



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

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SYNOPSIS

Drawing on the results of a small qualitative research project involving four work-based book groups—three in the UK and one in the USA—this article examines the ways in which participation in workplace reading groups facilitates women's networking within work organizations, in terms of both formal and informal as well as expressive and instrumental networking. It has long been recognized that women's employment progression is hampered, in part, by their exclusion from male-dominated networks. Taking a gendered approach to the analysis of workplace networking, this study suggests that book groups can function as an alternative to traditional old boys' networks, in some instances. Within the workplace, the collective reading of literature, I suggest, can potentially function as a means to extend the social as well as the more career-focused opportunities of its participants.

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This article takes an innovative approach to the study of women at work by exploring how work-based book groups¹ might assist women's networking possibilities within the workplace. Literature on gender and workplace networking suggests that women and men do not network in the same way and that access to either formal or informal organizational networks and to the networks' related rewards and resources is gendered (Durbin, 2011; Ibarra, 1992; McGuire, 2002). Women are less likely than men to network with higher status, influential employees and therefore less likely to accrue career advancement and advantages from their networking. Women's exclusion from old boys' networks within the workplace, for example, has been well documented (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Waldstrom & Madsen, 2007). As Durbin (2011, p.90) notes: 'Restricted network access denies involvement in the exchange and creation of tacit knowledge, and ultimately, organizational resources and power.'

This article, instead of focusing on women's exclusion from workplace networks, seeks to explore how alternative structures may provide networking possibilities for women. The focus here is on work-based book groups. Drawing on the results of a small

qualitative research project involving four groups—three in the UK and one in the USA—this article suggests that workplace book clubs provide possibilities for both expressive and instrumental networking; in other words, for social support and career advancement.

Despite increasing numbers of women in the workforces of the European and US economies, women's representation at senior levels remains relatively low. Globally, women constitute less than a quarter of senior managers, just 21% in the G7 economies (Grant Thornton International Business Report, 2014). In the UK, female representation on boards and executive committees is improving: among FTSE-100 companies, the proportion of female directors had increased from 12.5% in 2010 to 21.6% in 2014. But while women now constitute a fifth of directors, less than 7% of executive directors are female (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2014), and the UK remains, in some estimations, in the bottom 10 countries for women in senior positions (Grant Thornton International Business Report, 2014). In the US, at first glance, women's representation within the upper echelons of the workforce appears considerably better, with women making up just over half of management and professional employment. However, women's labor force participation rates are lower

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overall than in many other developed countries (Rampell, 2013), and senior women are concentrated at the lower levels of management (Davies-Netzley, 1998). In 2014, they made up just 4.6% of CEOs of S&P 500 companies compared to 19.2% of board seats, and 36.8% of first-level managers (Catalyst, 2015). The 'glass ceiling' may have fractured slightly but promotion tracks remain gendered.

The ways in which gendered patterns of networking act as a barrier to women's career progressions have been well-established in the existing literature (Benshop, 2009; Durbin, 2011; Ibarra, 1992; McGuire, 2000; Stoloff, Glanville, & Bienenstock, 1999). Even for women already at senior levels, exclusion from key networks, which tend to be male dominated, can inhibit further advancement (Oakley, 2000): 'women occupying senior positions are rarely allowed entry into informal networks that may assist with career success and advancement' (Davies-Netzley, 1998, p.341). These kinds of networks, constructed as they are on 'sameness or maleness' (Durbin, 2011, p.99), have been the hardest for women to join. Such 'shadow structures' (McGuire, 2002) maintain and reproduce gendered inequalities, despite increasing numbers of women at work. As one woman in Bierema's (2005) study of women's networks remarked: 'I'm not going to play golf with them [male colleagues], you know in groups or anything ... I don't have access to that. And I won't. It's just not the kind of company that's even comfortable with that kind of coed experience' (Bierema, 2005, p. 215).

