

**AN INSTITUTIONAL ECONOMIC ANALYSIS OF A  
PAKISTANI COMMUNITY FUNDING PRACTICE IN  
AUSTRALIA**

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## **Statement of Authentication**

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.



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## Abstract

People all over the world use different forms of rotating savings and credit associations to fulfill their financial needs. A form of rotating savings organisation and credit association is also prevalent in Pakistan, known as “*kitty parties*”. This is also practiced in Australia by the women of the local Pakistani community. Kitty party can be explained as a rotating saving association where a group of women hold regular meetings to eat and talk, and where one of the members is allocated an accumulated sum of money. The pool of money allocated to the designated member is generated from the equal contributions from all the members of the group. The distinguishing factor between kitty parties and other rotating savings organisations is the regular meeting. Each period one of the members of the kitty group hosts a party for the rest of the members. Therefore, unlike other rotating savings organisations, kitty party has both a financial and social aspect. The main aim of this thesis is to study kitty parties as practiced by Pakistani women in Australia using the framework of institutional economics to learn about it further, and to try and determine if it is an institutional or a cultural phenomenon.

An important aspect of institutional economics is to understand the link between institutions and culture and their relative implications on individuals’ economic choices. Over the years extensive research has been done investigating the link between culture and institutions and yet there are opportunities for further research given the complex relationship between the two concepts. Keeping this in mind this study aims to use the informal practice of kitty parties to a) understand the practice of Kitty using an institutional economics framework, and b) to increase and improve our understanding of the relationship between culture and institutions.

A qualitative research design and methods were used to answer the research questions. Twelve Pakistani women living in Australia who regularly participate in kitty parties were interviewed. Case studies and the interpretative approach of thick description was used to

collect and analyse the data. Kitty parties in Australia were considered one case and each interview was considered an observation.

After a thorough review of literature and analysis of data, this study revealed that trust is one of the most important factors necessary to run an informal practice like kitty parties. It is through trust that kitty rules are implied and understood. The study also examines the degree of agency and reflexivity demonstrated by the women participating in the kitty parties. Kitty members display varying levels of agency and reflexivity. According to the responses given by the kitty party members, they were categorised in three different groups based on their motivation and mode of participation. The motivations of participants were found to be social, financial, and cultural.

The study enabled us to understand kitty party in an institutional economics framework. Like institutions, it has social rules that structure engagement, commonly shared expectations, and implied sanctions when the rules are broken. However, it lacks the durability, persistence, and self-reinforcing qualities that most institutions exhibit. Similarly, if we use the definition of culture as a set of values and beliefs, then kitty party does not fulfill this criterion. However, there is an element of preference and behaviour that is socially transferred and shared by a subsection of a society. Therefore, kitty parties can be categorised as a cultural institution that can be transported to new locations by people who are willing to practice it in different parts of the world.

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# **1. Introduction**

## **1.1 The Kitty Party**

The primary focus of this study is an informal practice of community funding practiced by the women in Pakistani urban households, known as “kitty party”, which is a form of rotating savings associations (Waldrop, 2011). Being an informal cultural practice, an exact or widely accepted definition of a kitty party is not available, but it can be explained as a rotating savings association; where a group of women meet on a regular interval to eat, talk, and draw a “kitty”—a set amount of money—that has been accumulated on a particular meeting. This project will analyse kitty parties and how this informal practice of communal borrowing and lending is adapted in Australia by the women of Pakistani community.

The main aim is to study kitty parties using the framework of institutional economics. Though rotating savings organisations are usually referred as an informal social arrangement, through this study I want to determine whether kitty party is best understood as an institutional or cultural phenomenon. The findings will improve our understanding of the link between culture and institutions, and also understand the economic model of this particular community funding practice within its social context.

## **1.2 Key Issues**

The relationship between institutions and culture continues to be a challenge for institutional economics. Both institutions and culture have long been an interest of researchers who work on the relationship between social structures and individual economic choices. While there are many studies examining the linkages between the two concepts, the distinction between them is overwrought and remains difficult to delineate in both theoretical and empirical discussions. Accordingly, there remains an opportunity to improve our understanding of the link between institutions and culture and their relative implications for individuals’ economic choices.



Research has demonstrated that cultural variables, and their interaction with institutions, can determine economic choices (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015). Solow (1985) long ago argued that “...economic activity is embedded in a web of social institutions, customs, beliefs, and attitude.”. In fact, research has also suggested that cultural variables can even affect the speed of development and the wealth of nations (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015). However, clearly separating culture from institutions is problematic. For example, the terms “beliefs”, “customs”, and “norms” are used by researchers to define both culture and institutions, which makes distinguishing between the two concepts a difficult task. When studying them as an empirical social phenomena, culture and institutions appear to interact and evolve in a complementary way, with mutual feedback effects (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015). This apparent mutual interdependence adds to the difficulty of understanding their relationship.

While this thesis cannot solve all these issues, by using a specific example of an informal institution of community funding this study can help improve our understanding of the relationship between culture and institutions, and the role they play in individuals’ choices. Bornstein (2017) emphasised that acculturation can lead to individuals’ customs, habits, and behaviour to be altered. This study will investigate the practice of community funding brought to Australia (and the Australian institutional context) by the Pakistani immigrants. The outcome will make the institutional economic discourse richer by providing an explanation of how culture and institutions complement each other and effect individuals’ choices.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Even though important research has been done to understand the interlink between culture and institutions, both economists and institutionalists believe there are opportunities for further research to understand the relationship between culture and institutions (Andriani & Bruno, 2022). Within this study, I aim to understand how culture and institutions co-exist and complement each other, to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Can we understand the practice of “kitty parties” using the framework of institutional economics?
2. Can we use the case study of kitty parties in Australia to improve our understanding of culture and institutions?

#### **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 discusses the relevant literature, covering the important topics of institutional economics, institutions, culture, and kitty parties. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the data collection and analysis, and ethical considerations. Chapter 4 summarises the results of the interviews, and the emerging themes the interview data draws attention to. Chapter 5 presents analysis and discussion of the results. Chapter 6 gives the conclusion of research findings and discusses the potential for further research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Chapter Overview**

Institutions are the humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights) (North, 1991). Expanding on the definition given by North, institutional economics focusses on the role of social institutions in economic life. It strives to explain the nature and foundation of these institutions, the reason for their existence and continuation, and how they affect an individual's economic decision making. In this chapter I will review the scholarly literature relevant to this study.

The literature review is structured as follows. The following two sections will cover the origins of institutional economics and the difference between the two main schools of institutional economics: old institutional economics and new institutional economics. In sections 4 and 5, I will review literature on institutions and culture. Section 6 will focus upon kitty parties, while section 7 will conclude the chapter.

### **2.2 The Origins of Institutional Economics**

Generally, scholars recognise the terms “institutional economics”, “American institutional economics”, or “old institutional economics” as applying to the traditions of economics associated with Thorstein Veblen, John R. Commons, Wesley Mitchell, and Clarence Ayres (Rutherford, 2001, p. 5). American institutionalism took inspiration from the works of Thorstein Veblen, their main founder (Hodgson, 2009), who developed an early theory of economics and institutional evolution. Veblen strongly criticised hedonism including marginal utility theory (Rutherford, 2000) and emphasised the central analytical importance of institutions and institutional change (Hodgson, 2009). Following in the tradition of Veblen, American institutionalism asserted that markets themselves are institutions, and are constituted

in part by the action of the state (Hodgson, 2009). One of the most prominent themes, which was present in the writings of Veblen in the 1890s to those of John Kenneth Galbraith in more recent times, was the notion that the individual is not “given” but can be reconstituted by institutions (Hodgson et al., 1994). The central idea of this argument is that individuals’ behaviours cannot be taken as a given, but are highly influenced and shaped by their institutional and cultural circumstances.

Even though Thorstein Veblen had laid the foundation of institutionalism, the use of the term institutional economics (or institutionalism) to denote an identifiable movement within economics did not become common until the interwar period (Rutherford, 2000). It was those influenced by Veblen’s work, such as Walton Hamilton, Wesley Mitchel, and J. M. Clark, who created and promoted what became known as institutionalism (Rutherford, 2000). The term Institutional Economics was first introduced by Walton Hamilton in a meeting of the American Economic Association in 1918 (Hamilton, 1919). Hamilton claimed that institutions are the central point of economic theory, which is incomplete without taking into account the theory of human behaviour. In his paper, Hamilton presented five characteristics that any theoretical approach must satisfy to be able to qualify as an “economic theory”. According to Hamilton, an economic theory must be (i) able to give unity to its investigations, (ii) must be relevant to the modern problem of control, (iii) must relate to institutions as the changeable elements of life and agencies through which they are to be directed, (iv) must be concerned with the matter of process, and (v) must be based on an acceptable theory of human behaviour. Hamilton argued that only institutional economics could meet these tests.

In his paper, *What is the Essence of Institutional Economics*, (2000), Hodgson elaborated on Hamilton’s description in the following five prepositions:

1. Institutionalism is not defined in terms of any policy proposals.

2. Institutionalism takes insights from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology and anthropology to get a deeper understanding of institutions and human behaviour.
3. Institutions are a key part of any economy, and thus it is important for economists to study institutions and the processes of institutional change, conservation and innovation.
4. The economy is an open system, situated in a natural environment, effected by technological changes, and embedded in a broader set of social, cultural, political, and power relationships.
5. The notion of individual agents as utility maximising is regarded as erroneous or inadequate.

According to Hodgson, proposition 5 is the most important defining characteristic of what later became to be known as “old” institutionalism or “old” institutional economics, and also differentiated the old from the new institutional economics. While this thesis will work within the theoretical of this approach known as “Old” institutionalism, in the next section I introduce and discuss the approach known as the “New” institutional economics and identify the salient points of departure between these two dominant approaches to institutional economics.

## **2.3 Differentiating Old vs New Institutional Economics**

### **2.3.1 What are Institutions?**

The use of the term institution has itself become widespread in the social sciences in recent years, reflecting the growth in institutional economics and the use of the concept of institutions in several other disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, politics, and geography (Hodgson, 2006). This wide usage is perhaps unsurprising: institutions are the key structures that shape our social environment. As a key theoretical concept that has gained attention in economics (and other disciplines) institutions have been discussed by many authors and defined in similar (but not identical) ways.

As already noted above, Hodgson (e.g., 2006) defines institutions as the systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interaction. Scholars in the New

institutional economics, Acemoglu, Johnson, and Robinson (2006), define institutions in a similar way: “mechanisms through which social choices are determined and implemented”. Douglass North, a key institutional theorists associated with the New institutional economics, also commonly discussed institutions in the same way. Douglass North defines institutions as humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interaction. They consist of both informal constraints (sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct), and formal rules (constitutions, laws, property rights)” (North, 1991). In a slightly different approach, but still working within the “New” institutionalism, Greif (2006), uses the terms such rules, beliefs, norms and organisations to define institutions (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015).

One of the original scholars associated with the “Old” institutionalist approach, Walton Hamilton, interpreted an institution as “a way of thought or action of some prevalence and permanence, which is embedded in the habits of a group or customs of a people” (Hodgson, 1998, p. 179). While this definition shares similarities with the others presented, a key difference is the reference to “habits”. Habits do not readily appear as a part of the definitions provided by “New” institutionalists, and the reference to habits is one key difference between the two approaches (discussed further below).

While the next sections will explore these differences further, a general summary of what constitutes an institution is offered here, drawn from the work of Hodgson (Hodgson, 1998, p. 179). Hodgson provides the following list of characteristics that are common to the identification and definition of an institution:

1. All institutions involve the interaction of agents, with crucial information feedbacks.
2. All institutions have number of characteristics and common conceptions and routines.
3. Institutions sustain and are sustained by shared conceptions and expectations.

4. Although they are neither immutable nor immortal, institutions have relatively durable, self-reinforcing and persistent qualities.
5. Institutions incorporate values, and processes of normative evaluation. In particular, institutions reinforce their own moral legitimation: that which endures is often—rightly or wrongly—seen as morally just.

### **2.3.2 New Institutional Economics: Rational Individuals who “Maximise”**

While Veblen’s institutionalism held a strong position in the study of American Economics between 1920 and 1930, in the 1930s, during the post-World War II era, these ideas were sidelined by the growing dominance of the neoclassical-Keynesian synthesis. This model focused on incorporating the macroeconomic principles of John Keynes, within the neoclassical theory of utility maximisation by constrained individuals and firms facing production costs. Individuals were assumed to be rational agents, working independently with full information, while mathematical (formal) modelling gained popularity as a dominant methodology (Bernstein, 2001; Mirowski, 2002). Accordingly, the “Old” institutionalism remained somewhat overlooked during this period.

In the 1970s and onwards, another paradigm shift resulted from the works of Ronald Coase, Oliver Williamson, and Douglas North. Driven by these scholars, the focus turned once again to institutional analysis but with a new methodological approach. The project was referred to as the “New” institutional economics, and Oliver Williamson coined this term in 1975. According to Hodgson (2009) the chronological adjective was chosen deliberately to distance the newer approach from the old institutionalism. Furthermore, the term is also intended to include the Austrian approach to institutions and institutional change based on the works of Carl Menger and Frederick von Hayek (Rutherford, 2001). Contrary to old institutionalism, new institutional economics aims to justify the existence of institutions through the model of rational individual behaviour (Hodgson, 1998).

