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Network ties among social policy professionals: Benefits and costs for public service organizations and citizens

Policy networks are *en vogue* because they offer public institutions cheap access to non-state resources such as funds or expert knowledge. To date, most research on policy networks has focused on the organizational level, investigating under which conditions public and private institutions join forces and how successful network collaboration can be sustained. A different strand of network research has sought to shed light on the catalysing role of individual “institutional entrepreneurs” in bringing about successful network collaboration. However, little attention has hitherto been paid to the network connections of ‘ordinary’ organizational executives such as frontline workers in social service organizations, which is lamentable because Mark Granovetter’s ground-breaking research indicates that frontline professionals with a wide web of “weak” network ties might be better equipped for offering tailor-made services to citizens in need than those without. This paper takes an inside view at local jobcentres in the Netherlands and Denmark to show under which conditions frontline workers develop extensive professional networks that can help to make social service provision more efficient and effective. However, the paper also argues that the establishment and maintenance of network relations at the service delivery level can be costly because it takes time away from actual client encounters. Therefore, the paper argues for a balanced view on networks that takes into account not only the benefits but also the costs of network collaboration, especially in the social policy domain.

The empirical analysis in the paper will be based on qualitative interviews with Dutch and Danish caseworkers/managers in municipal jobcentres