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The Dynamics of Women’s Network Relationships

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Abstract: The lack of women in leadership positions remains a persistent social phenomenon. The aim of the paper is to investigate how networking is connected to leadership aspirations and examine women’s understanding and practice of networking as a career developmental skill. Theoretical explanations around women’s lack of leadership have focused on women’s organisational constraints, their outsider status and the conditions of women within the broader community; however, what is mostly absent from research is how women’s relationships with each other influence opportunities for leadership. Women often experience the ‘glass ceiling’ at the mid-career level, therefore the research focused on networking at the mid-career level in order to better understand how women draw on networking to help achieve their career goals. This paper responds to the persistent challenges that women face in networking by examining how networks are created, understood, and enacted by women. This paper reports on recent research that investigated how a select group of mid-career women understood and practiced networking. The paper discusses survey and interview data to analyse how women’s way of networking may influence career aspirations and identifies ways that women can strengthen their networking in order to build capacity and mobility for leadership.

Keywords: Leadership, Women, Networks

Introduction

The focus on how women network is prompted by successive research which shows that networking continues to challenge women (Ibarra and Andrews, 1993). Experiencing difficulties networking negatively influences women’s development and capacity for leadership because “the dependence of women’s advancement and success on early identification of, participation in, and adequate access to, networks” (Melkers and Welch, 2009, 1).

The aim of this paper is to add to the understanding women’s networks, networking, and progress towards leadership by examining more closely how women construct networks and enable networking. Rather than focusing on those women currently in leadership, the research focused on those aspiring to leadership, mostly working at the mid-level of the organisation. It is at this level that early patterns of network identification, participation and access can be identified. How mid-career women network has remained largely unexamined, yet it is from this group that the next generation of female leaders will emerge. Mid-career women are the next generation female leaders and how they understand and experience their organisations is critical in shaping their aspirations and opportunities in seeking leadership. While much has been written and researched about women’s workplace relationships, in comparison to males and male experiences, very few studies have focused exclusively on how women create and sustain intra-gender relationships and how these influence career and opportunity (Vongalis-Macrow, 2012). Networking and networks are important professional relationships for women and furthering understanding about how women construct and practice networking will add to the broader knowledge seeking to explain further why networking continues to present challenges for women and the influence that this has on promoting women in leadership.

Background

A network is different to your team or your group because the relationships between those within the networks have a clear purpose. The relationships are based on exchanges of services, information and even emotions. The natures of the exchanges are dependent on the duration of the relationships, their intensity and also the closeness of the members (Seufert et al., 1999).
Networks can be instrumental, that is, informal based on exchanges that are varied, for example, when seeking new job opportunities you may request information about any new openings from your network (Fombrun, 1982). The quality of the exchange depends, for example, on who you are, how much others know and support you and how close you are to others. Formal networks structure exchanges for a more transactional purpose, for example, particular and relevant information, resources and so forth. Formal networks are highly visible in many organisations as they bring together particular people for a specific purpose.

The main issue for women and lack of access to informal networks is that it is within these networks that tacit knowledge is transferred between members. This kind of knowledge includes strategic and political information that is implicit knowledge that comes with working within the organization. Women’s exclusion from political and strategic knowledge means that the way that women navigate and make career decisions is less informed by those who have ‘insider’ knowledge (Sabattini, 2011).

Durbin (2011) suggests women’s denied access over time and across career trajectories restricts access to channels of decision making and channels of control over resources. These two influences are closely aligned to power.

“Women’s exclusion from this essentially closed, informal system where strategic tacit knowledge predominates means that women are potentially denied access to a gateway network that ultimately controls resources” (Durbin, 2011, 91).

There are distinct reasons why many working women may experience exclusion from informal networks. Firstly, access to these networks is not necessarily negotiated within the workspace. Colleagues may do business on the golf course, or after work or over lunch. As more women are likely to have competing demands in terms of time spent at work balanced with and other home and care duties, it can be expected that fewer women may be able to participate in these extra work activities (Vongalis, 2012). Access to networks for women is an issue.