The new institutionalists disregarded old institutionalism as antitheoretical and did not consider old institutionalism as its own antecedent (Coase, 1984). New institutional economists generally identified themselves with neoclassical theory and attempted to extend the explanation of the institutional factors traditionally taken as given, such as property rights and governance structures (Rutherford, 2001). Unlike the old institutionalism, new institutionalists did not try to compete with or replace the standard theory. Instead, they connected their focus on institutions with the dominant methodological assumptions and approach of neoclassical economics.

Rutherford (2001) states that even though there are differences between the methodology, theoretical approach and analytical tools of the two institutional approaches, there are definitely connections between the two schools. Obviously, the primary focus on institutions as the key subject of interest is common to both old and new institutionalism. Additionally, a connection can be found between Williamson's new institutionalism and Common's old variant: use of the transaction as a basic unit of activity (Rutherford, 2001). Another connection is found in the acknowledgement of bounded rationality. Indeed, Herbert Simon recognized the influence of old institutionalists, such as J. R. Commons, on his thinking, and argued that (old) institutionalism was the "principal forerunner" of the behavioural theory of the firm (Rutherford, 2001). Finally, many scholars have also argued that Douglass North's later works showed inclinations towards the ideas of old institutionalism (Rutherford, 2001).

Despite the connections between the two schools, outlined above, the key difference remains the assumptions that underpin analysis of institutions, and the agents that respond to institutions in the economy. New institutionalism depicts the individual as a rational, utility maximising agent; a definition more in line with neoclassical economics. Within this approach, institutions are a result of the rational behaviour of individuals and human interactions. The causality in movement is explained as "bottom-up", or from the individual to institutions



(Hodgson, 1998). The new institutional economics focuses mainly on the interaction of given individuals as a reason for the existence of institutions, with an institution-free “state of nature” assumed as the context in which to consider this interaction of individuals and the emergence of institutions (Hodgson, 2000).

The methodological approach that underpins new institutional economics is, according to Hodgson, methodological individualism (Hodgson, 1998). Methodological individualists take the individual, along with his or her assumed behavioural characteristics, as the elemental building block in the theory of the social or economic system (Hodgson, 1993). It interprets institutions only as an outcome of individual behaviour and denies institutions’ influence on individual’s actions and preferences. Rational and informed choices are made by individuals in response to their circumstances, and institutions are formed.

In contrast, old institutional economists believe that even to make a rational choice an individual needs to possess some pre-existing beliefs and knowledge, which are a result of habit and learning. Agents cannot make a rational choice without a conceptual framework, and that framework is a result of prior habits, which in turn are acquired through interaction with institutions. Therefore, Hodgson (1998), argues that the new institutionalists attempts to explain the emergence of institutions through reference to a utility maximising rational agent is not realistic or useful in understanding the true nature of economic decisions.

### **2.3.3 Old Institutional Economics: Individuals Develop Habits through Social Influence**

The approach of old institutional economics does not treat individuals as rational or their preferences as simply given. Instead, old institutional economics states that individuals develop habits and follow rules that are consistent with the institutions they are embedded within. Institutions influence individuals, and those individuals, in turn, affect the structure of institutions with their preconceived beliefs and habits. In other words, the individual is both a product and producer of her circumstances (Hodgson, 1998). On this relationship, Veblen (1909, p. 629) wrote:

The wants and desires, the end and aim, the ways and means, the amplitude and drift of individual's conduct are functions of an institutional variable that is of a highly complex and wholly unstable character.

Wesley Mitchel (2017, p. 203) wrote on similar lines:

Social concepts are core of social institutions. The latter are but prevalent habits of thought which have gained general acceptance as norms for guiding conduct. In this form the social concepts attain a certain prescriptive authority over individuals.

Though institutions are the focus of both “old” and “new” institutionalism, the two schools look at them slightly differently. In the former, the concept of habit is fundamental. Institutions, habits, rules, and beliefs are some of the fundamental concepts of the old institutional approach to economic analysis and are considered essential for human behaviour. Spong (2019) states that institutions impact upon the subjective properties of individual agents through development of habit. According to old institutionalism, habits, rules and routines are sources of learning and information for individuals which in turn leads to the existence of institutions. In this approach, rational choice is explained as a result of habit and routines that give individuals rules of thumb and frameworks through which to interpret events and make decisions (Hodgson, 1998). Hodgson (1998) describes habit as a “largely non-deliberative and self-actuating propensity to engage in a previously adopted pattern of behaviour.” Furthermore, he writes:

“Habits form part of our cognitive abilities. Cognitive frameworks are learned and emulated within institutional structure. The individual relies on the acquisition of such cognitive habits, before reason, communication, choice, or action are possible.”  
(Hodgson, 1998)

According to J R Commons, when habits become a common part of a group or a social culture they grow into routines or customs (Hodgson, 1998). These customs and routines in turn form institutions. They constrain individuals' behaviour and develop individuals' habits in new and specific ways. The process of habit formation, resulting from institutional channels and constraints, is referred to by Hodgson as 'reconstitutive downward causation' (Hodgson et al., 1994). Individuals are influenced by institutions and individuals in turn effect the structure of institutions with their preconceived beliefs and habits.

#### **2.3.4 Downward versus Upward Causation**

The term "upward causation", extensively established in the social and natural sciences, can be explained as the follows: "the emergence of a higher entity from a lower one is characterised by a certain causal process leading from the lower level entities to the higher level ones, so that the lower level can be seen as the cause and higher level as the effect"(Emmeche et al., 2000, p. 5). Therefore, the units at lower-level affect and shape those at higher level.

The opposite notion, "downward causation", in the context of hierarchical ontology, was first coined by Donald T. Campbell in 1974 based on earlier works on "emergent causation" by Noble Laureate Roger Sperry (Hodgson, 2003). According to Campbell, downward causation occurs when "the laws of the higher-level selective system determine in part the distribution of lower-level events and substances" (Campbell, 1974, p. 180). Theories of downward causation fall into three categories: Strong, medium, and weak (Emmeche et al., 2000). Campbell saw evolutionary laws acting on population as an intermediate case of downward causation (Hodgson, 2003): "all processes at the lower level of hierarchy are restrained by and act in conformity to the laws of the higher levels" (Campbell, 1974, p. 180). In other words, if there are systemic features and propensities, then individual constituents of the system act in compliance with them.

In the context of institutions and individuals, old institutionalism recognises the presence of both upward and downward causation. Veblen (1919) argues that institutions affect

individuals, and in turn institutions are a result of individual behaviour and habituation. Commons, in his seminal series, *A Sociological View of Sovereignty*, also wrote (as cited by Hodgson (2000)) on similar lines: “The institutions in which he [a person] finds himself is both the cause and effect of his beliefs...Common beliefs and desires are the vitalising active force within the institutions”. In both these writings we see reliance of individuals on institutions and the moulding of individuals by the institutions (Hodgson, 2000). Individuals are influenced by institutions and they in turn effect the structure of institutions with their preconceived beliefs and habit.

Hodgson (2000, 2003, 2004) presents a modified and a stronger version of downward causation termed “reconstitutive downward causation”. Hodgson (2004, p. 188) writes:

“The causal powers associated with social structure may not simply impede or constrain behaviour, but may also affect and alter fundamental properties, power and propensities of individuals. When an upper hierarchical level affects components of lower level in this manner, this is a special and stronger case of ‘downward causation’ that may be termed as *reconstitutive downward causation*.”

In Campbell’s version of intermediate downward causation, evolutionary processes help to reconstitute populations but not necessarily individuals. However, reconstitutive downward causation in institutional economics entails that “both individuals and populations are not only restrained but changed as a results of causal powers associated with higher levels” (Hodgson, 2004, p. 185).

Neither mainstream economics nor new institutionalism support the idea of reconstitutive downward causation. Their emphasis is on individuals with given preferences making rational choices in clearly stipulated environments. In contrast, Hodgson argues that the framing, shifting, and constraining capacities of social institutions give rise to new

perceptions and dispositions within individuals and upon new habits of thought, behaviour, new preferences and intentions emerge. This is a key difference between the two approaches, with old institutionalism integrating an acknowledgement that individuals can be themselves changed by the social structures they are embedded within. In the next section I consider some of the broader issues relating to consideration of individuals as embedded in social structures.

## **2.4 Institutions and Individuals**

### **2.4.1 The Concept of Agency**

While institutional economics provides the context to study institutions and their relationship to individuals, to understand how individuals navigate social context we need to introduce individual agency. Agency refers to the freedom of individual human beings to make choices and to act on those choices in ways that make a difference in their lives (Martin et al., 2003). To be an agent is to intentionally influence one's functioning and life circumstance, and if people are exercising their agency then they are self-organising, pro-active, self-regulating and self-reflecting (Bandura, 2006, p. 164).

According to Bandura (2006), there are four core properties of human agency: 1) *Intentionality* – this refers to people's ability to form intentions that include action plans and strategies for realising them. 2) *Forethought* – in addition to future-directed plans, forethought includes anticipating likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate efforts. Through cognitive reasoning individuals use visualised futures as current guides and motivators for behaviour. The ability to bring anticipated outcomes to bear on current activities promotes purposeful and foresightful behaviour (Bandura, 2006, p. 164). 3) The third agentic property is *self-reactiveness* – this refers to the agents' ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution. This multifaceted self-directedness operates through self-regulatory processes and links thought to action (Bandura, 1991; Carlson, 2002). Finally, 4) *Self-reflectiveness* – individuals are not only agents of actions but they are also self-examiners of their own functioning. Through purposeful self-awareness of their thoughts,

they reflect on their personal abilities, the reliability of their thoughts and actions, and the meaning of their pursuits and make corrective adjustments if necessary (Bandura, 2006).

In exercising agency individuals make causal contributions to the course of action. They are the producers as well as products of their life circumstances, as they are the partial authors of the past conditions that developed them, as well as the future courses their lives will take (Bandura, 2006). How does agency fit within the context institutions, and both upward and down reconstitutive causation? The economist who has integrated this concept with institutional economics is John Davis. In a series of important contributions (2003; 2011), Davis highlights the need to consider individuals as possessing agency and reflexivity, and also recognises they (individuals) are embedded within a social context. The next section establishes the link between institutions and agency, and the related concept of reflexivity.

#### **2.4.2 Agency and Reflexivity in Institutional Economics**

To comprehend the process of interaction between the individual and their social context it is important to understand the subjective inner life of the individuals, a notion that the neoclassical economic approach fails to recognise. Davis (2003a; 2010) argues that in economics, individuals are presented broadly as any entity to which a maximising function might be applied, including single people, a collection of people, parts of people, countries, organisations, animals, even machines, and so on. In doing so, economics doesn't differentiate between a single human being as an "individual" or a group as "individuals". Also, it ignores the relationship between the objective environment and the subjective mind of economic agents, focusing instead on an "atomistic" conception of individuals in the context of mechanistic system (Davis, 2003b; Spong, 2019).

A second problem has also been identified by Davis. He has argued that without attributing agency to individuals, there is potential for individuals to be simply considered repositories of social influence. To this point, Davis (2003b) writes:

“...to understand the importance of individuals it is necessary to produce arguments that prove that individuals retain some form of integrity as individual agents in spite of those forces operating upon them that either collapse them into groups or remove them from the scene altogether” (Davis, 2003b, p. 11).

Unlike the neoclassical approach, institutional economics prioritises the relationship between the agent and the social environment. As explained above, it recognises the impact of social environment on the development of individuals through downward reconstitutive causation. However, it also has potential to acknowledge the individual’s awareness of the environment they are embedded within. Davis, in his own emphasis on this point, has nominated institutional economics as one approach that has the potential to present individuals as both embedded in social institutions, and yet also relatively autonomous agents.

Furthermore, Davis has argued that the related concept of reflexivity is an important trait if we are to represent individuals as comprehending the relationship between themselves and their social environment. The term reflexivity goes beyond agency, and extends to an individual’s understanding of themselves, and incorporates some ability to evaluate their own behaviour in the context of their environment. As Davis has outlined (2003; 2011) reflexivity involves comprehending the social environment and making a conscious decision to engage in activities, rather than participate without any reflexivity. It would be incorrect to say that an individual’s reflexive capacity will be free of influence from the social environment; however, through self-concept individuals who have developed reflexive capacities are able to evaluate externally imposed conceptions of themselves (Davis, 2003b).

Extending on Davis, Spong (2019) argues that without agency and reflexivity individuals may be interpreted as simply a product of the social context they are embedded within, and lacking real agency. He argues that institutional analysis of individuality should

integrate the notion of individuals as reflexive agents as discussed by Davis, with the habits that Hodgson has repeatedly emphasised as agential traits shaped by institutional context. While the next section turns to a short review of institutional economics and methodological perspective, this study adopts this hybrid approach, and will emphasise both the institutional structures to be observed in its subject of study (the kitty party), and also recognise the relationship that individual participants have to these social contexts they are participating within. A more comprehensive understanding of the practice of kitty, is gained by exploring the structure of the practice, and also individual participant's own understanding of their own participation.

