

The Safety Net as a Network

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The Safety Net as a Network

Abstract

The lack of a coherent understanding of what is meant by the American safety net made it difficult to have a meaningful discourse on the current condition. This paper proposes an alternative formulation of the social safety net based in network theory to overcome the shortcomings of the previous literature. The first part of the paper describes this approach, attempting to develop an alternative understanding of the safety net grounded in the actions of anti-poverty actors. Next is a list of propositions for measuring five dimensions of a safety net: the frame, structure, positions, influences, and the context. Three policy implications are derived from this new paradigm. First, shifting the level of analysis to network level allows policy makers to broaden the scope of the modern social safety net. Second, quantifying the interaction among actors reveals interdependency, which in turn redefines the power and influence of each actor within the network. Finally, the modern safety net could demonstrate a core-periphery structure. It calls for a new way of thinking about resource distribution and decision making channels of such unique structure.

Keywords: Safety net, social policy, network, social service, social service delivery

The Safety Net as a Network

Introduction

The social safety net was formed by family and local communities in the early days of the United States.” In 1935, after the Great Depression, President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal had established Social Security, and during the industrialization period, President Lyndon Johnson expanded assistance programs such as Medicaid and Medicare. Since then, government institutions and private entities have played increasingly essential roles in the social safety net. In defining the modern American social safety net, many questions arise: Does it consist only of public spending on social welfare programs and their eligibility requirements? Does it include schools and religious organizations? Are for-profit social enterprises included? What about the activities of individual volunteers?

For the moment, we are not concerned what the social safety net ought to look like, but formulating an understanding of what it is (or isn’t). Without a basis for understanding what is meant by the concept of a safety net, it is difficult to deliberate on pressing questions, such as whether the social safety net has been weakened following the passage of the welfare reform (time-limits and work requirements) or strengthened following the implementation of the Bush administration’s Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. While this has not stopped professional pamphleteers on various sides of the political struggle from engaging in this debate, the lack of a coherent understanding of what is meant by this construct has made it difficult to have a meaningful discourse

on the current condition of the American safety net.

The roots of the current understanding of the social safety net stem from early ideas about social provision in modern societies (Wilensky and Lebeaux 1958). These early ideas were held together by an understanding of the social safety net as a collection of mostly public programs and organizations designed to help the poor. Some viewed this agglomeration as a residual whereby it would come into play only when the normal parts of the social structure, such as the family or the market, break down. The social safety net served to address inherent instability and limitations in types of human organizations, including those with the responsibility for raising and protecting children and providing earnings from paid employment. In contrast, others viewed these programs and organizations as a manifestation of large-scale social change rooted in industrialization and mass-urbanization, where the safety net was designed to address human needs that become a legitimate claim on the entire society. Within this idea, the safety net is an organized system of services and organizations, designed to help individuals attain satisfying standards of living, health, and well-being. It is not a residual but a primary and accepted institutional arrangement within modern society.

Three conceptions of the social safety net seem to dominate the current literature: public spending, policy and program eligibility, and contracting out. The *public spending safety net* demonstrates a society's commitment to the poor and disadvantaged, and the degree to which these social problems are or are not addressed by designated institutions is best captured by the collective

public financial commitment to such problems and the degree to which this spending improves overall economic and social well-being (Blank 1997). Spending can be compared on a year-to-year basis in aggregate terms or it can be understood as a percentage of overall public resources or economic activity. The *eligibility safety net* is typically conceived as the rules and procedures that establish eligibility to particular government benefits and programs as established by statutes, regulations, or guidelines that determine who gets what for how long and under what conditions (Mead 1986). The *contracting out safety net* suggests that the provision of social services to aid the poor is best understood as a contracting regime or a series of relationships between principals and agents, between government and private organizations that deliver anti-poverty services (Smith and Lipsky 1993; Brown and Potoski 2006).

