



Women as networkers: a study of the practices of female owners of small to medium accountancy practices in Northern Ireland

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Introduction and research context

- Under-representation in business ownership
- ‘Networks matter’ (Flynn et al., 2015:482)
 - **Female entrepreneurs’ networks are less in evidence** (Poggesi et al., 2016)
 - **Female reliance on networks of strong ties, or informal networks**
(Hampton et al., 2011; McGowan et al. 2015; Surangi, 2016)
 - **Male reliance on weak ties, or formal networks (higher value networks)**
(Lockyer & George, 2012; Flynn et al., 2015)
 - **Different sources of networking support at different stages of business lifecycle** (Neergaard et al., 2005; Roomi, 2009; Omar, 2015)
- Female entrepreneurs of small to medium accountancy practices (SMPs) in NI
- SMPs are characterised as having predominately SME’s in their client base

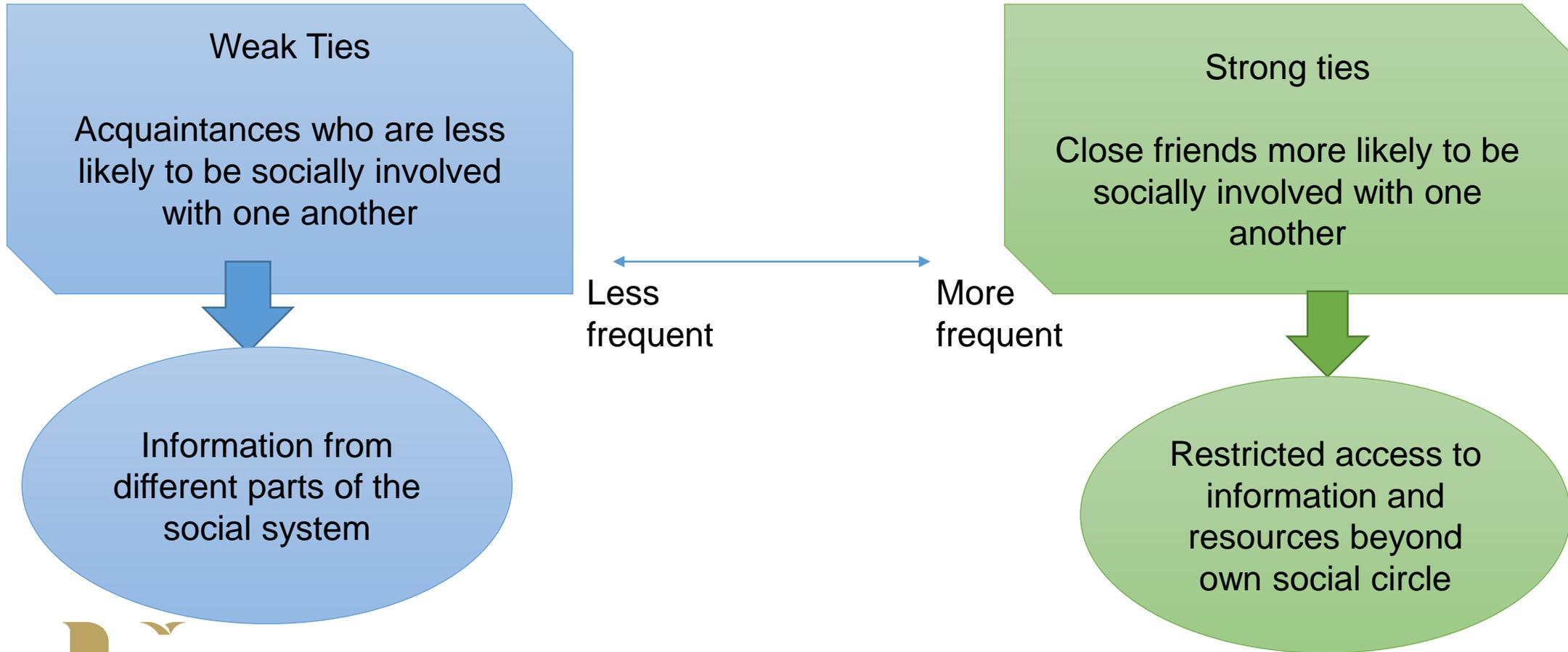
Research Aims

To provide insights into the networking practices of female entrepreneurs in SMPs in N.I. (sector-specific)

