

Gabriella Vezzosi

Title: The Benefits of Women Networks and Community: women networks and community transcend beyond the personal and private sphere and serve to perpetuate women in leadership

University of Wisconsin- Platteville
Organizational Change Leadership MS Degree
December 14, 2022

*Jason Laker*¹
APPROVED FINAL VERSION

I. Introduction and Statement of Problem:

Professional women are often lacking mentorship, support, and advancement opportunities within their organizations. Women networks are fulfilling these unmet needs. In this instance, women network communities have a specific mission. DeNel Rehberg Sedo (2004) defines women book clubs as networking communities:

The book club therefore represents a community of networks of interrelationships through which these book club women negotiate dominant ideologies and interpretations. Within the practices of reading, meeting, talking, and interpreting, the women may challenge or accede to oppressive ideologies and structural inequalities that they find in their homes, work, and society (p. 17).

These networks are comprised of women with diverse backgrounds; women profit from learning about others' various experiences through co-mentoring. As a result of this active engagement, women are further equipped with tools that they gained directly from this network and community. Women in networks can speak more honestly and freely without the looming concern of consequences from their respective employers. Speaking from a place of authenticity opens channels to receive support personally as well as professionally. The network and community's support gives rise to an increase in confidence and skills which can be directly incorporated into their professional lives.

These networking communities can become consciousness raising groups as women begin to share their experiences. Beach and Yussen (2011) frame the ways in which women can spark consciousness raising conversations by sharing their experiences, "...club members drew on characters' - perspectives to help them reinterpret past events in their lives...women's book clubs served as sites for women's collective sense of intellectual solidarity and resistance..." (p. 122). Women can begin to discuss their thoughts through by utilizing the readings as a foundation for discussion. Consciousness raising will be discussed later in this paper.

Professional women, at times, are seeking connections outside of the workplace as a layer of protection and support within the workplace. DeNel Rehberg Sedo states (2004): "Membership in a book club...provides these women with opportunity to validate and valorize understandings themselves, of their world, and their places in it...The social bonds that are formed within both face-to-face and virtual club enrich their lives" (p. 255). The relationships that are cultivated and that grow within these networks possess the potential to take root as a dependable space to share. A professional woman who is in search of meaningful connections may turn to book clubs as a source. The networks that develop and are strengthened outside of the workspace give rise to action taken within the workspace; book clubs provide a space to share feelings and to frame thoughts. Within a book club that is rooted understanding, women may be able to share their feelings that would otherwise be harbored within their own minds.

Often true feelings, concerns, or opinions are withheld within the workplace. Thus, it is easy to feel ostracized from coworkers in a work environment that perpetuates unhealthy norms. These unhealthy norms can be identified, analyzed, and addressed. Beach and Yussen (2011) trace book club members' journeys, "Members also value the opportunity to share their own life experiences and address issues...members may find support for their own social or political

attitudes” (p. 122). Networking communities or book clubs provide space to discuss topics, explore new learnings, and share ideas. The networks may be comprised of women from different backgrounds. Based on the sharing of each woman’s personal life stories, perhaps new perspectives can develop; the perspectives may provide refreshing insight and a point of comparison. The new perspectives can potentially shed light onto the current state and serve as a pulse check for the experiences each woman is facing.

Current Climate

Due to workplace norms, women may feel that they must withhold or censor their opinions or thoughts due the current climate. According to new research by Sattari et al. (2021), a specific form of sexism is present within workplace norms: “...men...are likely to respond to sexist workplace comments with ‘benevolent sexism’: attitudes, practices, and actions that seem positive...but that undercut their goal of supporting women at work, often under the pretense of providing them with help, protection...” (para. 2). Women are faced with various forms of sexism including “benevolent sexism”. Sexist remarks and actions are subliminally perpetuated by benevolent sexism. Though benevolent sexism possesses the appearance of combating sexism, it is deeply rooted in sexism.

This lack of authentic sharing provides no space for the corresponding and supplemental support to be provided. Amro Alzghoul et al. (2018) refers to authentic leadership as: “...continuing processes by which leaders and followers get self-awareness and establish open, transparent, trusting, and genuine relationships...” (p. 604). Working in an environment that does not have a foundation of trust and support, it is difficult to present one’s true self at work. If leaders and managers fail to employ authentic leadership styles or fail to display the qualities of an authentic leader, safe environment where ideas can be cultivated will not exist. Managers who

are unaware of or unwilling to see their actions in regard to further building an authentic environment or further build elements of distrust, will only further perpetuate a disingenuous workplace.

Catherine Hansman (2002) explains, “Mentorship relationships can be characterized as socially constructed power relationships...mentors can be considered ‘superior’ by virtue of their phenomenal knowledge and their main task could be seen as passing on to or “filling up” their proteges with this knowledge” (p. 45). Traditional mentoring operates in a different sphere compared to co-mentoring. The power dynamic that exists within traditional mentoring spaces does not allow for mentors and mentees to be viewed on an equal playing field. The restrictive nature of traditional mentoring does not allow for the elastic fluctuation of ideas.

Mentees or novice employees can feel that this power dynamic exists; the power dynamic may minimize the questions that novice employees ask due to feelings of inadequacy or self-consciousness. Applying this to the women networks, it is critical for members to be aware of how their actions, verbal, and nonverbal cues can inadvertently silence a member. Jess McHugh (2021) states: “...women turned to book clubs in times of upheaval, as a way of seeking wisdom both from books and from one another...Readers seek out a particular intimacy that can be bridged through books” (para. 23-25). With the common understanding that women are seeking wisdom from each other, as McHugh (2021) states, women should be aware of how they are actively increasing this underlying mission or undermining this mission. It may take new members time to adjust and to build their own self confidence to accept, incorporate, and emulate that they have wisdom to share. To better support the sharing of information, the burden of responsibility also falls onto the members to support the process of sharing insight.

Current mentorship design does not always yield the positive outcomes that leaders are in hopes of achieving. In research from Johnson et al. (2021), "...poor mentoring can be worse for employees than no mentoring at all. Ill-prepared and marginally competent mentors not only give mentoring a bad name in an organization. They also sabotage retention, commitment, and employee development..." (para. 4). Companies are not adequately providing resources to train mentors to mentor another employee. Thus, mentors are tossed into a position that they are not equipped for; mentors may feel inadequate or unable to uphold certain standards. These frustrations can easily be displaced upon the mentee whom the mentors were assigned to.

Networking communities, such as book clubs, utilize the book as vehicle through which workplace topics can be discussed. The books selected can serve as a disarming mechanism. Within the networking communities, women can begin to explore topics that would otherwise be considered taboo within the workplace, such as racism, sexism, and trauma. Book club members can discuss events in the book as a starting point to propel into something they are experiencing. The research from Grenier et al. (2022) emphasize: "Engaging in reading and discussing fiction with others can produce a critical and emancipatory form of adult learning that contributes to establishing spaces that provide sociocultural influence among members and supports employees' ability to reveal and counter hegemonic practices in their organization" (p. 25). The books are a cover story or a mask for the true nature of the clubs. The book club members are ready to listen to each other's experiences, validate experiences, provide support, and insight. These networking communities provide the necessary support, guidance, and safe environment to discuss sensitive issues. Women are provided the unique opportunity to mentor and guide each other within this space.

Through book club discussions, a co-mentorship relationship can exist. Co-mentoring, as defined by Gail McGuire and Jo Reger (2003), "...is rooted in a feminist tradition that fosters equal balance of power between participants, seeks to integrate emotion into the academic professional experience, and values paid and unpaid work" (p. 54). Seasoned professionals are provided with the support to embody the framework and freedom of a perpetual learner. The pressure to save face and harbor all answers is alleviated. Gratitude can be intertwined into the mentorship relationship. As the novice employee learns, the seasoned employee can also learn from the relationship. The novice employee will express feelings of appreciation for the seasoned employees unlimited sharing of knowledge. To express their gratitude, the novice employee will share any pieces of knowledge or tips that could greatly help the seasoned employee. This free flow of knowledge fills the networking community. The networking communities are all encompassing in the sense that formal structure mentorship roles do not exist.

The relationships that develop within book clubs are often rooted in trust and value. Since the book clubs employ co-mentoring relationships, all viewpoints innately hold worth. Considering that book clubs exist outside of the workplace, this provides an extra layer of support. Book club members can engage in discussion and dialogue with the freedom that their words will not penetrate the ears of their employer. New topics can be explored and shared that would otherwise be left untouched.