Unfortunately, our past and current ideas of the safety net have not kept pace with changes in American society and developments in the provision of social welfare. The notion of the safety net as a residual sphere that stands next to family and the market seems dated, given the widespread breakdown of traditional families (Cherlin 2004) and the growing dependence on market-based policy to help the poor (Howard 1997). Moreover, the proliferation of the new federalism, sometimes causing fragmentation of government policy at federal, state, and local levels, combined with the widespread use of independent nongovernmental organizations makes it difficult to accept definitions that regard this collection of services as a system or organized action (Gronbjerg 1993; Smith and Lipsky 1993). Similarly, conceptions of the safety net that rely on public spending,

eligibility criteria, or contracting regimes seem to overlook actual anti-poverty activists and private contribution that are common in almost every American community with a sizable poverty population (Hasenfeld 1992).

Each of the three current conceptions of the social safety net provides only a limited perspective. Public spending literature emphasizes aggregated monetary spending on social services, while eligibility literature evaluates individual agencies or programs. Contracting out literature focuses on financial transactions between governmental and non-governmental agencies. Each stream of literature only has a sensory perception of the social safety net and can thus lead to misinterpreted assessments of the safety net as a whole. The information in these sources is often inconsistent and in conflict with the other viewpoints.

Moreover, the literature mostly focuses on results without justifying the mean. It measures who gets what by when as a way to validate whether a goal of the safety net design is achieved. This is a static way of comprehending the safety net. There is often tension between federal officials who set targets in hopes of large improvements within a short amount of time and local actors who must implement the improvements with limited cohesion and resources (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984). Studying the social safety net requires the understanding that simple sequences of decisions and events depend on complex chains of reciprocal interaction among the actors who operate the social safety net.

In order to update our understanding of the social safety net construct and overcome the

shortcomings of the current literature, this paper proposes an alternative paradigm for understanding the modern social safety net based on network theory (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Blau 1982; Wellman 1983; Winship and Rosen 1988) and provides ways to assess the social safety net through this new paradigm. The first part of this paper describes this approach, attempting to develop an alternative conception of the social safety net that is grounded in the activities and interactions among anti-poverty actors. Next is a list of propositions used to measure and describe a safety net using a network perspective. Five dimensions of the social safety net are presented and discussed: frame, structure, positions, influences, and context. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for understanding the social safety net as a web of social relations.

The Social Safety Net as a Network

The safety net is best understood as a system of relationships among social actors who are engaged in activities designed to help low-income segments of the population. More specifically, this social safety *net-work* is bound by a socially constructed boundary and operates at an organizational field level. It includes a set of participating actors (nodes) and a set of relationships (ties). This section further describes the elements of a modern social safety net in terms of the actors, relationships, and boundaries.

[Figure 1 here]

Social actors, actors who orient their behavior towards others, frequently take the form of organizations. These organizations (or nodes) can occupy different parts of the social structure,

including the public, philanthropic, or the private sector. While formal organizations are most commonly identified as components of the safety net, individual actors can also occupy social space in the contemporary safety net, as unaffiliated philanthropists, consultants, or volunteers. Actors include those that fund, deliver, and design interventions.

While governmental organizations are within the bounds of the modern safety net, it is important to distinguish between those actors who operate within it and those actors who set the rules that govern the behavior of safety net actors, typically the legislative and judicial branches of government. The regulatory function of these actors is generally separate from the network of social relations that operate, implement, and comprise the anti-poverty helping sphere.

For our purposes, the safety net includes all social actors, regardless of form or function, who are engaged in work designed to improve social welfare. This sphere of activity does not substitute for traditional family functions or exist independently of the private market. As a social institution, its absence of a coherent authority structure makes it a particularly modern institution that is unable to make any claims or right on behalf of itself or those it serves.

Theoretically, it may be possible to identify a single safety net; however, like all systems of social relations, the safety net is bounded. Typically, these boundaries are established by geography, mission, and client population. It is also bounded by the presence and centrality of certain anti-poverty actors. These boundaries can be porous, sometimes spilling over into parts of the social structure frequently perceived as far removed from social welfare functions.

Within a socially constructed boundary, interactions among anti-poverty actors are better captured using an organizational field. An organizational field is defined as the aggregation of formal or informal organizations constituting a recognized area of institutional life that produces similar services or products (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). The modern American social safety net, as an organizational field, is an aggregation of interactions among anti-poverty actors, constructing a bounded network that offers social welfare to the poor.