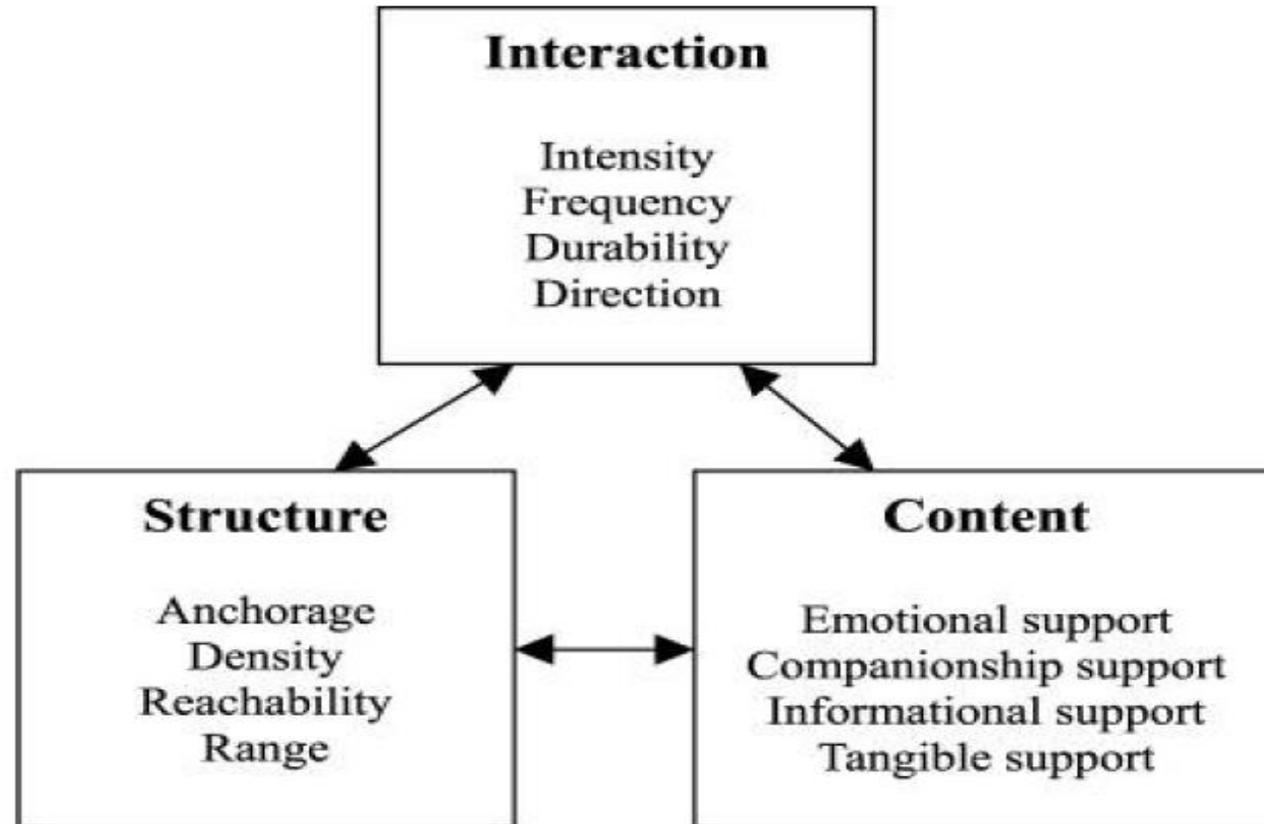
- Explore the experiences of female entrepreneurs in a male dominated profession and whether this has impacted networking behaviour
- Determine extent to which female entrepreneurs rely on informal networks rather than formal networks and the perceived efficacy of these networks
- Gain insights into whether/how networking practices of female entrepreneurs change over the lifecycle of their business

Key Literature

Granovetter (1973; 1983)



Conceptual framework for network studies of the owner-manager (Neergaard et al., 2005)



