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WOWnet: A Communication and Networking Model for Women

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Abstract: We interviewed members of Women Owning Woodlands network (WOWnet), an Extension program in Western Oregon and an ideal community to study how women communicate and network. We found that WOWnet women are involved in a variety of natural resource-based organizations. However, WOWnet is unusual because of its small-group, praxis-based approach. If more Extension and forestry organizations followed the WOWnet example of supporting women new to forestry and focusing more on women-centric knowledge, they can become more inclusive of women with diverse interests and backgrounds. Programming that incorporates women-centric knowledge has implications for Extension programs throughout the U.S. and elsewhere.

Introduction

Despite the fact that more women are becoming primary landowners through inheritance or purchase (Mater, 2005) and despite the availability of different forestry organizations to all landowners (Table 1), women are not as involved as men are in forestry organizations (Kuhns, Bragg, & Blahna, 2002). There has been a call to develop land management programs specifically for women (Cloughesy, 2005), like Oregon's Women Owning Woodlands Network (WOWnet) and comparable programs in Alabama (Women in Land Ownership, WiLO) and Maine (Women and the Woods Program). Extension historically fostered paternal land transfers (Sachs, 1996), but if Extension focuses on heterogeneity in ownership, such as increasing ownership by women, and recognizes management diversity (Vanclay, 2004), it may be more effective in creating and implementing programs that benefit landowners (Barbercheck et al., 2009; Harmon & Jones, 1997).

Table 1.

Forestry Communities Available to Oregon Landowners, Listed by Full Name, Acronym, and Extent of Membership

Forestry Communities	Acronym	Extent of Membership
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American Tree Farm System	ATFS	Nationwide
Forests Today and Forever	—	Oregon
Master Woodland Manager	MWM	Statewide
National Woodland Owners Association	NWOA	Nationwide
Oregon Small Woodlands Association	OSWA	Oregon
Society of American Foresters	SAF	Nationwide

Women Owning Woodlands Network (WOWnet) was developed by Oregon State University (OSU) Extension in 2005 with help from several female forest owners. Its goals are to:

- Recognize women who take on active woodland management roles;
- Raise women's forestry skill levels through hands-on education;
- Increase women's access to forestry-related resources; and
- Encourage communication among Oregon's women woodland managers through the development of networks.

WOWnet meetings are comprised of peer groups of diverse women where the knowledge exchange tends to be horizontal, and that has been shown to contribute to confidence building (Mom, Van Den Bosch, & Volberda, 2005). Most importantly, because WOWnet participants are almost exclusively women, the physical space of meetings and field tours are perceived as comfortable and empowering for participants (Redmore, 2009).

WOWnet shows how Extension can reach a different audience through the creation and use of a social network for women who own or manage woodlands. Social networks depend on social identity, social support (Maguire, 1983), and resource and information exchange (Haythornthwaite, 1996). Effective information exchange can bring individuals or groups together (Rogers, 1983), and social networks that enable and are enabled by good communication can serve as tools for empowerment. Social networks are important for women in building social capital, reinforcing solidarity, and creating the possibility for collective action (Agarwal, 2000). Social networks are also important in guiding land management decisions (Schelhas, Zabawa, & Molnar, 2003).

Social relationships and social networks, such as those facilitated by Extension and forestry organizations, are recognized as increasingly important (Barbercheck et al., 2009), particularly as private landholdings in the U.S. grow in number (Schaaf, Broussard, & Hoover, 2004). Extension and forestry organizations can expand their programming to offer more diverse, nontraditional management support activities (Erickson, Ryan, & De Young, 2002) to appeal to a broader audience.

Methods

Our research question, within the context of WOWnet, was: How do female forest owners and managers use communication and networking in forest management? We relied on qualitative methods for richer, in-depth

narratives (Bliss & Martin, 1989; Sayre, 2004) in our case study approach (Yin, 1993).

Sampling

The WOWnet database of members provided an opportunity to randomly select participants. This allowed access to stories both information rich and more representative of the broader community. In 2008, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 women randomly selected from the member database. Recorded interviews ranged from 33 minutes to 87 minutes, averaging about an hour each. All interviews occurred face to face in Western Oregon at a location convenient for the interviewee. We stopped after our 16th interview because we had reached the point of saturation when few new themes emerged (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) and the bigger story became clear. We also conducted a member check (Janesick, 1994) by sending each woman her transcribed interview to verify transcript accuracy.