While the idea of understanding a set of nodes and ties bounded by a socially constructed boundary seems simple, complications soon arise when one tries to comprehend the interaction among actors and understand the underlying mechanisms that cause different inter-dependencies within the modern social safety net. As illustrated in figure 1¹, the aggregation of a set of actors and relationships could reveal inter-dependency among them as indicated by the size of the nodes. The larger the node size, the more actors depend on it. However, actors can vary in their centrality to other actors, and relationships can vary depending on function and strength. As a whole, safety nets can vary in size and complexity depending on the number of actors and relationships.

This perspective relaxes the previous assumption that the roles of actors in the social safety net are defined by law or designed by policy. The traditional perspective is a static view. It cannot capture an operational field in constant flux because policy and law is carried by a set of actors who might have different goals and operational methods, yet depend on each other's resources or knowledge. This network paradigm allows for a more dynamic view of the modern social safety net

by capturing interactions among social safety net actors as they naturally unfold. The positions of these actors are then generated by the inter-dependencies among agencies rather than by laws or policies.

A position defined by inter-dependency is a relative concept. Inter-dependency is calculated by quantifying frequency of actual interaction among actors, conditional on all potential interactions. Centrality is also an indicator for measuring inter-dependency. Actors depended on by others are more central than those who are not. Centrality of actors is defined by social action, not by law or policy. They are perceived as highly important or deeply depended upon. The positions of central actors are subject to change when interaction between agencies changes.

Beyond the concept of a social safety net as defined by laws and policies, the modern safety net has no defined authority structure and is outside of managerial control. It is owned neither by democratic institutions nor social safety net actors. It is not property and cannot be privatized, nor can it be collectivized by a democratic political power. Rather, the modern social safety net is held together by the beliefs of those in the helping fields. Their ethical code is grounded in a commitment to service to those in need. The origin of this ethical code is unknown. Perhaps it is a part of human nature. Perhaps it is an expression of belief systems rooted in organized religion, nationalism/localism, or political ideology. Whatever its source, it can be found in all modern societies and gives rise to a set of actors who are dedicated to the provision of social welfare. Together, they constitute a social safety net designed to uphold expectations of decency and quality

of life for individuals who seem unable to function in modern society.

Nevertheless, in a modern social safety net, actors who share common ethical codes form more cohesive structures. There are powerful homophily processes in regards to what organizations actors consider to be relevant within their environment: those to whom they compare themselves, those whose opinions they attend to, and even those they mimic in order to survive. Understanding how central actors interact with others, how they make decisions, or which social services they implement reveals essential dimensions of the modern social safety net.

The three essential elements of the modern social safety net as a network have now been identified: actors, relationships, and a boundary. Because of resource dependency and institutional processes, actors interact with and depend on others. Dependency generates a unique network structure. The structure, power, and ties within a modern social safety net are therefore defined by relative dependency among actors, rather than by static laws or policies.

In summary, the goal of this research is to develop a method for observing the modern safety net and utilizing this method to identify (measure) this institution so that we can begin to understand it and develop the requisite knowledge required to evaluate its overall effectiveness. Similar to the discovery of the cell in biology, the first step in furthering this discovery process is to develop the dimensions needed to observe the unit under investigation. Without a clear set of dimensions for observation, it is difficult to further our understanding of how to evaluate the modern social safety net. The next section of this paper will further provide a set of propositions to explain the major

dimensions of the social safety net: frame, structure, power, ties, and context.

Propositions

Unlike the traditional approaches that focus on evaluating individual programs, the organizations, or contractual schemes, network approach investigates interaction among actors who constitute the modern social safety net. This approach examines the modern social safety from five dimensions: frame, structure, power, ties, and context. The frame dimension examines the scope of modern safety net. The structure, power, and ties dimensions study the characteristics of the safety net. The context dimension investigates how social safety net and the modern society interact.

Frame

The formal definition of a social safety net is understood as a collection of services provided by the state. In classical literature, Wilensky and Lebeaux (1958) define welfare provision as “formally organized and socially sponsored institutions, agencies and programs, exclusive of the family and private enterprise, which function to maintain or improve the economic conditions, health or interpersonal competence of some parts or all of a population.” While the traditional understanding of social safety nets only emphasizes governmental agencies, this paper includes unaffiliated philanthropists, consultants, and volunteers. In the contemporary safety net, informal organizations and individuals can share social space as long as they fund, deliver, and design interventions.

