

Building International Collaborative Capacity: Contributions of Community Psychologists to a European Network

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Abstract Europe is in the process of building a more participative, just, and inclusive European Union. *The European Social Fund*, which is an initiative developed to actively promote multinational partnerships that address pressing social issues, is a good example of the European transformation. This article describes the steps taken to develop and evaluate the activities of an international network promoting collaborative capacity among regional partners involved in the prevention of labor discrimination toward immigrants in three European countries—Spain, Belgium, and Italy. An international team of community psychologists proposed an empowering approach to assess the collaborative capacity of the network. This approach consisted of three steps: (1) establishing a collaborative relationship among partners, (2) building collaborative capacity, and (3) evaluating the collaborative capacity of the network. We conclude with lessons learned from the process and provide recommendations for addressing the challenges inherent in international collaboration processes.

Keywords European networks ·
International collaborative capacity · European Social Fund

The European Union (EU) is promoting comprehensive community initiatives aimed at establishing and sharing best practices to prevent vulnerable populations within and among its member countries from being excluded from social communities and labor opportunities. Vulnerable groups are often composed of immigrants who often have to deal with serious challenges integrating into the labor force and social life of the communities to which they migrate. One of the initiatives promoted by the EU is the *European Social Fund* (ESF), which encourages the establishment of International Community Networks (ICN). The partners in these networks include professional practitioners, grassroots community leaders, academics from local universities, and policymakers at local and EU levels. The purpose of these networks is to build up collaborative capacity, mutual learning, development and transfer of innovative tools, and best practices that have been field tested in national projects (European Commission 2004). Although the effectiveness of community networks varies with the collaborative capacity of their members, the specific challenges that confront international networks have not been sufficiently studied. This article explains the design of *Alameda-Equal*, an international network sponsored by the ESF in which community psychologists played a key role in promoting critical reflection and fostering a culture of evaluation.

Community Psychology and Collaborative Capacity in International Settings

Collaborative capacity refers to the conditions needed for coalitions, partnership, or networks to work together toward common goals in order to create sustainable community changes (Goodman et al. 1998). From the

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perspective of community psychology, collaborative capacity is associated with promoting a sense of community and a culture of learning, also referred to as *communities of practice*, among partners, in which individual members gain understanding, voice, and influence over decisions that affect their lives (Fetterman et al. 1996; Florin et al. 2000). Foster-Fishman et al. (2001) identified four processes needed to construct collaborative capacity among network members: (a) building individual *members' capacity* by helping them develop skills and knowledge about working in collaboration and fostering positive attitudes and motivation for collaboration; (b) creating *relational capacity* by fostering positive internal relationships among members as well as external relationships with other networks; (c) building *organizational capacity* by fostering effective leadership, communication, and procedures, as well as sufficient resources; and (d) developing *programmatic capacity* by following realistic goals that are driven by community needs and have culturally competent designs.

According to Ingleby and Schoorel (2007), collaborative capacity among international networks could promote interdisciplinary cooperation reducing the fragmentation and duplication of efforts that result from barriers between disciplines. Furthermore, it could facilitate the transfer of interventions designed for particular groups from one country to another—allowing for cultural and contextual adaptations; it could bring different theoretical and methodological traditions into contact with each other, stimulating critical thinking and problem solving; and it could create a body of knowledge and best practices to influence national and international policies.

Despite the above potential benefits, there are some challenges inherent in international networks' working collaboratively. Ingleby and Schoorel (2007) pointed out the most significant challenges: (a) the lack of a common model of implementation and evaluation of the basic strategies and principles among partners; (b) the lack of partners' experience in international collaborations; (c) the difficulties related to language and communication; (d) the effort required to schedule and attend meetings, and complete tasks when partners are in different countries; (e) the cultural differences in work pace, and perception of time across countries; (f) the fragmentation among multiple disciplines; (g) the segmentation within the network on national and international levels; and (h) the power relationships among members, which has an impact on making decisions.

Although previous research has supported the success of interdisciplinary networks to address complex social problems (e.g., Connors and Seifer 2000; Harper and Salina 2000; Maton et al. 2006; Suarez-Balcazar and García-Ramírez 2003; Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2006) community

psychologists have conducted little research on international networks involving a complex array of countries, settings, and languages. Community psychologists have a great deal of experience working with and developing networks for social change. They are able to engage the partners in a discussion of the issues involved and document and evaluate their efforts while simultaneously increasing the collaborative capacity of the partners (Fetterman 2002).

