

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

But how can you make sense of them?

Social network analysis (SNA) can “make invisible work visible”¹ as practitioners, researchers, and policymakers seek to address complex issues through collaboration. Research suggests that the structure of relationships may have meaningful implications for what can be accomplished by a network. SNA focuses on the relationships between the actors in a network, such as partners in a consortium, faculty in an institution, or organizations in a citywide initiative.



Surveys



Interviews



Observations



Archival data

SNA data can be collected via surveys, interviews, observations, archival data, or any combination of them. If you are seeking to understand relationships in a classroom, observational data may work best. If your goal is to learn how education policies become implemented in different settings, surveys and interviews may work best.

Visualize relationships through network maps called sociograms.

For instance, in the example below, each person is represented by a colored circle, and relationships are represented by lines from one person to another. Colors, shapes, and sizes can be used to highlight different aspects of the network, such as where an individual works or how long a conversation lasts.

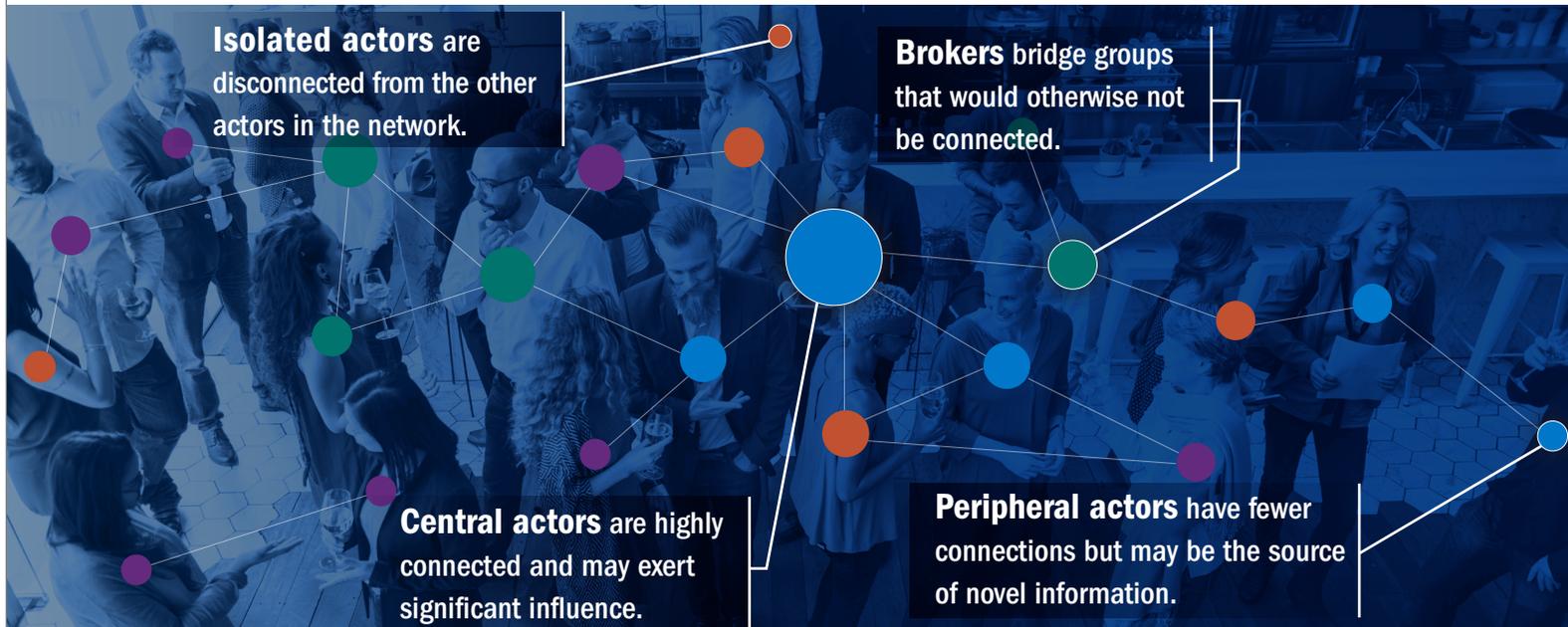
¹ Cross, R., Borgatti, S. P., & Parker, A. (2002). Making invisible work visible: Using social network analysis to support strategic collaboration. *California Management Review*, 44(2), 25–46.

Isolated actors are disconnected from the other actors in the network.

Brokers bridge groups that would otherwise not be connected.

Central actors are highly connected and may exert significant influence.

Peripheral actors have fewer connections but may be the source of novel information.



SNA can add value to your collaborative partnership in three ways.



1 Understand the network as a whole.

Using SNA, you can gather data on the number, type, and patterns of relationships in your network. Understanding the levels of interaction can help you identify successes, opportunities, and potential roadblocks.



2 Distinguish among actors in the network.

You can also examine the position of actors within a network in order to identify actors who may hold critical positions. For instance, in the sociogram, we identify four types of actors you may be interested in.



3 Make strategic improvements.

With an understanding of the network as a whole and the ability to distinguish among actors in the network, you are better positioned to promote effective network relationships.

A Selection of AIR's SNA Work



Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Postsecondary Strategy Analysis

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation Postsecondary Success team seeks to increase postsecondary educational attainment while closing equity gaps. Part of the team's strategy is to build and support networks of organizations that provide services to postsecondary institutions. AIR conducts SNAs of these networks by using surveys to assess collaboration and connectivity within and across networks to help inform awareness of the resources and capabilities needed to support successful networks. SNA data are triangulated with annual interviews, document reviews, and ongoing communication with network members to ensure understanding of the full picture. Early analysis indicates that networks foster collaboration among network members to improve services for institutions.



Education Non-Profit Influence

AIR conducted an SNA for two separate education nonprofit organizations that support the development of K-12 teachers and education leaders. AIR helped both organizations understand the relative influence of their alumni by visualizing formal and informal leadership and its influence on district policy-setting processes. AIR conducted interviews to collect the data and coupled it with extant data analysis that described the roles and responsibilities of all organizational actors in the change processes. In both studies, SNA data revealed that the education nonprofit alumni were individually and collectively more influential in the identified district in setting policy initiatives than were other district leaders who were not alumni of the organizations.

Why AIR?



Our team

Experts at AIR use SNA across contexts to provide valuable insights to collaborative partnerships. Our team includes leaders in education, health and human services, and workforce development.



A true partnership

When you work with AIR, you get a partner. We believe that, by including multiple perspectives from the start and by developing measures and collecting data together, everyone not only will be engaged throughout the process but will take ownership. We work closely with you to identify your pain points and your priorities.

TO LEARN MORE about AIR's work using SNA, please contact:



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