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4  **A novel alternative. Book groups, women, and workplace networking.**

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6  **Abstract**

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8  Drawing on the results of a small qualitative research project involving four work-

9  based book groups – three in the UK and one in the USA- this article examines the

10  ways in which participation in workplace reading groups facilitates women's

11  networking within work organizations, in terms of both formal and informal as well as

12  expressive and instrumental networking. It has long been recognized that women's

13  employment progression is hampered, in part, by their exclusion from male-

14  dominated networks. Taking a gendered approach to the analysis of workplace

15  networking, this study suggests that book groups can function as an alternative to

16  traditional old boys' networks, in some instances. Within the workplace the collective

17  reading of literature, I suggest, can potentially function as a means to extend the social

18  as well as the more career-focused opportunities of its participants.

19

20  **Key words**

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22  Women, book groups, networking, reading, literature, gender, work.

23  **A novel alternative. Book groups, women, and workplace networking**

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25  This article takes an innovative approach to the study of women at work by exploring

26  how work-based book groups[1] might assist women's networking possibilities within

27  the workplace. Literature on gender and workplace networking suggests that women

28  and men do not network in the same way, and that access to either formal or informal

29  organizational networks, and to the networks' related rewards and resources, is

30  gendered (Ibarra ,1992; McGuire, 2002; Durbin, 2011). Women are less likely than

31  men to network with higher status, influential employees and therefore less likely to

32  accrue career advancement and advantages from their networking. Women's

33  exclusion from old boys' networks within the workplace, for example, has been well

34  documented (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Waldstrom & Madsen, 2007). As Durbin (2011,

35  p.90) notes: 'Restricted network access denies involvement in the exchange and

36  creation of tacit knowledge, and ultimately, organizational resources and power.'

37

38  This article, instead of focusing on women's exclusion from workplace networks,

39  seeks to explore how alternative structures may provide networking possibilities for

40  women. The focus here is on work-based book groups. Drawing on the results of a

41  small qualitative research project involving four groups – three in the UK and one in

42  the USA- this article suggests that workplace book clubs provide possibilities for both

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[1] Book groups are also referred to as reading groups and book clubs within the existing literature and the terms are used interchangeably in this article. The focus here is, however, on book groups that discuss (mainly) fictional literature and, as such, are differentiated from informal academic reading groups set up to discuss academic texts. For an interesting discussion on how women's networking opportunities can be bolstered through participation in a feminist academic reading group see Macoun and Miller, 2014.

43  expressive and instrumental networking; in other words, for social support and career

44  advancement.

45

46  Despite increasing numbers of women in the workforces of the European and US

47  economies, women's representation at senior levels remains relatively low. Globally

48  women constitute less than a quarter of senior managers, just 21 per cent in the G7

49  economies (Grant Thornton International Business Report, 2014). In the UK female

50  representation on boards and executive committees is improving: amongst FTSE-100

51  companies the proportion of female directors had increased from 12.5 per cent in

52  2010 to 21.6 per cent in 2014.  But whilst women now constitute a fifth of directors,

53  less than 7 per cent of executive directors are female (Department for Business,

54  Innovation and Skills, 2014), and the UK remains, in some estimations, in the bottom

55  10 countries for women in senior positions (Grant Thornton International Business

56  Report, 2014). In the US, at first glance, women's representation within the upper

57  echelons of the workforce appears considerably better, with women making up just

58  over half of management and professional employment. However, women's labour

59  force participation rates are lower overall than in many other developed countries

60  (Rampell, 2013), and senior women are concentrated at the lower levels of

61  management (Davies-Netzley, 1998). In 2014 they made up just 4.6% of CEOs of

62  S&P 500 companies compared to 19.2 per cent of board seats, and 36.8% of first level

63  managers (Catalyst, 2015). The 'glass ceiling' may have fractured slightly but

64  promotion tracks remain gendered.

65

66  The ways in which gendered patterns of networking act as a barrier to women's career

67  progressions have been well-established in the existing literature (Ibarra, 1992;

68    Stoloff, Glanville and Bienenstock, 1999; McGuire 2000; Benschop, 2009; Durbin

69    2011). Even for women already at senior levels, exclusion from key networks, which

70    tend to be male-dominated, can inhibit further advancement (Oakley, 2000): 'women

71    occupying senior positions are rarely allowed entry into informal networks that may

72    assist with career success and advancement (Davies-Netzley, 1998, p.341). These

73    kinds of networks, constructed as they are on 'sameness or maleness' (Durbin, 2011,

74    p.99), have been the hardest for women to join. Such 'shadow structures' (McGuire,

75    2002) maintain and reproduce gendered inequalities, despite increasing numbers of

76    women at work. As one woman in Bierema's (2005) study of women's networks

77    remarked: 'I'm not going to play golf with them [male colleagues], you know in

78    groups or anything ... I don't have access to that. And I won't. It's just not the kind of

79    company that's even comfortable with that kind of coed experience' (Bierema, 2005,

80    p. 215).

81

82

83    Whilst gendered differences in networking practices have been identified as a key

84    barrier to women's career progression, workplace networks within organizations

85    fulfill important social as well as strategic needs. The old boys network not only

86    provides instrumental gains but also friendship and more general support (Durbin,

87    2011). As Benschop (2009) argues women network for a variety of reasons: 'to help

88    personal skills development, to meet others who could help with their careers and for

89    social contacts, indicating a mixture of instrumental and expressive ties […] they may

90    be networking for reasons other than their careers' (p.98).

