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Gender differences in early group formation

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to establish whether different gender groups develop in similar or dissimilar ways to conventional group formation patterns. Focussing primarily on Tuckman's model of group development, male, female and mixed gender learning networks (groups) of entrepreneurs were observed over a six month period, with the observations recorded and analysed, to establish whether different gender networks of business people adhere to Tuckman's model of group development in terms of early development and cohesion through the forming, storming and norming stages.

Design/methodology/approach – A total of 100 entrepreneurs were recruited in Autumn 2009/Spring 2010 and allocated to three different gender networks, male, female and mixed, in Ireland and Wales (six networks in total), as part of the Sustainable Learning Networks Ireland Wales (SLNIW, for detailed information about SLNIW see www.slniw.com) INTERREG 4A funded project. The groups began networking in January 2010, observed by impartial observers who noted group behaviour and dynamics and recorded observations quantitatively (based on adapted Bales criteria) and qualitatively. It is the results of these observations that form the basis of this paper.

Findings – This paper analyses the results of the group dynamic witnessed over subsequent network meetings for different gender mixes in Ireland. Whilst the observations are still ongoing, early results indicate that early engagement with group members, team bonding and group dynamics are formed sooner in the single gender groups. The paper explores why this could be the case and considers factors that could then address problems with early group development in mixed gender networks, so that the ultimate "performing" stage of group development and optimal business performance is achieved as early as possible.

Originality/value – This paper will be of considerable value to academics, theorists and practitioners. It will specifically add to the body of knowledge on single gender networks to see if they provide a more effective learning environment.

Keywords Gender, Group dynamics, Small to medium-sized enterprises, Entrepreneurs, Gender differences, Networks, Networking, Group formation, Ireland, Wales

Paper type Research paper



Introduction and objectives

The research into early group formation and the impact that different gender compositions may have on group development is one aspect of research that is currently being conducted as part of the Sustainable Learning Networks Ireland Wales (SLNIW) project.

The objective of the particular research documented in this paper is to seek to establish whether the network groups developed differently across the gender mixes. Tuckman (1965) model of group development (forming, storming, norming and performing) was selected as a basis for the group development process and observations of the networks were recorded and monitored to ascertain whether there were gender differences in early group development.

Conceptual framework

For the purpose of the SLNIW project, three different gender mixes of networking groups of entrepreneurs were observed and initial research was conducted by the project team into networking, group dynamics and gender differences therein.

Rationale and objectives of the research

Much has been proven with regard to the benefits of networking and working collaboratively within group situations (Donkels and Lambrecht, 1997; Miller *et al.*, 2007; Frazier *et al.*, 2004). Knowing the importance of collaborating within groups or networks and the positive impact this has on both individual businesses and the economy as a whole, this research set out to assess whether the positive benefits are attained more effectively by different gender mixes or whether gender has no impact on the progress of group development.

Having established different gender groups of business people that could be studied and observed, it was important that the project team undertaking the research had a clear understanding of group development, networks and networking, their significance, benefits and potential problems. It was also important to understand if different genders reacted differently within group situations and how group dynamics evolve. As such, a thorough background knowledge was sought within these areas of literature.

Networks and groups

Literature contains much debate on the definition of what a network is. The term has come to be loosely applied to any sort of collaboration among individuals. Within a business context, networking facilitates the exchanging of ideas which in turn can help generate new ideas. Networks are also seen as a good forum for problem solving (Huxham, 1996) and are a way of keeping informed about what is happening within an industry (O'Donnell and Cummins, 1999). It is also thought that networks established between businesses in the same geographical area have helped specific regions in the world to become identified as regions with a competitive advantage (Ferlie and Pettigrevv, 1996), such as Silicon Valley. The importance of networking for business owners has long been recognised as a key element in assisting business development (Donkels and Lambrecht, 1997). Subsequently it may be argued that networking may significantly contribute to local economic growth. This anticipated economic benefit to

the regions of South East Ireland and West Wales was one of the main reasons that the SLNIW project was established.

It is important to recognise that collaboration between individuals in a network or group situation can be difficult and that working with others is never simple, particularly with those from a different working culture, background or industry. The success of the collaborative process depends on how individuals and the group as a whole deals with the difficulties associated with collaboration for mutual advancement (Huxham, 1996). However, having acknowledged there may be complications associated with collaboration, it by no means diminishes the importance of network participation as a means to aid business advancement (Donckels *et al.*, 1997). Furthermore, businesses that engage in networking can differ from those that do not utilise networking as a business tool (Miller and Besser, 2005). Businesses that network have reported greater success in achieving their business goals and creating greater gross sales. Business owners who utilise networking can achieve many business benefits including competitive advantage (Miller *et al.*, 2007).

As business owners faced increased pressure to secure competitive advantage the process of engaging in networking has become increasingly prelevant for the advancement of global economic growth (Moller and Svahn, 2004). Moller and Svahn (2004, p. 219) argued that knowledge sharing is a crucial factor in the success of a business network as it “influences the cooperation and outcomes that firms are able to achieve”. This view was further substantiated by Frazier and Niehm (2004), who established that business people interact with others to access information, get new ideas and have access to resources beneficial to business strategy. This development of a knowledge platform is particularly relevant if the information available to network members is about new techniques, suppliers, customers and technology (Miller *et al.*, 2007). However, these researchers added a note of caution, stating that cultural differences within a network can cause barriers to the exchange of this knowledge and this therefore needs to be taken into consideration when dealing with people from different cultural background in a business network.

An interesting variance on the network debate is noted by Frazier *et al.* (2004) who found an emergent network pattern suggesting small retailers (businesses) do not want formal networks. They prefer to attain business information through informal person-to-person contact rather than business-to-business activity. Informal personal networks are seen as more accessible to SME owner/managers in terms of time and cost when compared with formal networks. Despite this anomaly, many studies have acknowledged the advantages of network participation for small business owners as helping their businesses to grow further (Donckels *et al.*, 1997) by giving them an advantage over business owners who are not involved in a network (Frazier *et al.*, 2004). This research is of particular relevance to the SLNIW project, whose participants are owners and managers of small businesses.

