Power Measures and Concepts for Aligning Across Sectors

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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) recently partnered with the Georgia Health Policy Center (GHPC) and many other organizations from across the United States to find ways of improving alignment across health care, public health, and social services. The ultimate goal is to improve community well-being and reduce health disparities, especially racial health disparities.

At the core of this effort is the Framework for Aligning Sectors, which suggests that collaboration efforts will be more effective if they focus on lasting alignment in the four core areas of shared purpose, governance, data, and finance. Further, the framework suggests that these efforts will be more effective if they directly address equity, community voice, trust, and power dynamics.

Power in particular has been identified by practitioners and researchers as a key factor shaping aligning successes and failures. However, power is a complex concept and can be difficult to effectively measure. To date, few collaboratives or researchers studying collaboratives have fielded measures of power. Nevertheless, many briefs and studies have now been written that highlight the importance of different types of power. This brief builds on the existing literature in two ways. First, this brief reviews research focused specifically on conceptualizing power in order to identify foundational power definitions and frameworks for understanding power. Second, this brief reviews research on health-oriented cross-sector collaboratives in order to identify the ways that power is normatively discussed in this context. The themes identified in this part of the review could potentially be translated into measures helpful for assessing aligning progress. The ultimate objective of this brief is to provide a foundation for the conceptualization and measurement of power for practitioners and researchers involved in, or interested in, aligning across sectors.

METHODS

Documents for this review were collected in two phases. The first phase of document collection involved a directed scan for studies addressing basic power definitions, types, measures, and concepts. This phase began with the collection of dictionary definitions and academic definitions for power. This phase continued with a search in Google Scholar using the search terms power, “measuring power,” “organizational power,” and “inter-organizational power.” From this search, three articles were drawn that provided frameworks for conceptualizing power.

The second phase of document collection involved an NVivo scan of research assembled for an earlier scoping review on health-related cross-sector collaboration. In this scan, 573 articles were searched for the word “power.” There were 330 articles that used the word power within this body of research. However, while many articles discussed power in a general sense, much of this literature did not describe power in a way that was meaningful for measurement. After the
passages mentioning power were read, 12 of the articles from the search were deemed relevant to the conceptualization and measurement of power in health-oriented cross-sector collaborations. These articles were deemed relevant if they addressed definitions of power, types of power, or power in collaboration relationships.

**FINDINGS**

The findings are organized into four main sections. These sections are definitions, power frameworks, power types in research on health-oriented cross-sector collaboration, and sources of power in health collaboratives.

**Definitions**

Dictionary.com defines power as the “ability to do or act; capability of doing or accomplishing something,” “great or marked ability to do or act,” “the possession of control or command over people,” “political ascendancy or control in the government of a country, state, etc.,” or “legal ability, capacity, or authority.” Prominent themes include capability and control. However, the generalness and the wide variety of these definitions suggests that power can be applied to many contexts.

Definitions of power among academics lean heavily on previous theoretical work on power dynamics between individuals and organizations. Theorist and sociologist Max Weber described power in 1922 as the ability to exercise one’s will over others. Weber’s definition of power is at the root of many subsequent academic investigations of power, suggesting it may also be a useful definition in the context of cross-sector aligning efforts. In the world of practice, Aye now offers a definition of power that is similar to Weber’s, though simple “power is the ability to affect an outcome.”

**Key Questions for Consideration in Measurement**

- How similar are the desires of the different parties involved? In what way?
- Who has final say over what?
- Who has final say over whose activities? In what ways?

**Power Frameworks**

A group of researchers from the United Kingdom authored a three-part series on the pathways communities can take from community empowerment to greater health equity. Using a case study of an English empowerment initiative called the Big Local, they developed and expanded on definitions and examples for different kinds of power. The research team took a systematic approach to identifying types of power that affect communities with the end goal of promoting health equity.

