

# Peer Effects, Civic Learning, and Youth Civic Engagement

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## **Abstract**

The study examines the role of social capital on civic learning and political participation in developing democracies.

# Peer Effects, Civic Learning, and Youth Civic Engagement

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## ABSTRACT

When traditional avenues for learning and participation become inaccessible for less advantaged young people to learn and participate, young people tend to develop other unconventional avenues to learn and participate in civic and political activities of their society. This paper examines how young women utilize self-created social networks as unconventional avenues to learn and advance their civic participation. The paper turns the focus of civic and political participation away from classical, formal Tocquevillian understandings to the unconventional avenues of participation that have remained outside of the scope of much research. It uniquely places the question of the pedagogical and political consequences of social capital into an analysis of young people's social interactions within social networks. The Study<sup>1</sup> adopts constructivist qualitative approach to penetrate young people's realities and capture their unique forms of participation. 49 participants were interviewed through 36 individual in-depth semi-structured interviews and 3 focus group discussions to collect the primary data for this research<sup>2</sup>. The findings reveal that self-created social networks create a space that is not found in other areas of less advantaged young women's lives; and that create a unique space for these young women to learn and participate in different civic activities in private and public political domains in unconventional ways. Finally, this paper sets the groundwork for future study to examine civic engagement beyond the conventional civic and political activities aimed at youth and less advantaged groups around the globe. It also provides policy recommendations for education and international development.

*Keywords:* civic engagement, civic learning, civic skills, political participation, pedagogy, social capital, social networks.

## Introduction and research problem

Previous research traditionally examines young people's civic engagement through a socioeconomic lens of a discrete individual as predictor of engagement in civic life. Rather than cutting the individual out of their social fabric, this study considered the relationship between discrete individuals and their social interactions. From this perspective, it is possible to see how young women weave together their civic learning. With this epistemological stance, this analytical framework incorporates social interactions, social capital, and social networks together to conceptualize young women's civic learning and participation. The paper draws on qualitative research on women's informal learning and civic engagement.

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<sup>1</sup> IRB Number: 1610E96081. The IRB: Human Subjects Committee of the University of Minnesota in US determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2

<sup>2</sup> A consent form in Arabic was prepared where all the 49 participants were asked to complete the research verbal consent form before the interviews.

This study offered innovative way to examine informal learning and civic engagement of young women in less advantaged communities. The study highlighted the way young women benefit from and generate social capital through their everyday interactions within their self-created networks in Egypt.

This study grounded in situated learning theory by Lave and Wenger (1991), and it examined the potential for the development of entrepreneurial identity of women in developing economies through spontaneous learning in social networks.

In a move away from conventional notions of learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced situated learning theory, a concept informed by cognitive and socio-cultural constructivist perspectives. Situated learning theory provides one model for understanding how the relationship between social interactions and apprenticeship may be affected by personal and contextual factors. Building on the work of Dewey (1938), Lewin (1947), Vygotsky (1978) and others, situated learning theory suggests that knowledge is contextually situated, with learner considered as a cognitive apprentice in everyday lives within a social network.

In this perspective, learners engage in activities that are situated in their own culture within which they negotiate meaning and construct understanding of their social circumstances. Learning, therefore, is seen as mutual transformation of existing knowledge; where through mutual transformation, stories, conversation, reflection, collaboration, and social circumstances influence the construction of knowledge in different ways (Rae & Carswell, 2000; Reuber & Fischer, 1993; Spulber, 2012; Sullivan, 2000; Young & Sexton, 1997).

Because every theory of education requires a theory of society that describes how social processes shape education (Baron & Markman, 2003; Reuber & Fischer, 1993; Scribner & Cole, 1973; Young & Sexton, 1997), our conceptual framework utilized the concept of social capital by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (1993) to: a) understand the process of human capital creation within social structures that permits access to entrepreneurial knowledge and facilitates entrepreneurial learning, b) address the effect of entrepreneurial knowledge and skills in facilitating women's civic engagement and using Putnam's (1993) language "social structures of cooperation lead people to become engaged and participate" (p. 89), and c) to draw on its role to permit access to resources by nurturing agency of women to acquire relevant skills to participate in civic activities.

To conceptualize these interrelated relations, I first distinguish between social interactions, social networks, and social capital. This can be understood through the hypothetical example of a group of faculties working together in the same university; they interact as they meet in corridors, as they grab their lunch at the university cafeteria, in the parking lot when they are leaving and in many other incidents. This type of social interactions, however, is not the one we mean where social capital is rooted. But, if a group of these faculties decided to meet and chat during their daily lunch time, they turn these interactions into systematic and recurrent interactions. The systematic and recurrent discussions take a form of social structure; for the purposes of this study, these recurrent discussant partners compose an individual's social network. Members of this faculties network benefit from the multidisciplinary knowledge exists in the group; and this is what constitutes social capital. Social capital, according to Coleman (1988) is a "byproduct" of social interactions that exist in social relations (p. S118). If a discussion on a public concern (e.g. environment) took place within the network of this faculties

example and increased members' understanding about this topic, it means they are engaged in public concern. If some of these faculties decided to integrate the issue of environment to their course syllabi or even to engage students to think about solution for an environmental risk, this means that the knowledge they gained from their network led them to act to mitigate this environmental risk. This example, though not directly relevant to women's civic engagement, shows the relation between social capital, learning, and civic engagement. It also shows the difference between social interactions, social networks, and social capital as interrelated terms, but they are not used interchangeably. In sum, this study uniquely placed the question of the pedagogical and entrepreneurial consequences of social capital into an analysis of women's social interactions within informal social networks.

