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# INTEVAL as a Positively Charged Social Network

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**Background:** This article seeks to employ theoretical insights from two connected bodies of literature to understand the unique characteristics of the International Research Group for Policy and Program Evaluation (INTEVAL). One perspective draws on insights from social network theories about how some networks are supportive and innovative while others are not. The second perspective draws on organizational learning and community of practice theories which illuminate how informal networks facilitate learning, innovation, and knowledge sharing.

**Purpose:** This article aims to explore INTEVAL as a positively charged social network, employing theories on social networks and communities of practice to understand its impact.

**Setting:** INTEVAL is a multidisciplinary, multicultural, and multinational group of evaluation experts who convene annually to discuss innovative topics in evaluation, contributing to book publications in the Comparative Policy Evaluation series.

**Intervention:** N/A

**Research Design:** The article uses a theoretical approach, drawing on social network and community of practice theories, supported by empirical observations and experiences within the INTEVAL network.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** The analysis is based on the author's extensive engagement with INTEVAL, supplemented by literature on social networks and communities of practice.

**Findings:** INTEVAL exemplifies the theoretical insights concerning features of a positively charged social network. Ray Rist's central role and personal connections have been pivotal in maintaining the network. Theories on organizational learning emphasize the importance of mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, which are evident in INTEVAL's practices. The density and reciprocity within the network, evidenced by frequent and meaningful interactions, contribute to the group's longevity and effectiveness. The nonhierarchical structure further supports knowledge sharing and lowers barriers to participation. These theoretical insights underscore the significance of trust, belonging, and a supportive network culture in sustaining INTEVAL's success and offer valuable lessons for other communities of practice.

**Keywords:** *social network theory; organizational learning; community of practice; INTEVAL; evaluation research; knowledge sharing; innovation*

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Social network theory provides one lens to understand the unique nature of the International Research Group for Policy and Program Evaluation (INTEVAL). Simply put, the theory attempts to explain why some networks of individuals are supportive, useful, and inspiring and why others are not. Granovetter (1973, 1983, 1985) described social relationships according to intensity of the relationship, and distinguished between strong and weak ties. Strong relationships can be described by their degree of intimacy, and typically involve close family members/friends. Weak ties are described as loose relationships that meet more seldom, this could be colleagues or acquaintances. Granovetter (1983,1985) showed that “the strength in weak ties” is that they provide access to new information and resources. While he also emphasized that the stronger the ties, the more effectively people work, and the more likely they have a high degree of trust and reciprocity. Scholars in organizational learning (Senge et al., 1999) have identified certain types of informal networks as a key explanation of diffusion of innovation and learning among individuals. Informal networks are vital to how people learn, share visions, coach each other, and make known practical lessons over time.

Rist (1999) has discussed similar views in an article on preconditions for learning, where he states that organizational learning takes place within the context of shared understandings, experiences, and values. While he focuses on organizational learning in the public sector, he identifies some preconditions for learning that may as well be applied to learning in general. For instance, the positive correlation between the credibility of the source and the acceptance of the information.

## A Community of Practice

INTEVAL could be described as social network rooted in a community of practice. The concept of community of practice has in the literature been adopted to describe learning within informal social networks:

[A community of practice is] a group of people who are spontaneously and informally bound through their sense of joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire of common resources. Participants are informally bound together by collectively developed knowledge, social interactions, established norms and relationships reflecting their interactions and communal resources

including language, routines, artefacts and stories. (Filstad et al., 2019, p. 119)

The practices of such a community are built over time, and are conducive to learning and innovation.

INTEVAL is a loosely connected multidisciplinary, multicultural, and multinational group of evaluation experts. The group comes together annually to discuss cutting-edge and innovative topics in the field of evaluation. These discussions lead to identifying and agreeing on new book titles for publication, and drafting book chapters for each publication, all published in the Comparative Policy Evaluation series with Ray Rist as the editor (now published by Routledge, Taylor & Francis group). Between the annual gatherings, the editors and contributors to the books work on the books/chapters and meet virtually in smaller groups.

The article in this volume by Gray and Lindkvist gives an excellent description of the history of INTEVAL and Ray’s key role throughout. While they use theory on psychological safety to explain the unique nature of the group, we are applying theories on community of practice and social networks as our perspective.

INTEVAL may well be described as a community of practice. Network meetings and interactions are not only marked by presenting and sharing information and knowledge, but more importantly the interaction is focused on the practice of producing and reflecting on evaluation and evaluative knowledge. This makes it different from other professional networks that meet once a year primarily to present and discuss the participants’ own papers and articles.