Using previous research along with their experience with Big Local, the research team developed two empowerment frameworks: the limiting power framework and the emancipatory power framework. These frameworks help explain power from two different perspectives and help explain how the two types of power can be shifted in the context of community collaboratives.

**The Limiting Power Framework**

The limiting power framework explains four types of power, and it describes ways in which these types of power can be shifted and changed. The four types of power are compulsory power, institutional power, structural power, and productive power. These are described below.

Compulsory power is power that is “direct and visible.” This kind of power “may be exercised by formal institutes of the state” and can involve “physical, psychological, or economic force,” usually by army, police, government departments, or legislation. When there is resistance against compulsory power, individuals or groups with the community are looking for a change in who created the relevant policy, what the policy entails and requires, and why a policy was put into place. Communities’ asks in relation to compulsory power are to make the policy or legislation more democratic and accountable to the community. Recent and past efforts of social movements to change policies around how and why individuals are arrested are examples of actions against compulsory power.
Institutional power is power that is “less visible, exercised through organizational rules, procedures and norm-controlling information put into the public sphere, who is involved in decision-making, etc.” Unlike compulsory power, institutional power will often amplify or silence different groups’ voices and demands. Institutional power is intimately tied to leadership, and change in institutional power often happens when new leaders change the agenda. The priorities of leaders shape the visibility and legitimacy of the concerns of disadvantaged communities and can shape the way institutional power is used.

Structural power, as defined by the research group, is power that is “invisible.” Structural power sits within our “systematic biases embedded in social institutions — generating and sustaining social hierarchies of class, gender, ethnicities, etc.” This kind of power can be examined “in the distribution of resources, opportunities, and social status.” While the authors describe this power as invisible, it is important to note that this kind of power intimately affects individuals’ lives and community well-being, and it may feel like a very visible form of power to those disadvantaged by it. While structural power does not make or enforce policies like institutional or compulsory power, structural power often is an important factor in the way leaders and lawmakers create and uphold policies and procedures. Because of the “invisibility” of structural power, it is important for communities, organizations, and individuals to build their collective power and work together to make structural changes. Because structural power is rooted in social institutions, changes in structural power often occur through social movements.

The last kind of power in the limiting power framework is productive power. Like structural power, productive power is also invisible. It “operates through diffuse social discourses and practices to legitimate some forms of knowledge, while marginalizing others.” This kind of power often “shapes the meanings of different social identities.” To change the balance of productive power, collaboratives, communities, and groups can use social media and other tools to combat stigma. When attempting to change stigmatizing discourses, it is important for individuals and small groups to use their voice. Larger collaboratives and community groups can have a larger reach in helping to develop positive narratives about disadvantaged groups.

In the limiting power framework, the types of power work together and separately to make changes in the balance of power. It is important to think about the limiting power framework when defining power because it allows definitions of power to go from the micro level up to the macro level and gives a breadth of understanding into how power can be shifted and changed in different situations.

### Key Questions for Consideration in Measurement

- What compulsory powers (i.e., direct and visible forms of control) are shaping the state of the aligning collaborative, the community in question, and other constituents of the aligning collaborative?
- What institutional powers (i.e., rules, procedures, and norm-controlling information) are shaping the state of the aligning collaborative, the community in question, and other constituents of the aligning collaborative?
- Who is involved in decision-making? How?
- What structural powers (i.e., group social hierarchies) are shaping the state of the aligning collaborative, the community in question, and other constituents of the aligning collaborative?
- What productive powers (i.e., phenomena that legitimate or marginalize different forms of knowledge) are shaping the state of the aligning collaborative, the community in question, and other constituents of the aligning collaborative?