II. The Benefits of Women Networks and Community

There is a vast need for women networks and community. The exchange of ideas is simply the tip of the iceberg of benefits. The benefits of being in community not only provide support, but also addition confidence that translates into the workspace. Within these networks, women of all ages have equal opportunity to share their experiences. The networks provide an even playing

field for ideas to be shared since the women are from all sectors with unique perspectives. Within these networking spheres beauty unfolds. McGuire and Reger illustrate (2003), “Each person in a co-mentoring relationship has the opportunity to occupy the role of teacher and learner, with the assumption being that both individuals have something to offer and gain...” (p. 55). Co-mentoring levels the playing field or hierarchical latter that usually exists when a seasoned professional mentors a novice. The exchange of ideas, experiences, new findings is upheld and relished within these co-mentoring networks. The notion that each person has valuable information to share provides a new perspective. Though novice professional may not have the twenty plus years of experience deeply woven into their resume or toolbox, they have equally as important skills to share.

This perspective shifting mentality of the perpetual learner creates a new dynamic. Anyone, regardless of years of experience, is subliminally and consciously encouraged to share their insights. Often nuggets of helpful information may be withheld by a novice professional since they think it might not have value. However, this golden nugget of information could save someone else immense time in performing a task. The comfortability and safe feeling that a networking community provides is luxurious.

Women networks provide a unique experience to deconstruct power dynamics that usually develop between a seasoned professional compared to a novice. “The main way in which this relationship was feminist was in its balance of power...Because we possessed equal levels of power, our energies were spent helping each other to improve upon our unique strengths rather than attempting to clone ourselves” (McGuire & Reger, 2003, p. 63). This idea of “cloning” greatly speaks to the multilayer pitfalls of traditional mentoring relationships. “Cloning” implies that any qualities, ideas, preferences, or techniques outside of the cookie cutter scope are not

wanted, disliked, or even discouraged. Co-mentoring expands the rigid lines of mentoring to a free flow of ideas.

The deeply rooted sense of encouragement that fills co-mentoring suggest that each professional has valuable qualities, competencies, and desirable skills. Lacy and Chen (2022) state, "...co-mentoring that acknowledges all identities of personhood in an equitable, affirming, validating and asset orientation, wherein honest two-way learning occurs that (re)produces critically reflexive knowledge(s) and communication" (p. 371). The burden of mentoring falls upon the novice learner to adjust, alter, and accommodate. Co-mentoring reframes this mindset to challenge that there is not a singular path that must be followed.

Traditional mentoring power dynamics also possess the pitfall to perpetuate out of date practices or ideals. The traditional structure of mentorship does not allow for fluctuation; expansive conversations are less likely to occur within a power-dynamic infused workplace mentorship. "Traditional mentor relationship is hierarchical one in which one person serves as a teacher, sage and sponsor to another one..." (McGuire & Reger, 2003, p. 56). Co-mentoring allows for the free flow of new ideas and the space to examine. Since there are no feelings of inferiority seeping through the relationship, co-mentoring also allows for the exchange of learnings.

Co-mentoring is deeply rooted in encouragement and support. Thus, seasoned professionals may feel more inclined to share their own areas of insecurities. The encouragement and support to discuss and learn will help create more confident employees. A seasoned employee who has never experienced the beauty of co-mentoring, may have had ideas to share regarding new processes or changes. Due to the strong power dynamic that exists in traditional mentoring relationships, the seasoned employee may not have had an opportunity to express these new

suggestions. Time will need to be dedicated to unlearning previous behaviors and traits. It is freeing to conceptualize the embodiment of the forever learner. As a learner, the pressure and stress that is placed on oneself is alleviated. Grace is granted to those who are learning.

Co-mentoring challenges these mindsets. Parties involved in co-mentoring can adjust to each role as both learners and teachers in the relationship (McGuire & Reger, 2003). This is empowering; professionals can feel as though they are allowed to make mistakes, experiment, and test new concepts. This acceptance will not only encourage seasoned professionals to try new techniques, but to also value the novice teachers. The ability to share information is empowering to the novice professional. They will welcome questions. Seasoned employees will feel as though their questions are valid since they will not be met with resentment or disdain.

Sophie Hennekam, Sally Macarthur, Dawn Bennett, Cat Hope, and Talisha Goh (2020) studied the benefits of online networks for women composers:

The mentors provided support, encouragement, inspiration and guidance to other women and helped to create new opportunities by challenging them to explore new ideas and try different approaches. Mentors also assisted with the acquisition of new technical knowledge and skills, helped composers to meet the “right people” to advance their careers, and provide critical feedback (p. 223).

The altruistic online mentorship provides a sense of comfort. The advanced composers who willingly joined the community are actively participating to mentor other composers. The altruistic online mentorship is truly a selfless act in the sense that the women do not have anything to gain and yet they are actively engaging to support another woman’s growth. This mentorship provides an open channel to share new skills.

Gayle Gay (2019) shares, “Hill also said it was critical for professionals to have mentors outside of one’s chain of command so that questions asked, and concerns raised are never brought up or appear on an individual’s performance appraisal” (p. 37). Mentors outside of the workplace provide an additional layer of protection. Mentors who are completely removed from direct contact with the workplace allow for ideas to be shared without the risk of repercussions or retaliation. Mentors in networking groups do not have a stake in the situation. Thus, the advice and feedback provided stems from a genuine place versus a means to their own end. The concerns discussed initially within networking groups allows for woman to practice who they will raise the concern with leadership. The feedback provided will only finetune their delivery and sharpen their articulation of the specific thoughts. Sharing concerns with a networking group also does not involve another coworker with the situation at hand. A coworker who is directly related to the situation or is aware of the history regarding an event may not provide unbiased and qualitative feedback.

III. The Benefits of Women Networks and Community Translate into the Workplace

The beauty that these off site, off the clock networks provide is the ability for people to speak freely. Often, thoughts and suggestions are prefiltered through a litany of levels prior to even spoken aloud during a work staff meeting. It is difficult at times to speak freely and openly at work. Work often lacks this safety net of comfortability. The workplace may not offer the same paradigm of the perpetual learner. However, within these separate communities, ideas are shared freely without the immense filter and edits. Authentically speaking provides each member with the ability and confidence to share (Alzghoul et al., 2018). Speaking authentically is the first step. The second step is the reassurance and acceptance after sharing new information with the group. When one’s idea is spoken from a place of authenticity and when positive feedback or

acknowledgement is provided by the group, there is an underling notion that the person's whole self is equally as accepted into the community.

As the community takes shape and develops, each members shared experiences has the potential to deeply resonate with another member. A key theme to this community is consciousness raising. For Catharine MacKinnon (1991), the key component to feminism is consciousness raising. "Consciousness raising is the process through which the contemporary radical feminist analysis of the situation of women has been shaped and shared... The key to feminist theory consists in its *way* of knowing. Consciousness raising is this way" (p. 84). Consciousness raising can occur when groups of women discuss their live experiences. These experiences are genuine, raw, and honest; it takes a large amount of bravery to speak up about injustices that are occurring throughout society. Women in these groups begin to realize that their personal experiences have also been shared by other women. With this knowledge, women can begin to fight the injustices that are occurring throughout society or the workplace.

Consciousness raising groups are criticized for gathering evidence through illegitimate methods. Catherine MacKinnon further states, "Knowledge is neither a copy nor a miscopy of reality, neither representative nor misrepresentative as the scientific model would have it, but a response to living in it" (1991, p. 98). MacKinnon argues that although the evidence that consciousness raising groups gather is seen as unconventional, it does not dismantle the fact that women's experiences occur nor that there are injustices in our society. This type of knowledge cannot be measured, weighed, or repeated, yet it is fully present and crucial. Denying that such experiences occur or refusing to acknowledge them on the basis that since it does not fall under the category of a scientific approach only further perpetuates the problem. This is a clear

indicator that society has very little faith in its members if it assumes that personal experiences are unimportant because they cannot be replicated.

Personal experiences are legitimate in and of themselves; though, they are unique to the individual, this does not discredit their worth. Consciousness raising is the exact moment when a woman realizes that her trials and tribulations are also shared by women across the sectors and spheres (MacKinnon, 1991, p. 102). A community that occurs outside of the workplace provides a sense of anonymity and separate for women to speak freely. Thus, when speaking freely, openly, and honestly, true emotion can take shape. This genuine consciousness raising can provide the very link that women have been longing for; the comfort in knowing that an experience which was previously felt isolating now is given light. Other women have shared similar experiences. The siloed and isolated feelings dissipate. The ease of speaking about the experience or the humor and connection knowing that another person truly understands builds a thick bond. One of the main components of consciousness raising as well as co-mentoring eliminating the power dynamic between people. It draws upon personal experiences to expose other women to the feeling of empowerment and connection. There is a deep thirst to connect with others. At times, the thirst to connect with others is not quenched in the workplace.

Thus, creating, developing, and nurturing a space where women feel deeply rooted and supported is critical. The alliance that develops is one in which women can arm themselves with in work. Catherine MacKinnon (1991) stated:

It was common for women in consciousness-raising groups to share radical changes in members' lives, work, life goals, and sexuality. This process created bonds and a different kind of knowledge, collective knowledge built on moving and being moved, on changing and being changed (p. 91).