Research approach

- Female-owned accountancy practices in NI
- No partnerships included due to influence on networking behaviour
- CAI (439) and ACCA (107) = 546 registered accountancy practices
- **54 practices** – female principle ownership (**47 CAI + 7 ACCA**)
- Quantitative and qualitative methodologies to explore 3 network dimensions – structure, interaction, content.
 - Surveyed **54** female-owned SMPs
 - In-depth interviews – 12 female entrepreneurs (SMPs) (deeper exploration of structure, interaction and content through lived experiences)



Research Approach

Survey

- All female principle-owner of SMPs – CAI and ACCA register
- Single owner-managed
- Questionnaire administered in December 2017
- Qualtrics software by email
- Reminder emails (3)
- Response rate – 24/54 – 44%
- SPSS – descriptive statistics

In-depth Interviews

12 in-depth interviews conducted with female owner-manager
Questions informed by literature and survey data
Geographical spread throughout NI
Interview duration approximately 60mins
Location convenient to participant
Participants encouraged to tell their personal stories and lived experiences
Nvivo – coded data

Findings

Quantitative and Qualitative



Survey Findings

Profile of respondents

- **Age** -
 - 50% between 31-40
 - 37% between 41-50
 - 13% between 51 -60
- **Marital status** - 96% married with more than 1 child
- **Education** - 96% attended higher education
- **Professional training** -
 - 71% came from SMPS
 - 21% big practice
 - 8% SMP & big practice



Network structure (Who)

- Network structure comprises strong and weak ties throughout the business lifecycle
- Reliance differs on strong and weak ties (range) at different stages of the business lifecycle

71% developing

54% growth not a top priority

*My priority at the minute is trying to juggle the business and two very small children and trying to keep my clients happy and keep the business afloat until they go to school and my time is a bit freer
(Interviewee 1)*

Network Structure (Who)

Weak Ties – Business Start-up

When I first set out the exposure that I got from the Chamber of Commerce was absolutely brilliant ...made the business visible and for me networking events and things to do with the Chamber of Commerce, commercial stuff like that was a big, big help (Interviewee 2)

At the very beginning, it was probably both (to build reputation and source clients) ...you go to these things and when you start your own business, everywhere you look is an opportunity. (Interviewee 3)

Network structure (Who)

Composition of strong and weak ties

Strong

- 92% indicated that professional friends (strong ties) were important to varying degrees in their network

I would try and stay in contact with former colleagues and that sort of thing because I am very much on my own here so I do need to (Interviewee 4)

...what we find is that as we move on with our careers...we all become experts in different areas so if we need to pull in somebody else, it's great to be able to pick up the phone and call...I think that applies across both men and women because I would have [former] male colleagues who I would also call if I needed some type of assistance with some specific area but definitely that network is very important and that comes from training firms, because that's where we would have started off together (Interviewee 3)

Network structure (Who)

Composition of strong and weak ties

Weak

- Approximately 50% indicated that formal business networks (weak ties) were important
- 48% indicated that women-only network groups were important to varying degrees in their network, however only 4% said women-only groups were extremely important

they do have their place, definitely have their place and I've been on them (Interviewee 4)

I think that some of the women who are in the 'Women in Business' groups...are in those arty, crafty sort of things and maybe their clientele are mostly women but I think in the professions it makes a lot more sense if maybe it was more than that (Interviewee 5)

My sense is that female-only networking is too nice, you know it loses the business purpose (Interviewee 6)

Network Content (What)

Findings:

59% of women consider networking as important

Main reasons for networking:

Ranking		% of respondents
1 st	Informational support	80%
2 nd	Expand your client base	55%
3 rd	Increase the profile of the practice	50%
4 th	Increase referrals	40%
9 th	Emotional support	10%

Network Content (What)

Women primarily network to gain informational support

...other people are a huge source of knowledge ... and especially older people who have been in business a long time, they've been through it all...(Interviewee 3)

I go to their CPD events obviously because I have to and you can pick which ones you go that are most relevant ...(Interviewee 1)

Network Interactions (How)

Frequency

- 80% indicated they spent less than two hours per week, networking
 - All women attend professional body CPD events (70% - not very often)
 - 40% never attend professional body networking events
 - 60-70% do not attend formal events such as Chamber of Commerce events
- Family and friends are a frequently used network:
 - ...every day I'm on the phone to [friend]... today I got a refund from one of the software companies which I was delighted about so I just feel the need to phone her. (Interviewee 7)*
- Online CPD Groups not run by the professional bodies
 - I do go to the CPD events because I have to... but I would have done a lot of online CPD, I still do...it clocks up the hours and you don't have to interrupt your day...I don't find the professional networks (Interviewee 3)*