Although this paper expands the scope of the modern social safety net, it focuses on the

providers' perspective. However, if one asked safety net users what the net looked like, it would likely differ from that constructed by social service providers. For safety net users, family, friends, co-workers, or community groups also play an important role in providing social support. Often, these users will seek work and family support before asking for help from agencies (Edin and Lein 1997). As a consequence, the domains of the safety net from which the clients seek help only partially coincide with the assistance offered by social safety net providers and we offer the following proposition:

The social safety net constructed by social service providers fully or partially overlaps with the social safety net constructed by clients. The level of overlap will determine the extent to which clients must go outside the network to meet their needs.

Conventionally, studies assessing the effectiveness of the social safety net look at government spending or caseload numbers. This is problematic because the distribution of assistance is endogenous on an individual's eligibility for assistance and personal characteristics. It is hard to say whether the success of the social safety net system is real or is an effect of tightening eligibility during periods of decreased public spending. Details regarding the consequences for users who are turned away from agencies are lacking in the literature. Have these users gained the ability to sustain themselves and their families after leaving governmental assistance, or are they receiving relief assistance from local charities or churches?

In fact, social safety net users typically develop a set of survival strategies that help them

close the gap between income and expenses (Edin and Lein 1997). As budgets or programs are cut or the safety net users lose eligibility for programs, people will seek help from other agencies. They seek assistance by asking existing agencies within their communities for support (Edin and Lein 1997; Reingold, Pirog, and Brady 2007). Usually, those agencies in the community would refer those clients to other agencies that they have worked with and have available resources to help. As a consequence, the large system and structure of the social safety net would alter the behavior and available survival strategies of the users.

The social safety net structure that is constituted by the social safety actors shapes the behavior of clients seeking assistance and services.

Structure

Because social safety net actors choose with whom they interact, the modern social safety net demonstrates a unique core-periphery structure that reflects its own formation. This core-periphery network differs from a hierarchical or integrated network because of the two processes. The first is privatization. Milward and Provan (2000) use a hollow-state metaphor to argue that the increasing use of third parties such as nonprofits reduces the role of government in the provision of services and decentralizes the structure of such provisions. As this privatization drives the modern social safety net towards decentralization, it prevents the formation of a hierarchical network led by a single government agency.

A modern social safety net is not an integrated network because competition arises as a

consequence of privatization. Since social service agencies need to build relationships with funding agencies in order to gain more resources during privatization, one might argue that the modern social safety net would demonstrate a more integrated network. However, this is not the case. A modern social safety net is a core-periphery structure because of variation in agencies' abilities to obtain funding resources from the government and in managing their interaction with others. Social service actors bring different capacities to the organizational field. Those who have received funding are likely to generate more resources to build better connections. Building and maintaining relationships requires substantial resources, time, and information. Limited resources and time prohibit certain agencies from working with other agencies, preventing the network from becoming a completely connected structure.

[Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 demonstrates these three structures². Figure 2A illustrates a hierarchical structure with one central actor connected to three subordinates that are connected to sub-subordinates. Figure 2B illustrates an integrated structure with no central actor, where everyone is connected with everyone. Since all actors are interchangeable, they should be equally central and share the same power. Figure 2C illustrates the core-periphery structure, a network that cannot be subdivided into exclusive cohesive subgroups, although some actors may be more connected than others (Borgatti and Everett 1999).

The core-periphery concept refers to a structure consisting of core members that interact

frequently with both other core members and periphery actors. However, the periphery actors are only connected to the network through those core members, but not with the others actors in the network. The core-periphery structure indicates which actors connect to the network with a greater or lesser degree of a social safety net. In a way, the degree of connection to the modern social safety net reflects the abilities of social service agencies to manage connections with other agencies.

The social safety net is organized around a core periphery structure.

Power

The roles of the social safety net actors are usually defined by their sectors, services, or programs. For instance, Open Arms (OA) is a religious nonprofit organization financed by independent Christian churches that provides family and youth services and operates a preschool. Knowing how many people use their programs per year is useful for assessing the role of OA in the social safety net. If this actor were removed from the safety net, specific types of services would be gone and many clients would need to be re-directed.