While gendered differences in networking practices have been identified as a key barrier to women's career progression, workplace networks within organizations fulfill important social as well as strategic needs. The old boys' network not only provides instrumental gains but also friendship and more general support (Durbin, 2011). As Benshop (2009) argues, women network for a variety of reasons: 'to help personal skills development, to meet others who could help with their careers and for social contacts, indicating a mixture of instrumental and expressive ties [...] they may be networking for reasons other than their careers' (p.98).

Women also read for a variety of reasons. As Long (2004, p.335) contends, 'Reading groups provide a fruitful site for examining women's use of literature in life'. Analyses of book groups suggest, for example, that while book groups provide a space to meet and discuss literature, they also provide an important source of social support and friendship (Hartley, 2002; Long, 2003) as well as a resource to extend cultural and social capital (Rehberg Sedo, 2011). Book group members, when asked, often describe their reading groups as first and foremost a means to meet and get to know new people or to deepen connections with existing friends or acquaintances. This study suggests that workplace book clubs replicate these social functions and provide an important route for many of the participants to develop friendships and camaraderie within the workplace. However, this article additionally argues that workplace reading groups can also provide instrumental networking outcomes, in certain circumstances at least. Indeed, this article suggests that organizations seeking to provide formal support for women's improved instrumental networking might consider the introduction of workplace reading groups. In so doing, the research presented here extends our understanding of 'women's use of literature in life' to the sphere of paid work and to the domain of career development.

Literature review

This study brings together two distinct realms of existing academic scholarship: firstly, the literature on book groups, and secondly, the literature on gender and workplace networking. By 2004, there were around 50,000 book groups in the UK (Patterson, 2004), yet research in this area remains limited. While it is difficult to quantify exact numbers of participants, given the informal, private nature of many of the groups, it is clear from the existing research that reading groups are a common and, for many, a much enjoyed part of cultural and civic life (Hartley, 2002; Long, 2003, 2004). Reading groups challenge not only commonplace and misguided notions of reading fiction as a solitary pleasure but also ask questions of reading groups' broader functions beyond the discussion of literature (Hartley, 2002; Long, 2003, 2004; Radway, 1991). Within the scholarship on reading groups, the specific analysis of work-based groups is even more scant and only appears embedded in broader discussions of book groups (for example, Hartley, 2002), or tangentially in terms of academic, research-related reading groups (Macoun & Miller, 2014). In terms of the scholarship on workplace networking, there is a larger body of literature, and the focus here will be on that which explores gender and networking specifically. Within the study of gendered networking in the workplace, the specific role of workplace book groups has not, to my knowledge, as yet been researched.

Book groups

Research indicates that while book groups have witnessed a recent spike in popularity and public attention, they have a long history both in the US and the UK (Hartley, 2002; Farr, 2005; Long, 2003, 2004). The oldest UK reading group, an all-male group that is still in existence, dates back to the 18th century (Hartley, 2002). In the US, Long's (2004) historical analysis of reading groups illustrates the importance of women's 'literary clubs' after the American Civil war as a space for middle-class and upper-class women to self-educate, assert social status, and associate with other women outside of the home, at a time when women's scope to participate in public life was severely limited. Similarly, men and women in African American literary societies met not for recreation 'but to gain cultural capital in an increasingly literate society' (Rehberg Sedo, 2011, p.3).

Under the umbrella of book groups, there exists a vast range of groups (Hartley, 2002; Slezak, 1995). Eighty per cent of the reading groups in Hartley's (2002) UK survey met in private houses. However, the format of the meetings diverge: length, timing, and intervals between meetings differ between groups. Most groups read one book at a time but some will read multiple books. Some groups will read a range of fiction but others will specialize in particular genres of literature. In most private reading groups, the chairing of the sessions is often informal, but some, particularly those located in institutional settings, may have a facilitator to formally chair the session or more formalized rules of conduct. Groups may have particular practices about food and alcohol. While the inclusion of some type of snack or beverage seems to be common to the practices of many face-to-face reading groups, some groups make it more central by choosing food that fits the theme of the book. Reading groups lend themselves to much creativity with niche

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