
Women's Business Networks: Do They Contribute to Sustainability by Facilitating Bonding and Bridging Ties, Increasing Confidence and Encouraging Creativity and the Sharing of Good Ideas?

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Abstract

Research gaps in the field of women's enterprise to date highlight a need to expand the knowledge base of networking approaches adopted by women in a business environment and to further our understanding of gender specific business support vehicles, such as networks.

In an effort to contribute to this emerging field, this paper aims to investigate the phenomenon, within themes drawn from a social capital framework and from a contextual perspective, considering whether women's business networks offer facilitating environments: nurturing trust; stimulating collaboration and co-operation; increasing social capital; facilitating bridging ties across structural holes; encouraging creativity through the sharing of ideas and ultimately contributing to sustainability.

Key Words

Women's Business Network, Social Enterprise, Network theory, Enterprise, Business, Gender, Social Capital, Feminist perspective, Sustainability, Confidence, Trust, Reciprocity, Collaboration, Bridging ties, Bonding ties

Background

As identified by Henderson (1991), organisations in the social economy sector are established in response to an identified need: to address a gap in the market. Women entrepreneurs in the North West identified that there was a lack of appropriate networks to answer the specific needs of businesswomen. In response to this, Women's Business Network (North West) Ltd (WBN) was established, as a social enterprise in April 2001. The organisation is driven by a declared mission and values aligned with the social enterprise sector.

The aims of the organisation are to support the creation of new women's business networks, both geographically based and sector focussed and to link these networks, as a network of networks, across the region. WBN currently has a membership of 22 networks, representing over 3,500 women.

As a membership organisation, WBN listens to and responds to the needs of its members, predominantly gathering this intelligence through Network Co-ordinators, as such, it might also be described as a community of interest company.

WBN organisational objectives, which are economic and social, provide the framework for all activities. As a social enterprise, WBN invests energy into the development of commercial income generating activities, for example the delivery of consultancy and training, to enable a more flexible, autonomous approach to the delivery of organisational objectives.

Despite a commitment by the UK government to invest in the development of women's enterprise support structures, there still remains limited understanding of the needs of women starting up and developing their enterprises or the effectiveness or value of women only business networks.

There is a need to expand the knowledge base of the networking process adopted by women in a business environment and to further our understanding of the economic and social benefits that might be gained through participation in gender specific support vehicles, such as networks.

The aim of this research was therefore, to investigate the particular benefits women gain through membership of a women's business network and focussing on the impact on individuals from a personal and business perspective. The study sought to evaluate whether women's business networks offer an environment, which facilitates access to these benefits.

Introduction

"The international community of nations has publicly committed itself to promoting gender equity, reflecting the realisation that the equality of men and women is essential for sustainable economic growth and full social development" (Rubin and Bartle, 2005, p1). The future of our world depends on our recognising the need to take positive actions to achieve sustainability, actions which address economic, social and environmental issues and effect change for the better. It is beyond the reach of this paper to discuss this huge agenda, rather this research focuses on the discrete aspect of furthering our understanding of what makes a facilitating environment for relationship building between women in business, however, the authors suggest that developing knowledge within this context can contribute to and inform strategies for broader sustainable change.

Women's participation in business ownership in European member states remains static, or in fact in some instances is in decline, Neergaard *et al* (2005, p339) suggest as one of the contributing factors, that:

it may be that women's participation in business ownership is restricted by gender-based influences, including the types of networks in which they are embedded and the extent to and ways which they can access and draw on networks for business purposes.

The emphasis of network theory to date has largely been on developing an understanding of network structures and process, which although important areas of research, fail to address all aspects of the phenomenon. O'Donnell *et al* (2001, p754) identify certain areas and issues which remain relatively neglected, that is: the process of networking; the contents of network relations; the dynamic nature of networks; networks in practice and the skill of networking.

In an effort to contribute to this emerging field, this paper aims to further our understanding of women's business networks, focussing on the impact on individuals from a personal and business perspective and seeking to evaluate whether women's business networks offer a facilitative environment, creating access to benefits and contributing to sustainability. The study is underpinned by network theory and social capital theory and necessarily draws reference to the feminist perspective and the ethics of care to contribute to our understanding of gender differences in network participation.

Theoretical Frameworks

Network Theory

Networking has long been recognised as a key ingredient to professional success and is frequently considered from the perspective of organisational effectiveness and performance. Research has identified that networks can be prescribed or emergent, formal or informal, literature attempts to understand networking as both a behaviour and a skill. A wide range of authors (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2004; Brass, 1985; Travers *et al*, 1997; Pini *et al*, 2004) have contributed substantially to the development of network theory, developing our understanding of structures and processes, drawing our attention to the wide ranging influences underpinning interactions within the network context and encouraging research that acknowledges the variables and investigates the implications on both individual and group effectiveness in the networking process.

