'A novel alternative. Book groups, women, and workplace networking' *Women's Studies International Forum* 52 (2015) 30-38

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

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Abstract

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.

Key words

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

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This article takes an innovative approach to the study of women at work by exploring how work-based book groups[1] 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 (Ibarra ,1992; McGuire, 2002; Durbin, 2011). 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

[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.

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 per cent in the G7 economies (Grant Thornton International Business Report, 2014). In the UK female representation on boards and executive committees is improving: amongst FTSE-100 companies the proportion of female directors had increased from 12.5 per cent in 2010 to 21.6 per cent in 2014. But whilst women now constitute a fifth of directors, less than 7 per cent of executive directors are female (Department for Business, Innovation and 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 labour force participation rates are lower 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 per cent 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 (Ibarra, 1992;

Stoloff, Glanville and Bienenstock, 1999; McGuire 2000; Benschop, 2009; Durbin 2011). 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).

Whilst 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 Benschop (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, whilst 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. Whilst 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 (Radway, 1991, Harvey, 2002, Long 2003, 2004). 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 whilst 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. Whilst 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 groups requiring dress to match book theme or meeting in varied locations, chosen to chime with the book under discussion (Hartley, 2002). Despite a diverse range of practices, book clubs attract a mainly middle-class membership. In Hartley's UK survey 88 per cent of participants had been in Higher Education (2002, pp.33-4). Similarly, Long's study of contemporary book clubs in Houston, Texas, pointed to a highly educated membership (2003, pp.87-8).

The growing popularity of reading groups has been matched by growing media attention to reading groups. Television and radio programmes have aired their own book clubs, most famously the Oprah Book Club in the US (Farr, 2005; Long, 2003; Rehberg Sedo, 2011), but also in the UK the BBC1's Page Turners and Channel 4's

Richard and Judy Book Club (Kiernan, 2011). Newspapers and magazines have run numerous articles on their popularity (Cusk, 2005; Heller 2011; Higgins, 2005); and publishing houses have devoted sections of websites to information on how to set up reading groups, offering guides for reading groups on particular books as well as spaces for online discussion (Long, 2003). Such is the noted influence of reading groups on the sales of books, publishers increasingly produce reading group guides to accompany books, offer discounts to book clubs, and sponsor reader event days targeting book group members (Fuller, Rehberg Sedo & Squires, 2011). Authors may even do book group tours. Book groups have also entered the public consciousness through their fictionalized portrayal. For example, in the UK, Channel 4 ran two series of 'The Book Group' in 2002-3, a black comedy about a book group located in Glasgow, Scotland. The *Jane Austen Book Club*, which was published in 2004 and released as a film in 2007, similarly focused on one particular book club and the entwined lives of their members, in this instance through the lens of their readings of Austen.

Research highlights that reading groups are a particularly feminine phenomenon: for example, Hartley's survey of UK reading groups noted that over two-thirds of reading groups were exclusively female, and 27 per cent were mixed gender (2002, pp. 25-26). It is arguably both the feminized and domestic, private, nature of the majority of reading groups that has meant that their academic scrutiny has hitherto been minimal, for some time occupying, what Long describes as, 'a zone of cultural invisibility' (2003, p. ix). As Devlin-Glass notes (2001):

> Until the recent explosion of cyber-salons and on-line book-discussion lists, telecast (Oprah Winfrey) and broadcast (Australian Broadcasting Corporation) book-reading groups, and the provision of "kits" for reading groups by publishers, the phenomenon of the collaborative reading of literature was a largely invisible one, or when it was visible sometimes sneered at, and certainly one that was under-researched. There are a number of reasons that this is the case. Reading groups occur in living rooms and outside institutional frameworks; they are engaged in mainly by women (p.571).