Analysis

We performed two levels of analysis, following Charmaz's (2006) suggested coding techniques. In the first level of analysis, we used *in vivo* coding, which is a form of inductive or "open" coding (Bernard, 2006). Using Weft QDA (2008) software, we developed initial themes directly from the data, using themes that "stick closely to the data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 47). In the second level of analysis, we examined these themes contextually and compared them with other themes. In this phase, using the most significant themes according to the initial coding phase, we re-worked the themes into broader categories that were then used to re-code the transcripts. Charmaz (2006) called this second level of analysis "focused coding" because it is "directive, selective and conceptual" (p. 57). Each interviewee is identified in this article by a pseudonym. We pulled narratives from the analysis to illustrate key findings.

Findings

Findings relate to interviewees' general involvement in natural resource-based communities (NRC) of interest. These include OSWA, MWM, other OSU Extension groups, local watershed councils, or other forestry education programs. Findings importantly focus on the role that WOWnet plays in increasing Extension's outreach to women. Study results are differentiated by either the subheading NRC or WOWnet.

NRC: Access to Information

Many interviewees cited access to information and education as primary reasons for being involved in forestry and natural resource communities. These groups offer tours and other educational opportunities accessible to a wide range of people. Some women noted that participating in multiple groups is especially helpful for accessing information. For one interviewee, having a full-time job makes it difficult for her to spend a lot of time gathering specific information. OSWA events, like vendor shows, simplify her need to search for information. Other women liked the publications provided by the different communities, such as the OSWA newsletters that provide association information and legislative updates.

Networking is an important way to access information. Through relationships developed over time, many interviewees said they can learn new information or find out whom to go to for help. Friendship is also an important element to consider. Because natural resource-based communities, like OSWA, Forests Today and Forever, or MWM, attract people who are interested in natural resource management, friendship and camaraderie, like networking, can be a major reason that people remain a part of the group.

WOWnet: Small, Comfortable Groups

WOWnet is a different source of accessible information for many women. Interviewees believed that WOWnet's small groups are comfortable and fun because they lack competition. Carol said, "I wouldn't be asking some questions in a large group. I think the size of a group makes a difference." WOWnet combines small peer groups and horizontal knowledge exchange, which appeals to many women.

Sometimes outside forestry experts are brought in for their proficiency in a particular area, and the knowledge sharing becomes more vertical. As Erin points out, "WOWNet was formed so that women can ask questions in a non-threatening manner. They can learn and not feel stupid to ask questions or have these guys talking all over their heads and everything. It's more [of] a safer environment." Josephine agreed that, "It's a good idea to take that element of men away because then the women are freer to talk."

Because WOWnet participants are almost exclusively women, the physical space of meetings and tours are safe from gender roles. Women become unexceptional because female participation is the norm.

Jennifer, who believes that WOWnet is a "safety net," said, "Having a support group and having women with different experiences and different attitudes, different ways of accomplishing the same purposeâ [the] infusion of confidence by these women has been a lifesaver." Jennifer also spoke of the confidence she gains because of her role as mentor. The diverse interests of women in WOWnet and the generally horizontal approach are viewed more favorably by many interviewees.

NRC: Having a Voice

Interviewees, particularly those involved with OSWA, noted the importance of the political support that OSWA provides its members. By staying informed about the current issues affecting land ownership, women can be sure that their management actions comply with the most current legislation. When they have political representation, women feel they can influence forest policies.

WOWnet: The Social Aspect

Most interviewees who mentioned the social aspect of WOWnet valued their group experiences. Interviewees developed friendships based on shared interests. Josephine said her goal was "to connect with the other women. Maybe make friendships with other women who have a common interest of the land and how to preserve this land and pass it on to someone else."

At meetings, there is usually some planned social time, either a potluck meal or roundtable introductions. There is also unstructured social time, like walks while touring someone's forest. These social times facilitate the development of deeper friendships.

Some interviewees strongly identified as WOWnet members and a part of the WOWnet community. Jean said that in building a relationship with other members through the small group, "You know that they're intelligent and informed." She feels that she can get to know other women better, feel less apprehensive about asking questions, and she knows that there is mutual respect because there is an understanding of other people in the WOWnet community. Sylvia agreed, saying "I think that it is valuable to know each other. It's valuable to be able to say, 'I could call this person and say, do you know who I can talk to about whatever?' And then I could see the emotional support."

