

**Women, Social Capital and Mental Well-Being: An
Examination of Participation in Community Groups**

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Summary.

This thesis examines women's participation in community groups, in order to investigate the concept of 'social capital' and its implications for women's mental well-being. Its aim is to examine the concept of social capital, and the ways it is linked with health, in a way that is attentive to gender and class inequity. For the purposes of this thesis, social capital is broadly defined as social relationships between people and the individual or community level 'resources' that can arise from these social relationships. Two different conceptualisations of social capital were considered in this study: the 'communitarian' approach associated with Robert Putnam, and the more 'critical' conceptualisation associated with Pierre Bourdieu. This research adopted a critical stance towards social capital, and focused upon four research questions: Firstly, what was the nature of participation in community groups among women who live in metropolitan Adelaide? Secondly, what were the personal outcomes that were perceived to arise from women's community group involvement? Thirdly, what were the differences in the nature and perceived outcomes of women's community group participation, according to social and economic factors? Finally, how did the nature and perceived outcomes of women's participation in community groups relate to the ways they experienced their mental health and well-being?

This study used qualitative and quantitative methods to investigate these questions. The quantitative analysis provided a preliminary investigation to complement the qualitative study, and involved the analysis of questionnaire data from 968 women in two contrasting areas of Adelaide. This analysis considered sociodemographic differences in the type and frequency of women's involvement. The qualitative research involved the analysis of in-depth interviews with 30 women. The interviews explored the participants' experiences of community group involvement; the personal outcomes that they felt arose from their involvement, their 'lay accounts' of their mental health, and how they felt community group involvement was connected with their mental well-being.

This study found that women's participation was shaped by gender and aspects of economic, cultural and 'informal' social capital. The qualitative data illustrated that women's involvement was influenced, motivated and constrained by the gendered

nature of their roles and responsibilities. These findings also highlighted contrasts among the participants in the types of involvement they undertook, and the personal outcomes of their involvement, according to their levels of material, financial and social advantage. This was supported by the quantitative findings, which revealed that the respondents' participation in community groups, the type of group involvement they undertook, and the frequency of their involvement varied according to sociodemographic measures.

The qualitative findings also identified how community group participation could lead to both positive and negative outcomes for individual women. Many participants reported the ways in which they felt their involvement enhanced their mental well-being. The qualitative data also illustrated how involvement could detract from mental well-being. In some instances, the negative consequences of participation had a severe and detrimental impact upon mental health. The findings of this study offer support to feminist criticisms of communitarian approaches to social capital, and to Bourdieu's critical approach to understanding the concept. The study concludes that Bourdieu's conceptualisation offers greater potential for considering how community group participation and 'social capital' can be used as a strategy to promote women's health and mental well-being.

Declaration.

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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