Hearing shared stories from other women provide a guidebook detailing how to handle a new situation, how to better phrase a statement, how to approach a situation from a new angle, or tactics to becoming more agile. This guidebook and tools better prepare women for the workplace. Though each member may not have experienced every instance that each person has shared, they are now equipped with the language and confidence to discuss the situations.

Crystal Turner-Moffatt (2019) explains: “To prevent the risk of being overlooked for promotions, self-advocacy is important... Through mentoring women can become better advocates for themselves by taking part in exercises such as role-playing” (p. 18). The safe blanket environment that networking communities creates a sense of security. Woman can build their confidence through these role-playing activities. With this confidence, women now have experience and practice of displaying their strengths. This experience directly translates to how women will approach their next midyear review, interviewing for a promotion, and evaluation. Networking communities provide women an opportunity to hone-in their skills, sharpen their delivery, and incorporate feedback into their key strategic statements. Role playing opportunities within a networking space also provide women experiences of presenting or speaking with other from various backgrounds.

As unbiased third-party members of the networking community, the execution of discussion can be analyzed. A network member can provide insight into the delivery of the message, if the correct message was delivered, and the effectiveness of the message. While presenting in the workplace, often there are people present from various departments within the organization. Perceived common knowledge may not truly be common for all. The role-playing exercise will shed light on this; women will have the opportunity to adjust their tactics prior to presenting to leadership.

Role-playing exercises within networking groups can also provide women an opportunity to discuss salary negotiations skills. Gray et al. (2019) state "...however, women had a more negative view of salary negotiation, were less likely to believe that they had the tools to negotiate successfully.... and are less likely to ask for what they want" (p. 1027). Since women harbor negative feelings towards negotiation and specifically salary negotiation, they are less likely to utilize negotiation tactics. Role-playing in networking groups can alleviate these negative feelings of impostor and self-doubt. Role-playing different negotiation strategies will build confidence and equip women with the tools, language, and confident mind-frame to strive for a higher salary. Salary compensation is another fraught and often taboo topic within a workplace.

The nature of co-mentoring also serves to reframe the mind when challenges arise. "Because we kept such detailed lists of our goals and accomplishments, we were able to remind each other how much we had achieved when we felt discouraged by our workloads. By serving as each other's memories, we were able to support and motive each other" (McGuire & Reger, 2003, p. 61). Co-mentoring shifts the narrow focus from the challenge at hand to the positive monumental moments that each woman may have forgotten. Co-mentors would not question the value of each other's worth. Thus, the symbiotic relationship begins to take place; women in turn will abandon archaic thinking of questioning their own worth after a setback. This pivotal part of mentorship underlines the beauty of co-mentorship. The ability for women to uplift each other's spirits in a tough moment truly shapes who they are as leaders. Women who have co-mentoring relationship want to see each other succeed. They find joy in witnessing each other's growth and triumphs. This outward spoken form of support is missing from workplace cultures. This pivot to reframe mindset will directly translate to the workplace.

Under the traditional lens of mentoring, women may not have received the needed support and mentorship to advance their careers; co-mentoring provides this much needed support. With support of networking groups, women can pivot and reframe their thinking. As their confidence builds, women will not let a setback deter their trajectory nor allow a setback to undermine their work. Women will not question their own value as employees nor allow others to question their value. Often, this sense of self-worth is questioned. With the support of the community, women will be able to regroup at a faster rate.

Network members can speak to another woman's strengths and encourage her to negotiate a higher pay. Through the network support, women will feel more readily prepared to seek out a new role that better suits their abilities and challenges them. Remaining stagnant within a role that no longer sparks interest only hinders the growth of the employee as well as the growth of the company. Abele et al. (2012) defines career stagnation as, "...as the involuntary- at least temporary- end of one's career development... Career stagnation will become a dilemma when an individual is not able to cope with and/or if every means of dealing with career stagnation has both desired and undesired consequences" (p. 108). Career stagnation is detrimental since the employee is not challenged, learning new skills, and feels underutilized; these negative aspects do not allow for an employee to fully utilize their talents within their current stagnant role. Through negotiation role-play, women will have the tools and knowledge to strive for a new position.

This confidence will directly translate to the workspace. Lisa Walker (2019) states, "Women's networks are a great place to develop personally and professionally. It's a space to cheer each other on and genuinely feel supported and accepted amongst the group" (Incorporate Confidence-Building Opportunities, para. 1) The surrounding support and confidence that

networks provide will serve as the building blocks for change. Women may not have been aware of their accomplishments; through sharing their strengths with the networking community, women will receive the much-needed recognition. This recognition can shift a woman's mindset; the doubt or reservations may dissipate as women gain confidence to apply for new roles that better showcase their strengths. An organization will be able to find candidates internally for roles.

Women are equipped with the tools necessary to excel in their newly found positions. Laura Sherbin emphasizes (2018):

The fact is, building relationships with others increases trust, leading to buy-in and results. In our research, we find that successful women invest deeply in peer networks. They're more likely than other STEM women to help peers connect to senior leaders, to risk their own reputations to advocate for the ideas and skills of their peers, and to help them recover their reputations after making a mistake (Invest in Peer Networks, para. 1).

Within the networking community, women share their strengths, weaknesses, and aspirations. Networking communities provide a space for all three aspects to be examined. The net of support that is built serves as a layer of protection. The ability for women to hear about the successes and failures of their peers humanizes mistakes and errors of leaders. It is grounding to witness that leaders make mistakes through open discussions within networking communities. The growth develops when women can tap into this support and quickly regain their confidence after a setback. The ability to continue moving forward after a failure is an invaluable tool. Without the support of a networking community, women may feel isolated or stunted after a setback.

However, the awareness that setbacks happen to any employee and the need for a developed plan

regarding next steps are critical. This plan can be developed within the networking communities after discussing how other leaders regained their stride.

As networking communities share their personal goals, the dynamic nature of the community uses these outspoken goals as a launching pad; Robin Buckley (2021) traces the nature of these networking groups:

Unlike other networking groups that might focus on ‘how can I use this group to build my own business,’ all-women’s groups typically embrace the idea of how to build other women’s business. It is this idea of give-and-get or ask-and-provide that changes the dynamics of the group (All-women Groups Support and Promote the Members, para. 2).

The altruistic nature of these networking communities illustrates that every woman has a very important role. The nature of the community is to utilize each woman’s talents to help another woman within the community. The networking communities take on a dynamic form in the sense that not each person is absorbing all the resources that the networking community provides; each member is actively engaged and participating to provide resources to each other. With the plethora of recourses within the networking community, each member can tap into this source to benefit their careers.

Robin Buckley (2021) states, “The other way all-women groups give back is in their focus on growing business for others ...Members look for ways to promote their peers’ goals through referrals and connections, knowing that their peers are doing the same for them” (All-women Groups Support and Promote the Members section, para. 2). As the networking communities grow, women will be very familiar with who each person is, their strengths, and their aspired career path. The same joy and excitement that is exchanged when a member achieves their goal

is contagious. This shared experience of joy is one that is protected within the community.

Women within the networking community would be very inclined to reach out to recommend someone for a particular role or to put a member in contact with someone who is working in the field that they desire to enter.

Through co-mentoring, role-playing exercises, and building authentic relationships, women within networking communities will look to spotlight a member when the opportunity presents itself. Laura Sherbin (2018) traces how networks are beneficial for women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics): “Not only do successful women in STEM build lateral networks that ensure they get credit and backing for their ideas in meetings their networks also deliver access to corridors of power. Half of successful women in STEM say peers connected them to senior leaders” (Invest in Peer Networks, para. 2). Women in networking communities are actively recommending and referring each other for career advancement opportunities. Each member is aware of each other’s strengths and interests due to the rich conversations that occur. When a career advancement opportunity is available, the women within the networking community will come to mind first regarding whom to recommend. The nature of the community to share resources, knowledge, accomplishments, and hurdles sets a precedence. The women witness the endless growth that exists within the community.

IV. Lack of community

Hermina Ibarra (2018) suggests that women connecting through networks is more difficult to cultivate: “...there are few other women around to build professional relationships with... Women are consistently excluded from male-dominated social gatherings, which businesspeople talk show and bounce ideas in an informal atmosphere that builds camaraderie and trust” (Bonding Problems section, para. 2). Understanding the differences and difficulties of

women network communities there is a lack there of. If, as Hermina Ibarra, suggests women are excluded from social gatherings, there is a need to have women social network gatherings. This need must be filled for women to build bonds, strengthen relationships as well as to generate ideas.

Since women have a difficulty infiltrating male networks, a new approach is necessary.