Granovetter (1973) identified the distinction between "strong ties", suggesting these to be more appropriate for purposes such as social mobilisation and "weak ties", which he deemed to be better for knitting a society together and for building broad norms of generalised reciprocity, articulating concepts which are present in and to be further explored within social capital theory. The linkages between the two theoretical frameworks can be witnessed frequently and can be seen to manifest

themselves in the definitional language employed, as exemplified by the hugely influential work of Burt, who, echoing Putnam's articulation of bridging and bonding social capital, hypothesises that it is the brokerage across "structural holes" between groups that provides the mechanism by which social capital is accumulated. This interest in the connectivity of the network to external resources available in other groups again focuses our attention less on the behaviour of the individual within the network, but rather on the level of linkages the network itself generates and whether these linkages can be taken advantage of, thus extending our consideration of networking skills to incorporate those which are deemed necessary to identify, interpret, translate and synthesise ideas across groups.

Drawing on the work of Mitchell amongst others, Neergaard *et al* (2005, p348) offer a conceptual framework (fig.1) for network studies of owner managers from a woman's perspective, which recognises the interplay between content, structure and interaction.

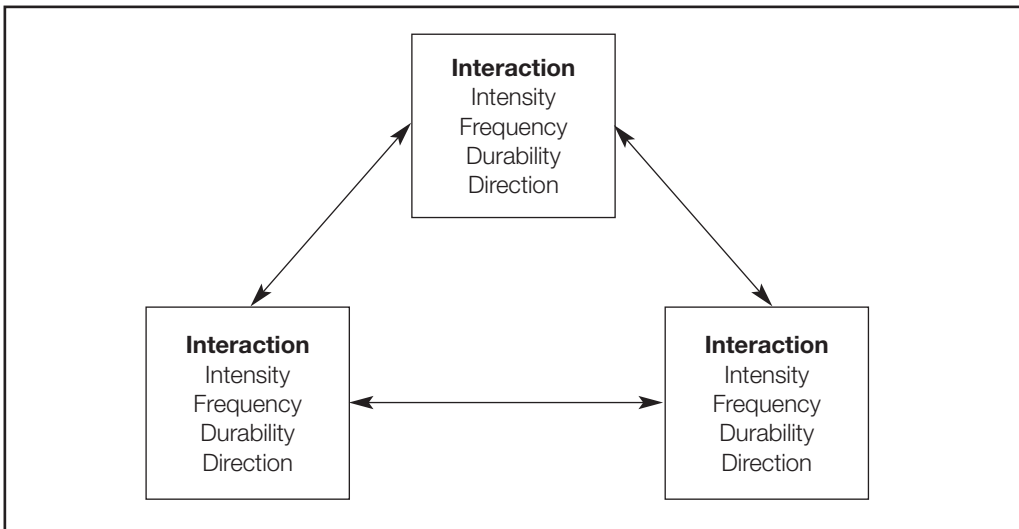


Figure 1 Conceptual framework for network studies Source: Neergaard *et al* (2005, p348)

According to McCarthy *et al* (2004, p11), "a networked world can become a more sustainable and a more enriching place", however we still have a long way to go in developing our understanding of network logic, furthermore, literature demonstrates limited research considering the combined aspects of women's enterprise and networking.

Research findings in the area of intra-organisational women's networks offer evidence that networking with other women can offer advantages in both career and social terms (Brass, 1985; Travers *et al*, 1997; Pini *et al*, 2004). However, Brass (1985, p330) offers that, "if women are less likely to be aware of or to build informal networks, it is likely that women will have less contact with others who are not included in their immediate groups". In relation to Burt's findings regarding the higher value of building bridges across groups, this conclusion may lead us to consider that the networking experiences of women are not necessarily opening up access to the creativity of good ideas that can be generated through connections across structural holes.

Vinnicombe and Colwill (1996, p88) offer further evidence to suggest that networking serves a different function for women as opposed to men, commenting that it is more "social" for women and more "utilitarian" for men. Some authors interpret this different functionality as network

membership delivering less benefit to women than it does to men, as women do not achieve the outcome of increasing their personal power, for example Timberlake (2004, p38) suggests, "women do not have access to social capital as women are excluded, or may exclude themselves, from the social networks that are the most significant component of successful power acquisition". This interpretation is dependant on us believing that a key objective in networking activity is access to power, a view that reflects the historic academic construction in the field and leads us to consider the possible distortions resulting from the male dominated influences on theory development. Greer and Greene (2003, p18) clearly articulate how this issue can affect business support strategies and suggest an alternative approach:

A traditional approach to entrepreneurship would focus on how to assist women business owners with growth and income generation, two areas where they typically lag behind. A more feminist and sociological approach recognises the additional validity of a low growth, less aggressive approach to earnings, along with the importance of business survival as a criterion of business success.

Acknowledging network theory is as yet an emerging field, it is considered useful to investigate alternative frameworks. Social capital theory bears close relation to network theory and it is offered that this provides sources of key contribution to unpicking the relational behaviours of social interactions and social structures. As articulated above, there exists the possibility that research investigating business networks has been shaped by the experiences and perceptions of men, therefore this paper also draws upon the feminist critique, to provide elaboration of this perspective and identify useful insights to inform understanding.

