Bun-baking mums and subverters: The agency of network participants in a Rural Swedish county

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Synopsis

During the 1990s rural Swedish women positioned themselves as women and formed networks aimed at addressing various local and most often gender-related problems that limited their quality of life. The aim of this article is to empirically describe and theoretically discuss the idea of agency in the context of women's social practices of networking and to examine how the participants either reproduce or transform the gendered structures that shape them. The empirical data for this article consist primarily of discussions with focus groups and interviews with network participants. Through interpretations, a pattern of gendered power-relations was illuminated, which both influenced and constrained the participants' activities. We have interpreted the participants' networking agency as acts of protest against everything that limits their living conditions. As women develop strategies through networking, their resistance seems to become increasingly significant for the ongoing transformations of the gender order.

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Introduction

The idea of agency has been present in much contemporary feminist theory in recent decades (McNay, 2003; Goddard, 2000; Apter & Garnsey, 1994; Gardiner, 1995; Anderson, 2003; Hughes, 2005; Parkins, 2000; Ahearn, 2001).[1]

Our interest in women's agency has to do with how the concept of agency can be related to other concepts, such as autonomy, ambivalence, contradiction and resistance. The aim of this article is to empirically describe and theoretically discuss the idea of agency in the context of women's social practices of networking and to examine how the participants either reproduce or transform the

gendered structures that shape them. Our ambition has been to contribute to the refinement of accounts of agency in a way that does justice to variations in the motivations, strategies, difficulties, and opportunities of the network participants. Since agency is formed in social and cultural contexts where power determinants such as gender and class are always included, the agents' capacities for action are necessarily constrained. When the network participants face challenges, they may respond in unexpected and innovative ways that may either reinforce the status quo or catalyse social change.

The debate about agency is often linked to other related debates, such as women's autonomy versus vulnerability, women as victims versus agents and women's dignity versus oppression. The way in which the power structures that impact upon gender are conceptualised tends to portray women as vulnerable victims and as eternally

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oppressed. They are thus represented as unable to strike back and become agents. However, feminist researchers argue that women have, over time and in different places, always opposed male dominance in ways that suggest some type of autonomy. Nancy Fraser has outlined the dilemma of women's agency within feminist theory: "*either* we limit the structural constraints of gender so well that we deny women any agency *or* we portray women's agency so glowingly that the power of subordination evaporates" (Fraser, 1992, p. 17).

We have used the term oppression to refer to institutional conditions that hinder women and men from participating in decision-making activities or from influencing conditions that determine their actions. In other words, these are the circumstances that limit people's ability to achieve personal development and communication with others. Expressions of oppression are not necessarily intentional and an oppressed group need not have a corresponding oppressor group. But when a group or a person decides the conditions for another's action, the latter is subjected to dominance (Young, 1990).

The network participants described here define women's networking as a way to come together and organise activities in ways dissimilar to traditional organising in associations and organisations. The open atmosphere is often emphasised, and this refers both to the broad-minded attitude that is linked to informality and to the tolerance shown towards various opinions expressed in discussions. Women's networking is understood as a social movement with more or less conscious links to the Swedish women's movement, although it is sometimes also regarded as just a fashion that fitted well into the ethos of the 1990s.

This article is about Jämtland, an inland area in Mid-Sweden. In this thickly wooded province that surrounds a large lake and is edged by mountainous rural areas, a great number of women's networks have been formed. The process began in the 80s and blossomed during the 90s. Women gather voluntarily, as women, to work with a variety of issues, such as environment, health, tourism, and creation of jobs, small-scale businesses, or just to create a cheerful atmosphere.

We do not assume that all network women share particular qualities. Nevertheless, as active women, many do share certain interests (Alcoff, 1997). When the women meet to discuss shared problems, the factors that differentiate them may fall out of focus.

A common idea in earlier studies is that women's groups and networks can be understood as striving for social change even when this is not verbalised or presented as the main purpose (Eduards, 1997, 2002; Rönnblom, 2002; Frånberg, 1996; Bull, 1993). In

Much is presumed in common understandings about women's networking and the women involved. When the first author initiated this study, the ideas she encountered about women's networking were predominantly that it was innovative, horizontal, and informal. When the informants were asked to describe a typical participant, the "bun-baking mums" (see below) were identified as "the kind of women" that usually get involved in all kinds of activities, from the children's school to local festivities.

In this article, women's networking is understood as constructed and reconstructed in ongoing, dynamic contextual processes (Connell, 1987). Qualities such as innovation *or* traditionalism, a horizontal *or* hierarchical character and informality *or* formality may vary with time and place and contrasting tendencies may even be combined in complex ways (Fraser, 1992). Our goal here has been to describe the gender relations network women are involved in, without presupposing any of these common ideas. Critical analysis of gender relations may help us to move beyond unquestioned assumptions, and enable plurality and complexity. In other words, we need to conceptualise alternatives to simplified notions of gender, power and action. In relation to women's agency, this may help us overcome the dilemma of describing people either as passive victims or as active agents and to establish a coherent notion of agency that is capable of integrating and balancing both structural constraints and the capacity of agents to act against such barriers in specific contexts.

The issue of agency touched upon in this article has been the focus of a broader study about the relationship between social subordination and health and ill health. Although this article only indirectly touches upon well-being, it falls within this field of investigation.[2]

Social context

The way in which a network is initiated varies greatly. The threat of closing the local school or the retirement home may prompt a group of women to form a network. In one case, the women's husbands were participating annually in a sports event, while the women were not. This motivated some of the women to begin a training program organised as a network. Some of the salaried women lacked opportunities for personal advancement at their workplaces, while others felt that their lives were constrained by patriarchal structures in general. The network model aroused expectations of social change. At one workplace where women were in the majority, the women felt that their salaries did not match their levels of competence, particularly in comparison to those of men with equivalent qualifications. For this reason a network was established to support the organisation of a strike. In