Caroline Castrillon (2019) traces the importance of why women networks are needed:

The study revealed that there is a need for that tight-knit female group because it provides critical information on job opportunities and challenges...The research also showed that women who form a strong inner circle with other women who can share career advice are nearly three times more likely to get a better job than women who don't have that support system" (The Extra Ingredient, para. 1).

Caroline Castrillon's work suggests that networks comprised of only women will better serve women; efforts to join a network of women will be greatly beneficial. **Though, all women networks are not free of flaws.** Women do not need to join a predominately male network to build connections and advance their careers. Rather, women who are in community with other women can grow their careers through sharing resources with other women. Women do not need to join networking communities with men; women can grow, flourish, and strengthen their skills while in community with other women. This heavily challenges the preconceived notions that male networking communities are elite or prestigious since they are exclusionary. Women do not need the resources from male networking communities; women can join all women networking communities to enhance their careers and tap into the expertise of other women leaders.

By joining a networking community, women can enhance their current skill set as well as help other women expand upon their own set of skills. “Because women’s informal networks tend to have separate work and social spheres, it can be harder for women to achieve their potential...A women’s network can be a supportive setting for women to compare notes and reinforce one another’s learnings.” (Ibarra, 2018, Join a Women’s Professional Network section, para. 1). Women who operate in separate simultaneous spheres of home-life and work-life can begin to blend these worlds through joining community. A network such as a book club that focuses on nonfiction works about women entrepreneurs or women businesses can begin to mix these worlds. What starts as a conversation about the selected piece conjures conversations about the author’s notes, experiences, or advice develops into applying that to the lives of the women in the group.

Creating a space for women to share their experiences or compare their own notes to the author’s or entrepreneur’s notes, conversations begin to immerge. Though one might not share the author’s experience, they may share an experience that was articulated by a woman in the group. Thus, the author’s voice takes on a new tone and begins to resonate with the women in the group. Dalia Jamal Alghamdi (2022) traces the impact teachers experienced while attending book clubs: “Teachers agreed that the book club enhanced their critical thinking skills. They learnt how to connect what they read in the books to their personal and professional life through deep thinking” (p. 12). This space of dialogue begins to take root. The book club may serve as a platform and a catapult. The book club is simply a foundation and starting point for conversation.

The networking and community aspect is the dialogue that takes shape after the prompt is read. This informal network can disarm women of guarded feelings. Using the book club context as a vehicle through which their ideas and opinions can be shared freely. The benefit of the book

club existing outside of work yet possessing topics and themes that occur within the workplace begins to meld the two previously separate spheres. The bridges that begin to appear within the spheres are built from the initial bricklaying of sharing ideas, experiences, and authentic discussions. The beauty lies within the notion that these networks occur outside of the workplace and the support created will be taken into the workplace.

The driving factor behind why women are searching for connections stems from the lack of quality relationships within the workplace. Emmons Allison et al. (2019) illustrate, “Moreover, women often seek networking opportunities primarily to develop relationships, as opposed to leads and sales among the relational co-benefits of networking activities, especially in the context of professional organizations...” (p. 37). Professional women are seeking a humanizing connection with other professional women. The benefits of these networking groups can in turn translate to benefits that are seen in the workplace. However, innately climbing the social ladder is not the foremost goal. Women are first seeking to learn from each other, to share, support, and flourish with each other. The key word is relationship. For a relationship to develop, grow, and sustain, there is intentional effort invested into it. The current climate of the workplace does not cultivate these relationships naturally. True trust is difficult to establish in an environment in which one feels as though their true self cannot be shown. This is a learned response. Due to workplace competition, pressure to adhere to archaic and established norms, or simply a fear of not wanting to be categorized as an outlier, women are seeking supportive networks outside of the workplace.

Alicia Dawn Bjarnason (2021) shares the eye-opening perspective as to why women feel they cannot present their authentic selves at work: “Many of the institutionalized ERG [(i.e., Employee Resource Groups)] type groups had a tendency to be more focused on supporting

women to ‘fit’ into current corporate cultures, versus using the platform and the information provided by members to help create systemic transformations” (p. 177). ERG’s which are developed within an organization to support employees are silently and covertly isolating employees. If every employee is internally comparing themselves, their interests, actions, hobbies, and preferences to the subliminal framework mold that is presented as the preferred “model employee”, there is not a fraction of room left for an employee to present their authentic self. The pressure that is placed on women to cause them to second guess themselves, question their worth and value would understandably pose a large barrier.

Women feel as though they must screen what they are saying through the filtered lens of the employee culture to then respond outwardly. Alicia Dawn Bjarnason’s (2021) research further states:

Women scientists can experience a feeling of isolation and may have to take on what seems like male values or a ‘masculine rationality’... These gendered relations can cause female scientists to leave their identities as ‘a woman’ behind (Mackenzie Davey, 2008; Manora, Walters, 2001) for fear of being ‘pushed out’ if they do not ‘fit’ the current social norms. To ‘fit in’ to the scientific culture that exists, women may have to play a ‘role’ or assimilate (p. 169).

Thus, they are coerced into speaking inauthentically. Those hearing their statement realize that the verbalized thought is not authentic. Due to context clues or a previous rapport, it can be easily detected that one is speaking inauthentically. Others are less inclined to chime in with an authentic thought if the precedence is set that “authentic” thoughts are not shared with the community. This creates a compounding environment that pushes down and hides who people truly are to surface a corporately acceptable version of themselves. The watered-down versions

are the flavorless masks women are pulled to wear. The conflicting and taxing call to present oneself as a hint of who they truly are is not sustainable. Women would be less inclined to share their true concerns since there is not a foundation on which to build true, meaningful relationships within workplace ERGs.

Networking communities can take many forms. One form is that of a book club. Robin Grenier et al. (2022) describes the benefits of book clubs: “Book club members also leverage relationships and learning to act as unifying force to counter dominant systems found in work and in society by making a safe space to engage in cultural change work” (p. 15). The book selections for book club discussions can present topics, concepts, mindsets, or sensitive issues; these issues could be ones in which may never be discussed at work. This “change work” can provide a safe space to explore new concepts or to provide the vocabulary to articulate what the members are experiencing.

Through book club discussions, members can explore and share new concepts and frameworks prior to addressing them at work. “The book club provided members access to valuable organizational knowledge and information and created a community of reciprocity in the workplace as the women helped and supported one another” (Grenier et al., 2022, p. 15-16). The book club shared experiences can provide a safe and supportive space to test or experiment with presenting certain issues, concerns or worries that the women are experiencing. The issues are first discussed and shared within this protective environment.

Women can provide their opinions and thoughts freely without the worry of repercussions. The women can share further readings to support the topic, first-hand experiences, or share perspectives of how managers should address the situation. The book clubs serve to first address an issue, articulate a response, and develop the framework for a topic. The women are provided

support and feedback. Thus, when a book club member is ready to discuss the issue at work or presented with a similar situation to address, they are fully equipped with the tools, support, and knowledge. The book club members can also provide different perspectives regarding topics (Grenier et al., 2022). Leading with empathy can change the way a situation is viewed. This could also help the members role play and assess how the situation was perceived from another's point of view.

Book clubs can serve as the catalyst for change. "The book club provided members access to valuable organizational knowledge and information and created a community reciprocity in the workplace as the women helped and supported one another" (Grenier et al., 2022, p. 15-16). Providing the framework and vocabulary for change may confirm certain feelings in the workplace that the members have been harboring. This "change work" is not being completed within the walls of the workplace. Women are seeking community outside of work to understand the innerworkings of what is happening within the workplace. Once made aware that other women actively are experiencing something similar, have experienced, or know the language that surrounds the event is empowering.

Mary Koov (2006) traces the benefits of book clubs for teachers: "A place to tell their stories, to reflect on teaching through stories in the books, to make sense of new meanings with other novice teachers, shored up and sustained the novice teacher so they could carry on. The book club united teachers without homogenizing them" (p. 221). Book clubs provide the sharing and exchange of "stories". The word "stories" implies a rich structure full of emotion with underlying motifs. Book clubs provide a space for meanings and truths to be shared. The words are rooted in substance. Generic, canned versions are not shared. The authentic experiences are expressed. The "stories" are critical since they link to further strengthen the backbone of

networking communities. Acknowledging each shared event as a story provides a sense of uniqueness as well as establishes worth. Each expression is worthy in and of itself to be shared. Sharing within the network only enriches the overall community.

Also, Mary Kooy (2006) emphasized the importance of new teachers to share their perspectives within book club (p. 221). Often new professionals are overlooked when information gathering is conducted. New professionals are discarded since they have not spent an “adequate” or what is deemed as a “substantial” amount of time in the roll. Book clubs empower the seasoned and new employees to equally share their valuable perspectives. New employees have the valuable insight into how onboarding programs can be improved, the robustness of training programs, and areas to improve streamlined processes. Though their time in a particular role has been brief, the opportunity to take these findings to improve the overall effectiveness and efficiency of the team is invaluable.