91

92    Women also read for a variety of reasons. As Long (2004, p.335) contends, 'Reading

93    groups provide a fruitful site for examining women's use of literature in life'.

94    Analyses of book groups suggest, for example, that, whilst book groups provide a

95    space to meet and discuss literature, they also provide an important source of social

96    support and friendship (Hartley, 2002; Long, 2003) as well as a resource to extend

97    cultural and social capital (Rehberg Sedo, 2011). Book group members, when asked,

98    often describe their reading groups as first and foremost a means to meet and get to

99    know new people, or to deepen connections with existing friends or acquaintances.

100   This study suggests that workplace book clubs replicate these social functions and

101   provide an important route for many of the participants to develop friendships and

102   camaraderie within the workplace. However, this article additionally argues that

103   workplace reading groups can also provide instrumental networking outcomes, in

104   certain circumstances at least. Indeed, this article suggests that organizations seeking

105   to provide formal support for women's improved instrumental networking might

106   consider the introduction of workplace reading groups. In so doing, the research

107   presented here extends our understanding of 'women's use of literature in life' to the

108   sphere of paid work and to the domain of career development.

109

110   **Literature Review**

111   This study brings together two distinct realms of existing academic scholarship:

112   firstly, the literature on book groups and secondly the literature on gender and

113   workplace networking.  By 2004 there were around 50,000 book groups in the UK

114   (Patterson, 2004), yet research in this area remains limited. Whilst it is difficult to

115   quantify exact numbers of participants, given the informal, private nature of many of

116   the groups, it is clear from the existing research that reading groups are a common,

117   and, for many, a much enjoyed part of cultural and civic life (Hartley, 2002; Long,

118   2003, 2004).  Reading groups challenge not only commonplace and misguided

119   notions of reading fiction as a solitary pleasure but also ask questions of reading

120   groups' broader functions beyond the discussion of literature (Radway, 1991, Harvey,

121   2002, Long 2003, 2004). Within the scholarship on reading groups the specific

122   analysis of work-based groups is even more scant, and only appears embedded in

123   broader discussions of book groups (for example, Hartley, 2002),  or tangentially in

124   terms of  academic, research-related reading groups (Macoun & Miller, 2014). In

125   terms of the scholarship on workplace networking there is a larger body of literature,

126   and the focus here will be on that which explores gender and networking specifically.

127   Within the study of gendered networking in the workplace the specific role of

128   workplace book groups has not, to my knowledge, as yet been researched.

129

130   *Book Groups*

131   Research indicates that whilst book groups have witnessed a recent spike in popularity

132   and public attention they have a long history both in the US and the UK. (Hartley,

133   2002; Farr, 2005; Long, 2003, 2004). The oldest UK reading group, an all male group

134   that is still in existence, dates back to the 18$^{th}$ century (Hartley, 2002). In the US,

135   Long's 2004 historical analysis of reading groups illustrates the importance of

136   women's 'literary clubs' after the American Civil war as a space for middle-class and

137   upper-class women to self-educate, assert social status, and associate with other

138   women outside of the home, at a time when women's scope to participate in public

139   life was severely limited. Similarly, men and women in African-American literary

140   societies met not for recreation 'but to gain cultural capital in an increasingly literate

141   society' (Rehberg Sedo, 2011, p.3).

142

143 Under the umbrella of book groups, there exists a vast range of groups (Hartley, 2002;

144 Slezak, 1995). Eighty per cent of the reading groups in Hartley's (2002) UK survey

145 met in private houses. However, the format of the meetings diverge: length, timing

146 and intervals between meetings differ between groups. Most groups read one book at

147 a time but some will read multiple books. Some groups will read a range of fiction but

148 others will specialize in particular genres of literature. In most private reading groups

149 the chairing of the sessions is often informal, but some, particularly those located in

150 institutional settings, may have a facilitator to formally chair the session or more

151 formalized rules of conduct. Groups may have particular practices about food and

152 alcohol. Whilst the inclusion of some type of snack or beverage seems to be common

153 to the practices of many face-to-face reading groups, some groups make it more

154 central by choosing food that fits the theme of the book. Reading groups lend

155 themselves to much creativity with niche groups requiring dress to match book theme

156 or meeting in varied locations, chosen to chime with the book under discussion

157 (Hartley, 2002). Despite a diverse range of practices, book clubs attract a mainly

158 middle-class membership. In Hartley's UK survey 88 per cent of participants had

159 been in Higher Education (2002, pp.33-4). Similarly, Long's study of contemporary

160 book clubs in Houston, Texas, pointed to a highly educated membership (2003, pp.87-

161 8).

162

163 The growing popularity of reading groups has been matched by growing media

164 attention to reading groups. Television and radio programmes have aired their own

165 book clubs, most famously the Oprah Book Club in the US (Farr, 2005; Long, 2003;

166 Rehberg Sedo, 2011), but also in the UK the BBC1's Page Turners and Channel 4's

167    Richard and Judy Book Club (Kiernan, 2011). Newspapers and magazines have run

168    numerous articles on their popularity  (Cusk, 2005; Heller 2011; Higgins, 2005); and

169    publishing houses have devoted sections of websites to information on how to set up

170    reading groups, offering guides for reading groups on particular books as well as

171    spaces for online discussion (Long, 2003). Such is the noted influence of reading

172    groups on the sales of books, publishers increasingly produce reading group guides to

173    accompany books, offer discounts to book clubs, and sponsor reader event days

174    targeting book group members (Fuller, Rehberg Sedo & Squires, 2011). Authors may

175    even do book group tours. Book groups have also entered the public consciousness