Feminist Perspective

Greer and Greene (2003, p1) contend that, "future research on women in entrepreneurship would benefit from a thorough grounding in wider sociological scholarship on women's economic activity and in more complete applications of feminist theory".

A wide range of feminist theories exist, but here we will introduce three sub categories: Liberal, Marxist and Radical. As Greer and Greene (2003, p2) offer, "the goal of liberal feminism historically has been the elimination of explicit legal and institutional barriers to women's participation in society" and it is based on the premise that "men and women are equal, autonomous individuals". Calas and Smircich (1996, p232) summarise, "Marxist feminism thought analyses how identities are constructed through social practices such as work, observing that power and sexuality are interwoven in work relations" and further that it "is thus concerned with women's double oppression of both class and sex". Finally radical feminism groups together approaches that have their basis in the fact that men and women are essentially different, with the result that, as Greer and Greene (2003, p11) describe,

male dominance is maintained, then, by systematically ranking the difference between women and men in such a way that men have more power (socially, economically, politically, occupationally, symbolically) and women have less.

Thus the theories, although built on differing premises, challenge a male dominated culture and propose alternative approaches which "emphasise the positive value of qualities identified with women" (Calas and Smircich 1996, p226). Encouraging us to examine that which we have taken for granted, early feminism questioned the impact of the under-representation of women in scientific research. Introducing the perspective of the "woman's voice", Gilligan, cited in Calas &

Smircich, (1992a) drew attention to the way in which inadvertent bias influenced not only the research design, but also the interpretation of results which underpinned the construction of a universal theory. Not only highlighting the effect of existing bias in society, Gilligan also introduced a key factor to support our understanding, that is the identification of gender differences in perception, thinking and self positioning. As a result of her study, she suggests that conceptual influences to reasoning differ between the genders, whereby men's action are "justified according to a system of rules", whereas,

women on the other hand, conceive of themselves as embedded contextually in an interpersonal network where the primary imperative is to be responsible to others and caring to maintain the web of connections. Actions are justified with reference to their impact on others. (Calas & Smircich, 1992a, p230)

Recognising the impact of the approach adopted by Gilligan and other researchers, Calas and Smircich (1992b, p232) emphasise, "how certain values, more common to male socialization, had come to be accepted as the standard for human beings". This encourages us to formulate more appropriate conceptualisations of the world.

The feminist critique has attacked the tendency of researchers studying women to use men as their standards of comparison. A key consideration in this work is therefore not only that research in the area of female entrepreneurship is still relatively new, but also that it has been developed within a framework that reflects a masculine dominated subtext and as a result, theories fall short, as they largely attempt to ignore all other dimensions of difference. Supporting this argument, Bruni *et al* (2004, p264) suggest,

to study gender from a feminist post-structural positioning means to destabilise gender categories studying the social, material and discursive practices which categorise persons within a binary system, attributing them features of masculinity, femininity and constructing symbolic systems, which are defined by difference.

Definitions of success, power and status have been historically influenced by traditional male values. Within the gender specific context of the research, the overarching framework offered by the ethics of care is offered as support of the premise that women only business networks provide the facilitating conditions to create network ties. Feminine contributions, that is: collaboration, co-operation, participation and empowerment, may shape and influence the network process, laying the foundations for enabling environments. These contributing characteristics of individuals may be the key influencers in the advancing of the whole, as Inkpen and Tsang (2005, p158) note, "individual social capital is critical, drives the development of organisational social capital and becomes the focus of the facilitating conditions".

Further, consideration of the questions raised within the feminist critique lead us to place emphasis on context, recognise the potential for the existence of different characteristics and motivations between the genders and encourage the use of reflection to underpin analyses.

Social Capital Theory

First introduced at the beginning of this century, social capital theory largely builds on the work of Bourdieu and Coleman in the eighties, who focussed on the strength of the cohesive ties within groups and their impact on collaborative action and the mobilisation of resources. Bourdieu's work contributed significantly to the positioning of social capital as a field of research. Although criticised for an overemphasis on close ties, rather than weak ties, Coleman's work, is also recognised as

holding a strong influence on contemporary debate. He saw the creation of social capital as a largely unintentional process, accumulating as a result of investment in activities engaged in for other purposes and acknowledged potential limitations, noting that "a given form of social capital that is valuable in facilitating certain actions may be useless or even harmful in others" (Coleman, 1994, p302).

Widely cited, Putnam is respected as promoting the entry of social capital into a wide range of fields and supplies a commonly used definition as: "features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating co-ordinated actions" (Putnam *et al*, 1993, p167), thus introducing the three features that continue to dominate the conceptual discussion.