For some, WOWnet can be too social and, therefore, unproductive. Brianna does not consider herself a member of WOWnet. She said:

I think the idea [of WOWnet] is a very good idea. How many women end up in situations where they're left with something and they have no idea how to manage or anything?... If you can get women together to be productive, more power to everybody. [W]omen are not productive when they get together.

For Brianna, the very nature of women's interaction can be unproductive. Sylvia, who believes that there is value in the friendships developed through WOWnet, agreed with Brianna that it is "a little bit of a social organization." She said, "We kind of sit around and have soup and bread and we don't know what we're doing." While the friendships and emotional support add value to her experiences with WOWnet, she believes that sometimes the environment at meetings may be too unfocused.

NRC: Barriers to Involvement

For some women, a major barrier to involvement with organizations is the comfort level they feel with other members. Elaine enjoys attending forest tours, but she does not feel as comfortable attending Extension classes. Sylvia, whose husband is involved with OSWA, also believes that information at her local OSWA meetings can sometimes be inaccessible. Similar sentiments may have contributed to the creation of WOWnet because, as Emily said, "it would be good to have the doors opened a little bit and help [women] get their feet wet in forestry."

Money for annual dues can be a barrier to involvement with other natural resource-based communities for women. For others the costs associated with travel can be a barrier. Some women have little time to be involved with different groups. While both time and money were mentioned as barriers to involvement, these barriers were generally not perceived to be significant. This may be because the perceived rewards outweigh the time and financial costs. For other women, the political agenda of certain natural resource communities is a major obstacle.

In contrast, women liked that involvement with WOWnet is free, that members can participate as much or as little as they like, and that there is no political agenda.

WOWnet: Inclusiveness and the Woman's Perspective

Because of its female perspective, some women view WOWnet more favorably than they do other Extension or forestry communities. The female perspective refers to both the kind of knowledge and the exchange of information between women, or women-centric knowledge. For example, Anna spoke about using a chainsaw, "designed for a guy with shoulders, and women, the sense of gravity is a whole lot lower, so I want to talk with [WOWnet] about running a chainsaw." Anna also believes that forestry topics, in general, are different when they come from a female perspective. "Like if they talk about women managing woodlots, or women and chainsaws, or women pruning trees. I'm sure that a lot of the information comes through the men, and I expect that if it hasn't, that it will get filtered through a woman's viewpoint."

Amy specifically joined WOWnet, "Because it was women. I figured the approach would be more geared towards what we want to know." In her case, she believes that women may need to access different kinds of knowledge than men. This may have to do either with gender differences in management objectives or with ways in which women navigate a world built by men. For some, WOWnet has been a critical source of information and networking. It can be a first step, because of the accessibility of the information and the palatability of the delivery, in learning how to manage a forest.

Discussion

While women are involved in a variety of natural resource-based communities, WOWnet is special to many Oregon women. WOWnet meetings are free, advertised in local and free newspapers, and without overt political agendas. WOWnet meetings also take a small group, praxis-based approach where women make connections with other women who are also interested in forestry, which may account for WOWnet's appeal to women with varied interests, from diverse backgrounds. Topics covered at meetings focus on women-centric knowledge, transmitted in a female-friendly fashion. This value-added difference may also account for WOWnet's attraction.

In order to work with women, Extension programs must develop two aspects of women-centric knowledge. One aspect specifically pertains to the need for women to learn different information than men. This need for women-centric knowledge may result from gender differences in management or knowledge gaps due to traditional paternal transfers of knowledge. Women-centric knowledge also deals with the process of knowledge transfer from women to women. This aspect specifically relates to a horizontal, praxis-based sharing of knowledge that values all experiences, values, and opinions. By supporting women new to forestry and focusing more on women-centric knowledge as we see in WOWnet, forestry can become more inclusive of women with diverse interests and backgrounds.

WOWnet is not a perfect model, but it is providing what many women landowners in Western Oregon need. WOWnet was created with the collaboration of several women woodland owners, from the ground up. Extension programming for women must involve women throughout the creation and implementation processes if it aims to successfully cater to women's needs and capacities. Programming that incorporates women-centric knowledge can positively affect women's empowerment and increase Extension effectiveness (Rivera & Corning, 1990).

Future research could examine how WOWnet compares to other women-focused natural resource organizations (Barbercheck et al., 2009). Women's natural resource-based groups are a recent phenomenon both in the U.S. and internationally. Studies of WOWnet and women's groups in other developed nations (Brandth & Haugen, 2000) would also be informative because collective case studies can help us understand what is occurring on a broader scale, both theoretically and practically (Stake, 1994).

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