Gender differences and network development

In order to develop successful networks a better understanding of the collaboration processes that occur when establishing a network, or six networks as in the case of the SLNIW project, gender differences need to be acknowledged and fully understood. It is well documented within the entrepreneurial literature, that historically entrepreneurship is seen as a prevailingly male undertaking (Mirchandani, 1999; Ahl, 2006), with the role

women played in entrepreneurship only being recognised academically as late as the mid 1970s (Greene *et al.*, 2003). This in turn, has lead to research on entrepreneurship being predominantly based on studies undertaken using the male entrepreneur and his practices as the “norm” (Bruin *et al.*, 2007). Subsequently, male entrepreneurial activities are used in the many studies as a benchmark for entrepreneurial behaviour (Brush, 1992). This has resulted in entrepreneurial activities based on female behaviour often seen as a deviation from the excepted male business model. This “othering” of women is not restricted to entrepreneurship but is a feature recognised throughout society as noted by de Beauvoir (1953). Tayeb (1988) agreed with this premise believing discrimination against women exists in most societies. However, the degree of discrimination differed depending on the social order within individual cultures. Brush *et al.* (2009) suggest that this prejudice may impinge on female entrepreneurship and therefore entrepreneurship needs to be studied as a gendered process and not just as a variable (Lewis, 2006).

Despite, a keen awareness throughout literature of gender differences in entrepreneurial activity (Mirchandani, 1999; Bruni *et al.*, 2004; Lewis, 2006; Brush *et al.*, 2009), there is still a distinct reluctance displayed by some female business owners to acknowledge these differences as they believe it results in loss of integrity and questions their professional ability as business owners (Lewis, 2006). Paradoxically, Lewis (2006, p. 467) argues the very fact that women see gender recognition as having negative connotations “demonstrates the gendered nature of entrepreneurship”. Research has suggested that by attempting to maintain a gender neutral stance it has lead to gender differences not receiving the recognition they deserve (Mirchandani, 1999; Ahl, 2006; Lewis, 2006). However, a contrasting view was expressed by Walker and Joyner (1999) who suggested that displaying a bias towards women may result in an antagonistic attitude towards women. Notwithstanding this, there is a growing awareness within entrepreneurship research of the need to study the gendered nature of entrepreneurship as a socially structured factor rather than a biological difference (Gupta *et al.*, 2009). Lewis (2006), while acknowledging the inherent nature of gender in entrepreneurship, suggested it may be beneficial to examine individual differences between female entrepreneurs rather than treating them as a homogeneous group. Furthermore, there is a noticeable leaning within the female entrepreneurial literature toward the development of a strong theoretical platform based on feminist theories to help underpin future research in this area, as demonstrated by authors Bruni *et al.* (2004) and Brush *et al.* (2009).

Despite the significant research undertaken on networks and the small business owner, there is still very little understanding about the impact of network participation on women owned businesses (Neergaard *et al.*, 2005). It has been suggested that participation in business ownership has been restricted for women by, among other things, the type of networks to which they belong (Aldrich *et al.*, 1989; Fielden *et al.*, 2003), and the way in which they use their networks differently to their male counterparts to the detriment of business opportunities (Brush and Hisrich, 1991). Traditionally, female-led businesses are smaller in number of employees and sales volume than male led businesses which may further impact on women’s ability to own successful businesses (Brush and Hisrich, 1991). This view was given further credence by Miller *et al.* (2007) who conducted a study involving mixed gender networks where it was found that women owned businesses had fewer employees and generated less gross sale, even though women’s involvement in network activities was shown to be equal to men and they perceived similar benefits of belonging to a network as men.

Notwithstanding this, Klyver and Grant (2010) noted that women business owners are less likely to be personally acquainted with an entrepreneur than a male business owner. They suggest this lack of connectivity to other entrepreneurs may have direct implications on female entrepreneurship by reducing women's access to suitable role models along with business resources. The reduced availability to business resources was also acknowledged by Diaz-Garcia and Carter (2009) who found although both genders received similar overall support from their networks women reported reduced access to contacts, referrals and knowledge. Thus, it could be argued that there is a need to look at the gender differences in business owner networks in order to get a better understanding of the impact of social capital on female-led businesses.

Despite these negative connotations concerning women's involvement in networks, Foss (2010) after an examination of the literature, found that research had shown there are no major differences in the networks of female business owners when compared with their male counterparts. The benefit of network involvement for female business owners is supported by Davis and Aldrich (2000) and recognised by Miller *et al.* (2007) who state that women increase their access to expert advice when they move beyond social networks of family and friends for business ideas and seek membership in strategic organisations such as business networks. Networking can help women increase their confidence; reduce the feeling of isolation frequently associated with business ownership and help generation new ideas (Tynan *et al.*, 2009). Interestingly, Klyver and Terjesen (2007), in their analysis of network composition, noted that female entrepreneurs initially have significantly lower proportions of males in their social networks when starting their business, but as they establish their business this changes and they have similar numbers of males and females in their network circle. What is more, they suggest that this equality of gender in established business owner networks is because business owners, no matter which gender, basically face the same key challenges and therefore must develop ways of accessing resources to cope with these challenges. Finally, they suggest in order to succeed, female entrepreneurs may build more male orientated networks as they move through the different stages of venture creation and development.

The need for women to cultivate a more masculine outlook is also recognised by Wan *et al.* (1996), who found that women are more inclined to turn to men for information and practical business advice. They suggested that this may be due to men being perceived as having a higher business status in society. They noted that women talk to other women for companionship and emotional support. However, Himmelman (1996) disagrees with this outlook of female networks being based on masculine values, as he found there is a distinct difference in female led networks when compared to male led networks. Himmelman found that network processes led by women usually develop equality of power within the network very early on in the network development process. They are also characterised by a high level of creative problem solving and value human resources more than financial resources. This is in marked contrast to networks led by men, in which there is more limited sharing out of power and authority. Men also prefer staying within the rules and regulations of existing power structures and emphasise financial rather than human resources.

The importance of networking to the SME owner/manager is not in doubt. Where there is an area of debate on this subject, it is concerning the establishment of best practice in network formation and development. In other words what makes networks work? The ability to communicate effectively is referred to throughout literature as

essential to building a successful network (Frazier *et al.*, 2004), as is the need to turn network theory into practical application (Gilmore and Carson, 1999). However, they caution that networks should not be established around strict criteria and that entrepreneurs should develop their own networking ability, for the purpose of using this skill as a proactive business tool. This is the premise upon which the Sustainable Learning Network Ireland and Wales (SLNIW) project is based.

Group dynamics

For the purpose of this research, Tuckman's model of group development (1965) was used as the conceptual framework against which observations of group development of the networks were measured.

When individuals are brought together in a group situation, it can take a long time for that group to bond cohesively and reach the stage where it is working well and achieving positive outcomes. It can take considerably longer than anticipated to build up trust and confidence between individuals, these being essential components for the group to work successfully together.

The research undertaken was based on a learned understanding of the potential benefits of network formation and group work and an awareness of the potential gender differences relating to these. Furthermore, a conceptual framework was identified (Tuckman, 1965), against which observations of group development could be measured.