176    through their fictionalized portrayal. For example, in the UK, Channel 4 ran two

177    series of  'The Book Group' in 2002-3, a black comedy about a book group located in

178    Glasgow, Scotland. The *Jane Austen Book Club*, which was published in 2004 and

179    released as a film in 2007, similarly focused on one particular book club and the

180    entwined lives of their members, in this instance through the lens of their readings of

181    Austen.

182

183    Research highlights that reading groups are a particularly feminine phenomenon: for

184    example, Hartley's survey of UK reading groups noted that over two-thirds of reading

185    groups were exclusively female, and 27 per cent were mixed gender (2002, pp. 25-

186    26). It is arguably both the feminized and domestic, private, nature of the majority of

187    reading groups that has meant that their academic scrutiny has hitherto been minimal,

188    for some time occupying, what Long describes as, 'a zone of cultural invisibility'

189    (2003, p. ix). As Devlin-Glass notes (2001):

190

191      Until the recent explosion of cyber-salons and on-line book-discussion

192      lists, telecast (Oprah Winfrey) and broadcast (Australian Broadcasting

193      Corporation) book-reading groups, and the provision of "kits" for reading

194      groups by publishers, the phenomenon of the collaborative reading of

195      literature was a largely invisible one, or when it was visible sometimes

196      sneered at, and certainly one that was under-researched. There are a

197      number of reasons that this is the case. Reading groups occur in living

198      rooms and outside institutional frameworks; they are engaged in mainly

199      by women  (p.571).

200

201 Book clubs have been derided by literary critics for being too low-brow; a cultural

202 devaluation which Kiernan (2011) argues is borne of their association with the

203 feminine and the domestic. But whilst sections of the literary establishment have been

204 quick to deride the book clubs for 'dumbing down' literary analysis, book clubs exert

205 power not only to influence publishing trends but in turn also to subvert elitist notions

206 of the 'ideal' reader, thereby reconfiguring 'the ways in which we attribute worth to

207 cultural practices' (Kiernan, 2011, p.136).

208

209 Most reading groups meet within private, domestic spaces, however a minority of

210 reading groups do exist and flourish in the public sphere also: in libraries, book shops,

211 prisons, community centers, even as Hartley notes in zoos and dentists waiting rooms,

212 and, of course, in workplaces (2002). With the development of new technologies,

213 reading groups now also prevail in cyberspace, with on-line reading groups straddling

214 and destabilizing public/private demarcations.

215 Whilst there are no overall statistics on the numerical frequency of workplace book

216 groups, websites giving advice on how to set up reading groups pervade the internet

217 (see for instance, Fast Company, 2015; Penguin Random House, 2013). More general

218 surveys of reading groups highlight a range of workplace reading groups (Hartley,

219 2002, pp. 12-13; Slezak, 1995). Some explicitly focus on business texts or read fiction

220 specifically to draw out work related themes, such as leadership and conflict (Simon

221 & Soufal, 1995), others (like the ones in my own study) choose fictional literature

222 purely for reading pleasure. My own research additionally points to book groups

223 within the workplace operating as both formal and informal networks: some groups

224 are institutionally encouraged, sponsored and organized; whereas others emerge from

225 the grass roots, with initiatives coming from individual workers with little or no

226 institutional support.

227

228 What emerges from the existing research on reading groups is that, whilst the named

229 goal of reading groups is to collaboratively read and discuss literature, the groups

230 fulfill important supplementary functions (Devlin-Glass, 2001; Hartley, 2002; Long,

231 2003; Howie, 2011).  Friendships and alliances form in reading groups that can

232 provide support, camaraderie and encouragement, often over many years. One of the

233 appeals of being in a book club is that participation encourages members to read

234 outside of their normal 'comfort zone' of literary choices. Group members typically

235 combine discussions of the book with reflections on their own experiences. In contrast

236 to other communal spaces in which literature is read and discussed, most notably

237 within the academic sphere, participants in reading groups are not tied to the formal

238 strictures of literary analysis. Instead, freed from any formal judgment of literary

239 competence, book groups offer the opportunity to entwine responses to the literature

240  with personal contemplation (Long, 2003). 'It is as if' Long (2003, p. 45) suggests

241  'the discussion is a lens that reveals the book under discussion and the inner lives of

242  the coparticipants and, through this process, allows participants to reflect back on

243  their interior lives as well'. As such participating in book groups can constitute a

244  voyage of self-discovery for the members, allowing 'participants to articulate even

245  discover who they are: their values, their aspirations and their stance towards the

246  dilemmas of the world' (Long 2003, p.45).  Howie (2011) sees this development of

247  self-esteem as rooted in the emphathetic environment fostered within book clubs,

248  where differences of opinion are recognized, tolerated and appreciated. In responding

249  to difference, she argues, subjectivities shift, values and opinion change, and

250  participants access new ways of seeing the world. Book clubs are, she suggests,

251  'consciousness-raising groups by another name' (p. 150), modes of 'dissident

252  practice' (p.154), which enable women 'to speak, imagine or live alternative

253  subjective positions that are relevant to their own changing needs and interests'

254  (p.153).

255

256  Whilst not explored explicitly in relation to the literature on networking, research into

257  reading groups illustrates how such groups enable participants to develop connections

258  with others. These may be new networks, perhaps joining a group when moving to a

259  new area; or starting a group to develop existing networks, with friends, neighbors or

260  work colleagues. Reading groups often start as adjuncts to other existing networks or

261  groups 'Skittles teams and aerobic classes have transformed themselves into reading

262  groups, as have choirs, friends from a rambling club, and a group who met on a short

263  residential course and wanted to continue to meet regularly' (Hartley, 2002: 39).