## **Theoretical background**

The aim of this section is to situate the problematic of this study theoretically and epistemologically in the related fields. I reviewed three bodies of literature. The first body of literature is *social capital* in which we examine the role of social capital as a means and end that facilitates entrepreneurial learning. The second body is *social networks* as unconventional avenues utilized by marginalized people. The last body is *informal learning* where marginalized women learn informally about entrepreneurial knowledge and skills.

### ***Social Capital***

In the past few decades the concept of social capital has been applied by an increasingly large number of scholars in various fields to explain outcomes such as educational attainment, health status, economic prosperity, and democratic participation. Social capital represents one approach to understanding the effects of informal social networks through the patterns of interdependence and social interactions. This body examines the ways that relevant scholarship defines and discusses social capital in relation to knowledge and skills learned through informal social networks in order to situate entrepreneurial learning in the realm of social capital. The social capital concept stems from the idea that social resources such as peers and families can be of value to learning especially for those with limited access to ordinary educational opportunities like the case of marginalized women in developing countries.

The conceptualization of social capital by Coleman (1988) is widely used in the literature of education, political science, and sociology since early 1980s. Coleman's conceptualization of social capital in the creation of human capital becomes one of the most salient concepts used in education and social sciences, and it generally refers to the norms that social structures develop to facilitate cooperation and to provide resources for persons that help achieve certain goals (Coleman, 1988). Coleman argues that there is a relationship between level of social capital of young people and their educational outcomes where social capital can be used as a determining factor of educational outcomes. Using family as an example of social structure, Coleman adds that the stronger the network relations the less the disparity in educational outcomes where young people with strong family ties and more stable family do better than their counterparts with less family ties where parents may be divorced. Similarly, Campbell and Hurlbert (1986) describe the "network-as-resources" (p. 97) where personal networks serve as a means of production of better conditions of life for their members. Coleman's (1988) assertion, from the one hand, shows the emphasis on the importance of social structure and social gatherings as vehicle to connect young people to available resources in a social structure per se. On the other hand, it shows his

functionalist epistemology as he defines social capital by its function through two components: social network and social interactions.

Similarly, Putnam (1995) defines social capital with a functionalist epistemology as “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit” (p. 67). This definition illustrates the three main components of social capital: trust, social norms, and social networks. Coleman (1988) notes that all social relations facilitate some form of social capital, especially in certain kinds of social structures (e.g. social networks) and distinguishes between two types of social networks, networks with and without intergenerational closure. In a closure structure model, peer members develop norms around each other’s behavior and shared expectations that help to monitor and guide behaviors. As such, closure of social structure is important not only to maintain effective norms but also to provide trustworthiness of social structure as a form of social capital.

In contrast, Bourdieu (1986) considers social capital as the assets of the members of the dominant class and stated that people’s participation in a personal network permits them access to all the resources available through this network and this, more precisely, constitutes their social capital. Bourdieu emphasizes the power of individuals within social relations to advance their benefits. In this regard, Bourdieu argues that individuals utilize social capital as a moral resource in struggles within different social arenas. While Bourdieu defines social capital similar to Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995) as access to resources, he criticizes how social capital is associated with middle-class or upper-class values and this does not fit with Coleman’s approach to social capital. Bourdieu’s critique is useful in understanding marginalized rural women and the kind of social capital they value and need, rather than the kind of social capital they do or do not gain from schooling.

Coleman (1988) postulates three forms of social capital to explain how such social relations constitute useful capital resources for individuals. The first form includes obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structure. Coleman notes two parts that constitute the first form: trustworthiness and obligation towards members, and asserts the importance of trust that ensures obligations will be repaid. This shows a relationship between level of obligation and social capital: “individuals in social structures with high level of obligations outstanding at any time, have more social capital on which they can draw” (Coleman, 1988, p. S103). Putnam (1993) adds that trust helps create reciprocity and civic associations and in return, reciprocity and civic associations create trust. Such a virtuous circle “results in social equilibrium manifesting itself in a high level of cooperation, expanding trust, civic activity, and collective well-being” (p. 177). On the other hand, a breaking in trust in the circle results in disorder and lack of civic community “trust comes from two related sources: norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement” (p. 171).

Information channels represent a second form of social capital. Information, Coleman (1988) notes, is important in providing a basis for action, but obtaining information entails additional cost. Individuals in a social network, however, can share information and knowledge with minimal or no costs to each other. This form of social capital facilitates actions that create human capital—knowledge and tools that enhance individual productivity (Putnam, 1995). Information and knowledge sharing as such align to the concept of transformative learning in social action by Foley (1999), as a form of informal learning. Foley highlights the pedagogical dimension of informal social networks and asserts the significance of such social gatherings

where “learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people’s everyday lives” (p. 95). Furthermore, Coleman (1988) notes the connection between social capital and human capital within networks and asserts that in a network, sharing of social capital gives members access to each other’s knowledge and skills through social interactions and absence of these interactions means the social capital is missing or is not circulating and utilized efficiently. In this context, Coleman asserts that shared benefit is what distinguishes social capital from other forms of capital, e.g. human capital. While the latter directly benefits the person who invests in this form of capital, the benefit of social capital does not necessarily benefit primarily the person who brought it into being for a group of people in a network. Rather, social capital provides indirect mutual benefits to those who are members of such network (Coleman, 1988). Social capital, therefore, augments the returns of investment in human capital and is a cumulative resource that grows as it is used (Coleman, 1988). Knowledge and skills provided by the network, therefore, is a key to facilitate individuals’ civic engagement (Baron & Markman, 2003; Putnam, 2000). The third form of social capital includes norms and effective sanctions. Norms in social structures include rewards and sanctions where Coleman (1988) notes that social capital includes productive norms that facilitate positive actions. Norms as part of social capital within social structure according to Coleman, however, is not clear what kind of norm that facilitate particular action and who set these norms.