Research methods

SLNIW is an INTERREG 4A funded project that is being undertaken by the School of Management and Business, Aberystwyth University, Wales in partnership with Centre for Enterprise Development and Regional Economy (CEDRE), School of Business, Waterford Institute of Technology, Ireland. The SLNIW project is funded under European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) through the Ireland-Wales INTERREG 4A programme 2007-2013. The primary goal of the SLNIW project is to increase the competitiveness, creativity and innovation capacities and capabilities of small, medium and micro-enterprises in West Wales and South East Ireland. This goal will be achieved through the creation and development of self learning networks in these areas.

The SLNIW project is a unique participant led project that aims to develop six learning networks, each consisting of ten to 18 entrepreneurs, who can exchange experiences and share knowledge with other members of their network. Bringing together progressive, like-minded companies, the SLNIW project is about learning new perspectives and utilizing the skills of up to 18 senior executives (network members) in each network and delivering cost effective benefits to SME and micro-enterprise owners/managers and their businesses.

The group dynamic aspects of the project commenced in the Autumn of 2009, with the recruitment of 100 SME and micro-enterprise owner/managers (50 in West Wales and 50 in South East Ireland) to participate in groups, or "networks" as these were termed for the purpose of the project. The participants in the project, in both localities, were divided into three gender groups/networks per country. In each country, the networks were organised so that there was one male group, one female group and one mixed gender group (males and females together).

Once the networks had been formed, the participants attended five/six months' of developmental sessions that sought to maximise their networking and group development skills. The observations recorded in this paper relate to the group meetings that were conducted as part of this developmental phase of the project. Since this research was conducted very early in the groups' formation, it is worth noting that none of the groups/networks attained the final performing stage of Tuckman's group development.

The second phase of the SLNIW project, from July 2010 to June 2011, involved the networks setting their own agendas for self-sustaining, self-learning group meetings. What happened in this 12 month period was guided by the participants themselves. The ultimate aim of the SLNIW project was to develop a process for creating self learning networks, leading to sustained regional economic development.

Network participants were sought for the project from a wide range of industry sectors, with the sole stipulations being that they should be owners or senior managers of the business, that the business had been in existence for more than three years and that the business employed at least one other person. A media campaign was conducted in both Wales and Ireland from September 2009 until February 2010 to promote the SLNIW project and try to attract businesses to the project. In addition to press releases, radio interviews, advertisements and information dissemination events, the project team also targeted individuals from suitable businesses on a one-to-one basis, which proved to be the most successful recruitment method, particularly in Ireland.

The method of application to join the network groups was by means of an application form that could be supplied electronically or in paper format, or completed online. These initial applications were assessed for eligibility and eligible applicants were then interviewed by the project team, in person or over the telephone, with a further in-depth questionnaire completed to ascertain both the dedication of individuals to the project and also to measure perceptions and current involvement in networking. The project team member conducting this second-level interview would then either recommend or not recommend individuals for the project.

All applicants who were both eligible and then recommended for inclusion in the project were allocated to a particular gender group. The interview process did ask if individuals had a strong preference for a particular gender group, with the vast majority opting to join a mixed gender group. This was particularly the case with male applicants, with very few (only one in Wales), indicating a preference to join a male only group. However, it was important that an even number of participants were allocated to each group in order that fair comparisons of group dynamic behaviour could be assessed.

Research methods

Research methods employed in this study included: informal interviews, direct observation, personal reflections by participants, periodic structured questionnaires, self-analysis and life/business histories. For the purpose of this particular research, participant attendance records and group observations are also used. Attendance records are simply a factual record of the number of participants that registered for each network session.

Direct group observation is particularly effective in investigations of certain kinds, e.g. communications, problem solving, etc. The direct observation techniques employed in this study can be classed as structured observation. The advantages of structured observation is that:

- it is readily adopted after preliminary training;
- it can be carried out simultaneously in different locations (by different observers), particularly useful in this study in the comparison of Welsh and Irish networks;
- observing the frequency of events also allows the recording of relationships between events; and
- structuring observations improves observer consistency, especially important in multi-observer, multi-centre studies such as this.

A mixed methods observation methodology was adopted in this study, combining a structured qualitative approach; where observers note personal observations within structured categories; and a structured quantitative approach; noting the frequency of group actions based on the Bales (1950) 12-category interaction scale.

Mixed methods research, where the research strategy employs a mix of both qualitative and quantitative methods has developed rapidly in recent years (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2007; Tashakkory and Teddlie, 2003). It can be defined as “the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language in a single study” (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). However, it is a contested approach where the purists of both qualitative and quantitative research have engaged in ardent dispute about mixed methods and many propose that the two methods cannot and should not be mixed in research design. On the other hand, mixed methods research supporters contest that employing both quantitative and qualitative approaches, by collecting multiple data using different approaches, draws from the strengths and minimizes the weaknesses of both approaches (Brewer and Hunter, 1989). Social researchers have used mixed methods in a diversity of ways, e.g. to improve data accuracy; to provide a more complete picture by combining data from complementary sources; to avoid bias in single method approaches; and to build on initial findings using contrasting methods (Denscombe, 2008). Mixed methods research is increasingly popular for group observation in social and educational research and Molina Azorin and Cameron (2010), report increasing use and acceptance of the research technique by business and management researchers in organisational journals. Mixed methods were employed in this study as project team observers wanted to qualitatively observe network meetings, but supplement this with a closed-ended quantitative instrument to systematically measure certain communication acts or interactions, to aid comparison of groups and assess group development over time.

The structured qualitative method adopted involved observers recording general meeting logistics, facilitation, content, and noting personal observations of any instances of conflict, group inclusion/exclusion, transfer of learning, and innovation/creativity (Table I).

The structured quantitative approach used allowed the trained observers to capture the flow of interactions within a group. Interaction in small groups has been extensively studied. In the study of small group interaction, the work of Bales is considered pivotal (Fahy, 2005). In particular, Bales’ interaction process analysis (IPA) approach to identifying task and interpersonal elements of group interaction has been termed “seminal” and “well accepted as a sound method for identifying the communicative functions of group problem solving and decision-making interactions [...] [with] a long history in communication research”, by Keyton (2003). Bales’ IPA system is used to

1. General observations – meeting					
1.1 Location of meeting					
1.2 Number present					
1.3 Meeting agenda/format – was this set/followed?					
1.4 What time did the meeting start? On time?					
1.5 What time did meeting end? On time?					
2. Meeting facilitation					
2.1 Did any participant(s) facilitate/lead?	Yes	No			
2.2 If yes, who?					
2.3 Facilitator’s performance – comments, positive/negative					
2.4 General tone of the meeting?	Formal	Informal	Tense	Relaxed	Upbeat
2.5 Pace of meeting?	Slow	Medium	Fast		
3. Meeting content					
3.1 What were the major topics discussed during the meeting?					
3.2 Was each topic resolved/closed during the meeting? Any outcomes reached? Any action points raised? Any action points from previous meetings followed-up?					
3.3 Was there conflict during the meeting? Briefly describe causes, positive/negative, was it resolved or managed – if so, how?					
3.4 Did meeting participants split into any intra group groupings? How many, how many per group? Comment					
3.5 How inclusive was the meeting? Any particular examples of forced inclusion, forced exclusion?					
3.6 Were there any particular examples of transfer of learning or knowledge between participants?					
3.7 Were there any particular examples of innovation/creativity?					
3.8 Was there any obvious “Power” play in the meeting?					
3.9 Were there any notable positives or negatives of networking?					
3.10 Observer’s general comments, e.g. overall reaction, general perceptions, good use of participants’ time?					