Building Collaborative Capacity in a European Network

The European Union is promoting the construction of international networks to address the integration of immigrants into the social and labor aspects of their communities. The long-term purpose of these networks is to strengthen the collaboration among its member states in order to develop a European identity and a sense of citizenship, progress, and cohesion as well as a common experience and history. In this sense, a core element of these partnerships is to widen the scope of partners in the collaboration process and strengthen collaboration in all phases of development and evaluation of the social interventions implemented by the member countries (European Union 2008).

The European Social Fund (ESF) is an initiative oriented toward guaranteeing structural and functional cohesion among its member states by aiming to provide every citizen with the same access to opportunities in the labor market and community life. The ESF helps member states combat unemployment by preventing people from dropping out of the labor market, by promoting training to improve the skills of the European workforce, and by supporting companies to be better equipped to face new global challenges. The ESF promotes international interdisciplinary community networks to disseminate the best practices identified at a national level, searching for the unification of working styles and the optimization of results. These networks have a horizontal structure and usually include three or four national partners. The various projects typically require university investigators to serve as external consultants. Funding is spread across the member states and regions, in particular those where economic development is less advanced. Over the period 2007–2013, some 75 billion Euros will be distributed to EU member states and regions to achieve ESF goals (European Commission 2008).

Alameda-Equal, a specific ICN composed of Spanish, Belgian, and Italian partners, is the focus of this paper. Established in 2002, the aim of Alameda-Equal was to develop innovative tools and strategies designed to prevent discrimination against immigrants in the labor market and

to exchange experiences and best practices among its members (Martínez et al. 2005). This international network attempted to enable partners to design and implement effective interventions, work as a team, and develop their collaborative capacity. The community psychologists from the Universidad de Sevilla (as a part of the contribution of the Spanish partner) were asked to establish and improve several aspects of the collaboration. The strategy was designed in collaboration with the coauthors from the University of Illinois at Chicago, with whom the Spanish team has an ongoing collaboration (García-Ramírez et al. 2003).

We anticipated potential barriers to, and likely pitfalls in, building and maintaining collaborative capacity among the participating countries (Martínez et al. 2000; García-Ramírez et al. 2002). The participation of these three countries was limited by differences in primary language spoken (Spanish, French, and Italian). Because there was no common language spoken by all network members, all materials were translated into all three languages.

Geographic distances implied that members could only participate at personal cost in terms of interruptions to their professional agendas, private and family businesses, and local professional obligations. There were also some barriers related to the professional and educational background of the partnership teams. The Spanish team included state workers, professionals from grass-root organizations, and university consultants; the Italian team was composed of private consultants who were experts in implementing European projects; and the Belgian team included bureaucrats from their Welfare and Health Ministries. Therefore, the positions of power of the members from each country were extremely different. In addition, cultural differences among the partners included work styles and pace of work, personality differences, and differences in the members' sense of commitment to the project.

Establishing a Collaborative Relationship

The community psychologist from Spain proposed a strategy designed to build and evaluate the collaborative capacity of the network. Network members agreed to pursue three goals: to identify and define activities that could improve long-term collaboration among national partners; to follow up the achievement of the activities of the network, establishing an internal system of ongoing evaluation of progress toward goals, objectives, and activities; and to evaluate the extent to which products developed by the network are the result of collaborative activities (for more on the evaluation, see Martínez et al. 2005).

To start with, network members needed to establish a collaborative relationship with common interests and

shared goals. The understanding among the partners was driven by mutual trust, respect, assurance, and compatibility (Suarez-Balcazar et al. 2005; Foster-Fishman et al. 2001). To facilitate consensus among network members, Brinkerhoff (2002) suggests the presence of trustworthy experts who support the initiative. In Alameda-Equal, the partners proposed a task force composed of the community psychology consultants and one professional from each of the national coalitions. This task force developed the framework for the collaborative relationship, connecting national groups and consulting with the project management committee in the decision-making process.

The task force also helped clarify questions from network members, encouraged discussion, prepared and conducted workshops and training seminars, and established a system of evaluation and documentation for all planned activities. An important achievement was the network members' adoption of the list of strategies for building collaborative capacities proposed by Foster-Fishman and her collaborators (2001) as a starting point to reflect on and discuss the priorities of the network. The input of the task force also helped address the barriers previously identified that arose from differences in language, culture, and interests among partners. It was possible to develop an agenda of common goals as well as goals specific to each national group. The task force assisted network members in adopting a formal decision-making process between the national partners and the management committee. Network members also agreed to hold a plenary forum to develop their action plans.

Building Collaborative Capacity

Once a general framework for the collaborative relationship was established, it was time to put the plan to increase the network's collaborative capacity into effect. Two things that needed to happen first were to equip the network members with the technical definition of collaborative capacity and to identify concrete strategies to increase the collaborative capacity within and among national groups and within the management committee. Therefore, two different processes were identified: processes that focused on increasing the internal collaborative capacity of the partners (communicate and work among themselves) and processes that focused on increasing their external collaborative capacity (communicate and work with others outside the network).

