Social networks and women’s agency: the role of voluntary associations in brokering opportunities across the life course

A Case Study of the VIEW Clubs of Australia

‘Being able to better yourself, and maybe get into a position where you can help others as well as help yourself, I think that’s a great opportunity.’ (VIEW member)

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Background and context of the research

- Case study of a large women’s service organisation in the Australian setting: Voice Interests and Education of Women (VIEW)
  - founded by The Smith Family in 1960
  - approx. 26 000 members
  - 400+ clubs
  - local and national presence
  - member and public serving goals

- Method: Primarily qualitative – participant observation, documentary and record analysis, in-depth interviews from grassroots to national level
The 1960’s…

Women Should Influence Government

by G. K. Forbes

From an address given by Mr. Forbes to the Combined V.I.E.W Clubs in the Newcastle area on the occasion of their first anniversary.

It is obvious to even the most shallow thinker that women are denied equality with men, not only in Australia, but in every country in the world. It is the way in which males, from the time they are born, are trained by our society to regard women as inferior in ability to lead and therefore not worthy of a true representatives, for a great deal of education of candidates in the art and technique of Government would have to be undertaken. 1
...and 40 years on...

BRIDGE WALK FOR FRIENDSHIP
Members of Gunnedah Day (NSW) staged a symbolic bridge walk over the Namoi River to commemorate this year’s International Women’s Day theme of “building bridges”. The walk concluded with morning tea in a nearby...
Organisational concerns: sustainability and effectiveness – the VIEW Vision 2005 agenda

For VIEW to continue as a viable women’s organisation in the 21st century we too must be prepared to consider who we are. Reviewing the link VIEW has with The Smith Family is timely and supported by the National Council…Your leaders in VIEW are being made aware of the environmental changes occurring for women in Australia and elsewhere. Unless we continually reassess who we are and what we do our future will be limited.

(National Manager’s Message, VIEW National Council Minutes, February 2001)

Link to broader concerns: social capital and women’s agency in interrogating collective and organisational capacity
Voluntary associations, social networks and social capital

- Social capital and voluntary associations in empirical research
  - Quantitative bias (i.e. Van Deth 1997, Van Deth et.al. 1999, Lowndes 2000, Devine and Roberts 2003)
  - Sources of social cohesion promoted over questions about power and inequality

- A contextualised account of social capital needs to:
  - Separate the sources and consequences of social capital
  - Distinguish aspects/elements of social capital and types of social capital
  - Recognise social capital has different uses in different contexts
  - Account for structured inequality in the distribution of resources and the networks which broker access to them (Bourdieu 1986, 1997, Foley and Edwards 1999)
Social capital as conceptualised by Michael Foley and Bob Edwards (1999)

Broader socio-historical context

Stratification patterns shaping the kinds and "use value" of resources present in specific context.

Resources present within a specific social context

Knowledge that resources are present

Access to resources present in the social field

Social Capital:

Resources accessible (mobilizable) to individual or collective actors in particular socio-historical contexts. Resource available for use

Individual or group agency/strategy responsive to perceptions of broader context, rather than individual "rational choice"

Resources utilized (mobilized) for particular purposes in specific situations.

The significance of women’s agency

- Women’s Agency (i.e. Gardiner 1995, Lister 1997, Siim 2000)
  - Agency as the capacity to act and determine
  - Individual and collective dimensions of agency. Thus in feminist scholarship *women’s agency* ‘often refers to women’s ability to determine their own daily life as well as their collective ability to make a difference on the public arena’ (Siim 2000: 4).
  - Important for citizenship and inclusion
  - Enables focus on capability and *capacity* for choice and action
  - Domains of agency in this study: individual, social, political

How does social capital relate to women’s capacity to realise agency across these domains in the network environment of VIEW?
Individual agency and ‘acting otherwise’ through VIEW

- VIEW and individual agency:
  - Time out / space for women to develop and express their independent identities as women
  - Combat loneliness – for some a substitute for family
  - Self-confidence
  - Skill development – leadership, public-speaking, communication
  - Forum to apply skills
  - Learning new things/knowledge
  - Lifelong learning: keeping mind active

- The significance of gender
  - Women’s space
  - Reflexivity: navigating biographical discontinuity
  - Social location
It’s nice to get out and do things…in a role where you’re not somebody’s wife or somebody’s mum; you’re just there because you’re you.

(Mica)

It does give you a lot more confidence in yourself. And, as I say women, they do become very bogged down once they’ve had children and the children have all left home. You sort of wonder what you’re going to do with yourself. And I know for a fact my husbands not too crash hot on me going out for the day. But I enjoy it and I’ve stopped feeling guilty now and I go, and this is something that we’ll probably have to discuss at a later time when we’re retired. I mean if I decide I want to go further, well it’s sort of something that just makes you feel good about yourself. And whether you do get any higher up or whether you just become a little more involved in the club type of thing it it’s something that gives you a purpose, makes you feel as though you belong. For sure.

