mathematics and computer science appears in the very first issue of Social Networks (Wolfe 1978), and a rapid rise of network analysis in the next quarter century was predicted.

Knox et al. (2006) claim that network analyses ended up reproducing the opposition between structure and agency, and for this and other reasons, the theoretical and methodological value of SNA waned in social anthropology. In his anthropological studies of science and technology, Bruno Latour (1993) tried to push past the distinction between subject and object, by recognizing that science is produced by the interactions of human and non-human agents. Actor-network theory, which followed on from Latour’s work (see, for example, Law and Hassard 1999), was firmly ethnographic in its empirical studies of networks, and apparently disinterested in examining structures using the concepts and techniques of SNA.

More recently, studies have explored the relationship between the structural (patterns of relations) and processual (the art of networking) forms of networks, and it is this synthesis that holds promise for network governance research in the future. Knox et al. 2006 suggest that this dual focus helps in reflecting on networks and in reconciling different disciplinary approaches to networks, and see this ‘third generation’ seeking
a fuller cultural and discursive foundation for network analysis, beyond the enriched individualism of the first generation and the focus on role relations of whole networks in the second generation.

Riles (2001) has led this within anthropology. The network is both a descriptor of social relations and a descriptor of itself – it is both a model and an object, and it stands both for itself and for something beyond itself. Her work provides a detailed ethnographic description of how people articulate their relationships as network relations, and can envisage these through pictorial representations of networks. She shows how the network and relations exist as the same thing, ‘seen twice’ (Riles 2001). Mische (2003) combined conversation analysis with more quantitative SNA methodologies to capture both of these aspects of networks in examining social movements. Her research links network analysis and culture together and aims for a more dynamic conception of networks as not merely locations or conduits, but culturally shaped processes of interaction.

Blending networks and culture requires measurement to move beyond thick description to pattern finding, which relies on the application of data reduction techniques to some extent in concert with observation and interpretation (Mische 2003). A number of contributions to the volume that her paper appears in (Diani and McAdam 2003) make similar calls for plurality and the combining of theories and methods, in their attempts to come to grips with social movements through network ideas. Sociologists have also been busy on this front. For example, Gibson (2005) linked network analysis and conversation analysis in his examination of the effects of hierarchy and friendship ties on turn taking in conversations in groups of managers.

Network analysis and mapping in combination with more discursive methods have had some limited use in areas that are more directly concerned with governance. Lewis (2005a) generated an approach that examines the structure of partnerships in health along with an evaluation of how they were used and valued, and how they changed over time (Lewis et al. 2008). Pope and Lewis (2008) further elaborated this approach in analysing community development partnerships, extending it to identify how it could help partnerships diagnose structural shortcomings, such as the omission of important actors. There have also been attempts to combine actor network theory’s focus on movement with mapping network structure, to discover the relationship between an actors’ network positions and the policy priorities that they regard as important (Lewis 2005b). These examples highlight how this synthesis of the more formal with the more interpretive can be used to address pressing questions in network governance.

This section and the examples within it has plainly indicated the strength that can be gained through using diverse approaches and methods, and synthesizing them so that the network is ‘seen twice’, and new understandings of network governance are generated. This is a specific example of the more general claim made by Stoker and Marsh (2010) in their defence of pluralism and dialogue between approaches in political science.

A recent review paper argues that substantial benefits have flowed from combining SNA with interviews, ethnography and historical archival research (Edwards 2010). Mixing SNA with other methods adds the context to help interpret network data. It can also produce an outside view of network structure to add to an inside view of the content, quality and meaning of network ties. Importantly, mixing methods also provides a focus on network dynamics through mapping the evolution of network structure and also exploring the reasons for the changes. The interplay between the form of relations that are mapped and measured, and the narrative about the content of those relations, means that the methods used to analyse networks require a dual focus on structure.
and process, because these are always intertwined. Such an approach is clearly useful for examining research questions about the formation, functioning and development of network governance, its metagovernance, its democratic implications and its effectiveness.

THE PRESENT SYMPOSIUM ON NETWORK GOVERNANCE RESEARCH

The collection of papers that follows provides a snapshot of the current state of theoretical and empirical approaches in this important sub-field of public administration. They provide a taste of the current variety in network governance research – from questions about the importance and impact of management strategies in networks (Steijn, Klijn and Edelenbos), to the discourses that encapsulate the meanings of network governance used by public managers and the associated possibilities for democracy (Jeffares and Skelcher), to analysis of the interpersonal networks of politicians and bureaucrats (Alexander, Lewis and Considine), and finally, to the inter-organizational relationships imposed by network governance arrangements (Robins, Bates and Pattison).

Steijn, Klijn and Edelenbos answer a very specific network management question about which factors impact on the outcomes of public private partnerships (PPPs). PPPs have become a common network governance arrangement, but what makes them effective remains vague. Using a survey of people from the national and local civil service, private firms and stakeholder groups involved in Dutch environmental projects, they tested a series of hypotheses about the relative effects of managerial strategies and organizational forms on PPPs. A series of regression analyses of process and content outcomes of PPPs were used to establish that managerial strategies were much more important than organizational form in shaping outcomes. This provides food for thought to those who emphasize the importance of organizational form rather than management in attempting to gain the outcomes desired from these partnerships. It underlines the importance of going beyond formal structure, but does so within a very formal model using familiar methods, re-emphasizing that judgements about what methods are ‘correct’ are ultimately beliefs about what specific approaches offer.

