De netwerk-kikker wakker kussen : Vrouwen en hun netwerk
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Summary

This thesis brings together three concepts – networking, career and women – to answer the central question: *To what extent are higher-educated women aware of how networks operate, how do they network themselves and do they use their knowledge of networks to fulfil their career goals?* To answer this question, I first determined what networks are: Networks consist of connections between actors and they create social capital. The extent to which this capital is created depends on a multitude of factors, such as the structure of the network, the density of the network, an actor’s place within the network, but also factors such as exclusion and reciprocity in the actors’ relationships. The actor plays an essential role in the creation of social capital and the use of network opportunities to realise her ambitions. Building a network is a reciprocal process (Buffel et al., 2009) and the person with whom a relationship has been entered into, or potentially will be entered into, plays a role in this process. Only if the link between actors is actively established can social capital be created and can resources become available to the actors within the network. These resources include, among others, information, knowledge and new contacts. These resources can be used by network participants to achieve career goals. Yet, to capitalise on the social capital, investments in the network are required – for example maintaining relationships takes time and attention. Additionally, awareness of the ways in which networks operate can contribute to better network results. Because existing research indicates that women and men do not benefit from networks in the same way, this thesis also explored the role of gender in networking.

This is the basis for the first, qualitative sub-study, which focused on the question *To what extent are women aware of the ways in which networks operate, the significance of networks and their role in the use of the network?* For this purpose, highly educated women who are active in their careers were interviewed. Twenty-six women participated in this study. Some women were reluctant to participate because they felt they did not have a network that was of interest to this research. During the interview the women were asked to look at their network in terms of structure, networking mechanisms, composition and outcomes. They were first asked to explain what a network meant for them, whereby it emerged that some respondents viewed their network primarily from a work perspective, indicating that the people they know
privately do not belong to the network. One of the respondents for instance said, ‘there are friends, and then there is a network’. In contrast to this, other respondents designated both their professional and their private contacts as their network. Next, the respondents were asked to draw their network. This served to make respondents aware of the network; while drawing, they gradually discovered who was part of their network and how they could make an appeal to them. In doing so, the women underwent a process from unconscious awareness and sometimes also unconscious use of their network to recognition of the network (conscious awareness) and also understanding how it can be used. Additionally, images of networks were used to analyse the depth of the respondents’ network (Henneberg et al., 2004; Mehra et al., 2014). Based on the combination of these different images a new image was created. According to the respondents, the depth was more varied than could be concluded based on the images. The active and conscious network-building, which Baker (1994) considered a necessity, was covered in the interviews. Here, it emerged that the network awareness of the respondents in this study was not very significant. As became apparent during the drawing, some of the women were barely aware of their network and its role in achieving specific goals. Some of the respondents also found it difficult to pose questions to their respective networks to achieve their career goals.

The subsequent sub-study focused on network behaviour and awareness. This study used part of Stam’s (2015) questionnaire to gain insight into network behaviour. Appendix C contains the questionnaire used for this research. This was a quantitative study of 747 women and men aged 25-67 years. Because men generate more results from their network (Burke et al., 1995), the main question in this study is whether women and men act differently in a network and which specific aspects are different. In the study at hand, the differences between women and men in the use of a network were particularly noticeable in network satisfaction, conscious networking and network awareness. Men scored significantly higher than women on network awareness and on conscious networking and satisfaction. On the sub-dimension of network behaviour, the degree of connection, women showed less dynamic network behaviour than men. Women showed lower network satisfaction than men, and the more dynamic the network behaviour is, the higher the satisfaction is rated. However, the relationship between network behaviour and network satisfaction was similar for women and men. On the aspect of making connections, men scored higher than women. There were also some other differences in network satisfaction: There was
a significant difference between people who plan to make a career step within a year and people who will only make a career step again in 20 years. If they did not anticipate a short-term career step, respondents were more satisfied with their network.

The third sub-study is again a qualitative study. The target group consisted of highly educated women with a top position; these women work as the ultimately responsible manager or in the first and second level of a company or organisation. In addition to looking at networks and career, the sub-study also included the role of their sponsor and partner as part of their network. It addressed the obstacles women experience in pursuing a career, such as stereotypes, exclusion and a lack of role models. The study respondents were very clear about the role of the network and indicated that it is essential, although there are differences in the extent to which and how the network is used. Their family situation also determines, in part, how much time is available for networking. Others were also clear about this: you should reach an agreement with the home front about the division of tasks (before starting a family). Working in a top position generally requires full-time (or at least four days a week) availability, and for this, you need to organise things well.

Another essential aspect that these top women mentioned is their visibility, both in the organisation and in their networks. The respondents indicated that being visible and expressing your ambition, but also showing what you mean to the company, is crucial to advancing your career. Others need to know what you can do and what you want. The top women who use their network to realise their ambition also liked using a sponsor. On the one hand, they agreed with their partner on how to arrange everything, and on the other hand, their partner’s own network and social capital can contribute to achieving career goals.

The insights from the sub-studies show that there are differences in network behaviour, the degree of connection and network satisfaction between women and men. Other significant differences in network awareness and conscious networking between women are also measurable.

Based on the results of the doctoral research, a chart was created (figure 25) that shows how networks contribute to career development. The chart begins by specifying the actor’s ambition. Next, several aspects were identified, such as being visible, knowing the value of the network, and using the network. Obstacles may be
experienced and a request for help (what question is being asked in the network?) needs to be drafted. The sponsor can help with this request. This also applies to the partner, who cannot only offer help, but with whom agreements can also be made to enable the woman’s career.