264  Similarly, in Long's research the groups studied exhibited 'a pattern of institutional

265    and social linkages related to participants nonliterary lives' (2003, p.91). On occasion

266    groups have been set up with the expressed intention of improving *other* people's

267    networking possibilities. For example, in Hartley's research she identifies a reading

268    group project set up by local GP and cultural services to help people suffering from

269    anxiety or isolation to form bonds. Within the workplace, one US Company instituted

270    a 'Book-of-the Month' club open to all employees regardless of position within the

271    organization. The group discusses business-related texts, and aims for discussions to

272    generate ideas and develop modes of business practice. Nonetheless, the group also

273    provides significant networking possibilities as senior members of the organization

274    (including the President) participate (Simon and Soufal, 2005 p.117).  In other

275    instances, participation in reading groups leads members to engage in new networking

276    ventures. Davis (2008), for example, in her research on the impact of White book

277    clubs reading African-American literature in the U.S. discusses the radical potential

278    for cross-racial empathy gained from the reading and discussion of the literature to

279    induce political action and an engagement with movements for social change.

280

281    *Gender and Workplace Networking*

282    Research on workplace networking in general emphasizes the importance of

283    networking in terms of employment outcomes, recognizing the key role networking

284    plays in job attainment, advancement and promotion. Stoloff et al (1999, p.92)

285    suggest that a 'large body of research indicates that social networks are crucial in the

286    job matching process. Although estimates of the proportion of people who find their

287    jobs in this way, rather than through formal job search methods, vary substantially, it

288    is clear that this method is commonplace'. Networks can be formal (i.e. put in place

289    and run by the work institution) or informal (emerging from the grassroots). As

290   McGuire (2002, p.304) notes: 'Informal networks differ from formal networks in that

291   their membership is voluntary and that they help workers achieve work-related,

292   personal and social goals through unofficial channels'. Whilst clearly influential,

293   informal networks are sometimes more invisible, harder to regulate and change than

294   formal networks precisely because of their informality (McGuire, 2000; Durbin,

295   2011). Reliance on informal networks, the literature suggests, can reproduce the

296   existing status quo and reinforce extant social hierarchies, which can be detrimental to

297   women and minority groups. Acker (2006, p.450), for example, argues that: 'Hiring

298   through social networks is one of the ways in which gender and racial inequalities are

299   maintained in organizations'. The 'old boys' network, dominated as it is by men of a

300   certain social and ethnic background, is a prime example here. Minority women can

301   be doubly excluded, by virtue of the intersections of 'race' and gender, from access to

302   workplace networks. As Combs (2003, p.395) notes in relation to the USA, 'African

303   American women face multiple barriers to participation in the informal social arenas

304   that contribute to successful career advancement'.

305

306   Within informal and formal networks the literature points to two key types of

307   networking: expressive and instrumental (Ibarra, 1992; Ng & Chow, 2009).

308   Expressive networking refers to interactions with colleagues for social support and

309   friendship, whereas instrumental networking is much more explicitly focused on

310   employment gains and attuned to 'acquiring work/task/professional resources' (Ng &

311   Chow, 2009, p.563). Expressive and instrumental networking may, of course overlap,

312   and it is one of the main contentions of research into gendered workplace networking

313   that men, most notably white men (given gendered and racialised employment

314   hierarchies), are able to integrate their instrumental and expressive network.

315 Researchers note gender differences in homophilous and heterophilous patterns of

316 networking. Homophily refers to preferences to interact with others with similar

317 social characteristics: race, education and gender, for instance. Heterophily, in

318 contrast, refers to interactions with those with dissimilar characteristics, for example,

319 cross-gendered interactions (Ibarra, 1992). Whereas both men's instrumental and

320 expressive networks tend to be homophilous in gender terms (i.e. they are both with

321 men), women tend towards homophilous expressive relations, networking with

322 women for social support, but heterophilous networks with men for instrumental

323 outcomes (Durbin, 2011).

324

325

326 Being able to network effectively, whether informally or formally, means being able

327 to access high status colleagues. As Ibarra highlights:

328

329　　　[…] people whose network contacts extend beyond their required work

330　　　flow interactions and immediate work groups or units tend to be more

331　　　powerful [...]Reaching diverse others, however, is not sufficient if few

332　　　contacts are high enough status to be instrumentally useful [...]; access to

333　　　peers, superiors, and an organizations "dominant coalition" are critical for

334　　　power and advancement (1995, pp. 674-75).

335

336 However, a lack of senior women in organizations means that women find it harder

337 than men to network with high-status peers of the same sex (and thereby to form

338 instrumentally influential, homophilous networks); for men this is easier, in part,

339 because of  the greater density of men at higher levels in organizations.

340

341  Consequently, instrumental networking for women not only means networking with

342  high status men (Ibarra, 1995; Combs, 2003; Durbin, 2011) but also, if they are to

343  sustain their interactions, developing networking styles that men are more

344  comfortable with (Ng & Chow, 2009). Davies-Netzley (1998) describes how many

345  senior women 'attempt to display forms of cultural capital that fit best with the male-

346  dominated corporate scene' (p.349). Women described, for example, learning to talk

347  about sport, adapting styles of speech, and wearing certain kinds of clothes, just to fit

348  in and not stand out as the 'woman in the room'. But crucially, gaining access is

349  sometimes the biggest obstacle, as many such networks revolve around masculinised

350  activities and leisure patterns and implicit expectation of male membership.  Durbin

351  for example notes that: 'Within these networks, socializing at the pub after work or

352  playing golf while conducting business is commonplace. Friendships are cemented

353  and reciprocity is expected. These networks are powerful at the higher levels in

354  organizations' (2011, p.99). So aside from the difficulties women may face gaining

355  acceptance in such informal networks already dominated by men, women are often

356  relatively time-poor, more likely to have family care responsibilities than men, have

357  less time for leisure, and thus fewer opportunities to begin with for informal out-of-

358  hours networking. As women often have to juggle different social and instrumental

359  networks (whereas men have less juggling as there is greater tendency for them to

360  overlap) this creates extra demands on time.

