Women’s Voluntary Organizations: Bridgers, Bonders or Both

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Most often social capital is traced back to Alexis de Tocqueville who believed that the opportunity for face-to-face interaction provided by participation in voluntary organizations not only teaches essential civics skills, such as trust, compromise and reciprocity, but also binds society together by creating bridges between diverse groups (de Tocqueville, as summarized by Newton, 1997).

A number of scholars have investigated the role of bonds and ties in the development of social capital. The consensus seems to be that bonding is based on dense networks and multiplex relationships (Leonard & Onyx, 2003), and occurs more easily among groups whose membership is homogeneous and who associate with each other over a period of time. Thus, the focus of the group is on the needs and interests of its members (Wuthnow, 2002), and group loyalty is valued. Bridging, on the other hand, spans different groups and includes less dense networks (Wuthnow, 2002). Because bridging links heterogeneous groups, reciprocity may be more important and thus, working together is more instrumentally-based and the extent may depend on perceived benefits (Leonard & Onyx, 2003). In this paper, we propose that the role of voluntary organizations in bonding and bridging may differ between gender neutral and women’s organizations.

We collected data from 645 voluntary organizations in Canada to understand in particular the responses of women’s voluntary organizations to changes in external environment (Meinhard & Foster, 2003). We found that while the responses of women’s organizations are similar in direction to other organizations, they are different in degree. Compared to other organizations, women’s organizations are more critical of current policies, and more pessimistic about the future. Although they are more inclined to collaborate, they are less likely to embrace a business orientation, develop new revenue strategies or see competition as positive. We concluded that despite strong shared sectoral trends, women’s organizations are a distinct subset of the nonprofit sector. Given this conclusion, the question is whether the social “glue” produced and maintained by women’s voluntary organizations is the same as for gender-neutral organizations. Is there evidence that women and women’s organizations are any more or less skilled than men or gender-neutral organizations at making bridging connections?

In our nation-wide study, we found that 69% of women’s voluntary organizations engaged in more than five types of interorganizational activities, a proportion significantly higher than the 58% of gender-neutral organizations (Meinhard & Foster, 2003). We also found that the predispositions for collaboration were quite different for women’s organizations (Foster & Meinhard, 2003). Gender-neutral organization are motivated to make linkages with other voluntary organizations in order to reduce costs, and because they believe competition is good. Women’s organizations are more likely to collaborate if they perceive an impact from environmental changes, believe there are few obstacles to collaborate, believe in the future of partnerships, do not believe that management solutions are part of the future for the voluntary sector, and if they have already implemented strategic staffing measures in response to changes
in the environment. This raises the issue of whether bridging and collaborating are the same thing, subsets of each other, or completely different networking phenomena.

This paper investigates the role of organizational characteristics (run by women or not, structure, size, and age) in predisposing an organization to bridge or to bond. These data will be compared with the model we have already developed on predisposition to collaborate (Foster & Meinhard, 2002) to gain insight into the similarities and differences between bridging/bonding and collaborating, with a special focus on women’s voluntary organizations.