### The Emancipatory Power Framework

The same research team also developed the emancipatory power framework. This framework was developed from experiences with the Big Local and from the empowerment literature. The emancipatory power framework describes four types of power that communities can harness and change for their own betterment. Unlike the limiting power framework, the emancipatory power framework examines innate types of power in communities. The research team identified four types of emancipatory power: power within, power with, power to, and power over.
The power within is the capability “internal to a community to support or drive collective control or action.” Markers of this include communities bringing together skills and expertise, shared values, common identity, and collective knowledge and skillset. Markers also include understanding of the community’s important needs and a shared vision for future work and priorities. Notably, shared purpose is also identified as an important element of aligning efforts in the Framework for Aligning Sectors.

Power with includes “capabilities to build alliances and act with others to achieve common goals.” Markers of power with are communities understanding that working together can help achieve common goals; identification of relationships that can be built; repairing or establishing relationships with institutions outside of the community; and the invitation of non–community members such as NGOs, local government representatives, and businesses to participate in meetings. Power with is an important kind of power for group interrelations. For members of the Big Local, there was an understanding that collaborating and creating strong relationships with other organizations would allow for longevity of the program. In the context of aligning, power with may be an important part of collaboration with community members, as connecting with community partners and strengthening other cross-sector collaborations could lead to resilience and, ultimately, longevity.

Power to is the “capability to establish space for collective decision-making and manifestations of … collective control.” Examples of this include a community’s ability to form governmental units, establish organizational practices, develop other opportunities beyond the government sector, and improve conditions for the community through collective action. Power to is an important kind of power since it is the type of power that promotes the ability of communities to have long-lasting results from collaborations. If collaboratives have power to, they have the space and structure in place to continue to function and make changes in their community.

The final mode of power from communities is power over. When an organization or individual has power over, they are experiencing imbalance of power, and one organization or individual may have power to make decisions that impact another organization or individual. Power over can be contentious in collaboratives where partners strive for equality of voices. For instance, political leaders may have more power in a collaborative than community members, and this may cause community members to feel disenfranchised or unheard. Power over and the potential it creates may need to be considered when collaboratives are both operating and creating policies and procedures.

### Key Questions for Consideration in Measurement

- What power within (i.e., the resources within the community in question) is shaping or may shape the state of the aligning collaborative, the community in question, and other constituents of the aligning collaborative?
- What power with (i.e., capacity to build and maintain relationships for a given purpose) is shaping or may shape the state of the aligning collaborative, the community in question, and other constituents of the aligning collaborative?
- What power to (i.e., capacity for collective control) is shaping or may shape the state of the aligning collaborative, the community in question, and other constituents of the aligning collaborative?
- What power over (i.e., control over outside entities) is shaping or may shape the state of the aligning collaborative, the community in question, and other constituents of the aligning collaborative?

### Power at the Individual, Interpersonal, Community, Societal, and Systems Levels

Like the researchers who developed the frameworks above, Coy et al. draw from existing research to outline power dynamics in different levels of society that can limit community empowerment. These levels range from the individual level to the systems level.

At the individual level, self-efficacy, attitude, and interest can all affect how communities take power. Self-efficacy includes things such as emotional well-being, self-image, support, and skills. Attitude includes beliefs, values, past experience, and mindset. Lastly, interest includes an individual’s desire, motivation, enjoyment, or attention. For individuals, these factors can reduce or increase their ability to promote power within a community. For instance, if an individual has low self-image, a negative mindset about the ability for communities to gain power, and a lack of motivation, and if they are a part of a community group, they will diminish that group’s ability to attain power. Groups,
and by extension collaborations, that have individuals with high levels of these characteristics can drive change and give the needed energy to the collaboratives. Self-efficacy, attitude, and interest are all factors that can be changed and enhanced to support collaborative efforts.¹

At the interpersonal level, an individual’s age, social status, gender, income or poverty level, and education may affect community empowerment.² While individuals may change in relation to some of these status markers throughout their lifetime, most of these factors are stagnant or take significant time to change (such as age).³

At the community level, various factors could impact the ability of communities to take power.⁴ Examples include community dynamics, emerging alternatives, and social influence.⁵ Community dynamics include collective self-efficacy, quality of leadership, equity of participation, sense of ownership, and social cohesion.⁶ Emerging alternatives may arise from diverse opinions, positive deviants, social movements that may be occurring, innovation, and opportunities arising within the community.⁷ Social influence includes the strength of norms in a given community, any stigma or discrimination community members may face, social identity prevalent in a community, the network’s attitudes and behaviors, and who the power holders are in the community.