361

362  One intervention made to improve women's access to high status colleagues is to set

363  up formal women's networks within or across organizations, although their success in

364  advancing women's careers is contested within the literature. Ibarra's research, whilst

365    not dismissing women's networks out of hand, does argue for the strategic importance

366    of women being able to develop 'greater ties to male colleagues' (1992, p.441).

367    Bierema's 2005 study of an intra-organizational women's network also pointed to the

368    potential pitfalls of only-women networks. The particular network in question was

369    less than successful. To a large degree as a result of the organizational sexism

370    amongst the mostly male senior management, the perception amongst employees

371    (including many women involved in the network) was that a separate organization for

372    women worked against women's advancement in the workplace. Bierema's study

373    highlighted the 'inherent contradictions of attempting to sponsor a women's network

374    in a male-dominated organization culture' (p.217) and the women's network

375    ultimately failed. However, other research suggests that women-only networks can

376    provide useful mentoring, reduce women's sense of isolation, and aid the projection

377    of positive female work identities (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Durbin, 2011). At their

378    most effective, they can begin to challenge the old boys' stranglehold on career

379    structures.

380

381    Within the literature effective networking is usually measured in terms of tangible

382    career gains, such as promotion. However, the intermeshing of instrumental and

383    expressive networking is also noted, not least in terms of how male networks,

384    particularly informal networks, provide not only routes for career progression but also

385    significant camaraderie and personal support. It is clear from scholarship that

386    expressive networking in itself has vital instrumental implications. Social support can

387    be indispensable not only in maintaining work performance but also in reducing stress

388    (Waldtsrom & Madsen, 2007) both of which impact positively on maintaining

389    employment.  The 'soft social capital' accrued via expressive networks is also seen as

390    important for self-esteem (van Emmerik, 2005) and can in turn impact on workplace

391    success. The elite career women interviewed in Davies-Netzley's research identify the

392    importance of being accepted into male networks, and developing similarities with

393    male peers, to progress their careers. But to survive in top level corporate positions

394    the women also identify the benefits of additionally networking with other senior

395    women, not only for sharing knowledge and resources, but for crucial comradeship

396    and support, in an often hostile, male-dominated environment. Similarly the

397    postgraduate and early career academics taking part in a feminist reading group in

398    Macoun and Miller's  (2014) study noted the importance of the group in terms of not

399    only peer support - friendship, intellectual engagement and knowledge sharing - but

400    also through fostering  a 'community of belonging' (p.296), providing solidarity and

401    resistance in an institutional environment in which they often felt marginalized.

402

403    **Methodology**

404    My primary research is based on two separate research methods. Firstly, my research

405    into book groups and work-based networking draws on my own decade long

406    membership of a workplace reading group, using participant observation as my

407    primary tool. In this sense, my research is partly ethnographic, in that my research has

408    involved on-going immersion in the field of study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

409    Secondly, my research draws on the results of fourteen interviews with participants in

410    three other work-based book groups. Interviews were chosen as a means to collect

411    further data as they enabled the qualitative exploration of the participants' experiences

412    of networking within their reading groups, focusing on the participants' own voices.

413    Interviews were based on a semi-structured list of research questions, lasted in length

414    between 45 minutes and two hours, and were recorded and later transcribed. A

415    thematic analysis of the data was conducted in which patterns within the responses

416    were identified, grouped and coded (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). All participant

417    information has been anonymized for this article. Pseudonyms are used for all

418    interviewees.

419

420    My own reading group, which is a university-based group, is currently made up of

421    seven women and based in the North-East of England. Membership has fluctuated a

422    little over the years, and in all thirteen women have been part of the group since its

423    inception in 2003. We settled on a membership of eight from 2008 until 2013, sadly

424    losing one of our members to cancer in the summer of 2013. Six of that eight were in

425    the group since the beginning; seven of the eight were employed at the university

426    when joining the group (and five of our current seven remain employed at the

427    university). Only one member joined us from outside the university structure as a

428    close friend of two of the members.  We are a women-only group. It is an implicit,

429    unsaid, rule of the group that it is all female (when new female members of staff have

430    started work they have sometimes been asked to join; new male colleagues never

431    have). The group members are all White European. Involvement in the group is by

432    invitation, with existing members agreeing on the proposal of new participants before

433    they are asked. We meet every month or so, in one of the members' houses (this is

434    loosely rotated). Members bring a selection of food and drinks to each meeting.