Civic aspiration and learning outcome is another dimension of social capital by Halpern (2005). Halpern introduces civic aspirations as a mediating factor between social capital and learning outcomes—knowledge and skills that individuals have attained as a result of their involvement in a particular set of learning experiences (O’Neill, 2006)—arguing that high expectations among peers in social networks can encourage and inspire members of networks. Halpern (2005) notes the importance of social capital in lowering barriers to knowledge transfer within social networks and asserted, “it boosts learning, and such learning should not be viewed through the lens of school alone” (p. 169). Halpern (2005) emphasizes that much of what people know is tacit knowledge where they pick up knowledge from their everyday lives and friends. In addition, peer interactions and positive feedback within social networks increase aspirations and encourage members to aim high to achieve (Halpern, 2005). The role of educational inspiration between peers in social networks to encourage individuals to utilize the knowledge they gain through transformation to achieve high may align to the aim of this study; that attempts to assess the pedagogical role of social networks in relation to women’s civic role albite Halpern’s focus is on schooling.

### ***Social Networks***

Social network is a term widely used to describe two types of networks: internet-based networks (e.g., social media that includes Facebook, Tweeter, and others) and face-to-face networks (e.g., personal groups and gatherings). Scholarship defines both types as “a set of ties linking members of a social system” (Cotterell, 2007, p. 2). Networks can be formal or informal; the former is hosted by a formal (government or civil society) institution, and the latter is based on a voluntary personal group (Cotterell, 2007). This definition is appropriate for the context of this study because it distinguishes between those formal social networks provided by the state or civil society (e.g. youth center, social and sports clubs) and the informal social networks that self-created by women themselves.

Singerman (1995) asserts that informal social networks play operational role as a useful survival mechanism for marginalized people in marginalized communities in developing

countries. Singerman demonstrates how poor women and men in slum quarters of Cairo are deeply involved in weaving collective social networks to advance their economic interests within the politics of everyday life. These informal networks evolved to utilize social capital generated by members to facilitate access or provide unmet services and resources as an alternative to the unavailable resources from the state. The social capital generated through the involvement of poor women and men in these networks creates reciprocal mechanisms where participants either receive or deliver an array of community services. These services include offering employment through family and the informal economy, access to credit through saving and rotating credit associations, voluntary health and literacy services, or access to local bureaucrats who may facilitate another range of services. The effectiveness of this form of informal networks lies in its very informality and therefore its avoidance of “direct supervision and regulations of the laws regulating formal associations in Egypt” (Singerman, 2006, p. 17).

Informal avenues as a concept have utility in the Egyptian context because of their potential to partially compensate marginalized citizens for their limited influence in such an authoritarian context. Participation is not limited only within the informal mechanism per se, but Singerman (1995) argues that these mechanisms create public spaces that reach out to the conventional public arena, and indirectly “connect individuals and communities to state bureaucracies, public institutions, and formal political institutions” (p. 17). The intersection between informal avenues and state institutions as such represents, according to Foucault (1980), a form of “manifold relations of power which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body” (p. 93). The concept of informal avenues shows the importance of the various, context-dependent ways that societies manifest their political activities, and it highlights the need for comparativists to be mindful of other creative mechanisms people use to advance their involvement outside of traditional formal civic engagement; and this is the focus of this study.

### ***Informal Learning***

Literature on informal suggests that situated learning theory is an appropriate framework for exploring learners' experiences of authentic learning where learning is based on interactions between learners and their environment (Lewin, 1947). Extending this framework to women's participation in informal networks in rural contexts and complementing it with the concept of social capital invites new and groundbreaking insights into processes and contexts of informal learning and civic engagement. Additionally, it became apparent that the research is fragmented and that no attempts have been made to investigate women's informal social networks in relation to their civic engagement. Since it has been argued that qualitative research methodology is useful particularly when there is little known about the phenomenon under investigation (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000; Bernard, 2011), we decided to adopt qualitative methods throughout this study to examine how women conceptualize their experience within informal networks in relation to their civic engagement.

Informal learning is a distinct process than formal and non-formal education. In informal learning, Scribner and Cole (1973) assert, there is no activity that is deliberately set aside specifically to educate members of a social gathering, rather it is based on their ability to interact within social gatherings to acquire basic skills, values, and attitudes on their own. Informal learning is often used interchangeably with the non-formal education. Non-formal education, however, is not a synonym of informal learning. Non-formal education refers to educational activities that also take place outside school but usually in an organized and intended manner (Rogers, 2004). It, non-formal education, is organized short-term and voluntary educational

activities on topics related to life skills and livelihood activities. Informal learning may include internal types that distinguish it from formal and non-formal education such as self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization (Schugurensky, 2000). The latter type, socialization, usually referred to as tacit learning. Informal learning, however, can also be intentional but not formally structured like informal learning within networking, coaching, and self-directed learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001).

The concept of informal learning can be intertwined with several other understandings of learning. For example, theorists have used different terms to refer to informal learning such as incidental learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001), spontaneous learning (Williams, 2007), experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997), conversational learning (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002), tacit learning (Polanyi, 1967), situated cognition (Halpern & Wenger, 1991), and action learning (Foly, 1999). While these and other scholars address the concept of informal learning across different contexts and disciplines, they tend to agree that it can be defined as “any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies” (Livingstone, 1999, p. 51).