### **2.4.3 Methodological Perspectives: Adopting an Agency Structure-Approach**

Agency is a key concept in understanding individual behaviour, particularly in the context of social rules and relations. This section briefly considers alternative methodological approaches in considering agency. The relationship between individual agency, and the social structure individuals are embedded within, is one of the central problems in social theory (Hodgson, 2007). A social structure is a set of relations between individuals that can lead to causal interactions. It is the broadest category of social relations and is not limited to simply institutional structure. It extends beyond rules to include all forms of social relations, meanings, even demographic factors. Individuals involved may or may not acknowledge these social structures, and the structures are not dependent on the individuals and can survive even without them. Therefore, in recognising social structure, the study of human social systems is not just the study of individuals, but includes the relations and properties of society in addition to those of the individuals themselves (Hodgson, 2004).

Methodological individualism and methodological collectivism are two approaches that have been used to understand the link between agency and structure. The proponents of methodological individualism tend to explain social structures, institutions, and other collective phenomenon solely in terms of individuals involved. Typically, methodological individualism



prioritises individuals over social structure. However, the substance and legitimacy of the term has been disputed (Hodgson, 2004). Below are some examples. According to Austrian economist Ludwig Lachmann (1969, p. 94) methodological individualism means that “we shall not be satisfied with any type of explanation of social phenomena which does not lead us ultimately to a human plan.” Elsewhere, John Elster (Elster, 1982, p. 453) defines methodological individualism as “the doctrine that all social phenomena (their structure and their change) are in principle explicable only in term of individuals – their properties, goals and beliefs.” Hodgson criticised this definition and called it “insufficiently precise” (2004, p. 16) as it is not clear if the interactions between individuals and social structures are properties of individuals or not. He contends that the confusion arises because of the following two points: should a social phenomenon be explained a) in terms of individuals alone, or, b) in terms of individuals plus individual interactions and social structures. Hodgson argues that reduction to individuals in point (a) is not possible as individual choice requires a conceptual framework to make sense of the world. He points out that social contract theories and general equilibrium theories both presume structured relations between individuals rather than individuals in isolations (Hodgson, 2007). Similarly, Kenneth Arrow (1994, pp. 4-5) also stated “economic theories require social elements as well even under the strictest acceptance of standard economic assumptions ... individual behaviour is always mediated by social relations.” The second version is also unacceptable because if individual interactions and social structures are an essential part of the concept, then calling it “individualism” is misleading.

Methodological collectivism, also called methodological holism, is a methodological approach which states that all individual intentions or behaviour should be explained entirely in terms of social structure, including cultural or institutional phenomena. Like methodological individualism, methodological collectivism has been criticised for taking an extreme position. The concept explains social phenomena entirely in terms of social structure, completely

overlooking individuals and removing human agency from the equation. It is also argued that methodological collectivism “not only diminishes the individual, but also pays insufficient attention to the processes and mechanisms by which the individual is fundamentally altered” (Hodgson, 2007, p. 6). Conflation of individual into the structure results in losing sight of the individual along with the mechanisms of social power, and any influence that it may have in the reconstitution of individual purposes and preferences.

Methodological individualism and methodological collectivism are both different versions of reductionism, which entails that all aspects of complex phenomenon should entirely be explained in terms of one level or a type of unit, i.e., either the individuals or the social structure. Hodgson (2007) insists that a framework is required that can explain the transformation of both individuals and structures. Such an approach involves explanations of possible causal interaction and reconstitution, from both individual to structure and from structure to individual. It would include clarification of how individual purposes and beliefs evolve plus how structures evolve. Hodgson strongly stresses the role of habits as agent-level properties, which are themselves shaped by the broader institutional structure. By forming this link, he develops a framework with which to analyse the interrelationship between agency and structure (Spong, 2019). Hodgson (Hodgson, 2007, pp. 12-13) further writes:

“Habits are acquired in a social context and not genetically transmitted. By accepting the foundational role of habit in sustaining rule-following behaviour, we can begin to build an alternative ontology of institutions, in which we avoid the conceptual problems of an account based primarily on intentionality. This is not to deny the importance of intentionality, but to regard it as a consequence as much as a cause, and to place it in the broader and ubiquitous context of other, non-deliberative behaviours”

This study will adopt an agency-structure framework that does not reduce explanation to simply social or individual units, and instead pursues explanation of the subject (the kitty party) through both individual and social level factors.

## **2.5 Institutions and Culture: A Difficult Relationship**

### **2.5.1 The Overlap between Institutions and Culture**

An important concept that is difficult to distinguish from institutions is that of culture. The two concepts have been defined in similar ways, and in many instances the definitions overlap each other. For example, the terms “beliefs”, “values”, and “norms”, are each terms often used by researchers defining both culture and institutions. In fact, the term culture is itself challenging to define. Culture is derived from a Latin word “colere” which has a range of meanings, including inhabit, cultivate, and protect, and scholars have argued it is one of the most complicated words in the English language (Williams, 2014). An example of this complexity is provided by Geertz (1973), who argued that culture is a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about, and their attitudes towards, life.

In their seminal systematic review, *Culture and Institutions*, Alesina and Giuliano (2015) explain empirical and theoretical definitions of culture. They note the work of Guiso, Sapienza, and Zingales (2006, p. 23), who define culture as “those customary beliefs and values that ethnic, religious, and social groups transmit fairly unchanged from generation to generation.” Alesina and Giuliano point to empirical studies that use values and beliefs interchangeably. On the theoretical side, values and beliefs are treated differently. Several authors have developed models in which culture means beliefs about the consequences of one’s actions, but where these beliefs can be manipulated by earlier generations or by experimentation (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015). Individual beliefs are acquired through cultural transmission and then over time by passing one generation’s experience to another these beliefs are updated and

restructured (Guiso et al., 2008). A similar point is presented by Avner Greif. In his opinion there is a subset of rational cultural beliefs which capture people's expectations about actions that others will take in various contingencies. Additionally, values and beliefs are said to interact systematically. Benabou (2008) incorporated mental constructs into a political-economy model and showed how those constructs interacted with institutions to generate different beliefs which could persist overtime. However, economists have not identified the differences between a belief and a value, therefore the term "culture" can refer to both values and beliefs (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015).

Reconsidering this discussion of culture in the context of definitions of institutions, results in the emergence of difficulty in differentiating the concepts. For example, the informal constraints in North's (1991) definition of institutions are informal norms that are "part of the heritage called culture"(Alesina & Giuliano, 2015, p. 902). Similarly, Greif (2006) defines institutions as a "systems of social factors generating behaviour", and by social factors he means "man-made, non-physical factors..., including rules, beliefs, norms and organisations". When considered in the context of new institutional economics, this overlap in the terms institutions and culture is such that some authors have suggested changing the interpretation of institutions themselves. Alesina and Giuliano (2015) propose to classify only formal institutions such as formal legal systems and formal regulations, as "institutions" and refer to culture as value and beliefs (informal rules). They write:

"Semantically speaking, we find it counterproductive and confusing to label culture (values and beliefs) as informal institutions. We find it confusing to label "everything" – from, say, the level of reciprocal trust in a society to constitutional rules about voting systems – *institutions*... We prefer the term *culture* over *informal institutions* (2015, p. 902)."

They argue that even though formal and informal institutions are interrelated and interact with each other, the label “informal” suggest that informal institutions are determined by formal institutions and are of lessor importance. Therefore, “culture” is deemed the more appropriate term for informal institutions like trust, values, and beliefs. Whether this is as useful as they contend is not clear—the result is that institutions are essentially reduced to laws and formalised regulations, which in turn results in institutional economics (or at least new institutional economics) becoming a form of law and economics.

### **2.5.2 Refining the Meaning and Measurement of Culture**

The economics studies referred to above highlight culture as related to beliefs and values, rather than active social practices. Possibly the most recognised approach to defining and measuring culture has come from Geert Hofstede, who devoted a lifetime of research to understanding culture as a social and mental phenomena that helps us understand the nature of groups of peoples. Hofstede was a mechanical engineer turned social psychologist, and a pioneer in the study of culture, using the analogy of the way computers are programmed to describe culture as software of the mind (Sent & Kroese, 2020); “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 2011, p. 3). Hofstede, further writes:

It is always a collective phenomenon, but it can be connected to different collectives. Within each collective there is a variety of individuals. If characteristics of individuals are imagined as varying according to some bell curve; the variation between cultures is the shift of the bell curve when one moves from one society to the other. Most commonly the term culture is used for tribes or ethnic groups (in anthropology), for nations (in political science, sociology and management), and for organizations (in sociology and management). A relatively unexplored field is the culture of occupations (for instance, of engineers versus accountants, or of academics

from different disciplines). The term can also be applied to the genders, to generations, or to social classes (Hofstede, 2011, p. 3).

Hofstede was the first to conduct empirical cross-country research with measurable cultural values. He moved away from classic typologies towards an analytical multidimensional view on cultural values (Sent & Kroese, 2020). After studying extensive data from over 40 countries Hofstede identified six problems and translated them into six dimensions of national culture, namely: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism vs Collectivism, Masculinity vs Femininity, Long Term vs Short Term Orientation and Indulgence vs Restraint. A “dimension” is an aspect of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures (Hofstede, 2011, p. 7)<sup>1</sup>.

### **2.5.3 Recent Investigations of Institutions and Culture**

Given the complexities in explaining the interlink between culture and institutions, the *Journal of Institutional Economics* had a special issue in 2021 focussed precisely on institutions and culture in the economic context. The purpose was to bring together a collection of contributions to conceptualise culture and institutions and to improve the theoretical and methodological understanding of the two concepts (Andriani & Bruno, 2022). The contributions covered various important aspects of culture and institutions. For example, the paper by Benati and Guerriero (2022) presents a theory of state formation by examining the first stable state institutions in Bronze Age Mesopotamia. They consider the impact of technology shocks on elites fostered a culture of cooperation between the elite and non-elite (Andriani & Bruno, 2022). In another paper, Gutmann and Voigt (2022) empirically evaluated Emmanuel Todd’s

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<sup>1</sup> These concepts are useful and have served to provoke an enormous quantity of research. However, the six dimensions are not examined in this context, and this study focusses on the terminology and approach of institutional economics to investigate kitty parties.

seminal work on classification of family types and its impact on society's economic, political and social development. Mickiewicz and Kaasa (2022) explore the role of societal cultural values of creativity and security in encouraging start-up engagement and entrepreneurship.

Other papers in the special issues are related to work of Geert Hofstede.<sup>2</sup> Using data from the European Value Survey, Andriani *et al* (2022) examine the role of Hofstede's cultural dimensions (individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and femininity) in individuals' attitude of tax evasion, Kaasa and Andriani (2022) explore how these traits affect institutional trust, while Amini *et al* (2022) investigate the relationship between individualistic values and potential attitudes towards the reporting of corruption. Lastly, using Hofstede's six dimension taxonomy, Moellman and Tarabar (2022) analyse the role of culture in economic freedom reform.<sup>3</sup>

While this special issue aimed to bridge the gap between interactions of cultural and institutional aspects, and justifies the need for further research and investigation in the field, none of these papers succeeded in improving a clear delineation between the two concepts, or worked through the interrelationships between them.

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<sup>2</sup> In their paper, Sent and Kroese Sent, E.-M., & Kroese, A. L. (2020). Commemorating Geert Hofstede, a pioneer in the study of culture and institutions. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 1-13. give an account of Hofstede inspiring life and career giving details of his ground breaking research and publications.

<sup>3</sup> The last contribution in the special issue is by Hodgson Hodgson, G. M. (2021). Culture and institutions: a review of Joel Mokyr's A Culture of Growth. *Ibid.*, 1-10. "Culture and Institutions: A Review of Joel Mokyr's A Culture of Growth", in which Hodgson provides a balanced and insightful review, capturing its paradox clearly and with strong arguments Andriani, L., & Bruno, R. L. (2022). Introduction to the special issue on institutions and culture in economic contexts. *Ibid.*, 18(1), 1-14. .

## 2.6 The cultural practice of a kitty party

The primary focus of this study is a practice of community funding practiced by the women in Pakistani urban households, known as “kitty party”—a form of rotating savings associations (Waldrop, 2011). It is a practice that is relevant to the economic behaviour of households in Pakistan; a process of community lending and borrowing that has been prevalent not only in Pakistan but in other south Asian countries as well, for generations. Rotating saving associations (hereafter ROSCAs) are practiced across the globe, particularly in developing countries within Africa, Asia and Latin America, and have been in existence for considerable period of time (Ibrahim, 2019). However, there are a number of different versions of ROSCAs and they are known by different names in different parts of the world. For instance, it is known as *Arisan* in Indonesia, *Ko* in Japan (Geertz, 1962), *Esusu*, in West Africa, and *Kameti* in both India (Ardener, 1964; Mohini Sethi et al., 1995) and Pakistan (Shoaib & Siddiqui, 2020).

*Kametis* should not be confused with “informal financing”. Unlike informal financing, and like most rotating saving associations, a *kameti*, is a result of social conventions, mutual understanding, and shared incentives of a community. It comprises of a closed group of people with similar needs and availability of funds. Through mutual understanding and pre-establish rules, a pool of funds is rotated among the group. Each month all the members of the *kameti* put in an equal amount of money in the pool, and one member of the group is given the entire pool of money. The cycle continues till each member has had their turn in receiving the pool of money. Once every member has had their turn, the *kameti* ends, and from next month, a new cycle or new *kameti* begins. There are no restrictions on the number of members or specific conditions for joining the *Kameti*. Members are usually family, friends and acquaintances. New members can join in (usually by recommendation of existing members) when the new cycle begins, and the old members can leave once the cycle finishes if they wish to. Both men and women participate in *Kameties*. Sometimes the group comprises of only women or only men



but there can be a mix too. In Pakistan, kametis are used by all income groups, in both rural and urban areas, and people have been using them to fulfil their various financial obligations for decades. Different income groups rely on kametis to pursue financial needs, achieve financial stability, and maintain social status (Shoaib & Siddiqui, 2020). Members also use kametis to save and accumulate large amounts of money to make big purchases, like white goods, cars, jewellery or family holidays depending on which income group they belong to.