At the societal level, metanorms, structural barriers, and the communication environment can help or hinder communities from growing in power.⁸ Metanorms include societal ideals like gender ideologies, socialization, decision-making patterns, and established power dynamics.⁹ Structural barriers in a community includes society’s influence through social cues, infrastructure already developed, living conditions of individuals within the society, access to and quality of services, and access to resources and information. The communication environment includes factual and scientific information present in the community, the media’s narrative, and the public discourse.⁹

Finally, at the policy and systems level, the community context and the actions of governing entities make a difference in empowerment efforts.¹⁰ The community context includes the social, cultural, and religious context in which the community itself is situated.¹⁰ Governing entities control fiscal context and incentives available for different groups and communities. They control and establish grievances against authorities, monitor and control the quality of the educational system, have the ability to recognize the issues communities want to change, establish policy and regulations, and can encourage or dismiss community voice and participation in the current policy system.¹⁰ These actions can limit or drive empowerment.¹⁰

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**Key Concepts for Consideration in Measurement**

- Individual self-efficacy
- Individual interest in the work of the collaborative
- Interpersonal differences in age, gender, income, social status, and educational or experience differences
- Community dynamics (e.g., collective self-efficacy, quality of leadership, equity of participation, collective sense of ownership, and social cohesion)
- Community alternatives and options for collaborating and achieving the desired outcomes (e.g., from diverse opinions, positive deviants, social movements that may be occurring, innovation, and opportunities arising within the community)
- Community social influence (e.g., the strength of norms in a given community, stigma or discrimination community members may face, social identity prevalent in a community, the network’s attitudes and behaviors, and who the power holders are in the community)
- Societal metanorms (e.g., gender ideologies, socialization, and decision-making patterns)
- Societal structural barriers (e.g., social cues, infrastructure, living conditions, availability and quality of services, and access to resources and information)
- Societal communication environment
- Policy incentives
- Systems context (e.g., social, cultural, and religious systems)
Power Types in Research on Health-Oriented Cross-Sector Collaboration

Network Power in Collaboratives
Using a social network analysis approach, researchers Kapucu and Demiroz measure power within collaborations by summing the number of connections a collaboration has. In this context, collaborations would have more power if there are more connections to other organizations and less power when there are fewer connections to other organizations. Kapucu and Demiroz examined networks from areas affected by crisis, such as New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and New York City after Sept. 11, 2001. They found that networked organizations that had more connections were better equipped to deal with the crises. However, this network-connection proxy for power within collaboratives only measures the number of connected organizations and inherently does not measure the quality or social power of organizations in other terms. Accordingly, Kapucu and Demiroz caution against using social network analysis alone to determine the power of collaborating organizations and encourage incorporating an analysis of governance and other formal and informal characteristics of the network.

Interorganizational Empowerment
Li et al. describe three types of interorganizational empowerment: cooperative empowerment, restricted empowerment, and unrestricted empowerment. An organization has high levels of cooperative empowerment if it has a high level of power within the collaboration. Restricted empowerment is observed where organizations are given power in circumscribed instances. Some organizations will have unrestricted empowerment. Their opinion highly influences what occurs within a collaborative, regardless of what others consider true or valuable and possibly regardless of a cost-benefit analysis. If organizations have unrestricted power consistently in an aligning context, it may silence other voices and ultimately inhibit the development or maintenance of effective collaboration.