Network Interactions (How)

Gender

- Parenting/children has a significant impact on networking behaviour

men can attend everything, it is easier for them to attend, you know if they are free ... before I had a family I was more free to attend everything as well ... (Interviewee 1)

- Men are more confident at networking than women

They were just so much more confident, more self assured...more entitled to be there, you know. (Interviewee 6)

...it is down to confidence, unfortunately for women it's very hard, because if you do stop to have children or take a break to have children, then that really puts you back. (Interviewee 3)

You know this imposter syndrome that we hear about all the time, that is so true (Interviewee 3)

Network interactions (How)

Gender

- Male dominated events can be intimidating

I would feel intimidated because I think men tend to gather in big groups as well they, you know they look after each other maybe better. I'm not sure women are as good as looking after each other. (Interviewee 6)

there's a room of maybe 200 people with maybe 160 of them men, it is a wee bit intimidating to be honest. (Interviewee 8)

You can go to maybe events and maybe [be] slightly intimidated because...the men are in their groups talking about the match, talking about the football or the rugby or whatever (Interviewee 9)

Network Interaction: Barriers (How)

Time

- 80% indicated that time was the biggest barrier to networking

To go out in the evening time and take time away from my children...I did it for years and I think it has to very specifically planned now and it has to be very beneficial (Interviewee 3)

...it's just not possible you can't juggle it all (Interviewee 2)

...when you're in a small practice and self-employed...you have to get the job done or you're not going to get paid...you have to weigh it up (Interviewee 9)

Network Interaction: Barriers (How)

Location

A lot of their social or networking events are in Belfast or Dublin and that's just, it's too difficult for me to go (Interviewee 1)

You know it's location, location is my problem so like they're not going to do anything for just me (Interviewee 1)

..you want to be at them but then...I suppose where we are, to go to Belfast, to go to something like that, you know that's a day away (Interviewee 9)

Cost

...some of the Institutes' CPD courses, they're expensive, like you're talking a few hundred pounds for the day plus it's your day out of the office and all so that's, that's pricey. (Interviewee 9)

Mentoring



- 58% indicated that they placed no importance on mentors as part of their network
- Broad agreement regarding the **value** of having a mentor at various stages of business development

...when I was a trainee there were a couple [of people] when I was in the firm who would have been fantastic (Interviewee 4)

...she's not an accountant but I can go and talk to her about 'I'm really struggling with what to do here' and she can sort of level with me and make me prioritise more (Interviewee 7)

I would love a mentor, to be honest, because if it was a mentor, it would mean that the travel time for me would be limited...and it would also be specifically tailored to what I need (Interviewee 3)

- Many view mentoring as an **element of the professional service** they provide:

I would do more [for my clients] than just their accounts, helping them get set up and take those first few steps...you know for confidence (Interviewee 1)

Mentoring

- The **stage** of business development influences mentoring needs

I think as the business grows...I'm finding myself in a transition where I'm moving away from working with clients on a day to day basis to moving more towards managing the business as a whole... so I find myself in need of something different so more specific coaching or mentoring for example in terms of leading or leadership qualities that I need to develop (Interviewee 3)

- **Becoming** a mentor

Definitely, you have to give it back, because we get so much help, there's so much support for women...the reason I got to where I am now is because of all the support I've got. So there is absolutely a place for all of that female support...you do need the push to make you go further, which sometimes women networking doesn't give you. Women will give you the support, but not necessarily the push (Interviewee 3)

Implications of the Research

- Gender does make a difference
- Networking needs DO change according to business lifecycle.
 - Networking approaches and opportunities, and mentoring, could be more carefully planned and positioned to ensure women in business can continue to progress.
- Informational support construct
 - Women-only network events can to too 'nice' and lack a professional focus
 - Events need to have a purposeful focus on delivery/exchange of relevant information
 - Localised network events, supported by professional bodies, could potentially address this
- Professional bodies
 - Emerging trend away from attending CPD events towards online CPD – diminished opportunities to maintain and build networks

Next stage of the research

- All-Ireland perspective
- Educational implications – practice

Thank you for your time.

Questions?