Over the years, the practice of kameti in urban areas of Pakistan has evolved into a phenomenon known as kitty party. A similar trend has been seen in India (Waldrop, 2011). While academics and scholars are aware of generic rotating savings and its variants across the globe, very little scholarly literature covers kametis as they are practiced in Pakistan and even less deal with kitty parties in Pakistan. The premise and basics of kitty party and kameti are the same. Kitty parties also have members putting in a set amount of money in a pool and each month and one of the members get the entire sum. The pool of money is also referred to as *kameti* or *kitty*. The cycle continues once every member has had its turn in receiving the pool.

While clearly a similar social phenomenon, kitty parties do differ from kametis and other ROSCAs in some important respects. Firstly, as the name suggest, kitty parties involve an actual social gathering each month in a form of a party for all the members, which is hosted by one of the members (usually the one getting the “kitty” in that month). Secondly, only women participate in kitty parties. Third, kitty parties are mainly practiced in middle to upper income groups in the urban areas of Pakistan. Lastly, the motivations and reasons for women participating in kitty parties maybe different from people participating in kametis. Sethi (1995), while discussing kitty parties in the context of India, writes “ROSCAs patronised by middle and upper class are called kitties, and again the emphasis is on socialising and entertainment”(p. 167). Though scholarly literature making the same claims about the practice in Pakistan does not appear to exist, given the similarities in Northern Indian and Pakistani culture, this might

be assumed to be similar for Pakistani kitty parties as well. This particular point, i.e., the role of kitty parties for primarily social or entertainment purposes, that the present study will both confirm and qualify in later sections.

Finally, the kitty parties that are the focus of this study are in the context of Australia. Over the past 10 years a large number of people have migrated from Pakistan to Australia. According to the Department of Home Affairs, by the end of June 2018 there were 84,340 Pakistani-born people were living in Australia. Remarkably, this was almost four times the number identified on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2008. People from Pakistan have settled in Australia, adapted to its ways, and at the same time maintained and practised some of their customs, beliefs, and aspects of culture. The Pakistani practice of kitty party has emerged in these local communities, within the broad institutional context of Australia, and this study will focus on this local practice.

## **2.7 Conclusions**

This review has outlined the historical foundations of institutional economics, and contrasted the approach known as “Old” institutional economics from “New” institutional economics. The study adopts the former as the approach it will pursue. The nature of institutions, as identified by economists, is presented and the concept of culture is introduced as one that contrasts and overlaps with institutions. Recent studies have attempted to link institutional economics to Hofstede’s work on culture, and while they have value there is still much to learn, and we are left with an interesting dilemma in reconciling the two. As noted by Alesina and Giuliano (2015), culture and institutions complement each other and the existence of such complementarities hinders identification of each.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 Chapter Overview**

This chapter considers the research methodology used to answer the research questions. As stated in the introduction the aim of this research is to a) understand the practice of Kitty using an institutional economics framework, and b) to increase and improve our understanding of the relationship between culture and institutions. Choice of research methodology should be dictated by the nature of research questions (Inanga & Schneider, 2005), or the nature of the phenomena to be researched (Tomkins & Groves, 1983). Given the exploratory nature of the research questions of my thesis, qualitative research design and methods are used.

The first section of this chapter explains why a qualitative method is the appropriate methodological approach for this study. Section 2 explains the concept of “thick description”, while section 3 provides an overview of the method of qualitative interviews and case study approach. In section 4, I revisit Hodgson’s agency-structure approach, and the section 5 covers ethical considerations. Section 6 concludes the chapter.

### **3.2 Qualitative Research in Institutional Economics**

In addition to the use of many basic economic principles, institutional economics takes ideas from other disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology to create a deeper understanding of institutions and individuals. Unlike mainstream applied economics, where most of the research is based on quantitative evidence and statistical analysis, much of the research done in the field of institutional economics make use of qualitative research methods, as significant empirical evidence is of a qualitative nature. These methods include analysing written records (constitutions, laws, statutes, company manuals, archival materials, etc), comparative case studies, participant observations, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and process tracing, to name a few (Skarbek, 2020).

Schluter (2010) gives various examples where researchers and scholars have used stories, “thick” data, and qualitative descriptions of particular empirical material for the development of economic and institutional theories. For example, Alston (2008) writes that Ronald Coase used various case narratives for analysis when developing his theory of the firm, leading to a much richer theory. Similarly, Carl Menger’s theory of money emerged through deductive reasoning and empirical observations of the real world, based on the information that had been collected by anthropologists about cultures from across the globe (Schlüter, 2010, p. 393). Another very important example where a researcher used qualitative data for institutional analysis is Elinor Ostrom’s “Governing the Commons”. Researching the problems of common property, Ostrom used “qualitative case studies to either prove or further develop hypothesis” (Schlüter, 2010, p. 393).

In a more recent publication, David Skarbek (2020) also provides arguments in favour of using qualitative research methods and qualitative evidence for institutional analysis. Skarbek argues that that inclusion of qualitative evidence allows us to analyse concepts and theories that require “thick description”. Thick concepts are theories inherently complex, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional (Coppedge, 1999, p. 465) making their empirical interpretation less straightforward to measure and test. A detailed discussion of “thick description” is presented in the next section. As shown in the previous chapter, institutions are defined in various ways with a wide range of important attributes. Institutions can be formal or informal, centralised or decentralised, flexible or rigid, permanent or temporary, and legal or extra-legal. All these varying attributes makes institutions multidimensional and multifaceted, and thereby better understood through qualitative evidence (Skarbek, 2020).

In addition to understanding thick concepts, Skarbek (2020) also states that qualitative evidence can also provide information about possible causal pathways. Economist mostly use quantitative methods to identify causal pathways. But unlike quantitative evidence, qualitative

evidence doesn't only tell us *what* happened, but also has the potential explain *why* it happened. While economists sometime use qualitative evidence to identify causal pathways, they do so informally. Using careful qualitative research methods can make qualitative evidence more disciplined, systematic, and rigorous (Skarbek, 2020, p. 2).

### **3.3 Thick Description**

The term and concept of “thick description” was first introduced by a British philosopher Gilbert Ryle in two of his essays in the mid 1960s, “Thinking and Reflecting” and “The Thinking of Thoughts”. Since its inception in 1960s, it has become one of the most important concepts in qualitative research. According to Ryle, thick description involves understanding and absorbing the context of the situation or behaviour (Ponterotto, 2006). The term was later borrowed by Clifford Geertz to explain how ethnography works in 1973 in his essay “The Interpretation of Cultures” and then by Norman K. Denzin in his book *Interpretive Interactionism* (1989). Ponterotto (2006), provides a working definition of “thick description” as follows:

Thick description refers to the researcher's task of both describing and interpreting observed social action (or behaviour) within its particular context. The context can be within a smaller unit (such as a couple, a family, a work environment) or within a larger unit (such as one's village, a community, or general culture). Thick description accurately describes observed social actions and assigns purpose and intentionality to these actions, by way of the researcher's understanding and clear description of the context under which the social actions took place. Thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them. Thick description leads to thick interpretation, which in turns leads to thick meaning of the research findings for the researchers and participants themselves, and for the report's intended readership. Thick meaning of findings leads readers to a sense

of verisimilitude, wherein they can cognitively and emotively “place” themselves within the research context.

Efforts to improve our understanding of the relationship between culture and institutions, including differentiating between them, would benefit from empirical studies employing thick description. Culture and institutions are endogenous variables (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015), and are characteristically complicated. Presently there is continuing debate regarding the definitions of the two concepts. Researchers define the two terms in different ways which makes the concepts multidimensional and multifaceted. According to the arguments of Skarbek (2020), this means they may be better understood by using qualitative evidence and thick description.

### **3.4 Data Collection and Analysis**

#### **3.4.1 Qualitative Interviews and Interview Questionnaire**

Following the contention that the research questions will be best answered by a qualitative research methods, the next consideration of the research design is the selection of the appropriate tool for data collection. For the purpose of my thesis and the nature of information I aimed to collect, qualitative interviews were the preferred choice. The term qualitative interviews refer to interview techniques that provide textually rich data (Kelly et al., 2010). Qualitative interviews are categorised as unstructured or semi-structured interviews and are rather different from structured interviews used in quantitative research. Unlike structured interviews, the main aim of qualitative interviews is to derive interpretations from interviewees and not the absolute facts (Warren, 2002). There are no restrictions in the format and types of questions. The data obtained through qualitative interview is the result of the interaction of the interviewer and the respondent and involves reflexivity and subjectivity of the interviewer and the respondent. The idea is to have a guided conversation with the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2011) utilising open-ended and semi-structured questions with the emphasis on listening “so as to hear the meaning” of what the participants are trying to convey (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Qualitative interview is the preferred choice as the purpose

of qualitative interview is to make “cultural inferences,” and “thick descriptions” of a given social world analysed for cultural patterns and themes (Spradley, 2016).

The interview questionnaire consisted of sixteen open-ended questions grouped under three categories: 1. demographic questions, 2. “kitty related” questions, and 3. questions exploring the motivations of interviewees to engage and participate in kitty. Demographic questions included questions regarding the participants’ employment status, qualifications, and the number of people in their household. kitty related questions were targeted to explore participants’ understanding of kitty parties, how long they have been taking part in the kitty parties, what are the norms and rules of the practice, and also some comparison between Pakistani and Australian (as practiced by Pakistani community) kitty parties. The last part of the questionnaire included questions to explore the participants’ motivation for involvement in kitty parties and whether it fulfils their goals (or not). However, while conducting the interviews additional questions were asked from each participant. As stated above, the aim of qualitative interviews was to have a guided conversation. The questions provided a basic direction of the interview with the aim of extracting as much information as I could from the participants through an open-ended process; the need for additional questions arose based on some of the answers interviewees provided, and the direction the conversation went in. This included follow-up questions and probes, both of which are essential aspects of qualitative and semi-structured interviews, in terms of guiding the interview towards fuller explication of the topic and covering the intended research ground (Kelly et al., 2010). Twelve interviews were conducted, and the sample consisted of women fulfilling the following criteria:

- Aged 18 and above.
- Of Pakistani origin.
- Living in Australia.
- Have been a member of Kitty parties in Australia for at least 6 months.

Initial (5) interviews were conducted face to face, but the remaining interviews were done online via Zoom because of COVID restrictions. Interviews were recorded to be transcribed later for analysis.

### **3.4.2 Language and Context**

Language is fundamental to qualitative interview techniques (Kelly et al., 2010) and was an important factor in the research design for this project. Respondents were encouraged to respond in the language they were most comfortable in. Almost all the women who were interviewed have been living in Australia for over five years and were fluent in English. Therefore, the majority of the interviews were conducted in English. However, there were some women who were more comfortable speaking in Urdu. Accordingly, for those participants, I conducted the interviews in Urdu, and maintained commitment to their preferred language of self-expression, consistent with the advice of Kelly et al.: “Qualitative interview techniques also require sensitivity to the *contexts* of language use” (Kelly et al., 2010, p. 5).

While the majority expressed themselves confidently in English, even among this majority some women would sometimes switch to common Urdu phrases, or say a sentence or two in Urdu to emphasise a particular point. Kelly *et al.* (2010, p. 5) observes that “as researchers, we share some aspects of social and cultural understanding with respondents...”. In my own case, belonging to the same social and cultural background as the respondents allowed me to understand the contexts of language they used and the references they made which later becomes useful for my analysis.

### **3.4.3 The Case Study Approach to Data Collection**

A case study approach is used for analysing the data collected from the interviews. Case studies account for a large proportion of research in all fields of social science. Several authors have tried to clarify and the concept of a case study and as a result we have several definitions (Starman, 2013). Gerring (2016, p. 28) defines a case study as an intensive study of a single case or a small number of cases, which draws on observational data and promises to shed light



on a larger population of cases. According to Sturman (1997, p. 61) “[a] case study is general term for the exploration of the individual term or phenomenon. Helen Simons, after reviewing various definitions, provides the following definition: “Case study is an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or a system in a ‘real life’” (Simons, 2009, p. 21). These three definitions point to analysis of complexity of a variety of real-life situations (Starman, 2013). According to George and Bennett (2005) one of the advantages of case studies is *conceptual validity* i.e. it helps in identifying and measuring the indicators that best present the theoretical concept that the researcher wants to measure. This requires thorough consideration of contextual factors.

People sometimes confuse the number of observations ( $n$ ) and a number of cases ( $c$ ) in a study (Skarbek, 2020). An observation is a single unit of observation in a study. There may be several cases, each having a number of observations. According to Skarbek (2020, p. 3) the best case studies tend to have only one case with many observations, or a few cases and many observations with each case. In my research, kitty parties in Australia are considered one case and each interview is considered an observation. However, one of the critiques of the case study method is that it is impossible to generalise based on an individual case. In case studies, inferences are made on the basis of analytical induction or analytical generalisation. In analytical induction, the relationships among individual characteristics, processes, or events and how they are connected to each other are examined. If a relationship and connection exists even in a single case, it may be theoretically significant (Sturman, 1997).