(Pearl)
I’ve seen some of the ladies who have just been members or Presidents, and then they take on Zone Councillor, and then go on to National Council. And I just see how … well, they seem to come over as a lot more confident and, yes just stronger people.

(Jacinth)

I’ve learnt the experience of being able to chair a meeting, to be able to get up behind the microphone and speak to 140 ladies, which I’ve never done before, and which gave me the … I did the eulogy for my dad 2 years ago, and I did the eulogy for my sister last year. I could not have done that. And my children are amazed at what I’ve now got the confidence to do.

(Crystal)
Individual agency and ‘acting otherwise’…

The role of social capital
- Support structure of other women
- Committee participation
- Reciprocity within clubs and the organisation i.e. turn-taking
- TSF brokerage role as important for:
  - Leadership development structure (the National Manager and the National Council)
  - Opportunities to contribute to TSF initiatives and widen networks
- The boundaries of social capital
  - Social capital failures
  - Resource ‘leakage’
  - Network resources and capacity – accommodating aging and encouraging diversity
Social agency and ‘making a difference’ through VIEW

- How does social capital facilitate social capacity and agency within VIEW?
  - Opportunity structure for women to engage in social connection and community service
  - Opportunity structure sustained and resources accessed through formal and informal network closure (Coleman 1988) (trust, values and reciprocity) and network brokerage (Burt 2000) (bridging social capital)

- Some issues and constraints:
  - Value change and value frisson
  - Communication and the importance of the interpersonal level
  - Available resources within the network
  - Voluntarism and the importance of choice
  - Solidarity – tradeoffs between social and service functions
  - The complications of altruism: blending ‘self’ and ‘other’
  - Network constraints on bridging social capital
‘making a difference’

VIEW incorporates so much – because it’s social for you as well as...you’re also achieving something by helping other people.

(Nephrite)

I like the feeling of purpose, of being able to help people who have not been as lucky as I have in their life.

(Gypsum)

Our little fellow we had...we got a letter to say that his family, their needs had got better. And to us, that was great, to hear that and to think, there you are, there’s one little fellow we’ve helped and let the family come to better times.

(Topaz)
Political agency in VIEW

How does social capital facilitate political capacity in VIEW?

Structure of collective action enabled women to:
- Articulate their concerns within the membership
- Link their concerns and interests to government
- Create grassroots democratic legitimacy
- Develop civic skills
- Draw on their bridging social capital with TSF to access additional political resources – network closure (Coleman 1988) network brokerage (Burt 1998, 2000) and ‘borrowed’ social capital (Burt 1998)

Some issues and constraints
- External constraints: the gendered polity
- Democratic structure and processes impedes external effectiveness (Knoke 1990)
- Borrowed social capital (constrained skills, resources and independent networks)
- Solidarity (friendship and inclusion) and bonding social capital crowds out political capital and bridging and linking social capital
- Ineffectiveness maintains inclusive solidarity? ‘we have a voice of we care to use it, but do we care to use it?’ (Amethyst)
Political agency

Political capacity in the informal arena

- Organisational structure and context of interaction as an environment for political learning – knowledge and democratic values (i.e. Verba et al. 1995)
  - Guest speakers, meeting people and discussion
  - ‘solidarity in difference’? (i.e. Lister 1997) the capacity to see the world from the standpoint of others
  - Self confidence as a resource to ‘act otherwise’
  - ‘women’s talk’ and the ‘ripple’ effect

It’s probably a very quiet role, in the end. Or no, it appears quiet but probably ripples go out. It’s really hard to tag that stuff, isn’t it? You turn up for your meeting and whoever’s giving … Cheryl is giving a talk on breast cancer and has brought along all the slides and whizzy bits and all of that, and you go home and you talk to your daughters, your husband, your son, about what happened and say to your daughter, ‘Get going on this breast cancer bit, sweetheart’. So it’s fairly quiet but it’s definitely happening. That then moves on, where she does or does not discuss it at work. So I say it appears quiet, but I’m sure there’s a ripple that keeps going.

(Sage)
Conclusion: social networks and women’s agency

- Social capital has different uses in different contexts – it is not a panacea – rather facilitates some actions and constrains others.
- The social capital fostered in this organisation contributes to the capacity for women, individually and collectively, to exercise agency in their own daily lives, in society, and in the polity, but it does so in a self-limiting sense.
- The organisation is more effective in areas that build on and expand women’s past experiences, commonly in the private sphere, than in those that expand their collective capacity for public engagement and power.
- Mediated by: purpose, network structure, sources of collective action and solidarity, wider socio-historical context and available resources.
- Generative context matters – for women in VIEW, the organisational context can broker new opportunities to act in new ways relative to their previous life experiences.
Bibliography