A great deal of learning occurs through social interactions and conversation. Kolb (2014) argues that conversation plays key role in informal learning. Although it may appear random, Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) and Thomas (1994) argue that casual conversation in everyday lives is an essential contribution to learning, especially for marginalized people. Despite its importance and effectiveness because of its dynamic and reciprocal qualities, conversational learning has received very little analytical or research attention, and most of the available studies on conversational learning are concerned with parent-child conversation (Thomas, 1994). In addition, conversational learning is a form of experiential learning and involves “a process of interpreting and understanding human experience” (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002, p. 2). Conversation is not just talking, but includes asking the right question in the right time; it has several forms, including face-to-face conversation, telephone conversation, and conversation among written texts or through social media (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002). Grounded in the theory of experiential learning, conversational learning builds on Freire’s (1970) proposal of problem-posing, education-based dialogue to promote deep learning as a powerful and transformative process. It also utilizes the concept of the interdependency and reciprocity of social capital by Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1993), particularly the ability of people to work together for common purpose (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002). Through conversations, learners construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge. Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) conceptualize the conversational learning process as learners moving through the cycle of experience, reflecting, abstracting, and acting. Receptive space is important for a dialectic process within which conversational learning occurs. This space, Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002) note, should be an open space that allow speaking and listening to all members in order to create conversation. Such a space within informal social networks is extremely important for marginalized women who lack safe spaces to participate equally in public life.

Experiential Learning is another form of informal learning. The theory of experiential learning is informed by the contributions of experiential learning models of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Kurt Lewin (Kolb, 1984). The process of learning from experience was first addressed when Dewey (1938) introduced the theory of experiential learning in the beginning of the last millennium. Dewey introduced the concept of experience in education as a way of



learning by doing to explain inductive interactive learning processes that are not limited to the teacher-pupil relationship in a classroom, where the latter is heavily dependent on the former as the only source of knowledge (in a model similar to the banking concept later delineated by Freire (1970). Rather, the main purpose of learning through experience, according to Dewey (1938) is to “prepare the young for future responsibilities and for success in life, by means of acquisition of the organized bodies of information and prepared forms of skills” (p. 3). This rational idealist epistemology is what, first, identifies experiential learning and, second, distinguishes it from other behavioral theories of learning (Kolb, 1984). Unlike transformative learning theory by Mezirow (1997) that is cognitively oriented, experiential learning is a holistic, integrative approach that combines experience, cognition, perception, and behavior (Kolb, 1984; Reuber & Fischer, 1993). Experiential learning, therefore, is a process where “knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 2014, p. 38).

While experience is the key factor in the theory of experiential learning, experience alone is insufficient to count as experiential learning. Joplin (1981) asserts that two factors are crucial in order to turn experience into experiential learning. The first is reflection, where learners are able to reflect on their experience, engendering the transformation of experience that generates knowledge, as identified by Kolb (2014). The second is the individual’s relationship to the topic: experiential learning is based on the assumption that knowing must begin with such a relationship. In addition, the process of experiential learning is dependent on experiential stimulus by a teacher (in the case of formal education) or by a facilitator (in the case of non-formal education). In the latter, the quality of that stimulus varies greatly depending upon the selected pedagogical approach. Intentionality is a factor that may determine the suitability of experiential learning as a form of informal learning within informal social networks and distinguishes the use of experiential learning between formal education and informal learning (Joplin, 1981; Reuber & Fischer, 1993). Bell (1993) postulates the interpretation of an experience as another condition for an experience to be considered as experiential learning, and asserted that experience exists through interpretation. In addition, Bell (1993) notes that individuals’ interpretations of lived experiences are often contextual and produced through the meanings given to them. In addition, experiential learning intertwines with conversational learning where the latter is important for the function of the former as Thomas (1994) notes, sharing past experiences through conversation and looking forward to future ones helps individuals gain familiarity with their context and manifests its pedagogical power.

Kolb (2014) notes several characteristics that distinguish experiential learning from other ways of learning. These characteristics include learning as a continuous process grounded in experiences, and learning as a holistic process of adaptation to the world. Although the focus of the theory of experiential learning by Dewey (1938) is on the pupil and classroom, it has potential to understand the informal learning within the informal social networks of marginalized women as well. The characteristics noted by Kolb (2014) show how conceiving of informal learning as a form of experiential learning may help engender understanding about how marginalized women can transform their everyday experiences through interpretation and reflection of their experiences to help generate entrepreneurial knowledge through their participation in a social network.

### **Study design and methodological consideration**

The broad purpose of this study is to understand how marginalized young women in developing world conceptualize their experiences of informal social networks as spaces for

developing their civic skills and knowledge. This study delves into social interactions within networks to assess how these women acquire knowledge and skills through informal learning in order to participate in civic activities.

From the perspective of constructivism, there is no single valid methodology for investigating and discovering truth, but rather a diversity of useful approaches (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the methodology for this study overlaps with three qualitative research genres to investigate the relationship between informal social networks and women's entrepreneurial learning. While this study was predominantly phenomenological in nature as it focuses on the attitudes and lived experiences of marginalized women, there was a clear overlap with two other genres, namely ethnography and discourse analysis. This phenomenological qualitative study, therefore, was guided by a naturalistic research paradigm where women actively constructed their own meanings and experience of social networks and learning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and where "meaning arise[s] out of social situations and is handled through interpretive processes" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p. 137). The phenomenological approach is conducive to understanding the informal entrepreneurial learning of rural women from their perspective, rather than from the perspective of the researcher. Thus, we employed phenomenological methods that helped the women to reflect on their lived experiences and also provided us with the opportunity to uncover these lived experiences.