### **3.5 Agency-structure approach**

In Chapter 2, the concepts of agency and structure were introduced. Martin et al. (2003) define agency as individuals’ ability to freely make choices and act upon those choices in order to make a difference in their lives. The work of Davis (2003: 2011) is seminal in bringing the concepts of agency, self-concept, and reflexivity into consideration by economists. Through

self-concept and reflexivity individuals practice agency and navigate the social structures they are embedded within, which includes rules, norms, meanings, and more. Institutional economics, as interpreted in the old institutional school, recognises the relationship between individuals and social structures. Just as Davis repeatedly emphasised, it acknowledges the impact of social structures on the development of individuals and individuals' awareness of the environment they operate in. Hodgson (1998, 2003, 2004), on various occasions, has emphasised the role of habits as agent-level properties which are the result of interaction with broader institutions. Spong (2019) states that when individuals experience new institutions, the conflict between their former habits and the newly encountered culture results in new forms of behaviour that are required to navigate the new social environment. In new social constructs, previously held beliefs and developed habits may become redundant and result in new and evolved institutions. Bornstein (2017) also emphasises that acculturation can lead to individuals' customs, habits, and behaviour to be altered.

The findings and analysis of the interviews in this study will help in assessing the role of participants' agency in deciding whether to take part in this practice or not. Through this study I seek to identify agency and reflexivity among participants, and how they form the decision to involve themselves in Kitty parties. In particular, are they choosing to participate due to conscious deliberation about this social engagement, or is their participation simply an outcome of interaction with a social structure, and without reflexivity and awareness of their relationship to this social context?

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

The interviews were conducted after receiving the approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). All the requirements of the ethics committee were fulfilled, and guidelines provided by the committee were followed. A Participant's Information Sheet (PIS) was provided to the participants and their consent was recorded before conducting the interviews.

Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the type of information they were expected to share.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

This chapter covered the overall research design and research methodology. It presented the rationale for using qualitative research methods for this study, and also discussed the importance of thick description to understand the link between culture and institutions. The chapter also provided the details of data collection and the use of qualitative interviews, in addition to an explanation of the use of a case study approach to collect and analyse the data. Furthermore, the chapter provided a recap of the agency-structure approach and how it will be used to understand the findings of the interviews, particularly seeking evidence of deliberation by participants regarding their decision to participate.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Chapter Overview**

The previous chapter discussed the research methodology including the data collection and analysis methods. This chapter will outline the results of the interviews highlighting the important content and key findings. The chapter is structured as follows. The following section provides a recap of how kitty party works and their rules as understood by the members. Section 3 divides the interviewees into three separate groups based on similar characteristics. In section 4 the role of agency and culture in the practice of kitty parties is examined, while section 5 concludes the chapter. The main aim of this chapter is to report the finding of the interviews in a systematic manner. The discussion is supported with the actual responses of the interview participants. More detailed analysis of the findings will be presented in the next chapter.

### **4.2 The Rules of the Game**

In Chapter 2, I provided an overview of kitty parties, including how they are practiced and what differentiates them from traditional rotating savings and credit associations. As stated earlier, kitty parties are an evolved version of a rotating saving model. Traditional rotating savings and credit associations only have one aspect, which is the financial one. However, kitty parties have two important elements: a financial aspect and the social aspect. Rules regarding the financial aspect are generally like any rotating savings organisation. A few people get together and form a group to start a kitty. It is usually initiated by one person, and they do much of the work to gather other people to be a part of kitty. Once a group is formed, a pool of money is generated by collecting an equal amount of money from each member. The entire pool of money—also called a kitty—is then given to one of the members of the kitty. The process is repeated every month until all the members have received their turn in receiving the pool of money. Once every member has had their turn the kitty ends, and whether a new kitty begins depends on the members themselves. There are different ways to determine the order in which members receive

the kitty. Sometimes the entire order is determined in the beginning of the cycle through a ballot. Sometimes it is done through consensus where members tell their preference and order is set accordingly.

When the interview participants were asked about the rules regarding the financial part of the kitty, they all described the rules as informal. There is neither any paperwork involved, nor the members are required to sign any statement agreeing to terms and conditions of participating in the kitty. The most important (informal) rule is to put in the specified amount of money by the given date. The rules are mostly verbally communicated and in many instances are pre-understood, as the participants background gave them an understanding of what the practice entails. Nowadays, because of availability of WhatsApp, most kitty organisers maintain a WhatsApp group so that members stay connected with each other and communicate easily. Sometimes the rules are also communicated through WhatsApp. Below is a message sent by one of the kitty organisers to her kitty group:

Assalam Alaikum

Lets start this kitty from April to next May 2022

I am sending some information about kitty and few rules as a reminder for all

1. Our kitty duration is from

April 2021 to May 2022

(14 months).

2. Each kitty amount is \$150

per month so total amount

of kitty is \$21,00 . Who

ever have taken two kitties

will get \$4,200.

3. You need to transfer the kitty by 15th of the month, failing to pay till the mid of the month will have to add \$5 every 2 days additional with the kitty . This time I have to be strict 😞😞.

4. Be kind and respectful to all members.

I hope we all have a good kitty time this year

Thankx

*Message containing the rules<sup>4</sup>*

It is quite evident from the language and the structure of the message that these are more of an expected behaviour rather than strict rules. There is a lot of flexibility in the rules as well. The following variations were found from the interviews.

- a) The kitty amount is dependent on the number of members and vice versa. For instance, if there are 10 women each contributing \$100, the total pool will be of \$1,000. Sometimes the kitty amount is decided first, and members are recruited accordingly. For instance, if the organisers want a \$1,500 kitty and specify a monthly contribution as \$100, they will try and get 15 members. If they are unable to get 15 members, they might increase the amount of monthly contributions to distribute among the existing members.
- b) The general rule is that each member contributes an equal amount of money. But sometimes it might not be affordable by some members then any two members can split the amount. For instance, if the monthly contribution is \$100 and some members can't afford to contribute that amount each month then two members can jointly contribute \$50 each. They then receive the kitty together when it's their turn and then that amount is also split in half. Similarly, sometimes members can put in double contribution and in that case, they receive the kitty twice.

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<sup>4</sup> Message forwarded to me by one of the Interviewees.

- c) The order in which kitty will be given to each member is usually decided at the beginning of the cycle. But sometimes the members would swap the places with each other with mutual agreement.

The second aspect of the kitty parties are the get togethers, which is the main thing that differentiates kitty parties from the other types of rotating savings associations. Each month one of the members of the kitty hosts a 'party' at their place, hence the name Kitty Party. It is usually the member whose turn it is to receive the kitty amount that month. All the members bring their contributions to the party and give it to the kitty organiser, who in turns hands it to the member hosting the party. When asked about the rules regarding the get togethers, all members pointed out that there are no specific rules. The parties are like any other social gatherings and members are expected to behave the same way they would at any party or an event. As one of the interview participants stated:

*"... it is not different to any other social setting. The only difference is that it's all females. Your husband and your children aren't there" (Participant 5)*

Some of the rules nominated by interviewees include the following: members are expected to be respectful to each other, they should refrain from passing judgements and refrain from talking about controversial topics, be courteous to others, and let the host know if they will not be able to come. The format and structure of parties would vary in different groups. It was also revealed that some women put in a lot of effort into the parties in terms of food and arrangements (this will be discussed more in detail in the next section).

One specific rule that was discussed by some interviewees is that only the women who are members of kitty and are contributing the money attend the party. However, in some groups there is a variation of this too. In some instances, the host would invite some of her other friends or acquaintances. However, this is not a general practice and would happen occasionally.

As stated earlier, these rules, both financial and social, are perceived by the members as informal, and perhaps more as norms than fixed rules. When asked the question if the rules of the kitty party are formal or informal, an interview participant enthusiastically said:

*“... there are no rules, first of all there are no rules, get this straight...there is no formal paperwork like the banks, no stamp duties thing... yes, yes, totally informal, everything is very informal ... “ (Participant 6)*

Another interview participant offered a similar response:

*“No, they [rules] were not written down and they are quite loosely followed” (Participant 1)*

Even though the rules are considered informal, and are more of an expected behaviour, they are maintained and enforced, especially the rules related to the financial side and are considered more important than the social rules. The main responsibility of enforcing the rules lies with the kitty organiser, and at times other members step in as well. If any of the members do not behave according to the expectation (follow rules) there may be consequences for those members, though all the interviewees stressed that it was not often. From the responses it can be concluded that rules regarding the kitty payments are implemented sometimes with clear instruction and sometimes with peer pressure and shared understanding.

*“I think there were couple of people who have been notorious for delaying the transfer of funds and then what happens is that they get a reputation and people don't want to include them in the next round.” (Participant 5)*

*“... we have a penalty for that... if someone is not following or break it, they have to pay the penalty. But it is not a written regulation... it has not happened often... but sometime people make it late then the organiser push them to pay on time.” (Participant 8)*



Similarly, if the members are not following the social rules, the organiser talks to them to improve their behaviour and there were instances when they were not included in the next cycle of kitty. So this enforcement appears to entail a form of social or community stigma, whereby individuals who are not participating in accord with others expectations.

### **4.3 Understanding the Kitty Parties**

After reading the transcripts of the interviews I realised that the interviewees can be categorised into three different groups based on their motivations to participate in kitty parties. The interview participants are grouped based on their profiles and the reason for their involvement in the kitty parties. This section elaborates on these three groups, with interviewees categorised in the groups described below.

#### **4.3.1 Socially Inclined**

Women belonging to this group participate in kitty parties primarily for social reasons. They were all born and brought up in Pakistan but have been living in Australia for over 20 years and are financially stable. Most of them are professionals, working full time, well educated, very confident and could converse fluently in both English and Urdu. The interviews were done in English with some common Urdu phrases being used to stress particular points. Most of the women in this group joined a kitty because their friends urged them to do it. When asked about why they joined a kitty party they all emphasised the social aspect. The main purpose for them is to get together with friends and have fun.

*“... the objective for me was not the money, the objective was getting together with friends and enjoying ... we actually had a lot fun with a close group of friends. (Participant 3)*

*“Social, social.” (Participant 11)*

*“... it started as mainly social for us. A commitment to a very regular social interaction.”  
(Participant 1)*

The interviews also revealed the format of the parties and how much effort the women put in organising them. Since hosting the parties was the main purpose for these women, they would

usually go out of their way to plan something different and interesting. The parties are generally an extravagant and ostentatious affair<sup>5</sup> in terms of effort put in setting out the spread (food), decorations and themes for the parties.

*“... there was one where there was a Mughal theme, for example, for which everyone had to really dress up, there were colour themes, there was one where we had partners, and everyone had to dress same as their partners. They were just fun themes.” (Participant 1)*

*“... you know, parties with, you know, people having themes around Chanel, like a brand theme, or could be, I don't know, culinary theme, you know, what type of food to serve ...” (Participant 7)*

*“Well there was one where we did a theme party. So every party had a theme. So then you would have to think about a theme that hasn't been done before. Let's say there was one where it was the cowboy theme. And then she went to all the trouble of actually telling everyone what to wear, you know, cowboy hats and check shirts, boots. So that was put out there. Then she went out and she sort of learned line dancing, and you know, these things that you had to associate with Cowboys, and then they she had decorated the house that way, then she put out food that would be served there, like you know buffalo wings and things like that. So a lot of effort does go into it. It's fun trying to organize one, and people look forward to dressing up in a certain way.” (Participant 11)*

Talking about her own parties, Participant 11 stated:

*“I told everyone to dress up in red, pink or white. And then even a cake was a love heart cake. And then so all the food was based around sort of, you know, the love kind of*

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<sup>5</sup> The interview participants did not use these terms. It is my interpretation of these parties after listening to the description given by the participants.

*things and finger foods and sandwiches cut in love heart. So that was good. What else have I done? I did a fall party. Like it was autumn. Everybody dressed up in sort of warm colours, like burnt orange, or maroons, things like that. And then I did a cake with leaves. And so that was all fun.”*

When asked about the financial aspect of the kitty, the women of this group stressed that it is not important for them. They do it because it is the basic part of kitty parties and would be equally happy without it as well. However, getting that “*extra chunk of money*” (Participant 9) was considered beneficial. They thought of it as a bonus.

*“... to me it was a social thing. But the money was sort of, it didn't hurt. It was nice to have some extra cash just to have fun with... I was sort of putting it aside, not touching it and mostly you know get something nice for myself.”* (Participant 9)

Other participants also stated that they would use the money for travelling, buy expensive jewellery or any other thing mostly to treat themselves. However, one interview participant did not care about the financial aspect at all:

*“When the first time somebody asked me that would you want to be a part of kitty party, it made zero sense to me because from a financial perspective it absolute makes no sense, you put in whatever amount of money you out in you get exactly the same amount back. So from a finance perspective it is a zero sum game.”* (Participant 3)

Even though the women liked the financial benefit, it is very clear from their responses that it is not the reason for their involvement. The main objective is to get together with like-minded people and friends, over high tea or lunch and have fun. They enjoy planning the parties, and coming up with new and different themes for them. The women also spoke about the friendship among the group. Through their participation in the kitty parties the women were able to make new friends and with the continued participation the friendship and bond have grown stronger.