Institutional Power in Collaboratives
Holt et al. describe organizations with institutional power as having an understood legitimacy within their collaboration. As discussed in The Limiting Power Framework above, institutional power is enacted through established rules and procedures, which can be seen as a form of legitimization. This definition within the collaboration literature is similar to that of the limiting power framework discussed above. Also similarly, this type of power comes with the ability of organizations or collaboratives to inflict their will upon other organizations or collaboratives. Institutional power is formalized in some form or fashion and is a recognized form of power.

Resource Power and Collaboratives
Resource power comes either from money that organizations or collaboratives already have or from grants. Organizations with resource power often have the most say and power within collaboratives since resources can be traded for influence. However, financial power is not defined only by money. This kind of power often includes human resources that individuals, organizations, or collaboratives can bring with them, including personnel and expertise in a given area.

Community Power and Collaboratives
Community power is the “collective power of community residents to improve health and well-being — through leadership development and collaboration with the community.” When communities have power, they can determine how money is spent within their community. Often community power can be confused for power that organizations within communities may have, but for communities themselves to have power, the community, not a community-serving organization, must hold the power to make changes in the community.

Political Power and Collaboratives
Another type of power that individuals, organizations, collaboratives, and communities can have is political power. Political power is an important type of power for setting agendas, distributing resources, and establishing the ground rules for collaboration activities.

Decision-Making Power in Collaboratives
Decision-making power is another kind of power often discussed in the collaboration literature. Sharing decision-making power with community members is widely understood to be an important step in advancing equity in cross-sector collaborations. When measuring decision-making power within collaboratives, researchers can ask individuals if they are able to make decisions that effectively represent themselves or their organization.
Types of Power in Research on Health-Oriented Cross-Sector Collaboration

- Relationship network connectivity
- Cooperative empowerment
- Restricted empowerment
- Unrestricted empowerment
- Institutional power
- Legitimacy
- Resource power

- Community power
- Financial resources
- Leadership-development opportunities
- Political power
- Decision-making power (e.g., community financial decision-making power)
- Money sources (e.g., who has it, who needs it, where does the collaborative’s money come from)

Sources of Power in Health Collaboratives

The self-presentation of individuals within organizations is extremely important in developing strong relationships between organizations. Individuals who have strong relationships with others in the collaborative gain access to, and influence over, other influential individuals with additional access to power. Individuals with strong communication skills and networking capabilities can also be perceived as having high levels of power, in effect granting additional levels of power. Individuals and organizations also tend to gain power if they have relevant knowledge and power.

Sources of Power in Health Collaboratives

- Communication and networking skill levels of individuals
- Expertise or information on pertinent topics

**DISCUSSION**

Power is a complex concept. Power can be coercive, and it can be enabling. It can be limiting, and it can be emancipatory. It is present at all levels of society, and it is an important element of health-oriented cross-sector collaboration. This review identifies a wide range of types of power and sources of power relevant to practitioners and researchers interested in cross-sector aligning.

Power can be measured at the individual level, the interpersonal level, the community level, the societal level, and the systems level. Different types of power can also be measured, including limiting power, compulsory power, institutional power, structural power, productive power, financial power, emancipatory power, network power, interorganizational power, resource power, community power, political power, and decision-making power. Power relationships exist between collaboration partners, leaders and followers, and many other types of individuals and groups, including groups identifying according to race, class, gender, sexuality, education, income, and other social factors.

In order to implement change according to the Framework for Aligning Sectors, aligning partners will encounter power dynamics. Change almost necessarily requires “the ability to affect an outcome” or even “the ability to exercise one’s will over others.” Efforts to measure power will likely focus on who is exercising their will, what their will is, and who or what they are exercising their will on.
Key takeaways:

1. Power of different types can be measured at multiple levels, for different groups. Practitioners and researchers should consider their needs and resources when deciding on a strategy for measuring power in health collaboratives.

2. Power is intimately connected to all elements of the Framework for Aligning Sectors.

3. Efforts to measure power in health collaboratives will likely focus on who is exercising their will, what their will is, and who or what they are exercising their will on.

References