Alicia Bjarnson (2021) expresses the valuable role that networking communities play; this role extends beyond career enhancing conversations. “The community-based groups...could bring knowledge to women that they may otherwise have access to; examples included legal advice around maternity/parental leaves, wrongful dismissals, and occupational health and safety rights on harassment in the workplace” (Bjarnason, 2021, p. 177). Women may not be aware of their rights that have been infringed upon. The networking communities serve as a touch point and a source of comparison. If professional women have been experiencing certain events over a period, they may be desensitized to this detrimental behavior. Sharing information within the group can reorient women into realizing that their workplace “norm” should not be tolerated. Though the “norm” does exist, it does not mean that women should withstand the effects. Harassment can cause women to feel very isolated within the workplace. Sharing this

information within the safe realm of the networking community can allow a woman to share her feelings, gather the surrounding support, and explore the next steps.

Since the networking exists outside of the workplace it is easier for women to discuss sensitive or personal topics. A woman could also be feeling a certain way after being let go from her company. Though, there may be feelings of shame or guilt from being let go, the terms at which the woman was fired may be questionable. Any concerns could be discussed as a group. If there were any doubts regarding the process of termination, the networking community would be one of the best places to start this discussion. At the very least, women would support each other and encourage each other to seek an opportunity that better suits their needs and talents.

V. Autoethnography

To research the inner workings of women network groups, I utilized an autoethnographic approach. Elizabeth Kristi Poerwandari's (2021) work describes:

In essence, "autoethnography" refers to an approach in which the researcher describes the setting where they have direct access and, as an active participant, they become the researcher's center of attention. The researcher lives or works in that setting and uses their experience, knowledge, and access to collect various materials for research purposes (p. 312).

I am a professional woman who is presently feeling the lack of support, encouragement, and mentorship within my current workplace. Autoethnography is the perfect method to conduct this research; I, personally, am a part of the group focused upon in this seminar paper. To begin research, I joined two book clubs. The first book club I joined predominately reads nonfiction books. The second book club predominately reads fiction books. Within each book club, each

member has a turn to select a future book the club will read and discuss. The book clubs meet once a month. The nonfiction book club meeting is held virtually over Zoom. The fiction book club is held in person at members' homes on a rotating basis. While I attended the book club meetings, I made mental notes of the topics we discussed and the feelings that arose. After each book club meeting, I reflected and further explored any thoughts that I had. I developed journal entries that correspond to each book club meeting. I attended five book club meetings in total. To protect their identities, I have created pseudonyms for the women and the official book club names: "Carla", "Rene", "Lila", "Sam", "Ella", "Josie", "Cat", "Marnie", "Buzz Book Club", and "Motor City Book Club". Tracing my experiences through attending this book club provided such insight. I was researching for this seminar paper, but I was also experiencing the direct benefits that the networking groups provide.

"Buzz Book Club" (Nonfiction book club)

"Buzz Book Club" is an organization that started in Ferndale, Michigan. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Buzz was a brick-and-mortar organization. Workshops, discussions, and networking for women would occur within the hive. A friend introduced me to "Carla". I met with "Carla" and chatted with her regarding her consulting work. "Carla", who was deeply involved with Buzz, recommended the Buzz book club. The Buzz book club is now hosted remotely online. This has extended the reach of Buzz. Each month six-to- twelve women login to discuss the book. The women are from across the United States. Each woman works in a different industry. The perspectives are so distinctive and pointed. Each woman is candid, honest, and raw. They share openly and freely for their love or deep distaste of the book. Listening to the conversations, it is easy to be mystified by the discussion. Only attending a few

sessions, it is easy to tiptoe around sharing one's perspective. However, "Rene", will directly ask each person their thoughts.

Journal Entry Sept 10th

The intention of the book club is to disarm oneself from the feelings of being graceful or adhering to some proper guideline etiquette. These women are armed with an arsenal of forward-thinking authors, and after each session, the list of recommended readings grows. The books are even scrutinized in terms of which ones could or would be recommended in the workplace for their lighthearted nature and overall appeal to the masses. However, the books they prefer to read are the ones that would not be deemed "safe for work" books. In this context, "not safe for work" applies to books that are very thought provoking, bring up sensitive topics such as trauma, racism, sexism, and require the reader to focus introspectively. This begs the question why books would not be able to be discussed in a workplace setting. This perpetuates the underlying current that pulls and weaves through the workplace: non-fiction book recommendations are even screened for appropriateness adherence. The women described a book "safe for work" when it would appeal to someone who is beginning their personal growth "work". In this instance, "work" refers to beginning the path of understanding the 'isms' that exist, the contribution to the 'isms', and how to combat the 'isms. Racism, sexism, and agism are a few of the 'isms' that they were referencing.

There is a certain amount of risk involved with sharing deep and thought-provoking books. The women shared that they did not prefer to read this book since it was too entry-level for certain members. The experienced members shared that the content of the book was not new information to them; the passages did not resonate with them due to the amount of literature that they have read. The women stated that they would refrain from referencing this book to their

inner circles. Thus, the women live in a sort of a constant balancing act. The selves that they have chosen to display at work does not encompass their true thoughts or feelings. Past experiences have supported the notion that one must be conscious of what information is shared at work, the ideas that circulate, as well as what topics are truly read.

Though the book itself was not considered rich enough for the discussion, the conversation was rich with shared experiences. The women discussed pieces of other works that further developed certain topics. They also shared their own experiences of how a particular quote reminded them of an even that occurred this week. One woman, “Carla”, shared that she felt deflated. She is working on a project to gain employee insight to create a better working environment and to retain employees. One employee saw the initial spark of change and seemed encouraged by the change. Two hours before the book club started, the employee submitted her two-week notice of resignation. The woman shared that she was so drained. She saw her company in a different light that day. The very act that the project was developed around, viewing employees as true humans with empathy, was not aiding all areas of the company fast enough to prevent turn-over.

Though she was flooded of feelings of helplessness, everyone on the Zoom call could feel her passion and dedication to improving the workplace. “Carla” did not create the current state of the company she works for. However, the connections she has made with the employees are strong enough to penetrate her life outside of her work. “Carla” showed up to book club as her authentic self. The hour or so discussion during book club, led to more connections, true discussion of emotion, calling out lack of effort, and speaking purely than any conversation at work.

While initially listening to the audiobook of *The Lightmaker's Manifesto: How to Work for Change without Losing Your Joy* (Walrond, 2021), I was caught off guard. There is a small

backstory involved. I took a Feminist Political Theory class as an undergraduate. While taking the course a few quotes resonated with me. One quote related to tools. I could not remember the entire quote and I could not remember the author's name. It had been bothering me for months. While listening to the audiobook, I heard Karen Walrond say, "It's like that great Audre Lorde quote, 'We will not dismantle the master's house with the master's tools.' You cannot use tools of oppression to fix oppression" (Walrond, 2021, 2:31). To me hearing this quote felt like a sign from the universe. I was so happy. I was eager to share my revelation.

Once I did share my revelation, it was met with a somewhat underwhelming response; it seemed as though my revelation was 'old hat'. A few of the other women were very familiar with Audre Lorde's work; they were very familiar with the quote. After this, I felt as though I was nervous about chiming into the conversation. These women were equipped with immense knowledge after reading so many books together that I felt I was playing catch-up. I had not heard the Audre Lorde quote in ten years. These women knew the quote immediately as I started to read it. This could be due to my own feelings of insecurities, but it felt as though there was a hierarchy that existed within the group. The facilitator of the group followed up my comment with a response of acknowledgement. The facilitator, "Rene", was excited in my revelation. Rene provided an example relating to her work utilizing the meaning of the quote.

Although the networking group's function is to share, discuss, support, and encourage, members must be aware as to not undermine the core purpose of the group. The networking communities are beneficial, but they also have flaws and areas to improve. The books chosen are to encourage discussion and sharing of thoughts. Thus, all thoughts that are shared need to be encouraged. The underwhelming response from the group does undermine the mission of the networking community. To combat this, I will need to speak up during the next meeting if I

notice this behavior happening. Though something may not resonate with me or seem like an obvious point it may be new to someone else. The silent or subliminal messages that are conveyed within a networking community are equally as important as the outward messages.

A simple statement such as, “That is a great thought”, “I really enjoyed reading that quote as well”, or “Audre Lorde has a fabulous way of articulating these topics. I also enjoy reading...”, are a few examples of acknowledging another person’s realization without undermining their growth. The growth that the networking community is seeking to cultivate occurs on an individualized basis. The networking community is not a space to subliminally pass judgement; this behavior is the culprit for why the networking communities were erected. Though we experience judgement, competitiveness, and lack of support within our workplaces, we must be cognizant as to not perpetuate these behaviors into the safe sanctuary of the networking community. There are moments where I am guilty of this behavior thinking how someone could not have realized a notion sooner. The action needed is taking accountability for our silent responses. Our responses that exclude women from the group deteriorate the credibility of the networking group.