Authors have distinguished between formal and informal, thick versus thin and inward looking versus outward looking social capital, demonstrating efforts to improve our understanding of this multi-dimensional model. Further unravelling the concept, Putnam introduces us to the differentiation between bonding and bridging social capital, thus,

bonding social capital brings together people who are like one another in important respects (ethnicity, age, gender, social class and so on), whereas bridging social capital refers to social networks that bring together people who are unlike one another
(Putnam, 2002, p11).

Further contributing to theory building and reinforcing the potentially higher returns to be gained from bridging ties, Burt's (2004, p358) work on structural holes demonstrated that "companies with a heterogeneous mix of alliance partners enjoyed faster revenue growth" thus supporting his theory that,

given greater homogeneity within than between groups, people whose networks bridge the structural holes between groups have earlier access to a broader diversity of information and have experience in translating information across groups
(Burt, 2004, p354).

The impact of this external connectivity is not underestimated in the literature, influential thinkers have identified the importance of the potential creativity and the stimulation of ideas that is generated through cross-disciplinary interaction. John Stuart Mill ([1848] 1987, p581) offered the opinion that,

it is hardly possible to overrate the value.....of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves and with models of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar....Such communication has always been and is peculiarly in the present age, one of the primary sources of progress.

In conceptualising the relevance of the application of the theory, we are invited to consider the inter relationship between social capital and sustainability by Porritt (2005, p159) who suggests, "from a sustainability perspective, the concept of social capital offers an exciting new way of thinking about and measuring the social dimensions of sustainability".

Elevating social capital to being integral to our understanding of economies, there exists considerable evidence that progress will not be achieved without the presence of trust. Civic participation is key to economic progress, as Porritt (2005, p281) notes, "we need a renewal of trust

between citizens and government simply because sustainable development cannot be delivered solely through individual choices, business innovation and voluntary action". Trust develops through the process of dialogue and the existence of trust stimulates reciprocity, "as atmosphere of trust should contribute to the free exchange of knowledge between committed exchange partners (Inkpen and Tsang, 2005, p154), or as Putnam (1993, p171) states, "trust lubricates co-operation. The greater the level of trust within a community, the greater the likelihood of co-operation, and co-operation itself breeds trust." Fukayama (2001, p8), further contributes that, "all groups embodying social capital have a certain radius of trust, that is, the circle of people among whom co-operative norms are operative" and that the size of the "radius of trust", that is whether it be larger or smaller than the group itself, reflects the positive or negative externalities accordingly.

Reflecting on contributions to theory development so far, we can identify key factors as: trust; co-operation; collaboration; reciprocity and networks, however, acknowledging that what may constitute social capital in one context, may be unsocial in another, draws our attention to the absolute need to consider the form, cultural domain, levels and form of interaction. The issue of investigating social capital, without contextualisation is further articulated by Wallis *et al* (2004, p240) who state that, "the complex set of relations and motivations that comprise the concept called social capital are highly context-dependent".

The discussion of social capital theory initially appears to throw up more questions than answers. As yet an emerging field, we are witnessing a fascinating range of contributions, although reflection suggests some degree of consistency: key features, being both positive and negative and being dependent upon the group, the culture, the situation and the outcome. The literature highlights the importance of devising local, contextually based measures in approaches to research. However, doubts cast over the empirical viability of developed methodologies to measure social capital do not necessarily bring into question the appropriateness of the theory to this research, which does not purport to measure impact. As Schuller *et al* (2002, p23) conclude, "despite, or even, because of, its problematic nature, social capital has, at this juncture, enormous potential for opening up new issues and providing fresh perspectives".

Considering Coleman's position that the creation of social capital is an unintentional process, we are encouraged to draw on conceptual factors that have been articulated in the theory development, without a reliance on this being the path to definitive solution. Therefore, it is considered that the concepts articulated within the theory, set within a wider analytical research approach, which both considers context and values the qualitative approaches encouraged within the feminist schools, contribute a suitable framework for research.

Rationale

The literature suggests that different gender functionalities exist in networking and that the positioning of women in society, together with the cumulative impact of their experiences, may mean that women have limited access to ideas generation, as they possess less opportunity to make connections across structural holes. Networking theory still leaves a number of gaps and the framework priorities identified by Neergaard *et al* (2005, p348) contribute dimensions worthy of consideration. Is it possible that despite the lack of access to opportunity faced by women, the network content: emotional support; companionship; informational support and tangible support (Neergaard *et al* 2005, p348) offers an alternative route to innovation and good ideas? This hypothesis is supported by Inkpen and Tsang (2005, p156), who offer, "proximity helps the formation of network ties and facilitates interfirm and especially interpersonal interactions through which knowledge is exchanged".

The feminist perspective highlights persistent gender blindness and the impact of the continued influence of male dominated perception and experience and encourages us to reflect on this in our interpretation. Finally social capital theory not only presents a framework to shape the research method, but also draws our attention to the wider implications and the links that might be made between understanding the processes that support the growth of social capital and how this might inform our approaches to investment in social sustainability. The value of this is captured by Porritt (2005, p161), who informs us:

The simple truth of it is that, without high and stable levels of social capital, no society can achieve its collective aspirations, companies and entrepreneurs find it much harder to transact their day-to-day business and fewer individuals have the opportunity to develop their full potential.