Table I.
General supporting
observation notes

identify and record the nature (not content) of each separate act in ongoing group discussion. In addition to speech, interaction includes facial expressions, gestures, emotional signs and non verbal acts of various kinds. These can be detected by the observer, given an interpretation in terms of the Bales categories, and recorded.

Bales was considered the most appropriate approach to quantify group interactions in this study for two main reasons:

- (1) the categories were considered well suited to monitoring the dynamics of interactions amongst participants in small groups, particularly the recording of “giving”, or “asking for information, knowledge”; and

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- (2) its particular suitability for recording non verbal behaviours, e.g. “tension”, “tension release”, “anxiety”.

Other techniques considered included Flanders interaction analysis (Flanders, 1970). Flanders’ approach, originally, part of a research into teacher influence and pupil attitudes, is considered a useful teacher training device. However, it was considered less suitable than Bales for this research, as the Flanders categories concentrate on one central group member (the teacher) and record the exclusively verbal behaviour of this member with other group members (pupils). Categories, e.g. “praises or encourages”, “asks questions” and “gives directions” relate to the central group member, with other group members “responding” and “initiating” expression of ideas. Therefore, the Bales’ categories, with its additional emphasis on non verbal group interactions, and more inclusive group orientated categories, was considered more suited to this study.

The Bales’ IPA system provides a detailed observational scheme for coding group members’ communicative behaviour, categorising communication acts, so that group behaviour can be recorded, isolated and interpreted (Schultz, 1999). The method has been used to develop theories and make comparisons across a variety of groups in different situations. Belbin’s (1993, 2004) work on management teams and team roles is based on research of group behaviour which used the Bales IPA system to observe group interaction. As previously stated, the purpose of the Bales IPA system is to identify and record the nature (not the content) of each separate act in ongoing group interaction. An act is a communication or an indication, either verbal or nonverbal, which, in its context, may be understood by another member as equivalent to a single simple sentence.

Studies developed from the Bales IPA system have been particularly influential in helping develop an understanding of interaction as a part of the group process (Gouran, 1999). By coding members’ behaviour into discrete categories, observers have been able to interpret whether participants’ comments are helpful or disruptive to a group and whether the communication acts are balanced (Schultz, 1999).

This study uses a minor modification of Bales’ IPA categories (Table II), grouping together giving suggestion/information/knowledge and asking for suggestion/information/knowledge and including a separate category for facilitation. These changes were made following initial group observations, in order to simplify data gathering and ensure greater accuracy in group observations and to specifically record the role of facilitation in the self-directed business network meetings.

Observations were made by a minimum of two project team members who unobtrusively watched and observed group dynamics, interaction and cohesion. The qualitative and quantitative methods employed were agreed by both the Welsh and Irish project team members and adopted after full team discussion and collective agreement of the recording approach to be used. The first observed meetings were viewed as “pilots” and all observers’ meeting notes compared and reviewed for consistency of observation approach and content. Minor changes, as described previously, were made to observation sheet content at this stage. Following this initial training, ongoing consistency was ensured by rotation of observers, periodic additional observation by a corresponding cross-border team member in each country and sharing and reviewing of all observations amongst team members.

Table II.
Bales modified
observation criteria

Observation	
1. Shows solidarity/friendliness/ encouragement	Friendly/warm, raises other’s status, gives help, reward, shows empathy
2. Shows antagonism/unfriendly	Signs of negative feeling, deflates other’s status, interrupting, defends/asserts self
3. Shows tension	Exhibits conflict without negative feeling, withdraws out of field, embarrassment action, e.g. worry, panic
4. Shows tension release/harmonizing	Jokes, laughs, shows satisfaction, light hearted attempts to reconcile disagreements
5. Shows anxiety	Exhibits conflict, withdraws out of field, embarrassment action, e.g. worry, panic
6. Agrees	Shows passive acceptance, understands, concurs, complies
7. Disagrees	Shows passive rejection, formality, withholds help
8. Facilitates	Attempts to keep communication channels open, encourages participation of others, suggests procedures for discussing group problems
9. Compromises	Offers compromise, yields status, admits error, disciplines self to maintain group cohesion
10. Gives suggestion/opinion/ information/knowledge	Leads in task direction, attempts to guide, exhorts others to action, provides evaluation or analysis, expresses feeling or wish, reports facts, observations, experiences
11. Asks for information/knowledge/ suggestion/opinion	Requests clarification, facts, observations, experiences, asks for direction in problem solving, possible action, keeps communications going, requests evaluation, analysis, expression of feeling

Note: The number of incidences of behaviour in the above categories was noted

Research findings

The aim of the SLNIW project is to establish learning networks that are entirely participant led and will continue to operate after the present support systems are removed. With these requirements in mind, a number of basic skills were identified in literature to help assist network participants to gain the maximum efficiency required to work together successfully in a learning network (Morris *et al.*, 2006; Kiely and Armistead, 2005; Huxham, 1996; Himmelman, 1996). These skills were introduced in Ireland as part of the first five network sessions. It is these network sessions that are under discussion in this paper.

The objective of this study is to examine how the networks evolved during the initial period of their network formation. The theory underpinning this study is Tuckman (1965) model of group development, forming, storming, norming and performing, and it is used to identify differences, if any, between the three networks during this stage of their network development.

A summary of the content of the skill building sessions can be seen below.

Initial skill building/network meetings

Session one – introduction day. The Irish networks began with a half day introductory session at a centrally located venue. The theme of the session was innovation and creativity in a learning network and the session was facilitated by a professional practitioner. The aim of the session was to bring participants together to meet their

fellow network members and to initiate the concept of creative thinking with the purpose of stimulating innovation and productivity within the networks. Participants were divided into their individual networks and undertook a series of exercises designed specifically to promote “thinking outside the box”. The session concluded with each individual network attending a network session facilitated by a member of the SLNIW project team. This network meeting mainly consisted of members introducing themselves and their business along with their reasons for wanting to be part of the network.