Grounded in the naturalistic paradigm, qualitative research, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), "[represents] a distillation of what we think about the world" and provides us the tools needed to examine the world from the individual's perspective (p. 15). Qualitative research, therefore, was best suited to exploring the ways women in rural areas come to learn about civic engagement. The decision to use qualitative research methods was motivated by the notion that reality is best understood by examining the social interactions that take place in the everyday lives of individuals in particular settings.

Qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were the primary source of data collection for this study. Other methods were also used to complement the data collection sources, including nonparticipant observation, informal conversation, reflective journals, and document analysis. During the semi-structured interviews, women were asked to think retrospectively about how they formed and maintained informal social networks until the time of the interview. After a network was identified, women were asked a set of open-ended and unstructured questions based on the flow of each conversation. The questions related specifically to their experience with social networks and how those experiences are related to their entrepreneurial learning. Most of the interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes, and, in a few cases, we scheduled a follow-up interview.

Several factors were considered in the process of selecting the geographic location for this study and the participants. Our selection of Egypt as the location of this research stems from Egypt's rural nature, which is relevant to this study. We chose three rural villages in Fayoum governorate: Hope Village, Dream Village, and Bright Village (these village names are pseudonyms for the actual three villages in Fayoum). The rationale for selecting the rural Fayoum governorate was because it is one of the most impoverished governorates in Egypt with a high percentage of marginalized women with little access to economic opportunities. Fayoum is located about 100 miles southwest of Cairo, with a total population of 2,111,589 as of January 2017 (State Information Service, 2017). Among females in Fayoum, 36.8% are illiterate (mainly

in rural villages of Fayoum) and 38.7% are between the ages of 15 and 30 (General Authority for Adult Education, 2017).

Forty women participated in this study. In addition, nine other participants from women's spouses and family members from the three villages were selected. All 49 participants were interviewed in their locations. The process of recruiting participants for this study was guided by our goal to provide an in-depth examination of women's lived experience with social networks as spaces for informal entrepreneurial learning. To select participants, we used a purposeful sample framework that took educational background and socioeconomic variables into consideration, as we were only interested in interviewing marginalized women. The mode of inquiry of this study employed open-ended techniques to ensure thick description of participants' situations and emic. The open-ended techniques allowed for prolonged engagement with participants in the field and, as Creswell and Miller (2000) contend, are useful for "constructivists [who] believe in pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended, and contextualized perspectives toward reality" (p. 125). These techniques, therefore, were consistent with this qualitative study and its phenomenological and ethnographic considerations. We utilized a combination of open-ended research methods including in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection, focus group discussion, nonparticipant observation, reflective journaling, and document analysis to supplement the data collection process. Our data analysis of this study was guided by a constructivist approach and the conceptual framework developed for this study. We took an inductive analysis approach to generate categories, themes, and codes from the raw data collected from various data sources. This inductive approach was effective in constructing a connected view of women's lived experiences of social networks and civic engagement.

Finally, the issue of validity addressed in this study was also governed by a constructivist paradigm. Creswell and Miller (2000), hold that validity is an important process that aims to ensure the accuracy of the results in representing realities of participants in a social phenomenon where the credibility of these results stems from the participants' acceptance of them. In alignment with this view, our choice of validity procedures relied on the views of participants of the study, the people who read the study, as well as on our views as the researchers and those of the research team for this study. By design, this study employed tenets of credibility and trustworthiness. In order to ensure credibility in collecting the data for this study, we considered disconfirming evidence and triangulation.

### **Findings and analysis**

The data revealed that women's peer group activities such as conversation, storytelling, and deliberation functioned as a pedagogical pathway where their social networks served as avenue of learning. While most women appeared to be unaware of the learning that happens through social interactions, they were able to notice and report on it when we asked for their reflections. Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned several forms of individually constructed women's social networks that allowed for gathering outside the home and time to chat, interact, learn and have fun. In these self-created groups, women typically talk about problems encountered in their daily lives that are of importance to them, including: their marriage, livelihood, family planning, child rearing, households, clothing, and makeup. Women also spoke of their thirst for more information outside the confines of their home sphere. These self-created women's groups represent a form of informal social networks.

## Avenues of learning

The data suggested that women's peer group activities such as conversation, storytelling, and deliberation provide a pedagogical pathway where their self-created social networks serve as avenue of learning. While most women appeared to be unaware of the learning that happens through their social interactions, they were able to notice and report on it when asked for their reflections. For example, one of the women, Amina, a 25-year-old married woman from Dream Village, said, "I just realized when you asked what I learned from that event, that I incidentally learned a lot from my peers as we spontaneously conversed." As Lave and Wenger (1991) note, spontaneous conversations represent a form of cognitive apprenticeship where women within a network rotate between the roles of master and apprentice. Women described their interactions within the network as a flat, horizontal (as opposed to vertical, top-down) relationship. These horizontal social interactions foster learning among women because it creates a power dynamic where women can learn and teach each other as both "masters" and "apprentices." These horizontal relationships resemble Lave and Wenger's emphasis on the crucial role of conversation; in other words, the peer-based conversations between women allowed for discussions about their everyday lives and also served as an invitation for dialog on topics like income generating activities and civic engagement. The concept of horizontal relationships provides insight into how the women process, learn, and understand entrepreneurial skills. Literature about informal learning highlights the role of conversation in learning skills and behaviors (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Baker, Jensen and Kolb (2002) add a dialectical dimension by claiming that, "conversation is a meaning-making process whereby understanding is achieved through interplay of opposites and contradictions" (p. 53). In addition, Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development theory (ZPD) maintains that conversation, as both activity and the context for learning, is the basis for the negotiation, participation, and transformation of external knowledge into internal processes. According to Vygotsky's ZPD theory, the women learn as they come together, form a network, and engage in social interactions.