However, it is difficult to know how the closing of this agency would affect other actors with which the organization had working relationships. Other nonprofits, faith-based organizations, or government providers might depend on OA for handling their client overflow. Local and smaller churches might depend on OA for sub-contracting funds. OA might play crucial roles in the decision-making structure of the modern safety net through its board members. No one can truly assess the impact of a single actor on the social safety net without understanding existing

inter-dependencies among them.

This paper argues that the modern social safety net is structured around a structure with actors classified into two groups: core and periphery. Being in the core indicates a certain prestige in a social safety net. Core actors might have more resources, an established reputation in the field through past performance, or more general services to which other actors refer clients. Therefore, core members connect to each other as well as to the periphery actors. They are usually the central entities in the modern social safety net.

Larger, more established, organizations providing a range of services will be core actors.

Organizations that are smaller, less established, providing more specialized services will be peripheral actors.

However, being in a core position because of one's characteristics may not be significant in the long run. A more important mechanism defining which actors occupy the core position arises from the connections an actor chooses. Some research shows that as one earns prestige, the extensiveness and heterogeneity of the actor's social contact will increase (Burt 1992). These actors can broker connections between otherwise disconnected segments and thereby secure their core positions (Burt 1992). Other research deems that essential actors are likely to connect with both other core entities and peripheral entities. Because actors are likely to connect with those in similar positions, a strongly interconnected cluster or cohesive group is created that generates yet more connections (Coleman 1990). Both arguments explain why actors are more likely to inhabit the core

position according to their connections. As a consequence, the following proposition was formed.

Controlling for resources, age, past performance, and types of services, actors who play a brokering role or connect with other core actors are more likely to be core actors.

Ties

Thus far, the modern social safety net has been argued to present a core-periphery structure.

Actors are in the core not only because of their characteristics but also because of their associations.

The next important question is how they associate with others and what types of relationships tie them together. Actors choose with whom they want to build relationships and the time and resources they are willing to invest in them. Certain relationships take less time and resources to maintain. For instance, the maintenance of a client referral connection simply requires one to know each entity's current projects without requiring the two agencies to work together. Relationships that require less involvement between the actors are considered weaker ties.

On the other hand, relationships like funding or board member sharing take time to build and require trust and resources to maintain. These time intensive bonds are referred to as strong ties.

Strong ties indicate stronger trust between agencies and perhaps indicates that which holds agencies together during turbulent times. Also, building strong ties requires superior reputations. Actors who have performed well and established their names are more likely to earn the trust of others. Actors in core positions are then more likely to build stronger ties with other actors in core positions.

The core actors in the modern social safety net are held together by strong ties.

However, what usually forms the bridge between core and periphery actors are weak ties, because they take less time and effort to maintain. Entities also do not need to be overly familiar with each other in order to form weak ties. Literature on collaboration among social service agencies shows that the most common reason for collaboration among agencies is for information exchange (Reisch and Sommerfeld 2003). If one removes all the strong ties within a network, the weak ties would stay and hold the network together. Therefore, we argue that the modern social safety net is held together by the weak ties, such as information sharing or client referrals relationships, and such weak ties bridge over the core and periphery actors.

The modern social safety net is constituted by weak ties between the core and periphery actors.

Context

A shift in public policy, which alters the rules governing the provision of public benefits to the poor, as well as other external economic or social events that may shift the demand and type of needs among the poor, will likely produce changes in the composition and structure of relations among anti-poverty actors. That is, rule changes governing who gets what for how long and under what conditions are likely to have a feedback effect on the composition and structure of safety net actors. However, the question remains how the characteristics or changes of the environment shape and affect the structure of the modern social safety net. One way to understand such an impact is to compare different social safety nets embedded in regions with different characteristics.