Using Foster-Fishman et al.'s (2001) list, the task force designed a system of discussion and reflection to be used among the different levels of members of the network, which enabled them to think critically about the strategies, skills, and products required to build up their collaborative capacity. Consultants instigated, advised, and provided

technical assistance and training when necessary. They also mediated within the management committee when conflicts among the national partners emerged. This process permitted network members to acquire a sense of ownership of the plan and provided them with an empowering way of thinking. This, in turn, enabled them to act and helped them realize that they were not acting individually but, rather, as a small community (Fetterman 2002).

Network members agreed to promote and develop personal competences, to share their social networks, and to build internal organizational capacity. With this focus, Alameda-Equal members were able to conduct various seminars, workshops, and brainstorming sessions in order to share and disseminate best practices to their respective teams; to assure a democratic and participatory atmosphere, facilitating transfer of knowledge of the culture and the history of the partners to one another; to promote frequent virtual and personal meetings at various localities. In addition, interpreters were hired and documents were translated. Members also conducted cultural competency training workshops within each national group. With these activities, network members were able to foster a sense of innovation, creativity, and eagerness to overcome personal barriers in order to embrace a common vision.

With regard to their activities outside the network, Alameda-Equal members were able to share knowledge and best practices related to integrating the immigrant labor force with colleagues and relevant community organizations in their respective countries; to develop new guidelines and policies for improving existing practices; to increase the level of expertise among relevant professionals from each country; and to disseminate the products and results of the interventions on a transnational level. The network teams carried out several additional activities. They were able to develop an index of indicators of immigrant labor integration, a virtual library focused on labor integration and immigration, a consensual definition of the professional profile of intercultural mediators or cultural competency professionals, and offer various workshops about immigrant worker issues in the three countries. Different groups of members were in charge of the various products and activities, and they received training and follow-up support from the task force.

Evaluating the Collaborative Capacity of the Network

As the international community network had to improve its ability to measure its own activities, the consultants from the task force had to provide training and develop instruments to make this possible. In addition, the consultants had to provide training on how to develop and use questionnaires, surveys, and other assessment tools, and how to lead discussion groups.

Evaluation involves a process but also generates a product. The task force members used several techniques to put together the information collected from the partners. The results of the evaluation had to explain whether each proposed activity was carried out as planned, identify the outcomes of each proposed activity, and state whether the process was conducted in a collaborative way and was building capacity. The members of the task force had to agree on a schedule to discuss the preliminary results, carry out all the data analyses required, and prepare a final report with a complete summary of the results and conclusions.

In Alameda-Equal, quantitative self-administered questionnaires were used to evaluate the degree to which the proposed goals and activities for collaborative capacity building among network members were attained (see “Appendix”). The instrument used items from the list developed by Foster-Fishman et al. (2001) that were selected as targets of the network’s activities and products. Qualitative interviews were used to assess the external instrumental processes. Multiple stakeholders in the governments, agencies, and communities from the three countries were interviewed using a set of standard questions.

After all members of the network had completed the questionnaire, a final forum was held with all partners and participants to discuss the results and lessons learned that might affect future collaborative initiatives. The members of the task force presented the results of the evaluation that were then discussed at the forum. This forum allowed participants to reflect critically about the experience, its challenges, and benefits. Participants were invited to make suggestions about the future of the coalitions and discuss the pertinence of including new partners, continuing or discontinuing some of the activities, and promoting new activities. They also discussed local needs that this initiative did not meet and the emerging problems of increased migration from sub-Saharan African countries, the racial tensions that this migration is generating in many communities, and the policies that are being considered among the partner countries to deal with this issue. The evaluation process was critical in allowing members of the network to identify their strengths and areas of improvement and to compare which strategies were working well in the context of the different countries. An analysis of contextual issues was important given that all three countries have different cultures and contexts. The results of the evaluation (the questionnaire, the interviews, and the final forum) were disseminated in a summary report to all network members and other stakeholders, such as community programs and agencies interested in the program. They were also used to enhance the communication between members, the sharing of information and best practices, and lessons learned from the programs implemented in each country to integrate immigrant workers.

Conclusion and Implications for Community Psychology

This article illustrates the collaboration between European and American community psychologists working together as consultants for an international community network involved in initiatives to integrate immigrant labor. We were able to combine our experiences and propose ideas to cope with the challenges of working as consultants in a transnational network. This is an example of using community psychology frameworks and principles to enhance and evaluate the collaborative capacity of an international network. From the onset, we assumed that improving the collaborative and evaluative capacities of network members would be impossible if we used rigid, prepackaged tools. The proposed participatory evaluation process, however, was tailored to the background experiences and specific needs, interests, and expectations of the partners. It is noteworthy that the community-psychology participatory approach was highly consistent with the philosophy and values of the ESF. As Lion and Martini (2006) stated, “The plurality of actors involved in programming and implementation of policies, the variety of objectives pursued, the multiplicity and heterogeneity of actions and strong links between the European Social Fund and other concurrent or complementary national policies have to influence the evaluation approach in terms of both issues and methodologies” (p. 2).