### 4.3.2 Practically Inclined

This is the second group of people and is different from the first group primarily in terms of their reasons for being involved in the Kitty parties, which is essentially financial. Their profile is like women in the first group: professional, working full time, well educated, and financially stable. All of them were born in Pakistan but brought up in Australia, and therefore fluent in English and could speak Urdu as well. They migrated to Australia at a very young age with their families. When asked about their motivations for involvement in the kitty parties, they emphasised that it was only for financial reasons. They like the idea of rotating savings and the idea of getting a lump sum amount of money at one time. They perceived it as forced saving.

*“For me it was financial 100%. So when I first started doing it I needed a certain amount of money you know once I wanted to pay off a credit card, once I wanted to have cash to go overseas.” (Participant 2)*

*“... for me in the past it has been financial. I have only done it if I wanted or needed something. So I wanted, one of the best ones I did was, I think I did one for I think \$4000 and that was because we were going to America for a trip and I wanted spending money. So I did the kitty and I requested that I be the recipient for the month that we were travelling and I told my husband, he knew I was doing it and I said that the money that I get that will all of my spending money. So I wanted to have the cash in hand for my shopping in America, and that worked really well for me and I found it be very successful.” (Participant 5)*

*“Kitty party, mostly that I have been involved in, they have been purely for assisting financially, certain members of the group that needed more than others. So we have just we just get together and provide that financial need for the person who needs it the most or a certain time of the year that need it the most.” (Participant 10)*

These women looked at it as informal borrowing system without the obligation of paying interest. They found it easier and less complicated than going through the process of acquiring

funds through a bank loan. The kitty gives them flexibility of timing and splitting the amount between two people if the monthly amount is too much for one person; options that one cannot find in formal banking system. The women in this group have used the kitty money to fulfill some important financial obligations like using the money to fund their children's wedding, pay credit card bills, buy furniture for the house, and so on. Since the main reason is financial, and the incentive is to have a large amount at the end, they try to have large kitty groups and the monthly kitty instalment is a substantial sum.

*“So it was \$1,000 a month that we were putting in. And that was 15 of us. And that started off with a friend whose daughter was getting married, and she needed some extra cash, but didn't she didn't want to take out a loan.” (Participant 10)*

This group was also more particular about enforcing the rules. It is perhaps because of the large amounts of money involved and also because women have significant goals to fulfill with that money. Again, there was no formal agreement or paperwork, but the rules were sent and members were reminded of them regularly.

*“So beginning of every, actually they send a list of rules that should be followed. And they understood to be very respectful. That's another rule to be respectful to other members privacy, so and be kind to each other, like the general rules. But I'd say that they're quite formally presented, because they are sent in every month, the leader, she sends the reminder, as well of the rules, and to be respectful and pay on time” (Participant 10)*

The social aspect was not very important for them they treated it as any other social gathering or party. They wouldn't put significant effort or thought into it. However, two interviewees did point out that it depends on the women's social circle. Some women did not care about the get-togethers and would throw regular parties with the most significant effort being something

minor such as a colour theme for participant clothing. While some women would go out of their way to make it a special event and would even compete with other women in the group.

*“It depends on your social circle, I think. There are people who would treat it like quite an extravagant event, and whoever is hosting, it kind of becomes a bit of competitive to make sure that the ladies will make sure that create a better party than the last party that has occurred. Other groups I don’t think it mattered; they were more casual about it.” (Participant 5)*

### **4.3.3 Culturally and Financially Inclined**

The third group of women is different from both the groups previously mentioned as their motivations are both social and financial. Like the first group they welcome the idea of social gatherings and like meeting regularly; and like the second group they appreciate the financial benefits and use it to their advantage. However, the profile of these women is also different from first two groups. Most of these women have migrated to Australia after getting married. Most of them are housewives, while some are working or studying part-time and belong to middle income strata. Though they can converse in English, are not very fluent and are more comfortable speaking in Urdu.

The women in this group use the financial aspect of kitty party to overcome their financial limitations. Most of these women are not financially independent and are supported by their husbands. They use the kitty money to buy things for themselves like clothes and gold jewellery, and sometimes use it to buy goods or services as a family, for instance family holidays, white goods, furniture and even big items like cars.

*“A friend of mine wanted to buy a fridge, another wanted to buy gold jewellery for a wedding, I wanted to buy furniture for my drawing room... Another friends had been trying to go for a holiday with family to Gold Coast and was not able to save the money”.(Participant 4)*

*“...this kameti (old Pakistani terminology for kitty amount) system is very useful. You get one big amount, and it can solve many problems ... some women send money to their parents in Pakistan”. (Participant 4)<sup>6</sup>*

Over the years these women have evolved the practice of kitty parties to achieve more socially responsible goals. A lot of times they would start a kitty mainly for a purpose of helping a couple of women who may be going through some financial hardship. They would run the kitty as usual, but the women who are in need would get their amount when they needed it. Furthermore, if there is a member who may not be in dire need of money, that member might give their kitty to charity. In fact, a lot of women in this group give a proportion of their kitty money to some charitable organisation, and sometimes an additional amount is given by all the members for charitable causes.

*“Once we gave the kitty money to Shahid Afridi Foundation<sup>7</sup>... once we sent Eid gifts to underprivileged kids in Pakistan.” (Participant 4)*

*“we once used the kitty money to pay for funeral cost of a community member” (Participant 8)*

The get-togethers organised by these women also fulfil a greater purpose than just having a nice time with friends and other kitty members. As stated above, a lot of these women moved to Australia after they got married and have few relatives and friends here, and are looking to make friends. Kitty parties provide them with an opportunity to meet new people and develop new friendships, and because of that their kitty circle keeps on growing and new members keep joining. They would also put in a lot of effort in planning and organising the parties. In many

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<sup>6</sup> Since most of these women are not working or even if they are, they are not financially independent and would get money from their husbands for household expenses. They would use a little amount from that to put in the kitty and save to send money to their parents or other relatives in Pakistan.

<sup>7</sup> A charitable organisation in Pakistan.

instances it would be just about getting together and having fun. However, most of the time they would try and achieve a bigger purpose. Their main motivation is to stay connected with Pakistani community, and to Pakistani values and culture. Their party themes would not be too grand or extravagant. They would keep themes that would be based on something relevant to Pakistan in some way. For instance, a kitty party in August would have an Independence Day theme<sup>8</sup> with green and white colours, or they would keep a party in Ramadan and integrate some religious aspect to the party.

Another difference in these kitty parties is that they encourage women to bring their children to some parties. Again, it is to inculcate Pakistani values and culture among their kids. They want their children to be constantly reminded of the Pakistani culture and Pakistani way of life. For instance, they would include a small lecture about Islam for children, or perhaps the theme would include dressing in Pakistani national dress and all the children would wear “Shalwar Kameez”<sup>9</sup>.

*“It is very important for the girls because they are studying in different schools, they meet people of different culture but when they come to our parties they strictly follow party rules and Pakistani culture.” (Participant 4)*

Kitty party for these women is an excuse to increase their network and support each other socially, emotionally, and financially. In addition to having some nice time with friends they also want to use the platform to accomplish more serious goals, both socially and financially. They are not only looking out for themselves but are highly motivated to help others in their community. It gives them a sense of belonging to a society where they can comfortably stay connected to their values and culture.

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<sup>8</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> August is Pakistan’s Independence Day

<sup>9</sup> Pakistani clothes



## 4.4 Culture and Agency

### 4.4.1 Language

Out of 12 interviewees, 9 could fluently converse in English. 3 interviewees were not fluent in English and 2 answered the questions completely in Urdu. However, even the women who spoke entirely in English used common Urdu phrases to stress a point regarding a Pakistani concept or a culturally specific reference. Some references were made to the patriarchal nature of Pakistani society and how it effects the women participating in kitty parties. One of the interviewees made a reference to Pakistani culture by calling the women who participate in kitty parties as 'Begums' (Participant 6). Begum is a title given to married Muslim women of high ranks. The reference was made while discussing the differences between kitty parties in Australia and Pakistan. This highlights another important difference between kitty parties and kamatis. Where kamatis are practiced by all income groups and both genders in Pakistan, kitty parties are only practiced by middle to high income strata women. Talking about kitty parties in Pakistan, Participant 6 stated:

*“It was also very prevalent in people of high social status, who did it more for fun, because those women had a lot of disposable income...the ‘begums’ who have servants who have cooks, and who have drivers who have, you know, women ironing their clothes. For them, it is purely social thing... they were very bored. And their husbands were out earning the money and so they wanted to flash their clothes and jewellery, then this evolved with them and they wanted those expensive, you know, 90 carats or whatever carats sparklers to show off so then they evolved this system or they learned about it and they did with big biggies and they would host a party and they would take out their best China and best outfits and best chiffon and best French laces and dress up”*

#### 4.4.2 Gender

Gender is a very important variable in kitty parties. As stated earlier, unlike kametis, kitty parties are only practiced by women of middle- and high-income households. Two distinct themes emerged in the interview. First, a lot of the women became a part of kitty parties because they are not financially independent (i.e., women within Group 3).<sup>10</sup> For these women, their husbands are the main earners of the family and women are given an allowance which they use to buy or do things for themselves and run the household. In this situation, if they want a lumpsum amount of money at any time they would either have to save for it or ask their husbands. Kitty provides a solution for them as it serves as a forced saving. They can put the money in the pool every month and then can request to receive the kitty in the month they want it. When asked why they would rather not just save the money themselves, many stated that it's not easy. They would start saving but would end up spending it on something else.

*“... if I have to do it [save money] on my own, it's not going happen. It's not going to work...you get that lump sum of money that you would never get your own self... I've tried many times to take out a certain amount and put it aside. Never works.*

*”.(Participant 11)*

Some interview participants also pointed out that some women would not like their husbands to know about the kitty money, as in how much they will be getting or when will they get the money. It was mostly because the husbands might not approve of what the women want to spend the money on. Also, it gives women the sense of authority over the money and the decision making power of how to use the money.

*“..., in the past I think traditionally they have been done by women who aren't working, use the money for something possibly they don't want to tell their husbands about ...*

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<sup>10</sup> Does not apply to women in Group 1 and 2

*normally, culturally husband have given their wives allowances or whatever, and sometimes I think that women feel that they need the extra money to make their purchases they can somehow get a large amount of money without anyone noticing and it not having a huge impact on their finances. So that's where I think that kind of stems from but, more and more women are working now but I think they still kind of like the idea of having that lumpsum amount of money without anyone having a say."*

*(Participant 5)*

The second theme relates to the social aspect, and it is the main reason why traditional *kametis* evolved into kitty parties. Kitty parties provide women with a platform to socialise and connect with other women. It given them an avenue to meet new people and make new friends, and an opportunity to unwind and relax with friends. This is particularly valuable to them in Australia, where a lot of the women participating in the kitty parities are first generation immigrants. Kitty parties really work well for them as they get to make new friends and feel comfortable in the new environment. Kitty parties also provide an opportunity for them to plan and host parties, which many of women claimed to enjoy.

*"Your question about if the social aspect more important or the saving and I answered savings but I think for many women the social aspect is why they do it. Because I think for many women they don't need the money they don't really care about the money but they do enjoy the social aspect of it. The dressing up and getting together so I think it would vary that answer would definitely be different."* (Participant 5)

*"Kitty party is a great, great exercise, especially for somebody who doesn't have many friends or may not know a lot of people and has a social urge to connect, and has time. And as well as love, you know, to be able to entertain, I would say, Kitty party is a great avenue great outlet to be able to connect with people and getting out of your comfort*

*zone to get to know, you know, others as well, in this hope I've seen people make some really good connections as well.” (Participant 10)*

#### **4.4.3 Trust**

The most recurrent theme that every interview participant mentioned is “trust”. Trust is the most important factor that makes this construct of kitty party successful. It is vital for both the financial and social part of kitty. As stated before, there is no paperwork, no signed documents by the members promising to fulfil their commitment. It is all done verbally and most of the times there is a large amount of money involved. The women trust each other with the money, and it is very rare that any woman tried to cheat or take advantage of the group.

*“... and this was something which was based on trust. So you had to know the people, because there is no formal paperwork, like the banks, there's no formal stamp duties things. So it's 100% based on trust ... there is no such rules in the kitty it's a trust and understanding.” (Participant 6)*

*“... it's not just me trusting other people it ten or twelve people trusting me as well because there may be people outside a particular group who have actually invested in it so that responsibility lies with the person organising it umm so yeah.” (Participant 2)*

Even for social gathering most women believed that trust and understanding is essential. Most women perceive these gatherings as an outlet where they can unwind, relax, feel comfortable and be themselves without being judged or criticised. They develop strong bonds and friendships which lasts for years. It is not possible to achieve all this without trust and good levels of understanding.

#### **4.4.4 Participants' Sense of Self and the Group**

In terms of agency and reflexivity, when asked about their reasons to participate in kitty parties, all the women were very clear about their reasons. However, among the three groups discussed in the previous section, the third group (the culturally and financially inclined) seems to demonstrate the most agency and reflexivity. Given the discussion of agency in Chapter 2,

agency has four core properties, intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness. The third group demonstrate all these four properties in their decision to participate in kitty parties. They have clear goals and aims that they want to achieve through this practice. They have clear intentions and action plans to act upon those intentions; they seem to have anticipated the likely outcomes of their actions and how they will execute their actions and lastly, they seem to reflect and examine their actions. They are aware of both the aspects of kitty parties and use them for their benefit. The most prominent theme in the interviews of this group was a clear sense of purpose.