As active as the women are in the networking community, we also have the power and ability to sabotage the community from within. Applying the quote further, “It’s like that great Audre Lorde quote, ‘We will not dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools.’ You cannot use tools of oppression to fix oppression” (Walrond, 2021, 2:31). We must first be aware of our own responses and actions to include, cultivate, and support within the networking community to even have the slightest hope of cultivating the needed change within our workplace. Further alienating, creating power distances, and not uplifting each other by applying the “master’s tools” (Walrond, 2021, 2:31) of the workplace into the networking community, will not enact

change. It is so important that we address the very behavior we wish not to perpetuate when it is displayed.

Following the meeting, I messaged “Carla”. I wanted to share with “Carla” that I appreciated all the effort she was making at work. I was upset with myself for not chiming into the conversation. This meeting made me realize I am changing. The small connections and fragments that are knitted together during these meetings are making me a more authentic individual. I wanted to share with her that I appreciated her dedication and devotion. “Carla” immediately responded and stated that she truly appreciated my kind words; she also mentioned that the simple email made her Sunday. A kind small gesture such as an email had that much of an impact upon her day. This begs the question if her day was truly that rough or was she drained emotionally from the taxing work week. I would normally not have taken that extra step. This is progress. For this reason, I am now beginning to see that I am holding myself back from fully sharing within the group.

I have placed the women who attend the Buzz book club on a pedestal for their accomplishments. At times, I do not feel as though I am on the same playing field. As I am advocating for the benefits of co-mentoring within this paper, I realize the dichotomy that exists. I, conceptually, know that I have gifts and talents to offer to the group. I have valuable thoughts to share. However, due to a learned behavior, I am or was intentionally withholding and solely listening. This does not align with the purpose of the book club. The book club is centered around sharing, open discussion and providing support.

Before the meeting concluded, we began discussing what we should read for next month’s meeting. Initially, it was suggested to read *SPEAK: How to Find your Voice, Trust your Gut and Get from Where You Are to Where You Want to Be* by Tunde Oyeneyin (2022). I was very

excited to hear that this was a possible book selection; I have been wanting to read Tunde's book for months now. Through discussion, since the *The Lightmaker's Manifesto* was so light, we would read *The Body Keeps The Score* by Bessel Van Der Kolk (2015). Another woman in the group shared that she was reading *The Body Keeps The Score* and began filling the book with sticky tabs to mark her favorite section. It was decided that we would read this book next month. After "Carla" heard this, she audibly sighed. "Carla" shared that she has read the book and was willing to talk about it. Clearly, due to the content of the book, revolving around trauma, that this was taxing and borderline triggering for "Carla". I asked myself, "Why would we read this book if one, 'Carla' has already read the book, two, she had such a negative reaction towards the book?". Another question I had revolved around why "Carla" withheld the reason as to why the book made her sigh or suggest that we read something else since it did not sit well with her.

We are all withholding information within the book club. I am withholding my true feelings and thoughts for fear that I will say something foolish. "Carla's" willingness to partake in a discussion about a book that causes her to have a visceral response instead of stating that she does not want to read the book is another example. Are we so focused on pleasing others that we are willing to endure a sense of pain? As a networking community for women, we should be creating spaces of support. Yet, we are in turn still harboring our gender conditioning and presenting it in the group. I, naively, assumed that being surrounded by a group of supportive women, I would not be weighed down by my own baggage. My own learnings of questioning if my thoughts will measure up to established expectations, real or imagined, prevented me from sharing with the group.

Meg Warren et al. (2019) express: "Several studies show that in mixed gender groups, uncertainty leads to poor creativity...women may fear their ideas being devalued by men..." (p.

504). Though the book club is comprised of only women, this does not absolve women of their gender conditioned experiences. Women may still harbor self-conscious feelings that their ideas are not worth sharing due to numerous experiences questioning of questioning their worth in other facets of their lives such as work, school, and other professional settings. Book clubs that meet monthly will only begin to chip away at the surface and to ignite the process of unlearning specific norms or preconceived notions. As Meg Warren et al. (2019) suggest, women question the worth of their shared thoughts and ideas, this notion is not contained within the workspace; this notion extends to fears beyond work and seep into the private lives of women. Thus, while in a networking group, such as book clubs, women are not free of their learned and perpetuated behaviors. The process of understanding why thoughts and ideas are screened can begin to take place within networking groups. Empowering other women to share as well as creating a safe space to share ideas will help disarm and combat questions of worthiness.

Journal Entry: October 14th

“Sam” kicked off the discussion of *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in Healy of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk M.D (2015). Sam suggested that the club read this book. She showed her copy was filled with tiny yellow tabs marking her favorite quotes. Sam shared that she absolutely adored the book. She wanted to understand others’ trauma and to learn how to approach people who had the specific traumas that the book explored. Sam shared that she wanted to be able to give other people grace; she acknowledged that she previously felt she did not give enough grace to others. Sam appreciated the technical portions of the book that describe the scientific reasons behind how our neurons, the sympathetic, and parasympathetic system are work together.

“Carla”, who audibly sighed at the thought of the book, did not enjoy the technical aspect of the book. “Carla” and “Ella” loved the “healing” portion of the book; the “healing” portion of the book emphasized the importance of movement, yoga, and music. They were drawn to this portion of the book more so than the details describing the body or the trauma stories.

While on the topic of bodies, “Rene” shared a story. She was speaking with her friend, “Josie”, who is a manager of a “glorified junk yard” in Texas. “Josie” told “Rene” that a woman in their office refused to wear a bra; a complaint was filed stating that the woman’s nipples were visible. Josie was going to speak with the employee about wearing a bra. “Rene” stopped her and emphasized the importance of not enforcing the woman to wear a bra. Josie later shared that another woman employee filed the initial complaint. This sparked a new discussion regarding why as women we are conditioned to feel that we must cover our bodies, why our bodies are shameful, and as to why another woman would report a fellow employee’s visible nipples.

When “Rene” shared this story, I had it in my mind that a male employee filed the complaint. I was taken aback when I found out that another woman filed the complaint. I was naive in thinking that women were only recipients of the societal pressures to cover up our bodies; women are also voice boxes perpetuating the pressures and norms that restrict and shame our bodies.

Consciously or unconsciously, when we are not taking an active role in dismantling the shame involved with the female bodies, we are actively perpetuating the current state. Audre Lorde (2022) states, “...this is essentially unconstructive resentment because it extends sideways and can never result in true progress on the issue, because it does not question the vertical lines of power and authority, nor the sexist assumptions which dictate the terms of the competition” (p. 313). We must be aware of how we are speaking to other women, the words in which we are

using, as well as the words that we are not speaking. This discussion opened my eyes because there were many times that I commented on another woman's outfit. I have more work ahead of me to begin to understand why I would ever have a need to comment on another woman's outfit let alone consent to perpetuating negative body shaming.

“Motor City Book Club” (Fiction Book Club)

A friend of mine introduced me to “Motor City Book Club”. I reached out to the founder, “Lila”. “Lila” started “Motor City Book Club” in 2018. Lila currently works in real estate. Previously, she was a manager for a retail store then switched to working in automotive. While speaking with “Lila”, she divulged that while she was a child, she attended a mother/daughter book club with her mom. The community that surrounded her as a child was one that she still was seeking. “Lila” discovered that her friend was in search of space to meet people and to connect. Her friend had been traveling frequently with a previous role. The friend shifted gears and began working in an office environment. The friend shared her difficulties in developing strong connections with her coworkers. Thus, the idea of starting a book club as a monthly dedicated space to discuss readings, new ideas, share a meal, and hold space for one another. As an adult, it is easy to sympathize with the difficulties of developing new friendships.

“Lila” framed her book club as a place of their own community. “Lila” shared that her previous coworkers cultivated a competitive environment. “Lila” wanted to protect the sacred and precious nature of her book club. When asked who the naysayers were while she embarked on piloting the book club idea, she stated that the naysayers were the same group of people who would not share in “Lila's” joy regardless of the capacity. “Lila” shared the burden of being book club facilitator. If a member chose not to attend book club for a few months, “Lila” would reach out to check in.

“Lila” describes the book club as a sacred place. “Lila” shared that at times she does not read the selected book to be discussed. She loves the conversation that develops. She will prepare a list of topics and discussion questions to keep the conversation on track or flowing. “Lila’s” aunt also facilitates a book club in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “Lila” and her aunt will exchange book recommendations, discussion starters, and follow up with one another regarding a book club session. “Lila” has been surrounded by a strong group of women.