Women's social interactions within informal, voluntary social networks generate social capital that facilitates informal learning. The young women recounted that their social interaction with each other within their individually constructed social networks promoted their sense of belonging and community, which in turn facilitated the creation of a form of bonding with others. This finding affirms Coleman's (1988) theory that social capital is a byproduct resource of social interaction that exists in social relations and that individuals may tap into it as a result of their social relations (see, for example, Amira, Sabreen and Doreya's narratives. But is also distinct from Coleman's theory in that it exists outside of formal institutions such as schools, and it may be more important in informal settings when institutions do not serve the needs of women. This study suggests that one of the practical implications that stems from discussion of public and social issues is informal learning. Social networks are a structure that serves as a vehicle through which young women can be connected to knowledge, skills, and available resources. This finding offers support to Foley's (1999) argument that information and knowledge sharing facilitates women's informal learning where "learning occurs informally and incidentally, in people's everyday lives" (p. 95). Traditional learning, such as formal schooling, can occur in abstract and decontextualized experiences; however, this study has found that unlike these traditional structures, women's informal learning takes place through relationships and interactions. This study also finds that these informal groups are well-situated to provide women with ways to tap into their prior knowledge and experiences, which can lead to opportunities to critique and challenge the social injustice of their societies. Learning of young women of this

study, therefore, is contextual. This finding bolsters Lave and Wenger's (1991) argument that women's informal groups are sites of authentic informal learning. Within a network, young women feel psychologically safe to converse, share experiences, practice, teach and learn from each other where conversation itself is a social action. For some shy, young women within these networks, learning occurred through their legitimate, peripheral participation in the network as theorized by Lave and Wenger. While shy, young women may not have direct involvement in the activity, they learn a great deal through observation from their legitimate position in the periphery. Group homogeneity, in sex, economic level, and somewhat age, is crucial for nurturing this sense of psychological safety, where women, especially those in the periphery (e.g. those who are shy or unable to have direct involvement), integrate opportunities to practice and learn from their conversations and experience by sharing, observing and reflecting (Vygotsky, 1978; Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Participants of this study perceived learning in ways that are inconsistent with how learning tends to be understood by education program designers. For example, the program designers of Neqdar Nesharek perceived that the young women would learn entrepreneurial skills to earn; however, young women tended to see it as a space where they could learn how to live. The narrative shows that the opportunity that women got to get out of the house to learn allowed them the chance, as women themselves conceptualize, to be politically active. In this sense, getting out of the house seems to refer to a growing mobility or possibility simply for women to be in "public spaces". This finding confirms previous research in adult literacy programs for rural women in Bangladesh, India, and Nepal by Rogers (2000) where women utilized literacy classes as a legitimate reason to come together, away from their homes.

The women's individually constructed social networks serve as a community of practice where young women contextually learned the value of being members of a society. The symbolic election event organized and conducted by young women to choose between different options mirrored the actual election process in the society, which confirms that the women's group could be a space for civic engagement, mimicking the larger society. Informal social networks, therefore, are the intersection between the young women and their larger society. The finding is consistent with Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory and it adds to previous research by Lake and Huckfeldt (1998), Richardson (2003), and Wedeen (2008) documenting connections between civic and citizenship education and engagement. This finding, that informal social networks serve as an intersection between young women and their larger society, is key to the argument I am building here: that young women learn about the civic attitudes and behaviors of their society through the recurring discussion that takes place in their everyday interactions within their networks. Furthermore, this finding adds support to Schugurensky's (2000) taxonomy of informal learning. According to this taxonomy, young women unintentionally internalize values, attitudes, behaviors, and skills during their everyday interaction within social network as agents of socialization.

Informal civic learning, gained through affiliation within a social network, prompts young women to initiate and participate in various civic activities in their society. Through social relationships and interaction within a network, young women become acquainted and updated with public life, which in turn helps develop some level of engagement in public affairs. This finding bolsters the argument of Lake and Huckfeldt (1998) that once individuals are engaged in the civic and public life of their society, their participation follows. Women's informal social networks foster civic engagement by providing access to skills and resources, stimulating interest

in civic life. This is also in line with Putnam's (1993) argument that networks are resources and avenues to access other resources and attain a more horizontal relationship with other individuals. These horizontal relationships are conduits for civic engagement.

The data in this study suggests that cost of participation may be even greater for women, as suggested by examples from these women, which presents an interesting paradox. First, the literature review shows the importance of politically relevant social capital to reducing the cost of participation as it provides the civic knowledge and skills required to motivate civic engagement (Downs, 1957; Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). Second, literature on the cost of participation from the field of political participation does not distinguish between men and women's cost of participation. This study shows a discrepancy between the existing literature and what participants portrayed, as women. The cost of participation for women is not limited to the time and effort required by an individual to learn about politics in order to make informed decisions (Downs, 1957), but it also includes what I have termed as the "opportunity cost of women's participation." In patriarchal authoritative societies, the socially constructed gender roles may add other aspects to the cost of participation for women: Saleema's divorce case serves as one example. This finding was robust across interviews for almost all of the women, and it brings to the surface more questions for future research and refinement.