The second reason why women’s participation in informal networks may be problematic is around is how women understand the value of these informal networks. For example, female colleague came to work and from the moment she arrived until the moment she left for the day, she hardly left her desk. She was working hard to finish all that she had to do within the tight frames of a typical working day. It used to annoy her to walk past her two male colleagues who would be in their office talking about their weekend and their passion for yachts. She often wondered where they got the time to sit and chat. My colleague understood the formal networks at work, and the need to be included on committees and power teams and so forth, but she could not decode the value of the informal networking as demonstrated by her male colleagues. What she saw as a waste of time, was something else. Durbin (2011) cites other important work around understanding networks in terms of codifying tacit knowledge. She states, “those who can successfully extract and codify tacit knowledge enjoy a competitive advantage: (Lam, 2002; Nonaka and Nishiguchi, 2001; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995 cited in Durbin, 2011, 91).

“Catalyst research shows that lack of access to informal networks—especially those networks that can provide important information—is one of the primary barriers to women’s and women of color’s corporate advancement. Thus, many talented women may not have the same access to their organization’s unwritten rules as their colleagues, to the detriment of their career advancement” (Sabattini, 2008, 6).

Failure to decode informal networks becomes a barrier in the creation and sharing of knowledge across the workplace. The sharing process, through informal exchanges and networking, is essentially a relational activity amongst colleagues. That casual conversation about weekend hobby could be paving the way for greater relational interactions and exchanges between the actors. Furthermore, tacit knowledge may also be transmitted and exchanged in
which one colleague can assess the ‘fit’ of another and store this information for when needed. Extensive research shows that informal networks are powerful drivers of success (Forbum, 1982, Iberra, 1993). The ‘old boys’ networks, the ‘golden skirts’, school ties and historical attachment are examples of tight informal networks. To the outsider, how the networkers are obliged to each other, is an unknown. The golden skirts, for example is an informal network supporting women on corporate boards. Members of the golden skirts are called super connected (Crabtree, 2011) and almost twice as likely to be invited to other boards (Browne-Quinn, 2011) These women are more likely to be invited on boards, not because they worked their way up in the business, (Crabtree, 2011) but because they know people and bring different perspectives.

If networks and networking pose difficulties for women, then one way of addressing some of these difficulties is to unpack how networks do this. In other words, how do networks exclude women and furthermore what can women do. This paper draws on an interpretive framework to analyse the interactions of a group of mid career female academics as they respond to the challenges of networking. The research analysis will take into account the participants’ understandings of the context and the relationships in which they find themselves. The research will interpret their understandings and practices to account for how these may create networking issues for this group of women (Littlejohn, 2000). The paper’s long term aims are to contribute to the knowledge base around women and networking, leading towards theory making through further research.

The Research

The aim of the paper is to better inform how networks are created, understood and valued by mid-career women by focusing on the networking understanding and practices of a subset of mid level female academics. In order to unpack the understanding and practices of networking, a questionnaire was developed focusing on how the group of women experiences networking in their workplace. In 2006, women made up an average of 40 % of academics, yet only 23% of women are in the senior levels of academia (AVCC, 2006). The questionnaire targeted a subset of women in the mid-career level because most women in academia work up to or at this level. A representative sample of 74 mid-career women respondents were selected from three universities. The respondents were initially identified through their Higher Education Union membership and a request for their participation was sent through a union distribution list. The participation was voluntary.

The questions within the questionnaire reflected current knowledge and understanding of networks and their purpose. The respondents were asked to rank their understandings against this knowledge base. The survey on networking consisted of 18 questions specifically about networking. Three other questions around the participants’ aspirations, organisational support and opportunity were designed to illustrate the professional desire of the participants to aspire to more senior roles. The responses were collected according to a 7 point scale ranging from consistently (1) to never (7). The participants were given an open question in which to add their comments about networking. The results are interpreted through frequency statistics and basic graphs of the data.

In addition, eight participants agreed to a 20 minute interview in order to discuss in further detail their ideas and practices about their networking. Excerpts from interviews have been included as anecdotal evidence that adds to the interpretation and analysis of the results. As the aim of the research was to understand the subjective experiences and perceptions of the participants, an interpretive framework gives meaning to the discussion. Interpretive research acknowledges that the participants’ perceptions reflect the “the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it” (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). The interpretation of their responses acknowledged their reality, experiences and explanations while seeking to contextualise these within their daily work practices.
Results

The graph shows that overall; over 40% of the participants believed that their organisation was not supportive of their career aspirations. While 23% remained undecided or at least could not decide. Most significantly, only 23% indicated a level of organisational support for their career. This gap between organisational support and the rhetoric around more supportive measures for women is noted more specifically by one of the participants. She states,

Note that there is a mismatch between beliefs and aspirations and reality. That mismatch exists because (1) the institution as a whole does little to foster relationships between staff working in different areas, (2) constant rounds of redundancies mean that staff do not collaborate (3) heads of the unit have fostered competition between staff rather than collaboration (4) colleagues in my discipline area have no sense of shared endeavour whether female or male (Participant.)