Consideration of the literature indicates that innovation is achieved through the generation and exchange of ideas and suggests that the environments which encourage such exchanges to be more effective are built on high levels of social capital. Therefore the research aimed to investigate this phenomenon by means of gathering and interpreting the perspectives of Co-ordinators of women's business networks and women business owners, who are members of those networks.

Methodology

Women are not a homogeneous group, notions of difference must be recognised and the feminist literature encourages that the researcher locates herself through declaration of background, experiences and values. As one of the authors is writing from the standpoint of a woman, as both an academic researcher and a practitioner within the women's enterprise support sector, this shapes the interpretation and delivers a perspective that lies within a set of already established beliefs and opinions; readers, located differently, may find alternative understanding. This declaration is included, in that it might assist the reader to understand the researcher's conception of reality.

The researcher's learning style; that of interpretivist, suggests strength in observation, reflection and abstract conceptualisation, promoting better understanding, interpretation and construction of meanings for actions, events and situations. Truman (1996, p28) suggests, "feminist epistemology stresses the importance of legitimising research as we personally live it and experience it - thus giving voice to the way that 'the personal is political' underpins feminist research", thereby supporting the benefits of an interpretivist style as being appropriate to this research, adopted in such a way that acknowledges, respects and considers context.

Due to existing relationships, researcher objectivity might be questioned, however considering the epistemological implications arising from the ontological position, that is the relationship between subjects and researcher, it can be argued that existing knowledge, experiences and relationships, in fact, add value to this research, as the distance between the two parties is minimised. Limitations in the research, resulting from lack of time and resource, are acknowledged. The lack of longitudinal study was addressed through the collection of nominal data in the survey, to enable an attitudinal comparison between groups of women who have benefited from network membership over different time periods. This research also suffers from a common criticism of feminist theory, choosing women only as research subjects and therefore not collecting data to enable gender comparison.

Method

Research methods: focus group; questionnaire survey and semi-structured interviews, were undertaken consequentially. The mixed methodology approach, combining quantitative and

qualitative research methods, is defended from both the feminist perspective and the developing thinking in the field of organisational and social research, which questions the ultimate achievement of objective research and applauds the recognition of the subjective influence. Thus, it is offered that those adopting an interpretive approach have a better claim to objectivity, that context has relevant influence, language, meanings and understanding are never static and interpretation is dependant on both the writer's and the reader's location, culture and experiences, at any given time.

Subjects were drawn from the membership of Women's Business Network (NW) Ltd: a membership of 50 networks, representing over 5,000 women in business, across the North West. As WBN Co-ordinator, the researcher had access to this relevant research set, recruitment of Network Co-ordinators was defined by personal experience, recruitment of women business owners was based on the recommendation of these Network Co-ordinators, therefore, the sampling frame adopted can be described as convenience sampling. The research methods undertaken, the sample groups and participant numbers are summarised in the following table (fig. 2).

Sample group	Research method	Number
Network Co-ordinators	Focus Group	5
Network Co-ordinators	Pilot questionnaire	12
Network members (women in business)	Survey questionnaire	59
Network members (women in business)	Semi-structured interview	5

Figure 2 Summary research methods

The small sample sizes and predominantly qualitative approach might call into question the interpretation of results and their applicability to the general. However, the research approach addresses the ontological dimension, gathering people's views and attaching value to these opinions, it is therefore argued that the methodological approach allowed for attitudinal and motivational responses to emerge.

Themes and Indicators

All research methods investigated the same themes, using a set of questions that had been developed as a result of the initial literature review, delivered in a consistent, pre-determined order, throughout each stage of the research process. Themes, drawn from social capital theory, were translated into indicators designed to capture data as follows:

Personal Impact

Kilpatrick *et al* (1999, p136) suggest personal development as an indicator of social capital building.

Indicator 1: Increased levels of confidence.

Reciprocity & Trust

Inkpen and Tsang (2005, p154) suggest "as trust develops over time, opportunities for knowledge transfer between network members should increase". Further, closely connected to trust, is the feature of reciprocity.

Indicator 2: Sharing of ideas, knowledge or contacts (giving & receiving)

Indicator 3: Extension of contacts (outside existing network)

Collective Social Capital

Drewery and Davies (2003) note that “social networks are acknowledged to be important conduits for information and valuable bases for collaborative behaviour”.

Indicator 4: Contribution to the group development

Indicator 5: Collaboration (business)

Results

5 Co-ordinators participated in the focus group, three of the networks represented had a membership of less than 10, the fourth had a membership of between 21 and 50 and the fifth had a membership of between 50 and 100. 59 completed survey questionnaires were returned, the profile of respondents' current economic status demonstrated that 41% were employed, 5% were not economically active and 54% were in business.