Session two – team building. Each network attended this session individually. It was a daylong event held in a specifically designed activity centre and consisted of physical indoor and outdoor team building activities. The concept of group dynamics and the part each individual has to play in order to successfully participate in a learning network was also introduced at this session and each participant was issued with their own completed Belbin Team Role Profile. The purpose of this day was to help network participants start building the trust and cohesiveness required to work together in an open and honest manner – key elements of a successful learning network.

Session three – communications and conflict management. This session introduced the importance of good communication when working in a learning network, along with suggestions on how to deal with difficult situations that may arise within the network. This was an interactive session with members discussing their own personal experiences with regard to these themes. The objective of this session was to make participants aware of the need to listen to each other thus, allowing each individual to participate fully in the network and therefore, preventing unnecessary conflict. However, this session also emphasised that a certain amount of debate and disagreement is part of being in a learning network and is therefore, necessary to move the process on. This skill building session was followed by a facilitated network session which concentrated on setting ground rules and terms of engagement for the networks.

Session four – change management. The aim of this session was to help network members deal with the changes that they will face as they move from being a facilitated network to being a fully participant led, self facilitated network. The main element of this discussion revolved around change being difficult and that good communication and listening skills are an essential part of the change management process. This was once again an interactive session with personal experiences being exchanged between participants aided by an appropriate DVD on change within a family business that stimulated a lively discussion. During the facilitated network session, personal business issues were starting to be discussed in earnest as were ideas on how the networks were going to operate when self facilitated.

Session five – sustainable development. This was the last session before the networks become entirely participant led and self facilitating. The aim of this session was to ensure suitable systems and processes were put in place to enable the networks to be managed by the participants themselves. With this in mind, this session involved in-depth discussions on what each individual wanted to attain from their network and how best to achieve these objectives.

As this study is concerned with the development of the networks based on the Tuckman (1965) forming, norming, storming and performing model, observations were recorded at each skill building/network session to try and ascertain if the gender

composition of the networks had an influence on the group/network development process. The resulting observations are chronicled below beginning with the mixed gender network.

The qualitative perspective

The mixed gender network

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(1). *Introductory/creative thinking session (forming stage)*. As a group of people meeting for the first time the mixed gender network were very reticent and conversation was very stilted. This reserve continued throughout the session and as a network they required active intervention during certain networking activities that day. This is classic behaviour at the forming stage of any group of people brought together for the first time as most people are naturally cautious and apprehensive in a new situation. However, despite this natural reserve, normally one or two people would make an input and voice opinions, but this did not occur with this network. Interestingly, there was also no marked behavioural differences between male and female participants, with both genders showing a reluctance to get involved in networking activities.

(2). *Team building session (forming stage)*. After initial hesitance participants got off to a great start. Despite, the lack of leadership qualities shown at the initial skill building session definite leaders emerged during this session; this was probably aided by the nature of the team building event and there was a constant request for information and clarification during the activities. Completing tasks quickly and successfully was very important to this network, with one participant finding “working together and making quick decisions” the most enjoyable part of the day. They worked together cohesively on all team tasks. However, occasionally there were some mild disagreements. This would appear to be mainly due to frustration, as some of the activities proved quiet difficult. This team building day appears to have achieved what it set out to do because, as a network, the participants seem to have established a good rapport and relationships started to be built. There was still no marked gender differences emerging between participants, with the exception of one outside activity in which it was suggested by a male participant that the female participants take a slightly less arduous task.

(3). *Communications and managing conflict session (forming stage)*. This was the first session where participants came together in a formal networking environment (sitting down together at a table with no external activities required). Participants chatted comfortably together before the session started. In spite of this initial interaction, during the skill building part of the session members were exceptionally quiet and there was very little interaction; with the exception of a couple of participants who were noticeably more vocal than others. As the session progressed enthusiasm increased leading to an exchange of business knowledge and some personal information. However, participants were still very polite and no direct challenge was observed; it was a case of occasional clarification rather than disagreement, suggesting that the network was still at the forming stage. Furthermore, although some business and personal information was emerging, some participants remained reluctant to become fully involved. This reluctance was slightly more noticeable in male participants than female participants. Notably, at this meeting men sat next to a male counterpart and women next to a female counterpart. However, during a discussion on ground rules for the network, it was suggested by a female network member that participants should move places at each meeting and that they should arrange the seating to enable them to sit closer together.

This may be evidence that members were starting to feel more comfortable and wanted to start working together in a serious manner. However, there was still some uncertainty displayed as to the aims and objectives of the network, with one participant expressing concern that “the meeting felt very nebulous and a bit too unstructured”.

(4). *Change management session (storming stage)*. By now the mixed network had definitely moved on to the storming stage of the group development process. Strong members emerged in this network, consisting of both men and women, who regularly initiated the discussion and were eager to move the network process on. Some members were not happy with the agenda that had been agreed at the previous meeting, deciding shortly after this meeting started they did not want to spend any more time discussing future network procedures, rather, they wanted to get “down to business”. The tempo of the meeting changed throughout the session, with the room coming alive when real business issues were presented. There was some disagreement during this session, but it mainly centred on future network processes, thus helping clarify how the network would proceed when the facilitated network sessions were over. Members were beginning to align their goals and objectives and to ascertain what exactly they wanted from the network. Concern was expressed by some members at what was seen as a lack of direction, with only some members appearing to understand the learning concept behind the network, whereas others still seemed unsure. This ambiguity was expressed by a fellow participant:

[...] can't put my finger on it, but something doesn't feel right. Is the group too diverse, are the issues too broad? Haven't got an answer but still not entirely comfortable.

Notwithstanding this confusion, network members were starting to show a real willingness to work together. Trust was beginning to build as business information was beginning to be exchanged. The mixed gender network was now showing signs of being ready to move onto the next stage of Tuckmans group development model – norming.

(5). *Sustainable development of the network session (norming stage)*. Participants were very keen to start directing the network sessions themselves. Some participants actively worked outside network time to put processes in place to aid self facilitation of the networks. There was general agreement on how the network should proceed to the self facilitated stage and participants approved the suggested network processes, with common goals being identified. Even though some participants had less direct participation than others, overall they seemed to be a cohesive group and co-operation was becoming the norm. This network had become a high energy group with lots of ideas and an eagerness to start producing results.

The male network

(1). *Introductory session (forming stage)*. For a first meeting the participants in this network seemed relatively comfortable with each other and they participated readily in the interactive networking activities with the assistance of the SLNIW facilitator. Although the vast majority of these participants had expressed a wish to join the mixed gender network, there were no signs of dissention because they were assigned to the male network. There did not appear to be a lot of personal interaction, but once again this would be considered normal behaviour when meeting for the first time in such a group. However, there was a considerable amount of general conversation

between participants; but polite reservation was the norm. This is a factor noted at the forming stage of group development.