Book clubs have been derided by literary critics for being too low-brow; a cultural devaluation which Kiernan (2011) argues is borne of their association with the feminine and the domestic. But whilst sections of the literary establishment have been quick to deride the book clubs for 'dumbing down' literary analysis, book clubs exert power not only to influence publishing trends but in turn also to subvert elitist notions of the 'ideal' reader, thereby reconfiguring 'the ways in which we attribute worth to cultural practices' (Kiernan, 2011, p.136).

Most reading groups meet within private, domestic spaces, however a minority of reading groups do exist and flourish in the public sphere also: in libraries, book shops, prisons, community centers, even as Hartley notes in zoos and dentists waiting rooms, and, of course, in workplaces (2002). With the development of new technologies, reading groups now also prevail in cyberspace, with on-line reading groups straddling and destabilizing public/private demarcations.

Whilst there are no overall statistics on the numerical frequency of workplace book groups, websites giving advice on how to set up reading groups pervade the internet (see for instance, Fast Company, 2015; Penguin Random House, 2013). More general surveys of reading groups highlight a range of workplace reading groups (Hartley, 2002, pp. 12-13; Slezak, 1995). Some explicitly focus on business texts or read fiction specifically to draw out work related themes, such as leadership and conflict (Simon & Soufal, 1995), others (like the ones in my own study) choose fictional literature purely for reading pleasure. My own research additionally points to book groups within the workplace operating as both formal and informal networks: some groups are institutionally encouraged, sponsored and organized; whereas others emerge from the grass roots, with initiatives coming from individual workers with little or no institutional support.

What emerges from the existing research on reading groups is that, whilst the named goal of reading groups is to collaboratively read and discuss literature, the groups fulfill important supplementary functions (Devlin-Glass, 2001; Hartley, 2002; Long, 2003; Howie, 2011). Friendships and alliances form in reading groups that can provide support, camaraderie and encouragement, often over many years. One of the appeals of being in a book club is that participation encourages members to read outside of their normal 'comfort zone' of literary choices. Group members typically combine discussions of the book with reflections on their own experiences. In contrast to other communal spaces in which literature is read and discussed, most notably within the academic sphere, participants in reading groups are not tied to the formal strictures of literary analysis. Instead, freed from any formal judgment of literary 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

and social linkages related to participants nonliterary lives' (2003, p.91). On occasion groups have been set up with the expressed intention of improving *other* people's networking possibilities. For example, in Hartley's research she identifies a reading group project set up by local GP and cultural services to help people suffering from anxiety or isolation to form bonds. Within the workplace, one US Company instituted a 'Book-of-the Month' club open to all employees regardless of position within the organization. The group discusses business-related texts, and aims for discussions to generate ideas and develop modes of business practice. Nonetheless, the group also provides significant networking possibilities as senior members of the organization (including the President) participate (Simon and Soufal, 2005 p.117). In other instances, participation in reading groups leads members to engage in new networking ventures. Davis (2008), for example, in her research on the impact of White book clubs reading African-American literature in the U.S. discusses the radical potential for cross-racial empathy gained from the reading and discussion of the literature to induce political action and an engagement with movements for social change.

Gender and Workplace Networking

Research on workplace networking in general emphasizes the importance of networking in terms of employment outcomes, recognizing the key role networking plays in job attainment, advancement and promotion. Stoloff et al (1999, p.92) suggest that a 'large body of research indicates that social networks are crucial in the job matching process. Although estimates of the proportion of people who find their jobs in this way, rather than through formal job search methods, vary substantially, it is clear that this method is commonplace'. Networks can be formal (i.e. put in place and run by the work institution) or informal (emerging from the grassroots). As