The graph shows a trend amongst mid-level female academics that their organisations remain consistently unsupportive and some of the ways that this manifests in the daily work of the women is through the under-development of relationships between academics across the university. The key problem, as identified by the participant, leads to a lack of collaboration and a ‘shared’ endeavour. The competitive nature of academic work takes precedent in shaping both and female relationships and leads to the perception of further contest. The graph and anecdotal evidence shows that the competitive structure of relationships is an organisational issue, rather than a personnel one.

When asked about their opportunity for advancing in their career, only 23% agreed that the organisation provided them with opportunities to advance. Around 63% of the women surmised
that they did not have opportunities for advancement within their organisation. Just fewer than 50% had strong feelings about their lack of opportunity.

These two graphs illustrate the working context for mid-level female academics for whom the organisation is mostly not supportive and provides limited avenues for advancement. While, further investigation of the women’s responses to context would clarify the structural and personal constraints, these two graphs underscore the importance that women would place on support and opportunity from other sources and possibilities that would override the constraints of higher education institutions. Under these circumstances, the value of networks and networking are highlighted as alternative ways towards career goals and aspirations.

Figure 3: The Value of Networks for Career

A participant in the study emphasised that “Networking takes practice” (Participant). Despite the admission that networking is a skill, a majority of the women recognised the value of networks in progressing their career. Only 20% disagreed with the value of networks in career development. This graph shows that women have identified networks as a key relationship in their career building. When asked to rate their skills at networking, Graph 4, there is a sense of confidence amongst women that they are good at networking. Over half of the women in the study were positive about their networking skills.

Figure 4: Capacity for Networking
For those women who were less confident about their networking, the interviews provided further insights about possible reasons. One participant stated, “It’s difficult to ‘network’ when there is hardly enough time in one’s fractional appointment to get the minimal deliverables achieved”. The networking was not the issue, rather the conditions of employment and the tight timelines made this difficult. The restriction around part-time employment and the negative effect this has on networking was further echoed by another participant. She commented,

“I find this very time consuming on .6, as I just have enough time to do the bare basics of teaching and administration. I have a meeting to visit a more senior female colleague at another university late this year, but I still feel that this is indulgent and takes away from my immediate “to do” list which is teaching administration.”

Networking is valued by most mid-career women and a majority rate themselves as good networkers. However, the conditions of employment, specifically the casual and fractional employees struggle with the opportunities for networking because their time is limited and they are focused on immediate tasks and short term goals. One of the identified constraints for women’s access to networks is related to their working hours and contractual employment.

**Networking**

The next series of graphs illustrates trends in how and why women network. Having identified the importance of networking amongst mid-career female academics, and the estimation that most rate their capacity as favourable in being able to network, how these skills are put into practice will further illustrate the women’s understanding of networking.

![Figure 5: Network for Career Advice](image)

Sabattini (2011) and others (Durbin, 2011) have argued that women denied access to networks, especially informal networks, is detrimental to their career advancement. The arguments affirm the importance of networking for career advancement. As this research was not a comparative study of male and female networking, the focus on how women understand and practice networking can shed further lights upon how women apply career focused networking amongst their gender. The participants were asked to identify female networking for career advice. Graph 5 shows that women are just as likely to network with their peers for career advice as seek the support of more senior women. However, there is difference in how strongly women network with their senior colleagues. For the women who are not strongly seeking career advice from their senior colleagues, the tendency is for women to rely more on their peers. This trend
confirms the findings of Durbin (2011) who suggests that senior women are more likely to network with other more senior women and not spend too much time on up and coming colleagues. The graph shows that at some level, mid-career female academics are not heavily networking upwardly with their senior female colleagues.