(2). *The team building session (forming stage)*. Once again, polite reservation was very much a feature of the male network. At the beginning of the session the conversation was rather formal and many of the participants sat outside in their cars until the SLNIW facilitator arrived at the activity centre. Even the dress code was reserved, with some of the participants dressing in smart casual outfits rather than sportswear. Despite this initial conservativeness, the team building day overall was relaxed, moving at a slow but steady pace. It would be difficult to pin point leaders at this stage, as diplomacy and tolerance were the norm; participants appeared not to want to offend each other by exerting authority. No major disagreement was displayed despite the frustrating nature of many of the activities. Although conversation was at a very superficial level, as would be expected at the forming stage of relationship building, there was an extreme effort exerted to include all members of the network in the activities. This effort for inclusiveness was further demonstrated by the agreement to declare a draw when the points achieved by the individual teams were calculated at the end of the day. This need to feel comfortable and accepted as part of the group is a key feature of early group formation, with conflict being kept to a minimum, and was noted in this network session.

(3). *Communications and managing conflict session (forming stage)*. This network was initially quiet, with very little conversation at the start of the session. There was a general sense of awkwardness or reserve. This improved however as the session continued and a congenial atmosphere developed. It was noted at this session that “the group was beginning to bond”. There was no major disagreement; participants were very polite and courteous to each other. The network was eager to start working together but seemed to be a little confused as to how this would happen, which is normal at the forming stage of group development. The group worked at a slow but consistent pace, but needed more time to build up the trust required to be more open with each other about their respective businesses and subsequent issues. This confirmed that they were still at the early stages of forming their network. No leader was yet identified; although one participant appeared to be more pro-active than the others when decisions needed to be made. Disagreement remained at a minimum, but there were signs of more active debate taking place, which was required to move the network to the next phase of group development.

(4). *Change management session (storming stage)*. As participants arrived they talked in pairs, however there was still a feeling of unease or discomfort which eased as the network meeting progressed and network members became more relaxed with each other. Though there was still no obvious leader identified in this network, some participants become more actively involved in discussion and decision making than others. As this group was still very reserved and respectful of fellow members, there was little sign of active disagreement. Despite, this general reticence, some participants were focused and knew what they wanted from the network, whilst others were less sure. Notwithstanding this, all members wanted to move onto the next stage of network development, with a request for “less facilitation and planning and more network participation”. This in turn led to the introduction of some very lively debate involving suggestions on how to proceed with the network. Because of this, it is safe to assume that the male network had reached the storming stage of group development. However, real openness had not yet developed, perhaps due to the conservative nature of the network.

(5). *Sustainable development of the network session (norming stage)*. Despite being a conservative group, animated conversation was noted between participants before the meeting started and during the coffee and lunch break. Members became more at ease with each other. Decisions concerning network systems and processes were finalised during this session and there was a general feeling of co-operation between fellow network members, giving rise to the suggestion that the male network had reached the norming stage of their development. In fact, the final part of this session was facilitated by the network members themselves. As one participant noted “we are now in the starting blocks, ready to go”. Notably, in spite of this being the last session before the network was to become self facilitating, it emerged that some participants were still unsure about what business sector fellow participants were involved with, stating “we are only starting to get to know each other” so, after all, perhaps this network was only at the early norming stage?

The female network

(1). *Introductory session (forming stage)*. This network started forming immediately. As participants met, they immediately began talking to each other. As a network they decided, without any prompting from the facilitator, to self facilitate when an activity required this and began working together straight away, with no signs of reservation. This instant rapport is worth noting, as very few women were happy with the fact that they were members of an all female network, expressing the fear that they would end up discussing female topics such as hair, makeup and child care issues. However, these fears were quickly dispelled with members stating they were extremely happy to be part of a network consisting of “a serious group of business women”. This network displayed an openness and cooperation that would not be considered the norm at this early stage of group development. There was a lot of consensus, with participants tending to agree with each other – behaviour typifying early group development.

(2). *Team building session (forming/early storming stage)*. The most noticeable feature to emerge from this session was the way participants bonded together. They appeared extremely comfortable together, partaking in friendly conversation from the beginning of the session. Strong leaders emerged during this session, including participants who admitted they found it difficult to work as a team as they were so used to taking the leadership role; thus, displaying an honesty and openness not usually noted in a network so newly established. Trust was beginning to build up. Some minor disagreements were observed, but were handled well within the network. Overall, the female network appeared eager to work together. Enjoyment was the common denominator for this network, but completing tasks successfully was also an important factor and there was a definite element of healthy competitiveness among members. One participant questioned the wisdom of dividing the network into two rival teams stating that “as a network they should be working together rather than competing against each other” giving further confirmation that the network had established a good bond and wanted to start working together, indicating they had already left the forming stage behind.

(3). *Communications and managing conflict session (storming stage)*. Once again these participants had no difficulty talking to each other both socially and within a learning network capacity. Network members were eager to talk about their own business experiences and valuable knowledge and information was exchanged, confirming that trust and confidence was now a fundamental aspect of this network.

This was further supported by the encouragement and support shown to fellow participants when necessary and emphasised the bond that developed between members. However, participants started to question how the network would operate when it became self facilitating. This led to some disagreement which was dealt with by compromise and good facilitation. Occasionally, the SLNIW facilitator had to interject as participants were talking over each other, resulting in confusion. Participants appeared a little restless at times and sometimes the session seemed to lack energy. There was a request “to go straight to business and start sharing ideas”. This questioning and eagerness are all signs that the female network was now in the storming stage of their network development.

(4). *Change management session (norming stage)*. The lethargy experienced at the last network meeting had completely gone. Participants showed a genuine willingness to work together and one participant willingly volunteered to organise supporting material required for future network sessions. A lot of decisions were made during this meeting on what group members wanted to achieve and how the network will run when it became self facilitating. This was done without any confrontation between members. However, occasionally there were two discussions occurring at the same time, although overall co-operation was the norm. Trust continued to grow, with the members identifying the network as a place to discuss their business issues with likeminded people, whilst giving them the opportunity to step back from their business, enabling them to get a fresh perspective. During this meeting it was obvious that the female network was ready to be self facilitated.

(5). *Sustainable development of the network session (norming stage)*. The agenda agreed upon at the previous meeting was used at this session. There was initial confusion as to what was to happen at this session but with help from the SLNIW facilitator the network session got underway and was mainly facilitated by the network members themselves. There was no obvious disagreement but a participant noted the need to “introduce an element of challenge as we are still very polite”. Interestingly, during the meeting there was some initial difficulty finding a member willing to present about her business at the next session. However, this was quickly overcome and a substantial agenda was decided upon for the next network session. This was definitely a cohesive group who were eager to work together as a network. Good relationships developed between members and processes were put in place to move the network forward. As noted by one participant “this is time well spent, I am really excited by the network, they are a lovely group”. At this point, this network was prepared to take over the role of running the network themselves and had reached the norming stage of the process.