435

436    The second group, a book group based in a hospital in the South-East of England, has

437    a monthly meeting. It is open to all members of staff – male and female – and is

438    advertised on the hospital's social events board. It has a fluctuating membership of up

439    to twelve, with usually at least six participants at each meeting. It meets in the

440    hospital's social club at 5.30 pm on the first Monday or Tuesday of each month. As it

441    is registered as a work social club, the hospital pays for a small buffet and members

442    can buy drinks from the bar, in line with general hospital policy.  Whilst the reading

443    group is open to both men and women, at the point of interview only two of the

444    twelve members were male. The group attracts members from a range of areas across

445    the hospital working in both clinical and research areas. In total four female members

446    of the group were interviewed in June 2005. All interviewees were White and

447    European. All interviews took place in the hospital social club.

448

449    The third group is a reading group based at a branch of a Telecoms company, located

450    on the outskirts of a city in Scotland. As part of this company's support of literature

451    and the arts it had facilitated reading groups across many of its UK offices. At its peak

452    the company sponsored over a dozen work-based reading groups, providing

453    participants with free books and lunch. This particular group had met monthly but

454    recently meetings had become less frequent. The site where I undertook the

455    interviews housed employees working in Operations, Acquisitions and Estates,

456    Building and Network Planning – with the majority of employees male. The numbers

457    participating in the book club had fluctuated (the nature of this branch meant that

458    many staff members frequently worked off site), but from a staff unit of fifty, twenty

459    had regularly attended. According to the interviewees, sometimes men were in the

460    majority; always there were at least 50 per cent men there.  The company had recently

461    been bought out by another telecoms company, which seemingly did not have such a

462    broad commitment to either the arts or to promoting work-based social activities. The

463    subsidization of the workplace reading groups had been called into question, with the

464    provision of the books and lunch under threat at the point of interview. Three of the

465    regular members of the book club – two women and one man - were interviewed in

466    June 2005, on the premises of the firm. All were White European.

467

468    The fourth reading group is located at a US University. The 'Women's Faculty Book

469    Club' had been established in 1991 and was open to all women on campus. In its

470    inception about 30 members had attended the first meetings. The membership has

471    changed over the years but, at the point of the interviews, a core group of fifteen

472    members attended regularly (with another 25 on the mailing list). Whilst new

473    members were often invited or learnt about it by word of mouth, the book club did

474    produce flyers and bookmarks to advertise the group to new members within the

475    university. The group met monthly at the house of one of the founding members,

476    always on Sundays at 7pm. Group members take it in turns to bring refreshments.

477    Seven of the reading group members (including one who had recently left the group)

478    were interviewed in April 2010; six interviewees were White American and one

479    Hispanic. Six interviews took place in various locations on the university campus.

480    One interview was held at the participant's home.

481

482    **Results and Discussion**

483    The research results illustrate that workplace book groups exist as both formal and

484    informal networks. Three of the four groups all existed largely outside of the formal

485    work structures. The UK and US university-based groups both met off campus in the

486    evenings. The hospital reading group met in after-work hours on hospital premises in

487    the staff club and had some monetary support for refreshments, but like the university

488    groups had emerged at the grassroots: conceived, organized and run by enthusiastic

489    individuals.

490

491 In contrast, the telecoms group was formally initiated and supported by the

492 organization. The corporate sponsorship of the groups had undoubtedly increased

493 interest in the book club and diversified membership. Employees were not obliged to

494 participate but, particularly in its early days, were strongly encouraged to participate,

495 and coaxed by free books and a complimentary lunch. The workplace reading group

496 functioned in a certain fashion as an ongoing team-building exercise, here with a

497 focus on books and literature rather than the usual physical or problem-solving

498 activities associated with corporate team events. One interviewee explained, how she

499 had been told about the reading group at her job interview and it was one of the

500 factors that influenced her decision to take the job: a company that was trying to

501 foster a good social atmosphere in the workplace appealed to her. The provision of

502 books and food undoubtedly contributed to its popularity. As another member noted:

503 'the lure of a buffet at lunchtime as well was always a bonus'.

504

505 Whilst book clubs have a feminine cultural image the formal sponsorship of this book

506 club had brought equal numbers of men to the group from a range of occupations.

507 Lamm (1995, p.205) speculates whether men are put off joining book clubs because

508 talking about books involves 'showing and sharing feelings' and, as Lamm puts it,

509 'would violate the Guy Code'? This appeared not to be the case in the Telecom group

510 where men had enthusiastically participated. However, with the change of

511 organizational ownership, and the impending withdrawal of financial support, the

512 interviewees commented on how overall participation had already begun to fall

513 amongst both men and women. This was seen not only as a result of the planned

514 withdrawal of free books and food, but also because receding enthusiasm amongst

515     top-level management produced a more skeptical attitude to the group amongst

516     employees.  As one participant remarked: 'for some people they got to feel that their

517     superiors weren't happy about it and regarded it as a bit of a skive … they picked up

518     vibes that it was may be not the most productive use of their time' (Cora, Telecoms

519     Reading Group, UK).

520

521     All four reading groups provided scope for members to expressively network, either

522     with colleagues already familiar to them within the work organization or staff

523     previously unknown to them. Across the four groups participants generally

524     highlighted the enjoyment gained from group membership. Involvement not only

525     spurred them to read more or beyond their usual literary choices, but also provided

526     them with the opportunity to forge closer or new relations with work peers. As Tom,

527     an engineer working for the Telecoms company, explained:

528

529          I kind of knew most people, but I've got to know a few more of them; I

530          knew them by sight or to say hello, but it's amazing what you can pick up

531          about people from the types of books they read ...[it] broadens your

532          perception of them. A lot of the time you just know people from the

533          workplace, you know them from 9 until 5.30 and that's it but sometimes

534          when they're talking about books they've read, films, plays etc that they

535          go and see you get a better idea of the person that they are.