Following analysis of the focus group and survey questionnaire results, reflection allowed review to ensure that categories and themes initially identified were appropriate and trends were emerging from the data. Revisions to key themes were not considered necessary, however additional questions were introduced to the interview structure, reflecting issues identified in the early research stages. Additional questions investigated initial objectives when joining the network; the role of trust and the potential impact of network membership on sustainability. Of the five women interviewed, three had been running their businesses for more than 3 years, one for between 1 and 2 years and one for less than a year. Four of the subjects belonged to networks where the meetings were attended by between 21 and 50 women, one belonged to a smaller network where less than 10 members participated in meetings.

Homals test was applied to the questionnaire survey results, to investigate association between business age; network size; frequency of meeting attendance and length of membership (fig. 3).

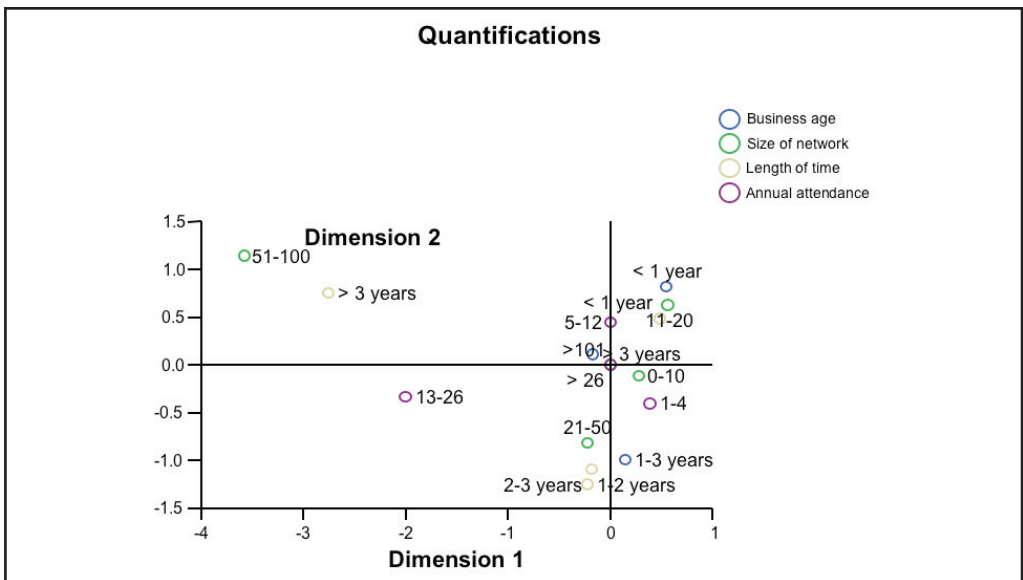


Figure 3 Quantification of business age; network size; frequency of meeting attendance and length of membership

The results indicated an association between business age and size of network, with medium sized businesses predominantly belonging to medium sized networks. Results demonstrated the clustering of younger businesses, smaller networks and less frequent network attendance in the right hand quadrants. The bottom left hand quadrant indicated medium age businesses attending medium sized networks reasonably frequently. Finally the top left hand quadrant suggests that the well established businesses (trading more than 3 years) have more of an association with larger networks.

Personal Impact

Findings from indicated that women perceived their participation in women only networking activities to impact positively on both their personal development and their business. Women reported that they chose women only networks as they considered that they offer support that is not generally available in mixed gender networks and further that motivation is largely driven by the opportunity to access this support. Attitudinal data regarding perceived levels of confidence before joining the network and at the time of survey distribution was subjected to comparative analysis, considering cluster groups based on economic status, network size, length of time of network membership and frequency of annual attendance. The results of a one way ANNOVA test indicated that women perceive network membership to have a positive impact on their confidence, [total mean now: 4.3390, before joining the network: 3.4915]. Comparison of means in bar chart format is presented below (fig. 4):