Some research finds that local inter-organizational fields present similarities from place to

place, given a wide distribution, on a number of important demographic characteristics (Warren, Rose, and Bergunder 1976). They argue that the similarities persist because local contexts are embodiments of an institutionalized thought structure characteristic of American society. This institutionalized thought structure is a combination of ways of thinking about social problems and ways of arranging local entities (Warren, Rose, and Bergunder 1976). However, other researchers have found that the structures of networks in different regions vary according to political and economic condition, demography, and uncertainty (Provan and Milward 1991, 1995; Provan et al. 2005; Milward and Provan 1998; Galaskiewicz and Shatin 1981; Gronbjerg 1993). They argue that when local welfare agencies play an essential role in implementing welfare services, the variations across regions in terms of political and economic conditions are likely to affect the structures of the social safety nets across different regions.

Literature examining welfare state development shows that environmental elements play important roles in shaping the size and interactions among key welfare service agencies. For instance, in a county with a more diverse population, a liberal political environment, and stronger economic conditions, the core and periphery will be less distinct from each other, and the structure of the network will be more diffused. On the other hand, in a county with a more homogeneous population, a more conservative political environment, and weaker economic conditions, the core and periphery will be more distinct from each other, and the structure of the network is more centralized.

Social safety nets serving more homogeneous clients and embedded in a political environment

with a less competitive local economy, and a less dense population will have a more distinct core and periphery structure than a network serving less heterogeneous clients in a less partisan political environment, with a more competitive local economy, and a denser population.

Implications and Discussions

By mapping the network of social relationships among anti-poverty actors, it is possible to describe a safety net that recognizes individual actors and their relationships within the context of public serving institutions. This article provides a point-of-view which is neither government focused (the spending safety net, the eligibility safety net, or the contracting-out safety net) nor client-based (understanding the safety net from the perspective of an individual person in need); however, this perspective does include public actors and provides a heuristic for understanding the challenges clients face when navigating inter-organizational relationships. It grounds the understanding of social welfare in a helping ethic. This ethic gives rise to human organizations designed to fulfill obligations associated with the value of helping others. These organizational forms (informal and formal) interact in a sphere of activity best described as a safety net.

The current literature has shortcomings in capturing the complexity of operations and implementations of the modern social safety net. The traditional perspective is censored and static. This network paradigm introduces an organizational field as a level of analysis in order to provide a more comprehensive perspective for understanding the social safety net. The interdependency between actors is revealed through their relationships, which in turn redefine the position and

influence of each actor within the network. In this paradigm, the structure of the social safety net is formed through quantifying the formal and informal interactions among participating actors. This structure captures the dynamic of the social safety net at the operational and implementation levels.

This paper introduces a perspective that captures the essential dimensions of the modern social safety net and explains how best to understand these dimensions. There are three policy implications from adopting this new paradigm. First, shifting the level of analysis to an organizational field allows policy makers to broaden the scope of the modern social safety net and to consider whether the change of structures would impact the safety net users. We have argued that the modern social safety net is not a well-integrated network. The core-periphery structure demonstrates that some diffusion and decentralization of the network creates special challenges for individuals seeking assistance. How is it possible for individuals in need to navigate complex inter-organizational environments where there is no single actor who can connect individuals with all other actors?

The short answer is that individuals in need of help from this web of organizational affiliations are faced with substantial costs to search and eventually secure appropriate assistance. While these navigation costs may be diminished if an individual is fortunate enough to seek assistance from a central actor in the social safety net core, no single actor has access to the entire network. To make matters more challenging, the composition and structure of the safety net appears fluid over the short-term, making it even more difficult to track who is doing what for whom. As a

result, access to the social safety net and responsiveness from its actors for a given individual client likely depends on client-driven perseverance, luck, and timing.

Second, quantifying the interaction among the actors within the modern safety net reveals a set of actors who occupy core positions, not because of policy or laws, but because of their prestige and unique relationship patterns embedded in the network. Some of these central actors are likely to be ignored in traditional literature. While much has been written about the hollow-state (Milward and Provan 2000), the rise in third-party governance, or however one refers to the widespread outsourcing of government functions to non-governmental organizations, government actors can still occupy the core position because other actors depend on them for funding.