McGuire (2002, p.304) notes: ‘Informal networks differ from formal networks in that their membership is voluntary and that they help workers achieve work-related, personal and social goals through unofficial channels’. Whilst clearly influential, informal networks are sometimes more invisible, harder to regulate and change than formal networks precisely because of their informality (McGuire, 2000; Durbin, 2011). Reliance on informal networks, the literature suggests, can reproduce the existing status quo and reinforce extant social hierarchies, which can be detrimental to women and minority groups. Acker (2006, p.450), for example, argues that: ’Hiring through social networks is one of the ways in which gender and racial inequalities are maintained in organizations’. The ‘old boys’ network, dominated as it is by men of a certain social and ethnic background, is a prime example here. Minority women can be doubly excluded, by virtue of the intersections of ‘race’ and gender, from access to workplace networks. As Combs (2003, p.395) notes in relation to the USA, ‘African American women face multiple barriers to participation in the informal social arenas that contribute to successful career advancement’.

Within informal and formal networks the literature points to two key types of networking: expressive and instrumental (Ibarra, 1992; Ng & Chow, 2009). Expressive networking refers to interactions with colleagues for social support and friendship, whereas instrumental networking is much more explicitly focused on employment gains and attuned to ‘acquiring work/task/professional resources’ (Ng & Chow, 2009, p.563). Expressive and instrumental networking may, of course overlap, and it is one of the main contentions of research into gendered workplace networking that men, most notably white men (given gendered and racialised employment hierarchies), are able to integrate their instrumental and expressive network.

Researchers note gender differences in homophilous and heterophilous patterns of networking. Homophily refers to preferences to interact with others with similar social characteristics: race, education and gender, for instance. Heterophily, in contrast, refers to interactions with those with dissimilar characteristics, for example, cross-gendered interactions (Ibarra, 1992). Whereas both men's instrumental and expressive networks tend to be homophilous in gender terms (i.e. they are both with men), women tend towards homophilous expressive relations, networking with women for social support, but heterophilous networks with men for instrumental outcomes (Durbin, 2011).

Being able to network effectively, whether informally or formally, means being able to access high status colleagues. As Ibarra highlights:

> […] people whose network contacts extend beyond their required work flow interactions and immediate work groups or units tend to be more powerful [...]Reaching diverse others, however, is not sufficient if few contacts are high enough status to be instrumentally useful [...]; access to peers, superiors, and an organizations "dominant coalition" are critical for power and advancement (1995, pp. 674-75).

However, a lack of senior women in organizations means that women find it harder than men to network with high-status peers of the same sex (and thereby to form instrumentally influential, homophilous networks); for men this is easier, in part, because of the greater density of men at higher levels in organizations.

Consequently, instrumental networking for women not only means networking with high status men (Ibarra, 1995; Combs, 2003; Durbin, 2011) but also, if they are to sustain their interactions, developing networking styles that men are more comfortable with (Ng & Chow, 2009). Davies-Netzley (1998) describes how many senior women 'attempt to display forms of cultural capital that fit best with the male-dominated corporate scene' (p.349). Women described, for example, learning to talk about sport, adapting styles of speech, and wearing certain kinds of clothes, just to fit in and not stand out as the 'woman in the room'. But crucially, gaining access is sometimes the biggest obstacle, as many such networks revolve around masculinised activities and leisure patterns and implicit expectation of male membership. Durbin for example notes that: 'Within these networks, socializing at the pub after work or playing golf while conducting business is commonplace. Friendships are cemented and reciprocity is expected. These networks are powerful at the higher levels in organizations' (2011, p.99). So aside from the difficulties women may face gaining acceptance in such informal networks already dominated by men, women are often relatively time-poor, more likely to have family care responsibilities than men, have less time for leisure, and thus fewer opportunities to begin with for informal out-of-hours networking. As women often have to juggle different social and instrumental networks (whereas men have less juggling as there is greater tendency for them to overlap) this creates extra demands on time.