The quantitative perspective

The Bales IPA technique (1950) was the quantitative tool used to gather supporting evidence for the qualitative data. The IPA system identifies and records the nature of group interaction as “acts” of communication. “Acts” of interaction are defined by Bales as that of a simple sentence or its equivalent. Fragments of sentences, words, or phrases; and non verbal interactions, e.g. gestures, facial expressions, emotional signs, etc.; are scored as acts when the observer can understand the meaning and transform the communication into a form which permits classification according to the Bales categories. Observers noted the number of acts according to the modified Bales observation criteria (Table II). With the set of categories in mind,

observers listened and watched for the smallest items or segments of behaviour to enable scoring in one of the categories of the IPS system.

Findings obtained from structured observation using the Bales IPA technique (1950) offer support for the qualitative results obtained from direct participant observations. Structured observations scoring the number of acts occurring in each network meetings were recorded by at least two observers. Obtained scores were averaged and mean scores for each network reported (Table III).

Looking at four group networking sessions (Figure 1), different characteristics were observed in the different gender groups, with the female group showing greater “suggestive” and encouraging behaviour in session two, with least compromise. In session three, the mixed network group equalled the female level for suggestions, with moderate levels of agreement, whilst the male group showed greatest levels of tension release. There was a noted reversal of these trends by session four, with the male group having the highest recorded level of suggestive behaviour, solidarity and agreement, whilst the females maintained relatively low levels of all observed behaviour traits. Session five saw an evening out of observed behaviour, although the male group had the greatest level of information exchange and disagreement. The female group at this stage were observed to have the highest level of tension releasing behaviour.

Structured observations when compared to results obtained from direct participant observations identify the male network to have the most encouraging results based on the mean (M) number of behaviours perceived as beneficial to group development. Although all networks reported a similar number of suggestions being made at their meetings, the male network overall exchanged more information than the other two networks (Male: $M_{\text{Information}}=16.75$; Female: $M_{\text{Information}}=6.50$; Mixed: $M_{\text{Information}}=12.00$). Furthermore, the male network had more disagreements than the other networks (Male: $M_{\text{Disagreement}}=3.75$; Female: $M_{\text{Disagreement}}=1.00$; Mixed: $M_{\text{Disagreement}}=2.50$). However, they also displayed comparatively high levels of solidarity ($M_{\text{Solidarity}}=14.75$) and agreement ($M_{\text{Agreement}}=11.00$) this along with the group’s ability to release tension ($M_{\text{Tension_Release}}=10.75$) can be argued to have contributed to this positive result when compared with the two other networks.

Although, the research to date would indicate that the male network displays the most positive behaviours beneficial to group development, they are also found to have the overall lowest attendance of the networks.

Discussion and implications

Bringing individual business people to work together is never easy, especially if the individuals in the group/network are from different business sectors (Huxham, 1996). However, when bringing a diverse group of people to work together, Tuckman (1965) found that there is a fundamental process that all groups must go through before they reach the stage where they can work effectively together. The present research agrees with Tuckman as, without exception, all three networks progressed through this group development process. Then again, this process evolved differently in each network.

The mixed gender network, though initially reticent, proved to be a dynamic group, displaying a number of positive behaviours, along with the ability to make quick decisions when necessary. Strong leaders were identified early during the forming process, with gender not having an influence on the leadership role. In fact gender has not been an issue at any time during this stage of the network formation, with the female participants

Table III.
Mean/frequencies –
positive observations by
network and event
(number of behaviours)

Network event	Tension				Compromise	Suggestion	Information	Antagonism	Anxiety	Disagreement
	Solidarity	release	Agreement	Facilitates						
Male	Team building	27.00	28.00	5.00	9.00	5.00	41.00	16.00	1.00	1.00
	Communications	1.00	7.00	0.00	0.00	1.00	22.00	10.00	0.00	1.00
	and conflict									
Female	management	27.00	2.00	34.00	2.00	1.00	38.00	5.00	0.00	5.00
	Change									
	management									
	Sustainability	4.00	6.00	5.00	9.00	4.00	27.00	36.00	0.00	8.00
	Total mean	14.75	10.75	11.00	5.00	2.75	32.00	16.75	0.25	3.75
Mixed	Team building	23.00	22.00	4.00	3.00	1.00	56.00	8.00	5.00	1.00
	Communications	10.00	3.00	19.00	1.00	2.00	32.00	4.00	0.00	3.00
	and conflict									
Mixed	management	10.00	0.00	3.00	0.00	0.00	12.00	8.00	0.00	0.00
	Change									
	management									
	Sustainability	4.00	16.00	10.00	5.00	2.00	27.00	6.00	2.00	0.00
	Total mean	11.75	10.25	9.00	2.25	1.25	31.75	6.50	1.75	1.00
Mixed	Team building	15.00	6.00	11.00	15.00	5.00	32.00	14.00	2.00	3.00
	Communications	6.00	3.00	8.00	0.00	0.00	30.00	4.00	0.00	0.00
	and conflict									
	management									
	Change	7.00	11.00	13.00	0.00	0.00	32.00	10.00	0.00	7.00
Mixed	management									
	Sustainability	8.00	0.00	0.00	3.00	0.00	34.00	20.00	0.00	0.00
	Total mean	9.00	5.00	8.00	4.50	1.25	32.00	12.00	0.50	2.50