Finally, the modern safety net reveals a core-periphery structure rather than a sector-based structure. This calls for a new design for distribution channels or decision-making structures between core actors and peripheral actors, rather than focusing on sector collaboration. Core actors are connected by strong ties but linked with the periphery through weak ties. Strong ties generally have more authority to pass policy or alter others' behaviors. The disconnection of strong relationships between the core and periphery creates a dilemma for those that fund social services and others with an interest in managing and reforming the safety net. Since many organizations remain isolated from established funding relationships and shared governance arrangements only reach a small segment of safety net actors, it is difficult for any single actor or clique to establish authority and organize the provision of social services. This could potentially explain why it is relatively uncommon for

organizations to co-locate or establish other forms of substantial service integration.

However, this network paradigm does not intend to replace the traditional views that describe social safety nets as policy design for public spending, eligibility, or a contracting scheme. Previous literature provides different information at different levels of analysis. In fact, much of what can be learned from the network is based on the context of public spending, shifting in program eligibility, and contractual relationships. The network perspective is an alternative way of looking at the social safety net that aims to examine the collective action of modern safety net actors.

The network paradigm illustrates a much more complex sphere of interaction among modern safety actors and provides a more dynamic view for understanding the operations of the safety net. However, the benefit of adopting a new paradigm is not just to say that the modern social safety net is complicated. Many studies on joint action of multiple agencies have demonstrated the complexity of implementation, and they made the point well (Pressman and Wildavsky 1984; Lipsky 1980). The real meaning of adopting the network perspective for understanding the modern safety net is to sort the complexity into a comparable and predictable structure. This paper proposes that the modern social safety net can be demonstrated as a core-periphery structure and further discusses the implications of the positions, influences, and context of such a structure. The network approach opens the door for thinking more systematically about the complexities of the modern social safety net.

Notes

1. To demonstrate the complexity of the modern social safety net, we create a 32 by 32 actors matrix that simulates actors and relationships among them. We then use Ucinet6 to calculate the in-degree of each actor and use the in-degree centralization measure for the size of the nodes. Finally, we construct the network image in Ucinet6.
2. To illustrate the difference among three structures of networks visually, we generate three different 13 by 13 actor matrices, representing a hieratical, integrated, and core/periphery structure. A network software, Ucinet6, was used to construct the network images.