One intervention made to improve women's access to high status colleagues is to set up formal women's networks within or across organizations, although their success in advancing women's careers is contested within the literature. Ibarra's research, whilst

not dismissing women's networks out of hand, does argue for the strategic importance of women being able to develop 'greater ties to male colleagues' (1992, p.441). Bierema's 2005 study of an intra-organizational women's network also pointed to the potential pitfalls of only-women networks. The particular network in question was less than successful. To a large degree as a result of the organizational sexism amongst the mostly male senior management, the perception amongst employees (including many women involved in the network) was that a separate organization for women worked against women's advancement in the workplace. Bierema's study highlighted the 'inherent contradictions of attempting to sponsor a women's network in a male-dominated organization culture' (p.217) and the women's network ultimately failed. However, other research suggests that women-only networks can provide useful mentoring, reduce women's sense of isolation, and aid the projection of positive female work identities (Davies-Netzley, 1998; Durbin, 2011). At their most effective, they can begin to challenge the old boys' stranglehold on career structures.

Within the literature effective networking is usually measured in terms of tangible career gains, such as promotion. However, the intermeshing of instrumental and expressive networking is also noted, not least in terms of how male networks, particularly informal networks, provide not only routes for career progression but also significant camaraderie and personal support. It is clear from scholarship that expressive networking in itself has vital instrumental implications. Social support can be indispensable not only in maintaining work performance but also in reducing stress (Waldtsrom & Madsen, 2007) both of which impact positively on maintaining employment. The 'soft social capital' accrued via expressive networks is also seen as

important for self-esteem (van Emmerik, 2005) and can in turn impact on workplace success. The elite career women interviewed in Davies-Netzley's research identify the importance of being accepted into male networks, and developing similarities with male peers, to progress their careers. But to survive in top level corporate positions the women also identify the benefits of additionally networking with other senior women, not only for sharing knowledge and resources, but for crucial comradeship and support, in an often hostile, male-dominated environment. Similarly the postgraduate and early career academics taking part in a feminist reading group in Macoun and Miller's (2014) study noted the importance of the group in terms of not only peer support - friendship, intellectual engagement and knowledge sharing - but also through fostering a 'community of belonging' (p.296), providing solidarity and resistance in an institutional environment in which they often felt marginalized.

Methodology

My primary research is based on two separate research methods. Firstly, my research into book groups and work-based networking draws on my own decade long membership of a workplace reading group, using participant observation as my primary tool. In this sense, my research is partly ethnographic, in that my research has involved on-going immersion in the field of study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Secondly, my research draws on the results of fourteen interviews with participants in three other work-based book groups. Interviews were chosen as a means to collect further data as they enabled the qualitative exploration of the participants' experiences of networking within their reading groups, focusing on the participants' own voices. Interviews were based on a semi-structured list of research questions, lasted in length between 45 minutes and two hours, and were recorded and later transcribed. A

thematic analysis of the data was conducted in which patterns within the responses were identified, grouped and coded (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). All participant information has been anonymized for this article. Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees.

My own reading group, which is a university-based group, is currently made up of seven women and based in the North-East of England. Membership has fluctuated a little over the years, and in all thirteen women have been part of the group since its inception in 2003. We settled on a membership of eight from 2008 until 2013, sadly losing one of our members to cancer in the summer of 2013. Six of that eight were in the group since the beginning; seven of the eight were employed at the university when joining the group (and five of our current seven remain employed at the university). Only one member joined us from outside the university structure as a close friend of two of the members. We are a women-only group. It is an implicit, unsaid, rule of the group that it is all female (when new female members of staff have started work they have sometimes been asked to join; new male colleagues never have). The group members are all White European. Involvement in the group is by invitation, with existing members agreeing on the proposal of new participants before they are asked. We meet every month or so, in one of the members' houses (this is loosely rotated). Members bring a selection of food and drinks to each meeting.