At times, “Motor City Book Club” has been a sphere where new topics and vastly different opinions are shared. The topics discussed in the books may be triggering or sensitive in nature. “Lila” expresses that each person approaches the conversation with a conscientious step. The women who attend her book club come from vastly different backgrounds. “Lila” and the members have encouraged women to change career paths, leave toxic relationships, and to better each other. They will share situations at work and ask how they should have handled it differently. “Lila’s” strength resides in her networking ability. She gains energy from networking with others. The book club represents a chance to network on a deeper level.

Journal Entry: September 18th

I truly enjoyed the “Motor City Book Club” talk. We met at “Cat’s” house. I have never met “Cat”. I was nervous about waltzing into another person’s home whom I had never met before. “Lila” posted about book club. She expressed that everyone was to bring a dish to pass. I, initially, planned on baking brownies to bring. However, I realized later that people may have certain feelings or would refrain from eating food that was baked in a stranger’s home. Thus, I opted for a mini charcuterie board filled with cheeses, crackers, and grapes.

“Cat’s” house was off a busy road. I turned down a side street to park. I saw another girl sitting in her car. I began to get out of my car and fumbled with the charcuterie board. I asked if she also was attending book club. She smiled brightly and answered “yes!” enthusiastically. She introduced herself as Lauren. I shared that this was my first time attending and that I was nervous. Lauren was so welcoming and sweet. Lauren shared that there usually were only couple women who attend book club regularly, others float in and out.

As we walked into “Cat’s” house, were greeted by “Cat” and “Sara”. “Cat” was so kind. We congregated in her kitchen, and everyone began talking. Lauren shared that she recently accepted a new Program Manager position for a well-known hospital in the area. She was very excited. She was still hoping for an offer with another company. “Cat” shared that she started recently at a new payroll company. “Cat” described how the culture of the company was vastly different from any company she had worked for. The company has a more relaxed culture. “Cat” further explained that her coworkers go out to lunch each Friday and have a few drinks.

“Cat” was surprised and taken aback by this. She was not sure if this was truly the state of the work environment. “Cat” attended lunch and found out that this statement was true. Her coworkers did partake in a few drinks during lunch. “Cat” felt as though she had to also have a drink on lunch to fit in with her new coworkers. As “Cat” shared her concerns of feeling uncomfortable with this as well as the pressure to fit in, we validated her feelings. She did not feel as though she could express her worries and unsettling feelings with her new coworkers since they were the ones supporting this cultural norm. The women in the book club served as a separate subset of “Cat’s” peers. Though, we did not belong to her group of coworkers, we are also her peers. Had we been present at “Cat’s” work, we would have felt equally uncomfortable and nervous. The book club provided the aftermath support. Knowing that the four of us felt the

same way that “Cat” did in that situation could provide her with the confidence not to second guess herself in the future.

I was expecting “Lila” to arrive. However, “Cat” shared that “Lila” was not feeling well and would most likely not attend. Internally, I was questioning how weird it was that the only person I remotely know would not be attending. I felt this way until “Marnie” arrived. I first met “Marnie” at my coworker’s bachelorette party. “Marnie” was a high school friend of my coworker. I had not seen “Marnie” since my coworker’s wedding six years ago. It was very nice to see a familiar face.

As the night continued, we talked about everything under the sun from work to family life, things we were reading in the media, questions about “Marnie’s” pregnancy, questions about the direction each woman shaves their legs to generational trauma. The conversation was rooted in each person’s experiences, learnings from work, or a close relative’s experiences. There was very little mention of this month’s book. The book was almost a segue to overarching topics and experiences. As each person shared something, follow up questions were asked and discussed. Since there were five of us total, simultaneous conversations were had.

I can completely understand how this book club serves as a constant connection for these women. Two women recently started new jobs with new companies. They are trying to build close ties with their coworkers. I have closer ties with my coworkers. However, I am missing the freedom that this book club forum has provided. I was able to speak freely and ask questions without hesitation. The women were close in age to me. I did not feel that anyone was present to flaunt their expertise. Everyone was on equal footing.

While the book club was ending, “Cat” came up to me and said that she hoped I had just as much fun as she did. She also hoped that I would come back to book club next month. These women were so quick to accept a new person into their sacred space. I was surprised and equally so grateful for the acceptance. Personally, working remotely is alienating at times. There are benefits in the sense that I can accomplish certain tasks at home easily. However, the one area that suffers is the sense of community. The book club truly has cultivated a community. There is also something to be said about sharing a meal or snacks with others. Food is an important common ground space to connect with others.

I genuinely loved learning about what was happening in each woman’s life. I was excited to congratulate Lauren on accepting a prestigious new position. The other women were equally as excited. It is nice to be surrounded in a sea of encouragement. It is also lovely to witness the women genuinely support each other’s accomplishments. At times, I’ve found that others vocalize their support of another woman’s advancement, then share a comment on the side about their opinion of the new role. That contradictory action spoils the moment. The women in the book club were happy at face value for each other.

Journal Entry: October 13th

October’s selected book was *The Other Windsor Girl* by Georgie Blalock. Five of us attended the book club meeting. There was a unanimous notion that the book was slightly underwhelming. Initially, the book discusses the main character’s thoughts of attending elegant parties in her dresses which are three seasons old. This made me question my own wardrobe. I shared that I felt as though my own wardrobe needed a refresh considering majority of my clothes surpassed three seasons. The conversation developed into dissecting current trends.

“Marnie” shared her experience in a coffee shop. She was waiting for her coffee and complimented the barista’s outfit of a crop top and wide legged 1990’s oversized jeans. An older woman behind “Marnie” shared her distaste and criticized the barista’s outfit for showing too much skin. “Marnie” turned to the woman and corrected her for shaming the barista. I thought it was amazing that “Marnie” outwardly expressed her thoughts to the woman in line. “Marnie” further stated that no one should shame another woman’s outfit simply because they personally would not wear it. I thought about this afterwards. How many times have I kept my thoughts to myself regarding another woman’s behavior that stemmed from a mean place? “Marnie” was an amazing example of outwardly supporting another woman. She also took the next step of publicly stating that that woman should not be shaming another’s outfit. I admired this. It struck me that complimenting another woman is the only the first step. We also have a duty to correct and adjust our behavior so that we do not perpetuate narrow-minded mentalities. It is our responsibility to call each other out when we see such behavior.

The conversation shifted to what three of the women would be wearing to attend a Halloween gala in Detroit. The women discussed their outfits, aspects of what they were nervous about, and questions revolving around whether their outfits would measure up to the high standards of the gala. The women purchased tickets to attend the gala. They invested time, money, and thoughts into building their outfits. The women were looking for support and encouragement. I truly understand why the women were nervous about their outfits. If a stranger can comment and share their distaste in what they think of our outfits, there are underlying feelings that prior or pre-screened support is needed to combat this.

VI. More Accessible Communities

Accessibility to these communities is critical. The benefits that these women networks possess is life changing. However, there is a caveat to these networks. The disheartening truth is that these empowering networks have been present. Moletta et al. (2021) suggest that women seeking access to the networks have been preventing themselves from gaining access. “Besides, women entrepreneurs are often excluded from business networks of male-dominated companies...many women face psychological barriers to enter business networks due to low self-confidence regarding their skills” (Moletta et al., 2021, Women Entrepreneurship section, para. 5). This psychological barrier that women have been placing on themselves due to the feeling of not being in community can partly be the reason why women have not found community.

This notion is truly sad. Continually being excluded from male dominated networks has taken a toll on women. Women are beginning to feel the effects that they do not belong in a network; this is false beyond belief. Women belong in community and thrive within a community. The smallest bit of self-confidence will serve as a catalyst for women to see that their thoughts, opinions, and experiences are valuable. The question lies into the statement of how to create a large buzz to attract and draw in other entrepreneurs into these networking communities.

Moletta et al. (2021), described the necessary element to build a successful networking community: trust. “In this way, trust becomes a precondition for the necessary cooperation behavior in business groups so that its goals are achieved; as it increases an organization’s access to resources, strengthens social relationships and its ability to deliberate on difficult problems...” (Moletta et al., 2021, Business Networks section, para. 4). Trust must be woven into the community. Each member needs to be encouraged and almost put into the spotlight to begin

sharing their experiences. It is daunting to enter a room or virtual video call full of successful women entrepreneurs. These networks reshape how women view themselves. As an outsider entering the community, it is almost alluring to silently listen in awe. It is a vision to witness a room full of successful women supporting each other, encouraging one another, as well as challenging each other to make the necessary changes in her role to see a promotion. The push comes with the questions directed towards the new attendee. One must take the plunge to share their thoughts and experience for possibly the first time a realm of true trust and support.