Wenger (1998) identifies three structural elements of communities of practice: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, which together define the practice and identity within the community. Wenger also discusses how communities establish what constitutes competent participation through their practice, which evolves over time. Learning in a community of practice relies on the participants’ sense of belonging. Mutual engagement creates a sense of shared reality in which to act and construct an identity (Filstad et al., 2019). The literature on social networks could help us further understand what makes particular communities of practice such as INTEVAL successful.

## Features of a Positively Charged Social Network

Some of the key features in describing a positively charged social network are centrality, betweenness, density, and reciprocity (Freeman, 2004). These features, in addition to the nonhierarchical construction, may be used to explain why INTEVAL still exists 40 years after it was created, and still produces book volumes with the acceptable quality and relevance to be published by an internationally renowned publisher.

The centrality perspective in social network theory, which explains why an individual with a high degree of centrality is likely to become an opinion leader, may be an explanation to understand Ray Rist's key role. A centralized network will have many of its links dispersed around one or a few individuals. Ray is also a person who has a personal relationship with all the participants in the group. This is what in social network theory is called "betweenness"—a measure of the extent to which an individual is directly connected to other individuals who are not directly connected to each other.

The terms "density" and "reciprocity" may be used to explain why the INTEVAL group has developed from just being connected through a common leader to being a positively charged network. Density, meaning frequency, duration of interaction, and amount of effort individuals invest in a relationship, explains how the social ties in the group have been strengthened through annual meetings and interaction between the meetings on the production of the books. This is a strong signal of the willingness to invest time and resources over time and an indication of reciprocity, meaning getting equal benefits from the relationship. Reciprocity norms within a network depend on culture, history, and the roles of the actors involved (Gamper, 2022, pp. 42–43), which may be a good description of why the members of INTEVAL continue to work together again and again.

Nonhierarchical structure is a feature of informal networks that often are beneficial to cocreation of knowledge. With the exception of Rist having been the de facto leader of the network, there are no formal hierarchies or strict rules or regulations to be adhered to. From literature on learning we know that such a flat social structure is conducive to knowledge sharing, since the bar for raising questions and contributing is low. The density and reciprocity are strengthened by the active diminishing of the hierarchy within the network. It is also notable that most of the members

of the network are not in a prescribed working relationship with each other.

## The Art of Networking

A positively charged network doesn't just appear by itself. It requires a conscious effort to build a network. There may be many ways of describing what specifically this implies. For instance, Schaut (2022) lists five key elements: (1) Help others, (2) Be fully present, (3) Stay in touch, (4) Be self-aware, and (5) Be respectful. In our views this is a good description of how INTEVAL has been created as a network. Ray, by his style and personality, has refined these elements and has set an example that others have followed. The joint efforts have indeed made INTEVAL a positively charged social network.

With his many social ties, Ray has had and used the opportunity to receive and disseminate knowledge. His professional and social ties with practically all INTEVAL members have made him the core of the network. He has been the bridge between the many different individuals who were not previously connected. Some of the founding members of the group have also played key roles and contributed to amplify Ray's centrality.

Ray has been clear in his role of leading the network. He has also gently had to guide some participants to leave who did not respect the culture of the group, or who tried to elevate their own roles. Ray has always been articulate in emphasizing the practice of producing knowledge. He has consciously made new members feel welcomed and acknowledged. This has contributed to strengthening ties and giving a feeling of belonging, which are preconditions for a positively charged social network.

## From an Informal Network to Institutionalization

Even though Rist as an individual has been important, there are several in the network who have been central in sustaining the network and in contributing substantially to making the network the active community of practice that it is. But INTEVAL is more than the sum of its individual members. Over the years the edited book series on comparative policy evaluation has produced a number of important books that contribute to furthering evaluation knowledge and practices. One of the books is titled *From Studies to Streams* (Rist & Stame, 2006). This title encapsulates not only the writings of the network, but also the way

individuals have come together as a network. The sum of several individuals' knowledge about evaluation is turned into a stream of evaluation knowledge, contributing to the institutionalization of policy evaluation.

## Lessons for Other Communities of Practice

Many different communities of practice exist. Unlike INTEVAL, most last for a limited time and then disappear. We have in this article tried to explain why INTEVAL is different, using social network theory as the lens. The features of the social network theory have been in play during the many years of interaction between the INTEVAL members. Reciprocity in the form of knowledge sharing, social support, and friendship is probably one of the reasons why members continue to invest time and resources to participate. It is also reasonable to assume that this creates a sense of trust and belonging. We also think this is a main lesson for others to learn from.

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