The first group (the social inclined) participate for social reasons, and their main purpose is to have time with a group of friends. All of them are financially strong and the rotating saving aspect, though appreciated, is of little relevance to them. All the women were very clear about their motivation for participating in the kitty party. However, these women have big social circles and are already socially active, so why do they need a construct like kitty party for social interactions? When asked why 'party' is important, one of the participants responded:

*"... because mostly it's women who don't have much to do (laughs). Who need an excuse to go out and party, or even if they have a lot to do, but it's just a gathering of friends that you enjoy a company of friends."*

*"I remember I think our last was, famous Pakistani singers. So the three of us, you know, three friends of us, we went as Benjamin sisters, you know, that's stupid sort of thing ... and then you'll probably sit for about two hours, just chatting and cups of tea and sort of, you know, and so my biggest memory is, after kitty sitting down two hours and just laughing at stupid things." (Participant 9)*

All the women in this group said that they were approached by somebody and were asked to be a part of kitty and it was the social aspect that attracted them. They are mainly involved in the

kitty because of the parties and usually do what the group is doing. They try to imitate the group in terms of actions and behaviour, and do not appear participate with the same degree of reflexivity.

Lastly, we have the second group (practically inclined), who are also very clear about their motivations and reason for involvement in the kitty party, which is financial. They use it as an mechanism for forced saving, which they otherwise find difficult to do. They host the parties too, but their parties are simpler, and they do not put in the time and effort in planning and organising the parties as the first group. Sometimes the members may even get the kitty without hosting a party. The interesting thing about this group is that, even in a country like Australia, where there are wider range of accessible financial products than Pakistan, women would still like to avoid financial institutions. They would rather go through this completely informal arrangement than go through a proper banking system. On the social side, even though they are not interested in parties, they still generally host the monthly parties. Their responses suggest that they do it because it is convenient compared to formal processes of financial system.

#### **4.5 Conclusion**

This chapter summarised the key finding of the interviews. I discussed the main rules of the kitty parties for both financial and social aspects. The interviews revealed that the kitty members could be grouped into three distinct groups based on their motivations to participate in the kitty parties. The chapter also provided an overview of two important cultural aspects, trust and gender. Lastly, I provided a brief discussion on the extent of agency demonstrated by the kitty members when deciding to participate in the kitty. The aim of this chapter was to just report the key findings of the interviews. In the next chapter I will provide a more detailed analysis of findings in the light of the research questions of this study.

## **5. Discussion and Analysis**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I will analyse the key findings of the interview data and explore it with specific reference to the economics literature on institutions, agency, and culture. Through this chapter I aim to understand kitty parties in the context of institutional economics, and also try to improve our understanding of the relationship between institutions and culture within this literature. In particular, the chapter seeks to learn how this literature assists us to understand the phenomenon of kitty parties, but also learn what we can about the institutional economics literature from the parties themselves.

The chapter is structured as follows. In section 2, I discuss the extent to which kitty can be understood as a social institution, and also evaluate its functioning as an institutional based practice. In section 3, I turn to one key element of culture that appears prominent in the interviews: trust. Within the fourth section, I consider the kitty party in the context of participant agency and reflexivity, to obtain a more nuanced understanding of how this social institution is interpreted by the participants themselves. Finally, in section 5 I return to a consideration of the difference between institutions and culture, and to discuss what is learned by this study about these differences. A brief conclusion summarises the chapter.

### **5.2 An Institutional Interpretation of “Kitty Parties”**

One key motivation of the study was to use institutional economics to interpret and understand the activity of kitty parties. The interviews reveal that the activities do align with much of our expectations of what institutions are, and how they function. As noted in Chapter 2, Hodgson (e.g., 2006) defines institutions as the systems of established and prevalent social rules that structure social interaction, while researchers adopting the approach of new institutional economics (Acemoglu et al., 2006), define institutions as “mechanism

s through which social choices are determined and implemented.” In his 1991 work explicating institutions in economics, North contends that informal institutions include sanctions, taboos, customs, traditions, and codes of conduct, while formal institutions can encompass constitutions, laws, and property rights (North, 1991).

The interviews with kitty participants certainly revealed that these social meetings do indeed incorporate rules and social mechanisms, informal codes of conduct, and also implicit sanctions. On the surface, therefore, kitty parties would appear to qualify as a social institution. However, we can draw upon the literature attending to definitions of institutions even further, to apply more rigorous interpretation of the characteristics of institutions, in our consideration of kitty as a social institution. In particular, Hodgson (Hodgson, 1998, p. 179) lists the following characteristics that he believes are common to the identification and definition of an institution:

1. All institutions involve the interaction of agents, with crucial information feedbacks.
2. All institutions have a number of characteristics and common conceptions and routines.
3. Institutions sustain and are sustained by shared conceptions and expectations.
4. Although they are neither immutable nor immortal, institutions have relatively durable, self-reinforcing and persistent qualities.
5. Institutions incorporate values, and processes of normative evaluation. In particular, institutions reinforce their own moral legitimation: that which endures is often—rightly or wrongly—seen as morally just.

Certainly, the interviews demonstrated that the practice of kitty functions according to set of informal rules that structure the interaction and choices of the willing participants. However, using these 5 defined criteria put forward by Hodgson, we start to obtain a better understanding



of the ways that the functioning of this practice (kitty) might diverge from other social rules that we consider to be institutions.

To begin, there is certainly interaction of different agents, beyond simply the individual participants and the organiser. Similarly, feedback is present through the process of the party itself, either in a tacit form as individual participants interact with others and obtain feedback about the organisation of the parties etc., or in some instances the key organiser of the group directs information to participants and might provide direction to individuals to adjust their behaviour, e.g., deposit money earlier. Certainly, as per Hodgson's second criteria, the rules are multifaceted in each case, with social engagements linked to a routine and even regimented activities of participants. There exists a shared understanding and common expectations among participants, with regards to the need to both deposit monies, to wait their turn to receive the kitty, and to organise one of the social gatherings. Thus the third criteria is clearly satisfied.

In regards to the fifth criteria Hodgson lists, there is an implied morality that underpins the commitment to the group, i.e., missing one's contribution or free-riding does seem commonly understood as inconsistent with the purpose of the group, and a normative judgement underpins this. Whether it has morality that extends beyond its own required behaviour is perhaps unclear. It could be argued that the morality is one of support for the community of which kitty is part of, as many participants made reference to the place of kitty in their social group, a point that will be explored in later section focussing on individual agency and reflexivity. Of the criteria Hodgson proposes for social institutions, criteria one, two, three, and five appear to be satisfied, at least to some degree, in the practice of kitty parties.

The issues Hodgson refers to in the fourth identified characteristic of institutions, including durability, persistence, and enduring qualities, are challenging to link to this social practice. There is certainly some degree of self-reinforcement, in that if the rules break down the kitty party fails. However, there is not necessarily a persistent quality beyond a single

“round” of kitty that ensures it continues as an ongoing practice. Once the circle is complete, and each participant has had their “turn” at hosting a gathering and receiving the funds, there is no social mechanism that ensure it begins again. In fact, the practice itself is not necessarily enduring without some initiation and organisation by an individual participant. Many institutions have a “spontaneous” quality that sees them endure without conscious instigation of an individual that is affected by them. However, kitty parties do not necessarily have this quality.

Overall, kitty certainly functions in much the same way that many informal institutions would appear to function, with rule structures and commonly shared expectations that underpin a morality of participation. Sanctions (for default) are more implied than clearly articulated and seem to be related to the stigma of an ongoing social penalty imposed by other members of the group or community. However, kitty does lack a durability or persistence many institutions retain. Instead, it is a set of rules that needs to be initiated by one more of the participants, and will be maintained only for a specified period of time (a full round). The fact the practice does not spontaneously sustain itself sees it diverge from what we observe in many other social institutions. The next section considers other details obtained from the interviews that provides some additional insight about the practice.

### **5.3 Culture and the Role of Trust in Kitty Parties**

In their own approach to the challenge of differentiating between institutions and culture, Alesina and Giuliano (2015) separate formal institutions from all informal rules, referring the latter as culture. As part of their discussion, the concept of culture is linked more strongly to what could loosely be described as more psychological variables, such as trust, values, and beliefs, rather than specifically observed social practices. Of these factors, the interviews revealed that trust was clearly an important aspect to the kitty process. This discussion emphasises this aspect of the social gatherings and their structure. It is the case that trust is

perhaps the key factor that makes the social arrangement function through each iteration. While sanctions for defection or default are often key in institutions, and the interviews mentioned the social stigma associated with potentially breaking the financial commitment central to participation in kitty parties, it was not particularly prominent in the interviews. Instead, trust was perhaps the key variable that occurred most often in the interview discussion.

Kitty parties, like any other rotating savings organisation, is based on informal rules that are most often verbally communicated. There are no signed agreements or enforceable contracts obligating members to fulfil their commitments. However, kitty parties are practiced by many Pakistani women living in Australia, with many doing it for years and claiming they will continue to do so. This informal social practice, which on many occasions involves large amounts of money, cannot operate without a very strong element of trust. This factor was also the most recurrent variable mentioned by almost all the interviewees. Perhaps this should not be surprising; it aligns with the writing of various authors who have written about the importance of trust in financial transactions and in social structures. Mayer et al. define trust as *“the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party”* (1995, p. 712). Elaborating on their definition, the writers add that being vulnerable suggests taking risk. However, they add that trust is not taking risk *per se*, but instead represents the willingness to take risk.

With regards to social interaction, trust can be categorised as either particularised or generalised. Particularised trust is trust extended toward people the individual knows from everyday interactions (e.g., family members, friends, neighbours, and co-workers). Generalised trust is a rather abstract attitude toward people, and encompasses those beyond immediate familiarity, including strangers (Freitag & Traunmüller, 2009). Alesina and Giuliano Alesina and Giuliano (2015), in their emphasis on generalised trust, write that the “...importance of this

[trust] trait cannot be overemphasized.” Similarly, Arrow (1972) writes, “virtually every commercial transaction has within itself an element of trust, certainly any transaction conducted over a period of time.”

The women within the kitty party groups rely on each other and trust each other to fulfill their commitments. They take a risk every time they allocate their share of the money to the organiser, but they do it willingly. They demonstrate both particularised trust and generalised trust to each other. When new members join the group, there is a mutual level of trust. The new member feels comfortable joining the group and the existing members welcome the new member without doubt or questions regarding their “credit worthiness”. This is consistent with generalised trust. As they get to know each other better, through repeated interactions and exchanges at the parties, the participants move to a particularised trust.

What allows trust to play such a prominent role in the functioning of these groups? Why do participants demonstrate trust so immediately? An important factor that contributes to the trust one party has for the other is the personal characteristics of the “trustor” and “trustee”. In this study, the key characteristic would seem to be belonging to the same background. All the women in the kitty parties in this study are from Pakistan. People tend to trust members of their nationality more than trust foreigners, and trust “travels” better with racial and nationality groups (Alesina & Giuliano, 2015; Guiso et al., 2009). The trust that is demonstrated in these groups most likely stems from belonging to the same ethnic group, and this acts as an important tool to ensure enforcement and monitoring of agreed upon rules.

#### **5.4 Agency and Reflexivity Among Kitty Participants**

While trust was prominent in interviews with participants, other factors were also discussed by the women in relation to the motivation for their participation with the group. This section reviews those factors to seek evidence of agency and reflexivity among the participants. The work of Davis (2003; 2011) emphasises the need to acknowledge and understand agency when

investigating an individual's engagement with social groups, and he has also drawn considerable focus to the extent to which individuals possess a reflexive capacity to understand their own relationship to the group. This section discusses the interviews in the context of these issues, focussing on the revealed agency of participants, and the evidence of conscious participation.

As noted in Chapter 2, Davis emphasised the need to represent individuals as possessing agency and also some level of reflexivity, i.e., their ability to recognise the relationship between themselves and the social groups they engage with. In an effort to evaluate these concepts among the participants, I apply some additional conceptual definitions to try and further define elements of both agency and reflexivity. Agency refers to the freedom individuals exercise in making choices and acting on those choices (Martin et al., 2003). In acting with agency individuals make a causal contribution to their course of action. They are the producers as well as products of their life circumstances, (Bandura, 2006). In the last chapter I stated that in my opinion it is the third group that demonstrates most agency. The following section revisits the four properties of human agency proposed by Bandura (2006) and examines the three kitty group according to them. I equate the first two properties identified by Bandura as aligned with the concept of agency discussed by Davis. While the second two properties identified by Bandura are aligned with Davis's emphasis on reflexivity.

As outlined by Bandura (2006), the first two agentic properties are: 1) *intentionality* – this refers to people's ability to form action plans and strategies for realising their intentions; 2) *forethought* –forethought includes anticipating likely outcomes of prospective actions to guide and motivate efforts. Intentionality and forethought are aspects of agency that allow the individual to identify a plan of action and pursue its implementation with some degree of anticipation of its likely outcome. The second two properties (of the four) proposed by Bandura (2006) are 3) *self-reactiveness* – the agents' ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution; and 4) *self-reflectiveness* – an individual's

reflection on their personal ability, the reliability of their thoughts and actions, and the making of corrective adjustments if necessary. Although Bandura discusses these as components of agency, these two concepts (self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness) are treated here as components of Davis's concept of reflexivity. They extend beyond an ability to make an independent plan of action, and instead provide individuals an ability to monitor and regulate their ongoing engagement within different social contexts, while also reflecting on their own experiences in order to make adjustments about the nature of their engagement. Below, the interviews are reconsidered, within the three broad groups I identified in the previous chapter, but with emphasis on these four components of agency.