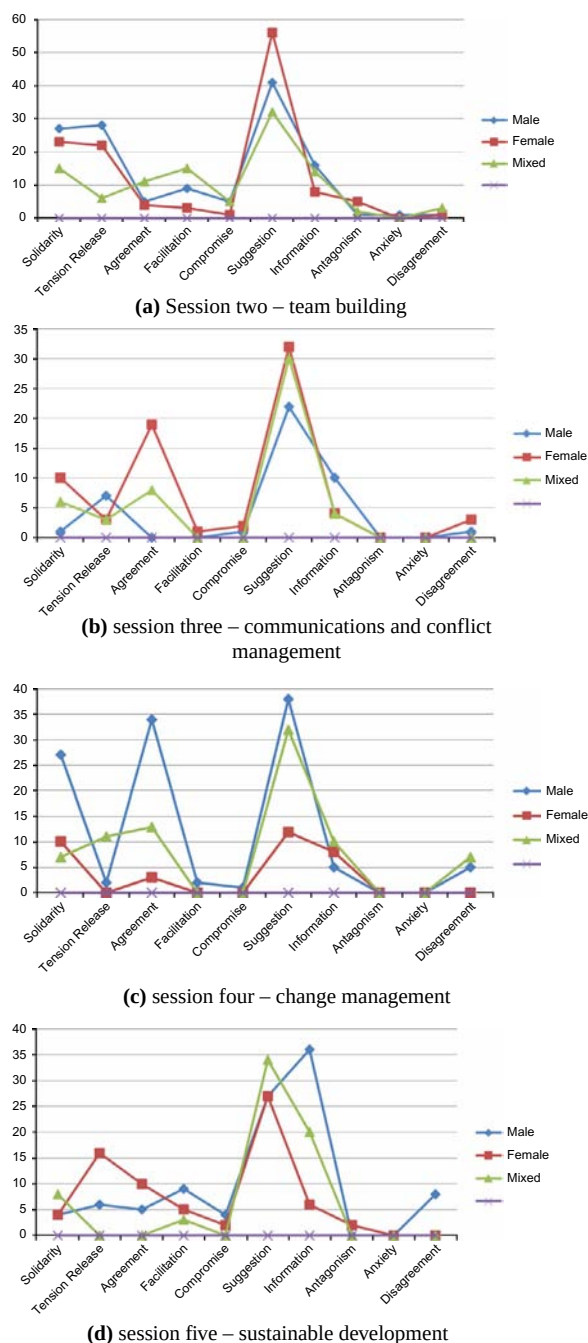


Figure 1.
Quantitative analysis of
the bales observations

behaving in a similar manner to their male counterparts. This is in line with the findings of Miller *et al.* (2007) who found women participated in similar networking activities as their male counterparts and gained the same benefits from networking as men.

The male network, although also reaching the norming stage of the formation process, demonstrated a reservation and conservatism that continued throughout the networking process. It took longer to build up trust and confidence between the male network participants than it did in the other two networks. Despite this initial delay in the group formation process, the quantitative structured observations identified that the male network exchanged more information than the other two networks, and similarly higher levels of solidarity and a greater ability to release tension. This may be due to men having more formal network experience (Watson, 2011) and with men being more likely to look to other men for advice (Aldrich *et al.*, 1989). Although procedures and systems were put in place to assist in the self facilitating stage of the network; it took more time for this network to reach these decisions than the other two networks. It could be argued this may be the result of more disagreement as shown by the quantitative structured observations. However, it is also possible that the lack of early leadership shown had an impact on the overall decision making process. Interestingly, this lack of defining a leading figure is in marked contrast to previous research in which it was found that the sharing of power in male led networks did not happen very often (Himmelman, 1996). Notwithstanding this, the male network became more relaxed and displayed the same eagerness as the other two networks to move to the next stage of the network process.

In contrast to the mixed gender network and the male network, the female network appeared to proceed through to the forming stage extremely quickly. The bonding process happened almost instantaneously, with quantitative structured observations identifying the female network as displaying the lowest level of disagreement behaviours. Though strong leadership qualities were identified in some participants early on in the formation process, it appeared that these qualities were suppressed in preference for equality and consensus. This equality of power within a female network was also noted by Himmelman (1996) who found egalitarianism usually evolved early on in the female network development process. Good organisation was a key element of this network, as was having fun in the process.

The quantitative and qualitative research did differ in their results, with the male group coming out as the strongest, demonstrating the most positive behaviour at an earlier stage to the female and mixed network groups. The quantitative research must be read in context and in line with identified limitations however and the overall consensus for the team of researchers was that the qualitative research and analysis most accurately reflected observed findings. The combination of qualitative and quantitative research proved valuable since the research undertaken was new and innovative, hence the need to maximise the data/information and observation material that could be gathered and its analysis.

It can be concluded that although all three networks went through the initial stages of Tuckman's group development model, the female network reached the norming stage before the mixed gender network and the male network. Notwithstanding this, the three networks evolved to reach the performing stage in the group development.

Despite the rigorous qualitative and quantitative observation methods and observer rotation employed, there remains the possibility that results could be biased by the individual researchers' interpretations of observed behaviour. It was acknowledged

during the research that observation skills improved over time and, if further research was to be conducted, the research team would be better equipped to provide a more standard and efficient record of observed behaviour from the onset. Observation of large groups has its own problems, with it not being possible to record every single interaction or behaviour. Consideration was given to filming and recording sessions, however this was investigated and found to have its own problems in terms of technical requirements, but more importantly the transcription thereafter.

This paper focuses on the period when the SLNIW project was in its early stages of implementation as far as the networks were concerned. There is significant further research to be done on later group development, particularly in the “performing” stages and maybe even towards the demise of the group and the fifth, mourning or adjourning stage of the process. Further research is planned to continue regular observation of network meetings and also conduct a number of semi-structured interviews with individual members of the networks. This will provide further information on the observation methodology employed in the study and the effect, if any, of the observers on the process. Individual interviews with network members will also provide a more rounded appraisal, through gaining interviewees’ opinions of the impact of gender on networks of entrepreneurs.

The value of business groups and networks has long been researched and discussed, however, how different gender mixes proceed through group development stages is a theme that has been rarely investigated. If, as this early research indicates, there are differences in how different gender mixes progress through group development process, the findings of this research could have considerable impact on future entrepreneurial group development theory and practice and a resultant positive impact on business and economic performance. If single gender groups/networks attain optimal business and economic performance more effectively than mixed gender, this may impact business support policy and practice. Thus, an interesting question for future research could be “what can we learn from the way single gender groups integrate and develop that could then be imparted on mixed gender business situations”?

Conclusion

This paper looked at the formation of network groups and the impact of gender differences on group formation. Tuckman (1965) model of forming, storming, norming and performing was used as a basis of network observations. Himmelman (1996) found that there were distinct differences between male and female networks and that women focused on wider issues and had a more equal approach to managing networks than men, who had power structures and focused on financial issues. This study shows that the all male group exchanged more information than the female and mixed groups, although they had more disagreements. This would suggest that they had passed the “storming” stage and were willing to challenge each other. This is confirmed by the higher levels of solidarity in the male network as well as the ability to release tension.

This paper makes an important contribution to the literature on gender differences in group formation and may have implications for the formation of entrepreneurial networks, in particular, support for female entrepreneurs. Although the female entrepreneurs bonded well with each other and had fewer disagreements they shared less information. Sharing knowledge and information is one of the most important benefits of networking (Fuller-Love and Thomas, 2004). The evidence from this study indicates that female entrepreneurs lag behind their male counterparts

in networking skills. This may be because of a lack of experience of business networks and their need to bond with other entrepreneurs in order to share experiences and develop a social network. Future research could compare the results of this study with other groups or networks of entrepreneurs. Also, the methodology employed, a modification of the Bales IPA, could be used in similar studies to observe networks or groups.

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