The second group, a book group based in a hospital in the South-East of England, has a monthly meeting. It is open to all members of staff – male and female – and is advertised on the hospital's social events board. It has a fluctuating membership of up to twelve, with usually at least six participants at each meeting. It meets in the

hospital's social club at 5.30 pm on the first Monday or Tuesday of each month. As it is registered as a work social club, the hospital pays for a small buffet and members can buy drinks from the bar, in line with general hospital policy. Whilst the reading group is open to both men and women, at the point of interview only two of the twelve members were male. The group attracts members from a range of areas across the hospital working in both clinical and research areas. In total four female members of the group were interviewed in June 2005. All interviewees were White and European. All interviews took place in the hospital social club.

The third group is a reading group based at a branch of a Telecoms company, located on the outskirts of a city in Scotland. As part of this company's support of literature and the arts it had facilitated reading groups across many of its UK offices. At its peak the company sponsored over a dozen work-based reading groups, providing participants with free books and lunch. This particular group had met monthly but recently meetings had become less frequent. The site where I undertook the interviews housed employees working in Operations, Acquisitions and Estates, Building and Network Planning – with the majority of employees male. The numbers participating in the book club had fluctuated (the nature of this branch meant that many staff members frequently worked off site), but from a staff unit of fifty, twenty had regularly attended. According to the interviewees, sometimes men were in the majority; always there were at least 50 per cent men there. The company had recently been bought out by another telecoms company, which seemingly did not have such a broad commitment to either the arts or to promoting work-based social activities. The subsidization of the workplace reading groups had been called into question, with the provision of the books and lunch under threat at the point of interview. Three of the

regular members of the book club – two women and one man - were interviewed in June 2005, on the premises of the firm. All were White European.

The fourth reading group is located at a US University. The 'Women's Faculty Book Club' had been established in 1991 and was open to all women on campus. In its inception about 30 members had attended the first meetings. The membership has changed over the years but, at the point of the interviews, a core group of fifteen members attended regularly (with another 25 on the mailing list). Whilst new members were often invited or learnt about it by word of mouth, the book club did produce flyers and bookmarks to advertise the group to new members within the university. The group met monthly at the house of one of the founding members, always on Sundays at 7pm. Group members take it in turns to bring refreshments. Seven of the reading group members (including one who had recently left the group) were interviewed in April 2010; six interviewees were White American and one Hispanic. Six interviews took place in various locations on the university campus. One interview was held at the participant's home.

Results and Discussion

The research results illustrate that workplace book groups exist as both formal and informal networks. Three of the four groups all existed largely outside of the formal work structures. The UK and US university-based groups both met off campus in the evenings. The hospital reading group met in after-work hours on hospital premises in the staff club and had some monetary support for refreshments, but like the university groups had emerged at the grassroots: conceived, organized and run by enthusiastic individuals.

In contrast, the telecoms group was formally initiated and supported by the organization. The corporate sponsorship of the groups had undoubtedly increased interest in the book club and diversified membership. Employees were not obliged to participate but, particularly in its early days, were strongly encouraged to participate, and coaxed by free books and a complimentary lunch. The workplace reading group functioned in a certain fashion as an ongoing team-building exercise, here with a focus on books and literature rather than the usual physical or problem-solving activities associated with corporate team events. One interviewee explained, how she had been told about the reading group at her job interview and it was one of the factors that influenced her decision to take the job: a company that was trying to foster a good social atmosphere in the workplace appealed to her. The provision of books and food undoubtedly contributed to its popularity. As another member noted: 'the lure of a buffet at lunchtime as well was always a bonus'.

Whilst book clubs have a feminine cultural image the formal sponsorship of this book club had brought equal numbers of men to the group from a range of occupations. Lamm (1995, p.205) speculates whether men are put off joining book clubs because talking about books involves 'showing and sharing feelings' and, as Lamm puts it, 'would violate the Guy Code'? This appeared not to be the case in the Telecom group where men had enthusiastically participated. However, with the change of organizational ownership, and the impending withdrawal of financial support, the interviewees commented on how overall participation had already begun to fall amongst both men and women. This was seen not only as a result of the planned withdrawal of free books and food, but also because receding enthusiasm amongst

top-level management produced a more skeptical attitude to the group amongst employees. As one participant remarked: 'for some people they got to feel that their superiors weren't happy about it and regarded it as a bit of a skive … they picked up vibes that it was may be not the most productive use of their time' (Cora, Telecoms Reading Group, UK).