The interviews suggest different reasons why some mid-career women are not networking with senior colleagues. An interviewee alluded to tensions between women. She stated,

“There are 2 females at or above my current level in my academic unit. Both work 3 days/week or less. The senior actively dislikes me and will not engage with the team I lead (of which she is a member). The woman at my level is extremely kind, but not pursuing career advancement at this time, due to retire soon.”

This statement suggests a personality clash between the two co-workers and certainly, networks are dependent on very commonality of purpose (Reagans and Zuckerman, 2001) as a basis of relationships. In a situation where there is a clash of personality and little support to overcome the differences, then networking is difficult. However, the theme of mid-career women experiencing difficulties with their senior female colleagues was raised by more interviewees. For example, “I have had trouble networking with senior, international female colleagues”. Another stated,

“Senior female colleagues have assisted me and my career but they have also caused a lot of problems. I don’t think this is because they are female but because of the seniority in a very hierarchical institution.”

This excerpt from the interview acknowledges difficulties between the women however, the difficulties are not solely because women cannot get along, and rather the interviewee identifies the hierarchical structure of relationships which creates obstacles for networking between different hierarchical levels. Similarly, another interviewee states, “Mentoring/networking at my institution as senior women are extraordinarily pressed for time”. The interviewee also identifies the constraint of time as an organisational factor in preventing networking between senior and mid-career women.

While some studies, (Rhode, 2003) have focused on the difficulties faced by women in finding mentors and accessing informal networks, alluding specifically to ‘old boys’ networks, the results show that women are pressed in finding mentors and opportunities to network with each other. Mid-career women may remain out of the loop in career development by not having access to informal male networks, but also by having more limited career networking opportunities with their senior female colleagues. The hierarchical organisation of higher education and the work demands on senior women create network access issues for mid-career women so they are just as likely to seek career advice from their peers as they are from their senior women.
Figure 6: Helping Actions in Networking

Graph 6 illustrates the trend in how mid-career female academics seek support and help, both illustrative of networking actions, in their meeting their career aspirations. What is immediately evident are the high levels of help that the participants have offered other colleagues in order to assist them with their career. Although the question did not specifically ask about the nature of that help, in the work of academia the help is directed towards teaching duties, administrative duties or with research. 70% of the women agreed that they had helped others to achieve their aspirations. However the lack of reciprocity in career help suggests a gap between the exchange of resources, information and knowledge between mid-career female academics. The graph reveals, while the majority of the women provide help, they do not receive the reciprocal amount of help. Less than half of the women, who help others, believe they receive help in return. It is evident that the networking relationships based on exchanges of services and information are not balanced suggesting that these are not close or beneficial (Seufert et al., 1999).

Figure 7: Supportive Actions in Networking

Suefert et al. (1999) suggest that networking also has an emotional component, that the networking relationships can be bound by an exchange of emotions. In many networks the opportunity to vent and discuss workplace emotions are part of the intensity and closeness of experiences between network members. Graph 7 illustrates the emotional aspect of networking
because it focuses on support. While the question did not specifically outline the nature of support, the very different responses to Graph 6 show that the women differentiate help and support. As with Graph 6 there is a marked difference between women’s supportive actions and the support they receive in return. A significant majority of women support others in their career; however, fewer than half of the participants agreed that they had been supported by others in their career. Significantly, when graph 1 and graph 7 are both considered, the message is clear that mid-career women are lacking in both institutional and collegial support for their career. The experiences are punctuated by some of the interviewees,

In my experience female colleagues have been happy to accept help and support, but have never reciprocated. In fact, when I have been in need of practical help they have always put what is personally good for their career above any attempt to help another woman (even if that being seen to provide support and friendship only). In other words, in this dog eat dog academic environment, my experience is that female support and solidarity has always melted away when needed.

The interviewee provides insight into competitive nature of university work and the strains this place on female solidarity to help and support each other. Another interviewee discusses her pro activity in ameliorating support issues.

“I have set up a women’s network at my university to assist this process, talk about our experiences and share information. I have been dismayed at concerns and inequalities I am hearing about but heartened by women’s openness to supporting each other.”

The interviewee shows that the need for emotional connection as a part of networking. The emotional disclosure around workplace inequity and coping with organisational constraints creates a network purpose.
“I will not network or share with all women in my workplace. While most are supportive and knowledgeable, others are not: I have been bullied and plagiarised by a female ‘colleague’. I am selective therefore, in which women I network with.”

