

# **AUNTIES IN ACTION: SPEAKING LOUDER THAN WORDS**

Rural Women Developing Social Capital

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## **Women Raising Funds and Spirits**

Thesis submitted by  
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in June 2005  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the School of Education  
James Cook University

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## **Contributions of Others**

I, the undersigned, am the sole researcher and author of this thesis. No other person or persons made significant contributions to the writing.

Editorial guidance contributed by Robert Bams Drs. and Bruce Hodding MA.

Financial contributions were made by the Government of Canada, the Government of British Columbia, the School of Education at James Cook University, and the Nanaimo branch of the Altrusa Club.

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## Declaration of Ethics

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Experimentation Ethics Review Committee (approval number H891).

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## **Auntie Louella**

### **Thinking Outside of the Box**

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## **Auntie Jenny's give-away**

To my Aunties Sandy, Judy, Jean, Pricilla, and Kay for your loving care.

To my "aunties" Marge Dewar, Louella Channel, and Linda Bell  
for being my mentors.

To the children in my life who believe in Fairy Goddess Mothers.

To Mom and Dad and the whole "famn family"  
for sticking with me throughout my "hick studies."

To Wes  
for beachfires, fireworks, and the fire within.

To Kit and Malcolm  
for your gentle guidance and for believing in aunties right from the start.

To the many, many people at James Cook University and Malaspina  
University-College who took risks and worked hard so that this achievement was  
possible.

To Mary, Chris, Jaime, and many other sister-goddesses in Canada and  
Australia  
who cheered me on during my quest (you know who you are)!!

To Alan and everyone at the Orcas Society  
for inviting me to play with the pod.

To Bruce and Rob (with Joan) for diligent copy editing,  
and to Chris for bibilographic persistence.

To my fellow Scrabble players  
for encouraging the growth of new dendrites.

To Sylvia, Kilbeggan, and Wattle and Gum,  
for nurturing the lagerphonist in me.

And to that danged Fred J.  
for his pride in rural and vernacular ways.

Ω  
Hy'che que, siem

## Abstract

“Aunties” are grassroots women who actively develop social capital by encouraging social trust and reciprocity to flourish; unfortunately, the voluntary contributions of aunties are often taken for granted and seldom included in discussions of social capital or community development. This study offers an important alternative perspective to the notion that unpaid social care provided by grassroots women is insignificant, and it counters the discourse of decline in civic participation that is dominant in many Western societies.

From the data arose three themes to describe the experience of being an “auntie.” Specifically, aunties are particularly active in formal and informal aspects of society, aunties build relationships, connections, and networks; and they do this by creating common understandings amongst families, community members, and the professionals who serve them. In addition, aunties actively resist the social construction of women’s social caring as trivial, and they persist in countering discourses that diminish the capacities of rural people, their families, and communities. Some aunties perform small, individual, local acts of living and giving, such as helping a sick neighbour, while others are active in large, collective movements, at a national level, such as through Girl Guides or Country Women’s Associations.

This hermeneutic phenomenological study is based on interviews conducted with ten selected women in Western Canada and Northeastern Australia, as well as on material and cultural artefacts, on photographic evidence I gathered of aunties in the vernacular, and on my own experiences as an auntie in several rural communities. Interpretation of the data was informed by social constructivist, feminist, heuristic, and response-base theories, through which I endeavoured to establish the locus of expertise with the participants as well as with the researcher.

The actions of aunties are significant to the development of social capital because they build relationships and trust within the community, which in turn, can promote the development of social and economic capital. If local, grassroots community members have the opportunity to contribute to both formal and informal community development, then the capacity to create shared goals may lead to increased trust amongst locals and professional developers, and therefore enhance the

community development process. When grassroots people and professionals arrive at a common understanding of the value of informal networks and activities to the survival of small communities, then the gap that divides public from private needs and desires may be more readily bridged. In addition, if those who reside in small, rural, or remote community contexts have the opportunity to build safe and trusting relationships with other locals and with the professionals that serve them, then misunderstandings may be avoided and the community development process may be more successful.

Aunties contribute significantly to the development of informal networks and reciprocal relationships, and they engender social trust and warmth, which in turn increases the capacity of families, neighbourhoods, and communities to generate and accumulate social capital. Therefore, it is important to study the words and actions of aunties to learn who they are, what they do, and how they do it in order to support and encourage other people to likewise become active and engaged citizens.

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