The first group (socially inclined) demonstrate intentionality. They are clear about their motivation to participate in kitty parties and make concerted effort to be a part of this practice. However, their main motivation is to be a part of a social group that comprises of friends and acquaintances. From the responses given by the women in this group, there is little evidence of extensive forethought about the financial component of the practice. They attend the social gathering as and when it happens, and enjoy it almost exclusively as a social event. Though they use the kitty money for various purposes, the financial aspect of the group it is not a primary motivation for them. They clearly exercise agency in deciding to participate in the group, but the "benefit" of participation does not extend beyond a social experience.

In terms of the more reflexive characteristics of participation, there is some, albeit limited, evidence of reflexive engagement. There is evidence of self-reactiveness as a lot of thought is put into planning and arranging the parties. For example, the themes and occasional need for costumes means they do prepare for each iteration of the event, and so they are conscious of how they engage with other participants. Again, the social aspect is of more importance than the financial aspect. All the women are financially stable and independent. There is little evidence of self-reflectiveness. The practice is a regular event for them and they

look forward to it, but is not a critical event in their life. They don't seem to reflect on the reasons for their participation or the consequences of it, outside of the opportunity for a social experience. Once the party is over they move one to other priorities and commitments of their lives. Participation in kitty does not play a role in changing their financial lives in any way, and the women are aware of this.

The second group (practical) are more interested in the financial benefit of the kitty party. Their primary motivating factor is the "forced saving" that participation engenders, and in my opinion their agency revolves around it. They seem to demonstrate all four properties to a certain extent; there is intentionality and forethought, and like the first group they are clear about their intentions, but they also demonstrate forethought and self-reactiveness. Since they are mainly interested in the lumpsum kitty amount, they think and anticipate the likely outcome of their participation, which in turn motivates their involvement in the kitty. They anticipate the timing of their turn and then plan their course of action accordingly i.e., how to arrange for the kitty amount every month and what to do with it once they get it. There is some indication of self-reflectiveness. They do seem to reflect on the reasons for their participation and its consequences in their life, and the role their own participation plays in the functioning of the group.

The practice seems to give them financial agency, even though many of these women are financially comfortable. It allows them access to a large amount of money which they feel they will not be able to save themselves if they try to. However, they don't seem to have compared the cost and benefit of this practice with other savings options available. It appears that they like the informality of the practice and easy access to funds, and they get to avoid the formalities and regulations of banks and other financial institutions, making it a convenient option. Unlike the first group, the social aspect for these women is of little importance. They host parties with little forethought or reflection. It is done as it is considered a norm associated

with Kitty parties. Similarly, the social aspect of the gatherings appears to be of little interest to them. Their heavy focus on the way that Kitty parties can support their financial goals seems to work to exclude consideration of the social process in which they are engaged. Thus, while they are certainly exhibiting agency, reflexive capacity is perhaps no more prevalent than in the first group.

The third group (culturally and financially inclined) utilises kitty party to its fullest taking advantage of both financial and social aspect. They consciously utilise the practice in support both their financial and social agency. Most of the women in this group are first generation migrants belonging to middle income strata. Some of them work on casual or part time basis, and many are dependent on their husbands financially. Therefore, both the financial and social aspect is important to them. They clearly articulate their intentions to use kitty parties to help them save money for some anticipated expense or event, and also as a social “get together” with people from their community. The interviews with these women provide evidence of forethought, self-reactiveness, and reflectiveness.

While the social aspect to the kitty party is important to these women, their focus is not simply on having a good time. Instead, they participate with an awareness of the practice as linked to their cultural background, and they are looking for others who share this personal history. The practice gives them an opportunity to meet members from their ethnic and religious backgrounds, and one of their main purpose in hosting the parties is to stay connected to Pakistani community in Australia, so that they can stay attached with their roots and values. For this purpose, they plan and arrange parties with themes relating to Pakistani culture, and they keep on trying to create new ways to incorporate this culture into the social gatherings. Furthermore, their participation is part of their broader effort to continue to inculcate Pakistani cultural and religious values within their group and their families, and particularly their



children. Their conscious participation in this practice is evidence of a reflexive participation in this practice that is perhaps more acute than the other two.

When considered as a financial practice, rather than the cultural dimensions, once again all the four agentic properties are apparent. As stated earlier, the women are not financially independent, and this practice gives the women some degree of financial agency. They can save up the money and use it the way they see fit. In this way, they can overcome one element of the patriarchal social structure they are embedded within. They use the kitty amount to buy things for themselves and even support other members of their family as well as community. Over the years, many of these women they have used the kitty amount to help and assist community members who may be in need.

Overall, the third group demonstrate agency and reflexive participation beyond that exhibited by the other two groups. While the first group treat the event as an opportunity to socialise, they do not consider other aspects of the parties nor are they motivated by the financial aspect of the groups. In fact, the financial aspect is perhaps redundant to their objectives. The second group are motivated to participate due to the financial opportunity it provides for them, and while they are conscious and clear about this, they do not give consideration to the social experience. Finally, the third group make a conscious effort to participate in the group in a way that continues to maintain and develop Pakistani culture in Australia, while also using it for specific financial purposes. Through kitty parties the women support each other financially as well as socially, and they have at times adapted the practice to suit their motivations.

#### **5.4 Institutions and Culture: What do we learn from kitty?**

In Chapter 2, I provided a detailed discussion on various definitions of institutions and culture. It will not be wrong to say that even after enormous amount of literature available on both the concepts, and the previous discussion on the nature of kitty, the distinction between the two is still not clear. In fact, if we analyse kitty parties it is difficult to determine if it is an institution

or cultural phenomenon, as it shares features of both the concepts. The following discussion elaborates on this point by examining some of the definitions of institutions and culture discussed in chapter 2, but tries to learn some lessons.

While kitty parties do share characteristics of institutions, one key point on which they appear to diverge was in relation to continuity and persistence. While institutions often have self-sustaining properties, kitty did not demonstrate this in the same way. Instead, this practice is instigated by individuals or start each individual kitty event (which leads to its subsequent rounds). Furthermore, kitty was found to be dependent upon trust, and while sanction played a role, it was limited. Finally, different groups emerged that saw kitty practiced with slightly different focus and reflexivity of participants. This indicated that not all manifestations of kitty are the same, and that the participants can impact the nature of the practice. Can these insights help us to further understand institutions and culture, and do they result in kitty being specifically one or the other?

The fact that kitty is not self-sustaining, may offer an important clue to how we might consider it in relation to institutions and culture. In his seminal book, *A Culture of Growth*, Joel Mokyr defines culture as "... a set of beliefs, values, and preferences, capable of affecting behaviour, that are socially (not genetically) transmitted and that are shared by some subset of society". Institutions on the other hand are "are socially determined conditional incentives and consequences to action and these incentives are given to individuals and are beyond their control" (2017, pp. 8-9). The distinguishing factor here is that culture is transmitted with more control of the participants, and entails some element of choice. Essentially, Mokyr differentiates culture from institutions by regarding culture "as something entirely of the mind" which is "to an extent, a matter of individual choice" (Hodgson, 2022).

Culture is often defined as a set of values and beliefs, and kitty parties cannot be deemed as culture if it is simply limited to these components. However, if we consider Mokyr's

definition, and in particular his emphasis on the way culture (as preferences) is socially transmitted within a subset of society, then we can begin to understand kitty as at least possessing an element of culture. The practice of kitty party is not carried forward genetically, nor is it self-sustaining. However, it is instigated and transferred to members of the community through a social mechanism. The women have seen it operating socially by other women in their families and community, and that's how they know how it works. More importantly, kitty parties are confined to one community, a subset of society, i.e., Pakistani community in Australia. Also, as noted, it is up to the members of this community whether to engage in this practice, and thus they have some degree of individual choice. Therefore, it might be argued that Kitty is indeed a cultural practice.

Although kitty parties are not a self-sustaining perpetual practice in the same way institutions often are, it is clearly a social phenomenon and not simply psychological in the form of values and beliefs. Kitty does have rules that apply for both the financial and social aspects of the practice. Even though these rules are not formally written anywhere and can be considered informal, they are monitored (and potentially enforced). Kitty members who fail to follow the rules are subtly reprimanded and must deal with the consequences if they continue to do so. However, these rules can be shaped by each kitty party and some adjustments are made in the way each kitty is practiced and its purpose. This would put the practice in conflict with some definitions of institutions that regard institutions as constraints (and perhaps taken as given by individuals, such as in the work of North). Similarly, Mokyr describes them as conditional incentives that are beyond individual's control. This is not the case with kitty, which, as noted above, entails some degree of choice and control by participants.

Another final point to note is that the social practice of the kitty party is an evolved version of various rotating savings organisations, which originates in Pakistan and has travelled to Australia with the Pakistani emigrants. It is practiced within the Pakistani community only,

and this study has considered it within these communities. It has been argued that when institutions “travel” from one geographic location to another, the “imported institutions grow together with the domestic ones or else the imported rules or set of rules will sooner or later be rejected” (Zweynert, 2009). To this point, the practice has continued to exist as embedded within the broader institutions of Australian society. It does not appear to be developing clear interrelationships with the institutions around it, and therefore perhaps this is further support for the view that it is a cultural phenomenon rather than an institution.

In conclusion, studying kitty draws attention to the fact that cultural practices might be those that can be instigated and more consciously influenced by the participants. Those practices that can “travel” with immigrants to a new location and be practiced in the context of broader institutions that do not necessarily support them, might be social practices that identify more with culture than institutions. On the other hand, institutions can also be created: a politician can champion new legislation. Furthermore, culture is surely something than can be practiced, and is not limited to psychological characteristics such as beliefs or values. Perhaps we can conclude with the compromise that kitty is best understood as a cultural institution practiced in different locations around the world.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

In this section I analysed the interview results by discussing the important themes and ideas that emerged in the interview data. It can be concluded that trust is fundamental for smooth operation of this practice. It is through trust that the preconceived rules are understood and implemented. The section also provides a discussion on the participants varying levels of agency involved in this practice. The third group demonstrate most agency both in term of social and financial aspects. They are most reflexive when it comes to deciding whether to engage in this practice. They have clear aims and goals that they want to achieve and use this practice for fulfilment of those goals. Lastly, I discussed the predicament of classifying the

practice of kitty party as an institutional or cultural phenomena. Considering numerous definitions of culture and institutions it is difficult to reach a clear answer. The practice contains characteristics of both culture and institutions. Like culture it is set of preferences shared by a sub set of society; and at the same time involves rules and norms which are a feature of institutions.

## 6. Conclusion

The main objective of this study was to understand the practice of kitty parties using the framework of old institutional economics and to improve our understanding of culture and institutions. I conducted 12 qualitative interviews of women who actively participate in kitty parties in Australia and analysed their responses using the thick description approach. After analysing the responses given by the interview participants, I can make the following concluding remarks.

First, trust emerged as the most important factor ensuring the smooth functioning of this practice. The model of informal rules and implied sanctions can succeed only on the basis of generalised and particularised trust that the women demonstrate towards each other. An important reason for the existence of trust between the group is belonging to the same ethnic group, and this acts as an important tool to ensure enforcement and monitoring of agreed upon rules.

Secondly, all kitty members demonstrate varying level of agency and reflexivity. Though all of them exhibited agency by having clear motivations and intentions, they are still a somewhat diverse range of participants. I was able to categorise them on the basis of their inclinations towards social, financial, or cultural aspects of kitty parties. Similarly, reflexivity was varied amongst the groups as well. One group showed more reflexivity than the other two, and this was linked to their interest and awareness of how they can use the practice to celebrate Pakistani culture. In addition to having intentionality and forethought they also displayed self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness about their participation.

Lastly and most importantly, the study enables us to understand kitty party in an institutional economics framework. After thoroughly reviewing the literature and analysing the interview data based on the existing literature, I can conclude that kitty has both institutional and cultural characteristics due to which we cannot label it as one or the other. Like institutions

it has rules, structure, commonly shared expectations, and implied sanctions when the rules are broken. However, it lacks the durability, persistence, and self-reinforcing qualities that most institutions exhibit. Similarly, if we use the definition of culture as a set of values and beliefs, then kitty party does not fulfill that criterion. But there is an element of preference and behaviour that is socially transmitted and shared by a subset of a society. Based on the preceding discussion it will not be incorrect to categorise kitty parties as a cultural institution capable of travelling to new locations with the people who are willing to practice it in different parts of the world.

While this conclusion has not presented a definitive statement as to whether this practice is strictly cultural or strictly institutional, it does offer some avenues for future work to improve our understanding of the relationship between the two. The fact that kitty could be instigated at relatively low cost by groups of Pakistani migrants may provide some clue as to common characteristics of culture that are often absent from institutions. While broad social institutions are difficult to immediately create, cultural practices can travel with individuals and groups, and be instigated in a new location without widespread support or acknowledgement. In this way, practicing kitty resembles much closer the act of starting an ethnic restaurant in a new location (e.g., Pakistani restaurant in Sydney), than the legislation of new law or the slow emergence of new informal institutions. These simple insights can be further explored in future work to continue the improvement in our understanding of institutions and culture.

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