All four reading groups provided scope for members to expressively network, either with colleagues already familiar to them within the work organization or staff previously unknown to them. Across the four groups participants generally highlighted the enjoyment gained from group membership. Involvement not only spurred them to read more or beyond their usual literary choices, but also provided them with the opportunity to forge closer or new relations with work peers. As Tom, an engineer working for the Telecoms company, explained:

> I kind of knew most people, but I've got to know a few more of them; I knew them by sight or to say hello, but it's amazing what you can pick up about people from the types of books they read ...[it] broadens your perception of them. A lot of the time you just know people from the workplace, you know them from 9 until 5.30 and that's it but sometimes when they're talking about books they've read, films, plays etc that they go and see you get a better idea of the person that they are.

For many building up a rapport with colleagues within the reading group in turn bolstered workplace interactions outside the group:

> You got to know what made people tick, what they liked and what they didn't. And sometimes it could be unexpected things that people came out with. But even discovering that you had some things in common, it would just give you more of a connection with that person, and that then carries over into the working relationship with them as well (Cora, Telecoms Reading Group, UK).

Whilst a key function of all four groups was expressive networking, the extent to which the groups also provided means to instrumentally network varied. The hospital group brought together a range of colleagues from both the clinical and research branches of the institution. Many had little overlap in the workplace, being employed in completely separate areas, so there was the potential at least for diverse networking contacts to develop from participation in the reading group. As one of the participants of the hospital reading group noted:

> My co-organizer, because she's a clinical psychologist, she has met people at least one, possibly two through here, where she's said "oh what do you do?" and found out that, you know, in professional life it would be useful to know that person (Jean, Hospital Reading Group, UK).

At the Scottish telecoms group, the particular nature of the site meant that there was quite a flat structure with high level management physically located at a distance. As with the hospital reading group, participation did develop the members' contacts with people outside of usual work channels, again potentially the diversifying of networking contacts, albeit not directly with higher-status colleagues. Yet the

horizontal employment structure limited networking possibilities with high status colleagues.

In the instance of my own book club, the group has provided a regular space for members to socialize off-campus, to share the pleasure of exploring literary texts, and to maintain and develop social bonds when time pressures squeeze opportunities for social contact within work hours. In this sense the network's function is mainly expressive. As a network it does not bring members in contact with a diverse and fluctuating range of work colleagues, but instead solidifies existing personal bonds amongst work peers. This is not to say that the group does not have also an instrumental dimension. At each gathering there is usually some exchange of work-related knowledge, and the opportunity is taken to share work news or sometimes to seek advice explicitly on work matters. Importantly the group has also provided a means for some members to retain connections with the university when their own attachments to the university have become more precarious due to maternity leave, ill health, or changes to work contracts.

It was, however, the US University-based reading group that provided most clear latitude for instrumental networking, and it was in these interviews that the lure of instrumental networking via the reading group was most explicitly stated. Without exception all interviewees acknowledged the instrumental networking bonuses of being involved in the women's book club:

On one level membership of the book club engendered a greater familiarity with other employees that eased workplace interactions. One member explained her reasons for joining:

> I think it was the whole idea of being able to network with other women in the university, and then whole idea of a book club in and of itself too. I wasn't reading enough fun things. I needed to stop being so serious all of the time with my nose to the grindstone [...] It's not high powered networking as such. We talk about the university but it's much more casual than that. But I think it's a good way to get to know various people, so when you do interact with them at the university it's kind of a different relationship because you have this relationship from the book club (Jane, University Women's Book Club, USA).