536

537     For many building up a rapport with colleagues within the reading group in turn

538     bolstered workplace interactions outside the group:

539

540      You got to know what made people tick, what they liked and what they

541      didn't. And sometimes it could be unexpected things that people came out

542      with. But even discovering that you had some things in common, it would

543      just give you more of a connection with that person, and that then carries

544      over into the working relationship with them as well (Cora, Telecoms

545      Reading Group, UK).

546

547  Whilst a key function of all four groups was expressive networking, the extent to

548  which the groups also provided means to instrumentally network varied. The hospital

549  group brought together a range of colleagues from both the clinical and research

550  branches of the institution. Many had little overlap in the workplace, being employed

551  in completely separate areas, so there was the potential at least for diverse networking

552  contacts to develop from participation in the reading group. As one of the participants

553  of the hospital reading group noted:

554

555      My co-organizer, because she's a clinical psychologist, she has met

556      people at least one, possibly two through here, where she's said "oh what

557      do you do?" and found out that, you know, in professional life it would be

558      useful to know that person (Jean, Hospital Reading Group, UK).

559

560  At the Scottish telecoms group, the particular nature of the site meant that there was

561  quite a flat structure with high level management physically located at a distance. As

562  with the hospital reading group, participation did develop the members' contacts with

563  people outside of usual work channels, again potentially the diversifying of

564  networking contacts, albeit not directly with higher-status colleagues. Yet the

565 horizontal employment structure limited networking possibilities with high status

566 colleagues.

567

568 In the instance of my own book club, the group has provided a regular space for

569 members to socialize off-campus, to share the pleasure of exploring literary texts, and

570 to maintain and develop social bonds when time pressures squeeze opportunities for

571 social contact within work hours. In this sense the network's function is mainly

572 expressive. As a network it does not bring members in contact with a diverse and

573 fluctuating range of work colleagues, but instead solidifies existing personal bonds

574 amongst work peers. This is not to say that the group does not have also an

575 instrumental dimension. At each gathering there is usually some exchange of work-

576 related knowledge, and the opportunity is taken to share work news or sometimes to

577 seek advice explicitly on work matters. Importantly the group has also provided a

578 means for some members to retain connections with the university when their own

579 attachments to the university have become more precarious due to maternity leave, ill

580 health, or changes to work contracts.

581

582

583 It was, however, the US University-based reading group that provided most clear

584 latitude for instrumental networking, and it was in these interviews that the lure of

585 instrumental networking via the reading group was most explicitly stated. Without

586 exception all interviewees acknowledged the instrumental networking bonuses of

587 being involved in the women's book club:

588

589     On one level membership of the book club engendered a greater familiarity with other

590     employees that eased workplace interactions. One member explained her reasons for

591     joining:

592

593          I think it was the whole idea of being able to network with other women

594          in the university, and then whole idea of a book club in and of itself too. I

595          wasn't reading enough fun things. I needed to stop being so serious all of

596          the time with my nose to the grindstone [...] It's not high powered

597          networking as such. We talk about the university but it's much more

598          casual than that. But I think it's a good way to get to know various people,

599          so when you do interact with them at the university it's kind of a different

600          relationship because you have this relationship from the book club (Jane,

601          University Women's Book Club, USA).

602

603     Membership could also lead to reciprocity within the workplace. One senior woman

604     in the university gave her motives for being involved in the group in the following

605     way:

606

607          Clearly there is an attraction just to be there with the other people in the

608          group and that attraction is both because I think they have really

609          interesting things to say about the book, but it's also a great source of

610          information about what's going on ... these things keep you feeling you're

611          on top of everything. It's also a way of networking; I think sometimes

612          people end up doing other people favors. It's definitely both the

613        discussion and the particular group (Louisa, University Women's Book

614        Club, USA).

615

616    A relatively new professor acknowledged the clear networking possibilities that the

617    book club had given her and others. As she noted, even senior members of staff

618    sometimes have difficulties getting to talk to the Dean; an adjunct would never have

619    this possibility. However, through the book club that kind of interaction, in an

620    informal, off-campus setting, was possible:

621

622        It was very useful as I met lots of women who I would have eventually

623        met, but probably what was nice about it was that I met them in a setting

624        where we could talk somewhat openly and informally rather than in the

625        structured setting of work. Where initially my interactions with them

626        would have been more over business matters, it would have been more in

627        the context of their programmes, or some meeting, so that was nice. The

628        other thing for me that was useful was since I am a new person, it was

629        interesting to hear them talk about [the university], there's a kind of

630        discussion that goes on not only about [the university] a kind of gossip

631        that went on there. I was introduced, by being there, to gossip about other,

632        usually high level administrators, or faculty. It was both interesting to hear

633        them talk about the university and various aspects of it and also talk about

634        various characters and people so it gave me a kind of good, a useful

635        introduction to [the university] [....] For me it was very useful in terms of

636        networking, and in terms of meeting certain colleagues who have been

637        very helpful [in my field], and learning certain things about [the

638    university] that could have taken much longer to learn: what you might

639    learn by going out to lunch, in two way conversation with one person. But

640    that kind of group knowledge exists, where you have lots of different

641    people communicating what they know (Sally, University Women's Book

642    Club, USA).

643

644    That there were a number of women in key senior positions in the university was key,

645    and their presence at the book group was clearly recognized by other employees. As

646    one interviewee remarked without irony: one young woman used to attend but

647    'stopped when she got tenure' (Dora, University Women's Book Club, USA).