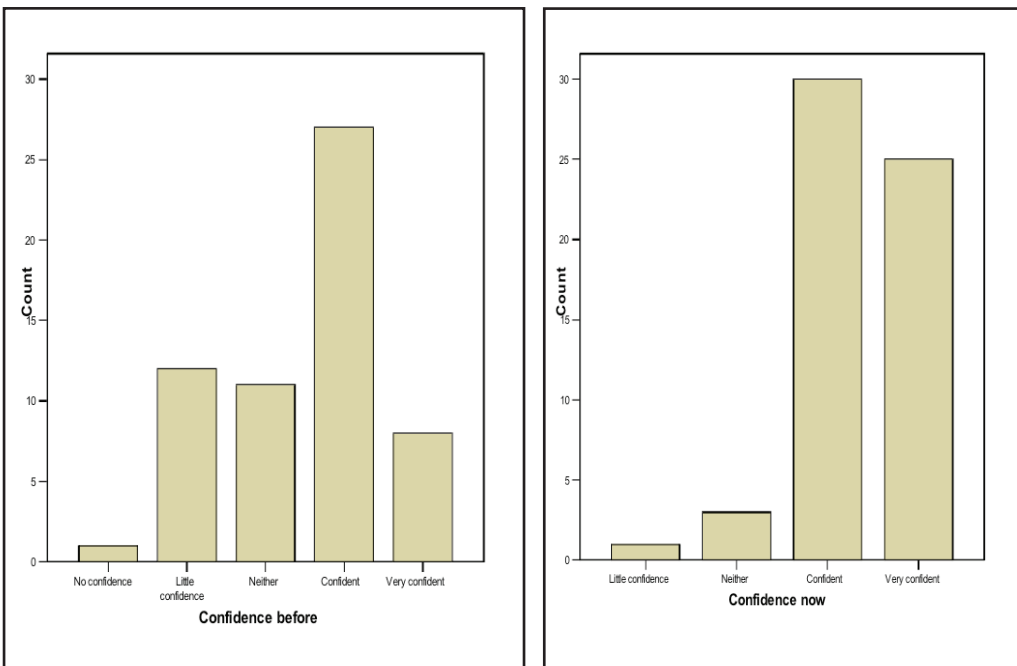


Figure 4 Comparison of mean perceived level of confidence before joining the network and now

Research findings offered strong indications of perceived increases in levels of confidence, although it is noted that these increases were higher in the group who were not economically active than in the group who were employed. In terms of network size, members of medium sized networks

reported the highest increase in perceived levels of confidence. Interestingly the group that had participated in networks for a moderate amount of time (between 2 and 3 years) reported the highest perceived increase in confidence levels.

Reciprocity & Trust

Survey responses indicated that a high proportion (80%) of respondents have gained contacts from outside the network as a result of network membership. Further evidence of women's business networks offering environments which facilitate the ties which bridge structural holes is demonstrated by a Network Co-ordinator who commented about her members, "a lot of them have actually received work, through a contact that they have met at the network, giving them another contact that is actually outside the network". Further, a number of responses demonstrated that trust is perceived to be an essential ingredient to successful network relationships: "trust plays a tremendous part" and "trust is vital".

Collective Social Capital

Research results offered strong evidence that caring and consideration of other members' needs is a phenomenon witnessed within women's business networks and presented several examples, both general and specific. Demonstrating a commitment to the development of the network itself, because it is a vehicle of support to others, one business woman said, "that's why I'm involved in helping it [the network] continue, because I believe it helps other people".

Finally, research results also suggested strong indications that there is a relationship between network membership and business sustainability, as one woman said, "networking has absolutely contributed to the sustainability of my business".

Discussion

Reflecting the feminist perspective encourages us to move away from using men as our standards of comparison when studying women and thus we find support for considering the more emotional aspects of attitudinal impact, as we explore our findings further. The results of all research methods employed offered indications that membership of a women's business network is perceived to have a positive impact on confidence levels. Interestingly, results indicated that higher levels of increased confidence as a result of network membership were perceived by those women who were not economically active, in comparison to those women who were employed. This difference between groups might be explained by the fact that, as the literature suggests, the employed group may well also have access to intra-firm networks, offering alternative support.

The literature informs us that time is an essential ingredient, "social capital tends to be cumulative so that the components...increase with each successive interaction" Timberlake (2004, p35), this is supported in the results, both in terms of the regularity of meeting attendance and in terms of investing in the building of relationships. However, results might lead us to consider that there may be an optimal impact level to network participation and indeed confidence levels were higher for those who attended meetings between 5 and 12 times a year than those who attended between 13 and 26 times a year.

In trying to identify the components of effective Network environments, it is useful to draw on social capital theory, which offers that economic and social sustainability is dependent on the creation of good ideas and on network theory, which suggests that new ideas are more likely to be generated across structural holes (Burt, 2004), p354) and underpinning our understanding of networks, there is also considerable evidence to support the conclusion that progress will not be

achieved without the presence of trust (Putnam 1993, p171). Further, if we revisit conclusions offered by Calas & Smircich, (1992a, p230) we note the contextual embedding of women in networks, where “the primary imperative is to be responsible to others and caring to maintain the web of connections”. Qualitative findings presented numerous examples of consideration for others, the exchange of ideas and the introduction to contacts. This, taken together with indications of a tendency towards co-operation and sharing demonstrated in the quantitative results, supports the conclusion that strong evidence of reciprocity and trust can be found in women's business networks and that these features are closely inter-related and contribute to a network environment, which effectively creates opportunity.