This tightly focused quantitative study of effectiveness and outcomes differs from the discursive approach taken in the paper by Jeffares and Skelcher, who aim to capture the high level contours of the debate about tensions between network governance and democracy. This has been a growing area of network governance research in recent years. The paper aims to understand how people construct their role as actors in this arena by examining varying discourses on network governance and democracy. To probe these tacit perspectives in a systematic way that fits with their interpretive approach, they used Q methodology – a quantitative technique that establishes the patterns of perspectives held by a group of people.

Q relies on people sorting a series of statements which represent the breadth of debate on an issue (the concourse) by level of agreement with them. English and Dutch civil servants were surveyed and five different perspectives were revealed – pragmatism, realism, adaptation, and optimism (progressive and radical). The Jeffares and Skelcher study shows that there are a number of distinct clusters of discourses held by these civil servants, which are useful in understanding how they come to network governance with different attitudes to its possibilities for democracy and inclusion. This is a neat illustration of what can be accomplished when the (somewhat artificial) qualitative-quantitative divide is traversed and interpretive and more formal methods of data collection and analysis are integrated.
Alexander, Lewis and Considine use SNA in their paper, focusing on communication through interpersonal networks. They examined the importance of internal and external networks in governments, compared with more formal hierarchical and functional structures. A survey of more than 700 local politicians and bureaucrats in the State of Victoria, Australia, collected data on the networks actors use to get advice and strategic information. These data were then examined in terms of the amount of traffic within and across roles and position (politicians, senior bureaucrats and middle managers), and internal and external to the government. Some of these local governments are found to be more hierarchical than others, and some are more externally focused in their communication patterns. The networks of politicians and bureaucrats are markedly distinct too, with politicians being less central than bureaucrats (in SNA terms).

The paper demonstrates the utility of examining such networks empirically using SNA. It yields important insights about informal network structures compared with formal structures, showing that (in these governments) politicians occupy network positions that are much less important than their formal status signals. It is also clear that some governments are held together by much better information channels than others. The large network mapping and measuring approach used is not, however, able to shed much light on the ‘how and why’ questions that a mixed approach could. The authors conclude with a call for future research to take such an approach in order to progress the field.

In their article, Robins, Bates and Pattison propose structural questions about what makes network governance effective in social structural terms. They argue that: network structures that can facilitate effective coordination of action, supporting the development of trust and team work; widespread agreement about goals and actions; and specific goals and actions that adequately address the intent of the governance system, are required. Networks established through governmental action might not realize their intentions without the appropriate ‘structural signature’. The foundations of structural signature they use are the concepts of relational embeddedness, which refers to reciprocal relationships between pairs of actors, and structural embeddedness, which is the extent to which actors are involved in cycles (groups of three) which ensure information is spread and actors can scrutinize each other effectively. For effective network governance, both relational and structural embeddedness are required, as well as a strong macroculture of shared understandings, otherwise the networks will be more contested than cooperative. The strength of utilizing the theoretical insights from SNA, rather than the network as simply as heuristic device (Christopoulos 2008) are most apparent in this contribution.

Their case study of water resource management uses SNA methods to investigate the structural signature of a governance network for the Swan River in the south west of Australia. Data was collected from those involved in this network, on their ties to other organizations – what the subject of that interaction was, how important these organizations were and how easy it was to work with them. Using social network measures and models, they conclude that the system is driven by an intersection of crucial, difficult relations. Establishing formal procedures for cooperation through governance networks cannot prescribe the emergence of informal relationships that might either help or hinder the policy intent of the network. They note the imperative for more empirical SNA research on how network governance operates in practice, while providing an examplar of how a mix of structural and actor centred concepts and methods can produce rich insights.

In summary, the papers in this symposium represent an array of conceptual and empirical approaches to network governance research. A standard survey approach
based on questionnaires was used to address the important and ongoing question of how management impacts on network effectiveness. Discourse analysis and Q-methodology was employed to analyse how public managers understand what they are doing in networks and questions of democratic legitimacy. A survey approach that incorporated SNA data collection methods was able to generate the data required to map and analyse the network structures of politicians and bureaucrats, and the diversity of these in different governments. Interviews that captured network data were used with SNA concepts, to postulate desirable structures for inter-organizational relationships and then analyse them empirically.

Together, these papers provide a snapshot of some of the many contemporary research interests in network governance, the growing variety of approaches being used, and the increasing use of SNA. They also point to new directions for the field that might be pursued by thinking across conceptual and methodological boundaries. Approaches that combine a focus on both the structural and the processual aspects of networks provide research space for interpretation without giving away causality entirely. Combining SNA with interviews and ethnography can produce more sophisticated theories and stronger analyses than can be gained by either simply mapping connections, or concentrating solely on the stories that actors tell. Synthesizing different approaches, as well as encouraging the diversity displayed in this symposium, seems the most promising way forward. In particular, synthesizing SNA concepts with the interpretive methods capable of collecting and analysing data so as to see networks both as structures and as cultures, represents a richly rewarding future for research on the emergence, dynamics, legitimacy and effectiveness of network governance.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The roundtable that generated this symposium of papers was supported by Interdisciplinary Steering Committee funding from The University of Melbourne. The contributions of Rod Rhodes as chair, all the other participants, Siobhan O’Sullivan for roundtable assistance and David Mence for help in chasing references are gratefully acknowledged. Thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewers of this paper for their helpful comments.

REFERENCES


Date received 12 January 2010. Date accepted 30 May 2010.