Rural, young women's participation is not only restricted to their civic engagement in the private domain, but also included in public participation in the political domain. In contrast to the results of classical, political research that tends to rely on Tocquevillian indicators and SES determinants to assess women's public participation, this study found that young women participate civically and politically in private and public domains in unconventional ways. Women's unconventional participation presents an interesting paradox: on the one hand, the finding is consistent with Ekman and Amna's (2012) assertion that "citizens are still much interested in politics, informed, skilled, and have political efficacy beliefs. But for the time being, many of them chose not to take part in politics in a conventional sense" (p. 297); however, on the other, it mirrors the contention that rural, young women do not participate in state sponsored civic and political activities. In fact, women's conscious decision to boycott state political activities (e.g. elections) is, according to Ekman and Amna's typology, a form of latent political participation. Omama and Doreya's participation in parliamentary election observations and Nevine's attempts to contact her political representative represent additional examples of women's manifested political participation in the public domain.

Life skills have direct and indirect links to women's civic engagement. The data suggested two sources where young women acquired their life skills: through their participation with development programs and through their social interaction within their individually constructed social networks. The direct link is represented by those life skills women learned that are also seen as civic skills, such as: time management, communication, critical thinking and problem solving. The implication of this finding is consistent with the study by Kirlin (2003) that highlighted the role of similar civic skills in fostering civic engagement. Yet this paper also shows there are indirect links between other life skills such as cooking, childrearing, and sexuality and greater civic engagement and political participation. Young women recounted they intentionally employed these skills to control their environment and recognized the need for emancipation from social and family oppression. This finding conforms to the conceptualization of redistribution and recognition by Fraser (1999) that provides a useful analysis of the link between life skills and the public participation of young women. From Fraser's perspective, life

skills are the catalyst for women to gain recognition and become civically engaged in their society.

Young women learn from their civic action how to transform the status quo. Conversely, civic engagement helps women band together in collective action (see, for example, Rasha and her peers' vaccine initiative and Saleema's NGO example. This finding is consistent with the argument by Fukuyama (2000) that in authoritarian contexts informal social structures help people come together and gain power needed to organize, support collective needs, and defend their interests. This finding also points to a complex interpretation of civic engagement and collective civic action. Young women engage individually and collectively to address issues they and their communities face. While the terms "civic engagement" and "collective civic action" are frequently used interchangeably by most scholars, the data suggests that women's civic engagement is not at all similar to their civic collective action. This finding is consistent with Lake and Huckfeldt's (1998) assertion on the difference between individual civic engagement and collective action. They contend that civic engagement stems from individual behavior, but that collective action is oriented toward group goals. Individual civic engagement, however, may provide opportunities to participate in larger collective action.

Women's civic and collective actions are not agentic in and of themselves; rather, they are a consequence of personal and collective agency. This finding points to the intentionality of women's civic and collective action. Women's involvement in the civic life of their society, therefore, is not a random or incidental act; rather, it is a conscious act and consequence of their agency. Furthermore, this finding is consistent with Bandura's (2001) argument that planning agency can be used to produce preferred outcomes. In addition, the data suggests that women's agency is developed through individually constructed social networks: women are empowered through interactions with their peers. It is important to note, however, that agency alone does not ensure women's ability to exercise strategic life choices. There is a need however, to consider agency as a part of resources. Resources, as defined broadly by Fraser (1999), include the access and future claims to material and human and social resources that women need to gain recognition. This presents yet another area for future research and refinement.

Finally, for these women, civic engagement may not be purely motivated by the desire to contribute to the public benefit; rather, in some cases it may be driven by private gain. The data in this study suggests different motives prompted women's civic engagement (see, for example, Iman's voting bribe and Omaina's election observation. Omaina's civic engagement was motivated by a financial per diem and the hope that the candidate may help her find a job if she won. Iman voted for a particular candidate in the public election in return for twenty Egyptian pounds and other commodities. This finding points to the need for a more complex interpretation of these civic acts that maybe seen as ineffective practices of citizenship. It also points to another way in which the SES model does not fully capture public participation. While the SES model shows that the income level is a major determinant of public participation, Omaina and Iman's narratives illustrate how participation can be prompted by their low-income status; and they, in contrast to the notion of the SES model, prompted to participate in two different manifested political acts to make money not because they are well off.

## **Conclusion**

The previous findings and analysis demonstrate how women's conceptualization of their individually constructed, informal social networks served as avenues of learning and offer