Figure 1: The Elements of Network Paradigm: Boundary, Nodes, and Arcs

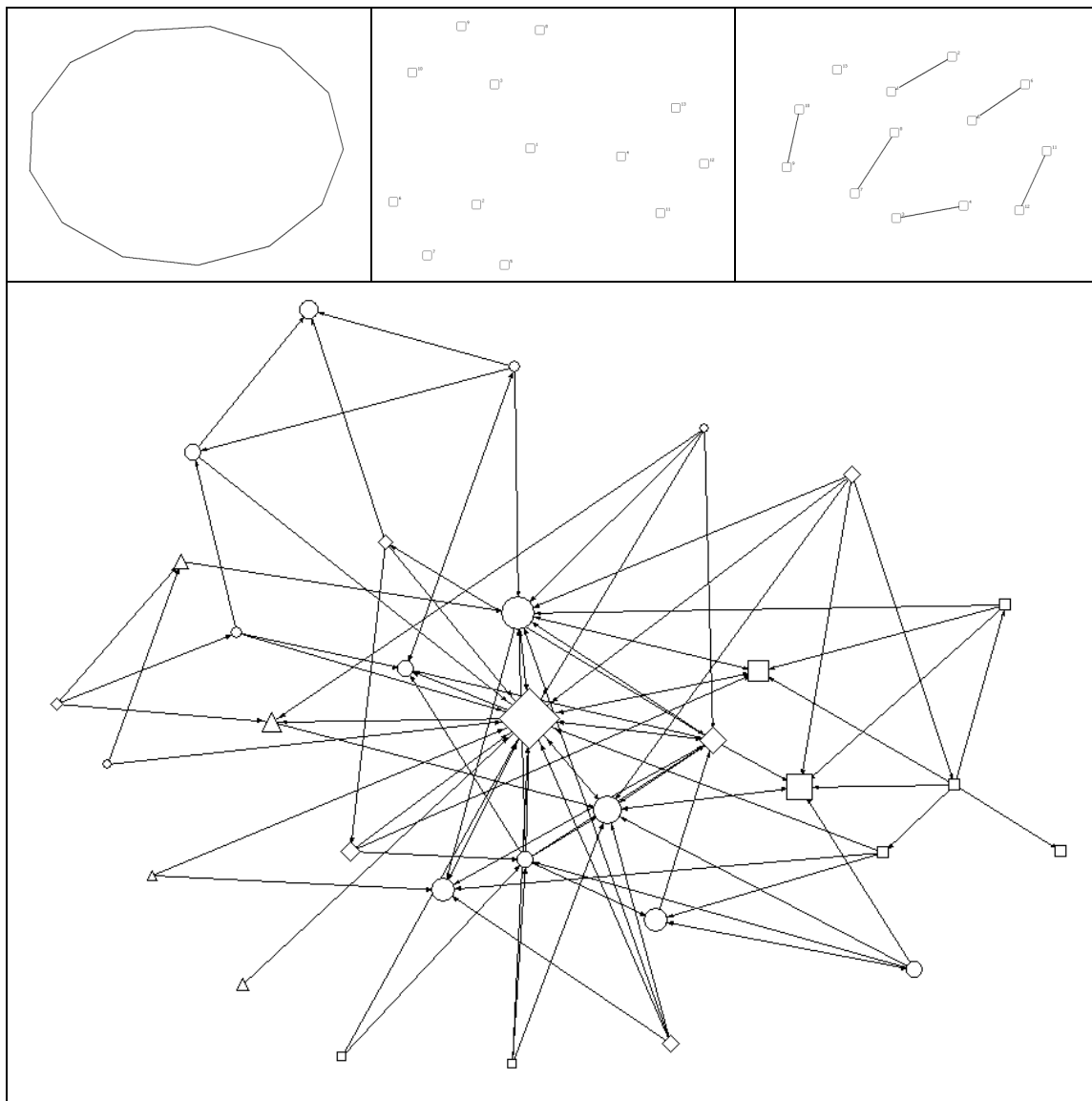


Figure 2: Examples of Hierarchical, Integrated, and Core-periphery Structure

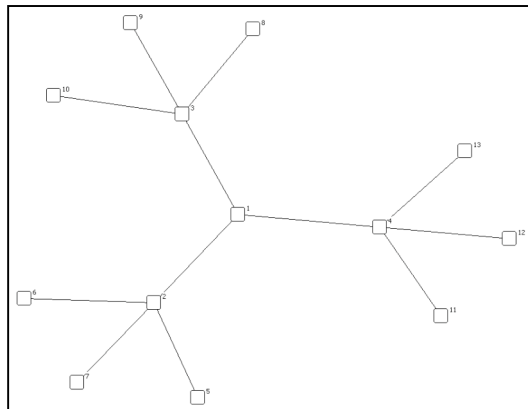


Figure 2A: Hierarchy Structure

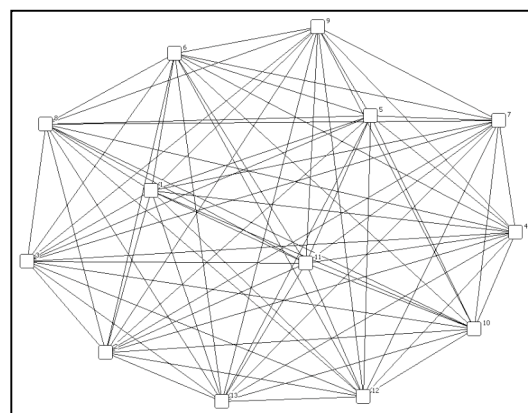


Figure 2B: Integrated Structure

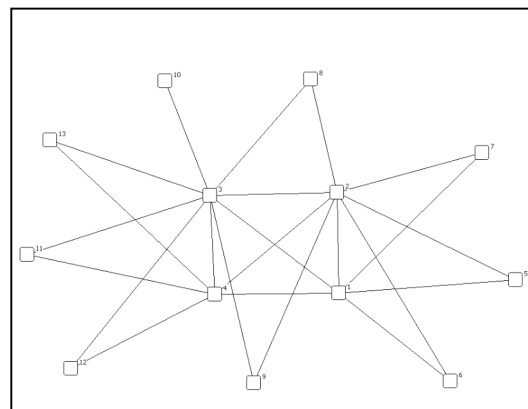


Figure 2C: Core-periphery Structure

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