648

649    But the book club was not universally acknowledged as supportive to women. One

650    member had left the group unhappy with what she felt to be a lack of solidarity shown

651    by some of the women, unable to reconcile tensions with colleagues at work and

652    socializing with them at the book group. She explains how, on arriving at the

653    university, she was encouraged to join:

654

655    'I was told by the previous Chair that it was an important group of

656    women; it was a politics breaker. So I went and enjoyed being the baby in

657    the room. I went for several years, because it is once a month on Sundays

658    always in the same place at the house of one of the founders, and it was

659    interesting to get to know people. I was new to [the university]. The

660    people that you met were not my age, close to retirement, people I did not

661    really feel I had anything in common other than just meeting for this book

662    club... [but] I felt welcome, I felt I was getting to be a professor rather

663     than a grad student; it was a different stage in my life, so yeah at the

664     beginning I enjoyed it **[…]** In the course of the years the politics, factions

665     started emerging and I had major differences with [two senior reading

666     group members]. The purpose of going to that group in the first place is to

667     be part of the mason lodge and being initiated into the power structure,

668     and it happened completely the opposite' (Valerie, University Women's

669     Book Club, USA).

670     For many members, book groups are useful places to network, socially or

671     instrumentally, but they can also be sites where conflicts are replayed, or indeed

672     generated. Informal networks can, as Acker (2006) notes, serve to reproduce existing

673     social differences and shore up in-group identities, which exclude other groups. This

674     particular interviewee felt disconnected from the group not only because of work

675     tensions but also because she felt alienated by the particular class and ethnic profile of

676     its membership. Contrary to Howie's (2011) assertion that the emphathetic culture of

677     women's reading groups is intrinsically supportive and accommodating of difference,

678     this interviewee's experience instead highlights the ways in which ethnic and class

679     status can also be maintained within groups, creating barriers to resources and support

680     for non-hegemonic women. In this sense we can see how the exclusionary dynamics

681     of informal old boy networks can be replicated in informal all-female networks.

682

683     **Conclusions**

684     This study suggests that workplace book groups provide an important alternative

685     space for some employees to network in addition to, or instead of, more traditional

686     informal networks revolving, for example, around sports or after-work drinking. This

687     may be especially useful for women (and indeed some men) who either have no

688    interest in pursuing these kinds of activities with work colleagues or find accessing

689    such networks difficult or off-putting (either in terms of the logistics of participation

690    or their particularly masculinized environments). To this extent workplace reading

691    groups may present networking possibilities in addition to existing, well-established

692    old boy' networks.

693

694    Across the reading groups it was clear that for the majority of participants their

695    membership enabled them to both strengthen and extend their range of work-based

696    contacts, and to develop supportive social ties with work colleagues. In many ways

697    workplace book groups exhibit similar social functions to those existing in the private

698    sphere: friendship, camaraderie, a sense of shared identity.  In particular, the

699    discussion of literature was seen to be a useful vehicle for getting to know not just the

700    books under discussion better, but also the people discussing them. In the

701    conversations around texts people share information about themselves, often relating

702    their literary analysis to personal experience. Within the work context this expressive

703    function had work-related consequences in that such disclosures often elicited closer

704    and easier work interactions outside the group. The scope for informal workplace

705    reading groups to positively add to employees' overall work satisfaction and, in so

706    doing, potentially to their successfulness is not to be under-estimated.

707

708    However, this study also suggests that reading groups can directly foster effective

709    instrumental networking in addition to their expressive functions. The US book club,

710    for example, illustrates how an informal women-only network can bolster women's

711    instrumental networking if, firstly, there is a work hierarchy in which women occupy

712    senior positions, and if, secondly, these senior women attend and actively support the

713    informal network. In some ways the women's book club represented a female

714    alternative to the usual old boys' networks. Less senior women knew that

715    participation in this informal group would bring them into contact with influential

716    high-ranking colleagues, and was an important network in a strategic career sense.

717    However, just as old boy networks often exclude certain groups of non-hegemonic

718    men as well as women, the interviews suggested similar patterns might be reproduced

719    in terms of the ethnic and class profiles of members within all female groups.

720    Analyses of both women's workplace networking and women's participation within

721    reading groups must therefore be mindful to the intersections of gender, race, class

722    and other social markers of difference and their impact on group dynamics, inclusion

723    and exclusion.  Whilst the vast majority of participants in this study spoke of the

724    positive networking aspects of their participation in the workplace reading groups,

725    further research into barriers to participation is to be welcomed, to ascertain why

726    some workers may leave or never join workplace book clubs. This study suggests that

727    Howie's (2011) assertion that the emphathetic environment of women's book clubs

728    fosters an atmosphere of tolerance and inclusion needs to be further interrogated in

729    relation to workplace (and other) book clubs, with further attention to the dynamics of

730    ethnicity, class and other aspects of social difference.

731

732    This study suggests that the corporate sponsorship of formal book group networks can

733    work positively for women's networking. As the telecoms reading group illustrates,

734    when a reading group is financially supported and participation is institutionally

735    encouraged membership is both increased and diversified to include a significant

736    number of men as well as women from a range of occupations and levels. A broader

737    membership, particularly if members are recruited across the employment hierarchy,

738  can multiply and strengthen networking possibilities. An advantage of this kind of

739  book group is, legitimated as they are by management, that they are able to function

740  within work hours, and do not require any out of hours time commitment, which may

741  be particularly beneficial to workers with care responsibilities, the majority of whom

742  will be women. Moreover, the formal nature of these reading groups can mean that

743  specific, institutionally supported, steps can be taken to diversify membership, and

744  potentially counter the tendency of some informal networks to recruit mainly from

745  colleagues of similar gender, class and ethnic backgrounds.

746

747

748

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