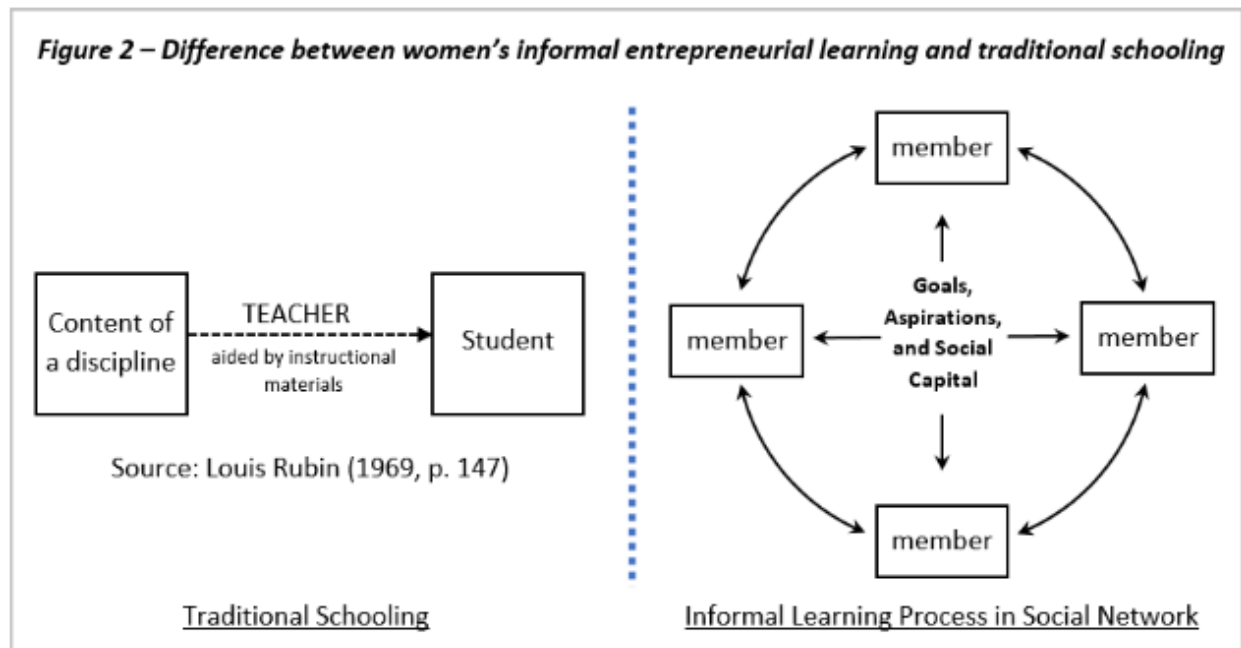
pedagogical pathways to civic engagement. In these informal networks, marginalized women interact, generate social capital, and acquire the knowledge and skills needed to participate in civic activities. Informal social networks are useful for women's civic engagement where they facilitate the creation of social adaptability, social perception, and social persuasiveness. These skills are important for entrepreneurs as they help create impression management skills which induces them to develop positive reactions towards others as argued by Baron and Markman (2003). Women's narratives suggested a distinction between their informal entrepreneurial learning and traditional schooling as depicted in Figure 2 below.

Young women teach and learn from each other without a teacher as in formal education and without a facilitator or a trainer as in non-formal education. They learn spontaneously from their interactions within their self-created groups as a form of experience-based learning. In such learning process, there is no learner/teacher relationship; rather, there is old-timer/new-comer type of relation. With the absence of a mediator (i.e. teacher, trainer), women learn about entrepreneurial knowledge and skills as a byproduct of their interactions and discussions. Unlike conventional learning curriculum, learning curriculum in women's informal learning is a field of learning resources in women's everyday practice and consists of women's goals, aspirations, and social capital as depicted in Figure 2.

Women set their learning goal and they get inspired by their peers to achieve their goals. Amira, from Hope Village, is one of several women who were self-directed to learn about civic engagement. Amira's aspiration to learn about making and selling pastry stimulated by her desire to be an entrepreneur. Social capital facilitated Amira's aspiration to acquaint herself with some basic knowledge in order to participate in civic activities where she drew on the human capital—knowledge and expertise—of her peer within the social network. Although human capital and social capital are not the same thing, the production of social capital in recurring patterns of interactions and relationships between Amira and her peers facilitated her utilization of this knowledge and expertise as human capital and social capital are interrelated (Lake & Huckfeldt, 1998). This conceptualization also shows the relation between personal development (e.g.



Amira's case) and agency. Bandura (2001) affirms the necessity of interdependency between social groups, personal agency, and personal development by noting, "personal agency and social structure operate interdependently. [Where] social structures are created by human activity, and socio-structural practices, in turn, ...provide enabling resources and opportunity structures for personal development" (p. 15). Through these learning avenues, marginalized women are not only learning implicit entrepreneurial knowledge and skills in order to participate in civic activities, but they are also learning the skills necessary for initiating effective decision making while also maintaining healthy relationships with their context.



Young women highlight the significance of spontaneous conversations about their experiences on their learning. Prominent theorists of human learning and development such as Dewey (1938), Lewin (1947), Vygotsky (1978) and, more recently, Lave and Wenger (1991), have given a central role to experience and conversation in their theories of situated learning. According to Lave and Wenger, learning is a matter of creating meaning and constructing knowledge from the real activities of everyday lives. In addition, Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989) highlight the role of social networks as avenues of learning because they have the ability to facilitate collaborative learning. From their perspective, individuals participate consciously in a "social network within the culture helps them develop its language and the belief systems and promote the process of enculturation" (p. 39). Previous examples on women's learning how to be innovative in their ideas aligns with this process of enculturation. In addition, learning through social interactions aligns with the contention of Lave and Wenger (1991) that informal learning is a socio-cultural phenomenon, not the action of an individual acquiring general information. For the participants in this study, informal learning is a means to acquire information and relate it to needs and concerns faced by the larger culture. As Vygotsky (1978) has noted, culture deeply maintains, influences, and shapes the activities and learning of individuals. The data of this study suggests that marginalized women in developing countries—Egypt, utilize the knowledge and skills they acquire from social networks to start and run SMEs that contribute to change their lives. Examples of women's SMEs include home growing poultry, lunch box for workers in the

nearby construction site and by-order meals, sewing, home bakery and pastry, grocery, fruit and vegetables vending, kindergarten and literary classes, handmade souvenirs and ornaments, and hair salon and makeup. Finally, a significant portion of the participants' learning journeys were determined by the extent to which they had the possibility to enact their new entrepreneurial role in their families and society.

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