The interviewee alludes to uneven and inequitable experiences relative to her work and knowledge. Her experiences of being plagiarised and bullied, has eroded her trust and thus her capacity to share and network based on an exchange of her knowledge.

Similarly, the lack of talk and career talk amongst women further suggests a lack of trust in exchanging knowledge and information specific to career aspirations. While, women may be supportive and help each other in their career plans, talking about these is challenging. Only 4% of the surveyed women admitted to talking about their careers in a strong way. Over half of the women stated that they did not talk to their colleagues about their careers. Perhaps, the lack of talk, which suggests an informal connection based on a common purpose of articulating career plans, is an issue when considering women’s lack of access to informal networks. The results suggest that perhaps it is not only the lack of access to informal networks, but the reluctance to create informal networks through shared talk about careers. Further investigation is necessary to unpack this phenomenon because if women are being very selective with whom they talk, and not being social in the way they talk about their career (Ibarra, 1993), they are also shutting down avenues for informal exchanges which have served men extremely well in building their informal networks.

Conclusion

The paper set out to examine how a group of mid-career female academics understand networks and enact networking. The study responded to arguments that women who are building their careers are denied access to networks, especially informal networks. This lack of access means that they are unable to leverage the value of networking in progressing their careers. As many studies about women in networking have focused on gender comparison, this research focused solely on women and how networks are understood and experienced by women.

The basis of network relationships were examined through a series of broad questions that aimed to generate an understanding about the value of networking and how networking is enacted by this group of academics. The importance of networking for mid-career female academics is underscored by their experiences that their organisations are, on the whole, not supportive of their career aspirations. This lack of support suggests that the women need to find other sources of encouragement and assistance in order to proceed towards their career goals. The value of networking is not lost on this group of women as a source of career enhancing support. However, how they build their network relationships is problematic for the women because while they acknowledge the value of networking, the actions that create and sustain networks are challenging and often not reciprocated. For example, mid-career women refrain from networking most actively with their senior female colleagues. Some of the women commented that their senior colleagues were not always available in forming networking relationships. Without the important relationship with senior women, mid-career women do miss out on access to some of the unwritten rules about their work, context and colleagues which has been identified as detrimental to career advancement (Sabattini, 2011). Networking for career purposes also draws on the politics of networks, in that; they can offer political access to resources (human and information) that may be restricted or limited to all. Thus, the political access offered by a senior colleague is valuable. Critically, women appear to hesitate and not expect of networking with their senior female colleagues. For the most part, important career advice was sought from their peers, however peer-only networking is a relationship which has limited access to power, information and resources as these are associated with the higher levels of leadership.
In terms of networking actions, overwhelmingly the women showed an “ethos of sharing” (Ponti, 2011), which tended to shape their relationships. They admitted mostly to showing help and support to their colleagues. Both these actions are essential ways of creating connections between members of a network. These actions strengthen network ties and serve the mutual interests of those involved. However, the women identified these exchanges as uneven. The majority revealed that they expended more time and energy helping and supporting others than was reciprocated. The uneven nature of these sharing and caring exchanges problematizes the mid-career context as an even playing field amongst mid-career female academics. When a few were pressed to explain, they revealed that the overtly competitive nature of their work and institution influenced their relationships and networks. The competition extended to competition not only with their peers but also with their senior colleagues.

Networking is also made purposeful when it has a specific goal. Career planning is a key function of networking and identified as challenging women because accessing the kind of informal information about opportunities required network relationships that have been established and trustworthy since the kind of exchange is often confidential in nature. Talking about their careers presented challenges for women. Talking about career aspirations to others is distinct from seeking career advice. Talking implies a less purposeful exchange, and less formal discourse about career and intentions. It infers a kind of informality in the exchange, perhaps a friendship, and a less invested dialogue. This kind of exchange is less evident amongst the women. Which raises the question, why is this so? Is this kind of informal exchange about their career of lesser importance to women? The research focusing on women’s way of doing networking illustrates that there is more work to be done to understand the dynamics of women’s relationships and how these influence networking and the benefits of networking so that women can make better progress towards seniority and leadership.
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