Membership could also lead to reciprocity within the workplace. One senior woman in the university gave her motives for being involved in the group in the following way:

> Clearly there is an attraction just to be there with the other people in the group and that attraction is both because I think they have really interesting things to say about the book, but it's also a great source of information about what's going on ... these things keep you feeling you're on top of everything. It's also a way of networking; I think sometimes people end up doing other people favors. It's definitely both the

> discussion and the particular group (Louisa, University Women's Book Club, USA).

A relatively new professor acknowledged the clear networking possibilities that the book club had given her and others. As she noted, even senior members of staff sometimes have difficulties getting to talk to the Dean; an adjunct would never have this possibility. However, through the book club that kind of interaction, in an informal, off-campus setting, was possible:

> It was very useful as I met lots of women who I would have eventually met, but probably what was nice about it was that I met them in a setting where we could talk somewhat openly and informally rather than in the structured setting of work. Where initially my interactions with them would have been more over business matters, it would have been more in the context of their programmes, or some meeting, so that was nice. The other thing for me that was useful was since I am a new person, it was interesting to hear them talk about [the university], there's a kind of discussion that goes on not only about [the university] a kind of gossip that went on there. I was introduced, by being there, to gossip about other, usually high level administrators, or faculty. It was both interesting to hear them talk about the university and various aspects of it and also talk about various characters and people so it gave me a kind of good, a useful introduction to [the university] [....] For me it was very useful in terms of networking, and in terms of meeting certain colleagues who have been very helpful [in my field], and learning certain things about [the

> university] that could have taken much longer to learn: what you might learn by going out to lunch, in two way conversation with one person. But that kind of group knowledge exists, where you have lots of different people communicating what they know (Sally, University Women's Book Club, USA).

That there were a number of women in key senior positions in the university was key, and their presence at the book group was clearly recognized by other employees. As one interviewee remarked without irony: one young woman used to attend but 'stopped when she got tenure' (Dora, University Women's Book Club, USA).

But the book club was not universally acknowledged as supportive to women. One member had left the group unhappy with what she felt to be a lack of solidarity shown by some of the women, unable to reconcile tensions with colleagues at work and socializing with them at the book group. She explains how, on arriving at the university, she was encouraged to join:

> 'I was told by the previous Chair that it was an important group of women; it was a politics breaker. So I went and enjoyed being the baby in the room. I went for several years, because it is once a month on Sundays always in the same place at the house of one of the founders, and it was interesting to get to know people. I was new to [the university]. The people that you met were not my age, close to retirement, people I did not really feel I had anything in common other than just meeting for this book club... [but] I felt welcome, I felt I was getting to be a professor rather

> than a grad student; it was a different stage in my life, so yeah at the beginning I enjoyed it **[…]** In the course of the years the politics, factions started emerging and I had major differences with [two senior reading group members]. The purpose of going to that group in the first place is to be part of the mason lodge and being initiated into the power structure, and it happened completely the opposite**'** (Valerie, University Women's Book Club, USA).

For many members, book groups are useful places to network, socially or instrumentally, but they can also be sites where conflicts are replayed, or indeed generated. Informal networks can, as Acker (2006) notes, serve to reproduce existing social differences and shore up in-group identities, which exclude other groups. This particular interviewee felt disconnected from the group not only because of work tensions but also because she felt alienated by the particular class and ethnic profile of its membership. Contrary to Howie's (2011) assertion that the emphathetic culture of women's reading groups is intrinsically supportive and accommodating of difference, this interviewee's experience instead highlights the ways in which ethnic and class status can also be maintained within groups, creating barriers to resources and support for non-hegemonic women. In this sense we can see how the exclusionary dynamics of informal old boy networks can be replicated in informal all-female networks.

Conclusions

This study suggests that workplace book groups provide an important alternative space for some employees to network in addition to, or instead of, more traditional informal networks revolving, for example, around sports or after-work drinking. This 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.
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