This international collaboration among community psychologists is adding to the scarce literature available in the field on international collaborations. Context and culture emerged as critical to this collaboration. Thus, each member country of the network added its own history, policies regarding immigration and labor laws, and ways of relating to migrant populations, among other factors. Other community psychologists have highlighted the importance of culture and context in collaborative capacity (Stockdill et al. 2002). Given the current emphasis on globalization there is an increasing need for documenting international networks such as the one discussed in this paper.

Projects like Alameda-Equal are powerful interventions to overcome the barriers that threaten European cohesion and that run the risk of excluding its more vulnerable citizens. That is one of the reasons why the European Union is making such a large investment in these programs. The consultant team needed to provide adequate paths for communication, designing strategies to overcome the linguistic barriers and making it possible to create a positive and trusting climate to manage emerging conflicts. Potential pitfalls to the collaboration process can endanger each step. In this case, we had to face several challenges, like

small budget allocations for consultants and evaluators of transnational activities, which made it difficult for the Spanish team members to conduct face-to-face meetings to discuss delicate issues with the partners; the reluctance of some members to participate in the follow-up process because of fears that evaluation results could have a negative influence on the funding of future proposals; mistrust of university researchers; and insufficient time for some network members to be included in the participatory process (for example, the timeline for the evaluation was short because of the great political pressure to implement the national programs).

The European Social Funds Commission has expressed its desire to keep similar records and assess the impact of other interventions in terms of collaborative capacity among international partners (European Commission 2004). This is the reason the ESF has opted for strategies of self-evaluation, which allow the attainment of continuous feedback, and aim toward continuous quality improvement of the various sponsored projects. To address the above challenges, we propose that community psychologists become more actively involved in the process of developing formal courses and training workshops on building collaborative capacity among community partners, government authorities, and other social scientists. We should also use new communication technologies to offer more opportunities to disseminate our methodologies and approaches and ask the ESF to include participatory evaluation strategies to enhance collaborative capacity when implementing community initiatives.

Given the state of globalization, more attention needs to be paid to international collaborations, their implications for the field, and their contributions to the advancement of theory and practice in community psychology. Through this study, we discovered that the partnership model developed on the basis of participatory evaluation methodologies allowed people with different levels of commitment and skills to work together and acquire confidence in their abilities as well as broaden their capacity for social influence. It is up to us, community psychologists, to share our skills and knowledge to promote the success of programs like Alameda-Equal.

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Appendix

See Table 1.

Table 1 Tool to evaluate the collaborative capacity built within EQUAL ECPN task forces

	Workgroups												
	Answer only in those in which you have participated. Check the code list at the bottom of the page												
	CC	SLI	E	OL	WS	BP	NW	CC	W1	W2	W3	NE	
The members of this workgroup have improved their teamwork skills													
My participation in this group has improved my understanding of immigrants' job problems													
The collaboration among members of this group has been productive													
Collaboration among the members of this group has allowed us to achieve our predicted goals													
In this group, the members' viewpoints have been respected and valued													
I felt capable of influencing this workgroup													
This workgroup encouraged the participation of all its members													
The group helped its members identify and strengthen their skills													
In this group we learned to overcome difficulties													
In this group we learned to overcome the difficulties caused by linguistic differences													
In this workgroup a positive and open atmosphere was promoted													
In this group there was an effective conflict-management atmosphere													
In this group we shared the same goals													
All members of the group participated in the decision-making process													
We included the interests and ideas of all members in the job plan													
In this group we took the individual differences into account													
This group increased its relationships with its communities and institutional representatives													
My social network has broadened as a result of my participation in this group													
This workgroup had democratic leadership													
This group has a leader with adequate conflict-resolution skills													
In this group adequate work procedures were developed													
Communication in this workgroup was effective													
In this group we shared information and solved our problems by consensus													
This group optimized the use of the economic resources granted to it													
This group aimed at continuous improvement and feedback													
In this group the deadlines to finalize the products were respected													

CC coalition coordination, SLI social-labor indicators, E exchanges, OL on line library, WS web site, BP best practices, NW network

CC cultural competence mediator, W1 workshop 1, W2 workshop 2, W3 workshop 3, NE network evaluation

English version has only been made with the purpose of being included in this paper

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