The Harvard Business Review (2019) featured an article that highlights expanding women networks: “The highest-ranking, best-network women connect with people in a wide variety of functions, geographies, and business units...female networkers tend to shy away from the tactic because it feels uncomfortable or overly promotional” (“The Secrets of Successful Female Networkers,” Boundary-spanning section, para. 1). Within the workplace it can be difficult to handle the gymnastics of navigating and expanding one’s network. This coupled with the shift in working from home, it can be difficult to virtually meet with women outside of the walls of an organization structure. The conscious, and often silent, decision to remain siloed will only perpetuate the inevitable lack of change.

Networking communities outside of the office are bursting to the seams with diverse members. Networking communities can draw in people from different parts of the United States as well as the world. It is easy to empathize with nervous feelings. If a woman has not ever been a part of a true networking community, feelings like those that arise on the first day of school surface. However, the rich qualities of the networking community vastly outweigh the brief momentary nervous emotions. Book clubs that are held virtually offer a different tone than book clubs that are held in person. Virtual book clubs allow for the flexibility of its members to attend

from any location. Simply listening to the conversations that are shared within the networking communities is enough to spark a new idea, draw thoughts of change, and provide the necessary comfort that women have been seeking.

VII. Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

With the exchange of conversation, women can provide support, encouragement, and advice to others. The unmet needs of professional women are now met within networking communities. The communities foster the sharing of new ideas and techniques that would otherwise be withheld or guarded in a workplace environment. Without the support and guidance that is uplifted in network communities, professional women would be left with very limited workplace resources to advance in their careers. The networking communities provide a supplemental and often fully imperative source to champion growth. Networking communities are not flawless; women within networking communities need to be aware that the actions in which we do not want to perpetuate are displayed. This will take time to adjust. The first step is to be aware of how our actions, verbal, and nonverbal cues impact others. Networking communities strive to encourage and support women. However, we must allow ourselves grace to unlearn the restrictive and self-limited behaviors that we have adopted.

The support, encouragement, and guidance found within the community will serve as a foundation for women to become better leaders within the workplace. The confidence that women can gain being in community will allow them to thrive and excel in male dominated sectors. The shared experiences of women within the community will provide an ever-flowing knowledge and resource. Women in community will not only better themselves, but also better their environments.

Future work includes expanding the current book clubs. If it is difficult, based on the culture of the work environment to invite other women to book club, a simple small conversation can be had regarding new learnings or insight. For example, a short conversation about a topic that stemmed from a book could be approached as, “Hi, have you heard of this concept,” or “Did you know that...” Based on who is interested in discussing the small topics can indicate who else may be interested in joining the book clubs. These small conversations can be the spark that will enact change for women in the workplace.

VIII. Reference List

- Abele, A. E., Volmer, J., & Spurk, D. (2012). Career Stagnation: Underlying Dilemmas and Solutions in Contemporary Work Environments. *Work and Quality of Life*, 107–132. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4059-4_7
- Alghamdi, D. J. (2022). The impact of using book clubs among female teachers in their professional development in Saudi Arabia. *Cogent Education*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186x.2022.2090190>
- Alzghoul, A., Elrehail, H., Emeagwali, O. L., & AlShboul, M. K. (2018). Knowledge management, workplace climate, creativity and performance: The role of authentic leadership. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 30(8), 592-612. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JWL-12-2017-0111>
- Beach, R., & Yussen, S. (2011). Practices of Productive Adult Book Clubs. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(2), 121–131. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.00015>
- Bjarnason, A. D. (2021). “A Space of their Own?” Professional Women’s Groups in the Alberta Resource Sector. *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, 13(2), 163–183. Retrieved from

<https://genderandset.open.ac.uk/index.php/genderandset/article/view/704>

Buckley, R., PhD. (2021, December 17). This Is Why We Still Need Women's Networking

Groups. *Entrepreneur*. Retrieved September 23, 2022, from

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/leadership/this-is-why-we-still-need-womens-networking-groups/403316>

Castrillon, C. (2019, March 10). *Why Women Need To Network Differently Than Men To Get*

Ahead. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carolinecastrillon/2019/03/10/why-women-need-to-network-differently-than-men-to-get-ahead/?sh=3bd0c3f0b0a1>

Emmons Allison, J., McCrory, K., & Oxnevad, I. (2019, September). Closing the renewable energy gender gap in the United States and Canada: The role of women's professional networking. *Energy Research & Social Science*, 55, 35–45.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2019.03.01>

Gay, Gale Horton. "How Mentoring Can Save Your Career." *Women of Color Magazine*, vol.

19, no. 1, 2019, pp. 37–38. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26652806>. Accessed 23 Sep. 2022.

Gray, K., Neville, A., Kaji, A. H., Wolfe, M., Calhoun, K., Amersi, F., Donahue, T., Arnell, T., Jarman, B., Inaba, K., Melcher, M., Morris, J. B., Smith, B., Reeves, M., Gauvin, J., Salcedo, E. S., Sidwell, R., Murayama, K., Damewood, R., . . . de Virgilio, C. (2019, November 1). Career Goals, Salary Expectations, and Salary Negotiation Among Male and Female General Surgery Residents. *JAMA Surgery*, 154(11), 1023.

<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamasurg.2019.2879>

Grenier, Callahan, J. ., Kaeppel, K., & Elliott, C. (2022). *Advancing book clubs as non-formal learning to facilitate critical public pedagogy in organizations*.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/13505076211029823>

Hansman, C. A. (2002). Diversity and power in mentoring relationships. *Critical perspectives on mentoring: Trends and issues*, 39-48.

Hennekam, S., Macarthur, S., Bennett, D., Hope, C., & Goh, T. (2020). Women composers' use of online communities of practice to build and support their careers. *Personnel Review*, 49(1), 215-230. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-02-2018-0059>

Ibarra, H. (2018, May 21). *How Women Can Build Their Professional Networks*. WSJ.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-women-can-build-their-professional-networks-1526868480>

Johnson, W., Smith, D., & Haythornthwaite, J. (2021, September 17). *Why Your Mentorship Program Isn't Working*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2020/07/why-your-mentorship-program-isnt-working>

Kooy, M. (2006). *Telling Stories in Book Clubs Women Teachers and Professional Development* by Mary Kooy. (1st ed. 2006.). Springer US. <https://doi.org/10.1007/0-387-33927-2>

Lacy, N. B., & Chen, Y. W. (2022). "It takes a village": proposing critically reflexive (co-) mentoring with underrepresented students as racialized, gendered, and othered. *Communication Education*, 71(4), 370–

373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634523.2022.2105922>

Lorde, A. (2022). *Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving* (1978). *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 50(1), 311-317. doi:[10.1353/wsqa.2022.0025](https://doi.org/10.1353/wsqa.2022.0025).

MacKinnon, C. A. (1991). *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Reprint ed.). Harvard University Press.

McGuire, G. M., & Reger, J. (2003). Feminist Co-Mentoring: A Model for Academic Professional Development. *NWSA Journal*, 15(1), 54–72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316944>

- McHugh, J. (2021, March 27). *How women invented book clubs, revolutionizing reading and their own lives*. Washington Post. Retrieved December 11, 2022, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2021/03/27/womens-book-clubs-history-oprah-reese/>
- Moletta, J., de Carvalho, G. D. G., do Nascimento, R. F., Barboza, B. M. L., Resende, L. M., & Pontes, J. (2021). Business networks of women entrepreneurs: an analysis of the expectation and reality of factors that affect trust in a business network. *Journal of Intelligent Manufacturing*, 1-16.
- Poerwandari, E. K. (2021). Minimizing bias and maximizing the potential strengths of autoethnography as a narrative research. *Japanese Psychological Research*, 63(4), 310-323.
- Sedo, D.R. (2004). *Badges of Wisdom, Spaces for Being: A Study of Contemporary Women's Book Clubs*.
- Sherbin, L. (2018, April 30). *6 Things Successful Women in STEM Have in Common*. Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/2018/04/6-things-successful-women-in-stem-have-in-common>
- The Secrets of Successful Female Networkers. (2019, November). *Harvard Business Review*. Retrieved September 23, 2022, from <https://hbr.org/2019/11/the-secrets-of-successful-female-networkers>
- Turner-Moffatt, C. (2019). THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP. *Professional Safety*, 64(8), 17-19. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/power-mentorship/docview/2269007281/se-2>

Walker, L. (2019, April 25). *A Company-Supported Women's Network Can Encourage Confidence And Participation*. Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2019/04/25/a-company-supported-womens-network-can-encourage-confidence-and-participation/?sh=3a89cbbb5405>

Walrond, K. (2021, November 2). *The Lightmaker's Manifesto: How to Work for Change without Losing Your Joy*. Broadleaf Books.

Warren, M., Donaldson, S. I., Lee, J. Y., & Donaldson, S. I. (2019). Reinvigorating Research on Gender in the Workplace Using a Positive Work and Organizations Perspective. *International Journal of Management Reviews : IJMR*, 21(4), 498–518.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12206>