Finally, considering the contextual positioning of this research and the potential implications for wider application and interpretation of findings, it is noted that women in business believed there to be a relationship between the sustainability of their business and their membership of a network. It is suggested that this demonstration of positive impact on sustainability might be further extended to indicate a positive impact on sustainability in its broader sense, as Sirolli (1999, p143) suggests, “civic economy can be defined as the economy resulting from generalised reciprocity, from people helping people to succeed, with the understanding that the well-being of each member of the community is to everybody's advantage”

Conclusions

Network theory draws attention to gender differences in network functionality, (Vinnicombe and Colwill 1996, p88, Ibarra, 1997). This consideration is further encouraged by issues raised within the feminist perspective, which highlight the continued influence of male dominated perception and experience. The location of one of the researchers, informs a particular reality and shapes interpretation throughout and it is suggested that the objectives of this investigation: to explore, analyse and contribute fuller understanding of the phenomenon, are delivered within a set of already established beliefs and opinions, which value and emphasise female characteristics. Network theory further identifies relatively neglected areas of research in the field and revisiting O'Donnell *et al* (2001, p754) encourages a focus on the content of network relations, inviting investigation of motivations. This is further supported by observations, drawn from social capital theory, which highlight, “the complex set of relations and motivations that comprise the concept” (Wallis *et al*, 2004, p240).

Social capital theory invites us to consider the differing dimensions of bonding social capital, which relies on strong ties and reinforces particular social networks and bridging social capital, which describes the building of connections between heterogeneous groups. Burt (2004, p358) hypothesises that potentially higher returns can be gained from bridging ties. Immediate reflection might lead us to conclude that women only networks present a group connected by a single homogeneous aspect; gender, however, the networks comprise of business women from a variety of business sectors, therefore it can be argued that advantages exist, which can be gained from the heterogeneity of members, an aspect which Burt (2004, p354) suggests leads to growth and creativity. The number of examples of sharing of ideas, knowledge and contacts between network members from different business sectors, presents evidence supporting the conclusion that bonding ties are evident and utilised effectively.

Although, as Coleman (1994, p302) suggests, the accumulation of social capital is largely an unintentional process, it does not detract from the appropriateness of the theory to shape the research method. It is considered that both network theory and social capital theory contribute dimensions worthy of consideration, to support the collection of insights, which help us to understand the underlying processes and the contents of effective network environments. The

investigation produced evidence of positive impacts resulting from membership of women's business networks and suggested that women only business networks can provide the facilitating conditions to create network ties.

Again, with reference to the social capital framework, evidence of bonding and bridging social capital was found; ideas, knowledge and contacts being shared, both between network members and also across structural holes; that is between networks. These positive impacts were supported by the emphasis on the vital role that trust plays in these reciprocal interactions. Developing our conceptualisation further and recalling the proposal of Kilpatrick *et al* (1999, p136) that "concern for others in the group" is a key indicator of an environment, which enables the development of social capital, leads us to offer that evidence of co-operation, indicates that women's business networks provide just that facilitating environment. A key motivational driver of network membership was identified as the support that can be accessed through interaction with other women business owners and there were strong indications of perceived increases in confidence levels over time. Supporting recommendations offered by other authors, these initial indications suggest future research into the contents of network relations, to further our understanding of motivations, expectations and outcomes.

Recognising the dynamic nature of networks highlights the static nature of the research and although some of the findings offer an indication of positive changes occurring over time, these results were based on the sample set comparing their perceptions before joining the network and now, at a fixed point in time. The researchers support the call from other authors for longitudinal studies that might capture this data more completely and effectively. Observations drawn from quantitative analysis indicate that relationships may exist between business age, size of network and length of time of network membership and leads us to consider that there may be an optimal impact level to network participation, again supporting the call for longitudinal studies, which might offer more incite into these potential relationships.

There exists a historic tendency of theory development to be grounded in male experience and definition and this highlights the need to consider results within a context which respects female values, experiences and behaviours. Discursive analysis particularly demonstrated the presence of caring attitudes, co-operation, collaboration and consideration for others, suggesting that women's business networks are contextually embedded in environments that encourage and enable investment in social capital.

According to Neergaard *et al* (2005, p338), "since the 1990's, entrepreneurship and small business research has been interested in exploring the relationship between networks and the survival and success of small firms". The research briefly visited aspects of sustainability, both in terms of how membership of a network impacts on business sustainability, an affect perceived positively by the research sample and also in terms of the potential association between women's business networks and economic and social sustainability. The literature draws our attention to connectivity between higher levels of civic participation and economically sustainable regions and the authors suggest that increased societal interaction might result from network membership, thus suggesting a contribution to increased social sustainability. Revisiting Porritt (2005, p161) for support, who suggests, "high and stable levels of social capital" create the opportunity for individuals to develop their full potential, it is suggested that this aspect would merit further investigation, to explore if and how the network process contributes to sustainability.

Resources forced limitations on the study, however the research was undertaken with an exploratory objective, aiming to build upon and contribute to existing knowledge. The authors,

therefore, encourage future research, which values both personal and business development in approaches to understanding entrepreneurial growth and which recognises the historic implications of the male dominated sub-text, which has led to an emphasis on success being measured as economic growth, higher profits and increased power. Findings support the argument that network studies can benefit from investigation of motivations such as access to: emotional support; friendship; advice and information and the relationships between network membership and the achievement of these objectives.

Finally, it is hoped that this investigative study goes some way towards furthering our understanding of women's business networks and encourages future researchers to continue this journey of exploration.

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