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From Cook to Community Leader: Women's Leadership at Highlander Research and Education Center

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Keywords: highlander, women, activists, social movements

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to uncover the roles of the women of Highlander Research and Education Center and analyze how these women influenced not only the curriculum but also the institutional structure of Highlander. Robnett's (1997) concept of bridge leader provided the theoretical framework for data analysis.

The story of history is all too often the story of great men. Even institutions dedicated to social change are not exempt from this tendency. Robnett (1997) has highlighted how this played out in the Civil Rights Movement in which agencies expressly designed for change and equality mirrored the injustices in society within their own ranks.

The same is true for what is arguably the most admired social-change institution in the field of adult education. Highlander Research and Education Center is the primary example of an adult education institution which works for social justice. Highlander has worked steadily to fight various forms of injustice for over seven decades; yet the story that is told is one of a great man, Myles Horton, one of its' founders. Although he was a great man, he was not the only great person who was there. The research will try to tell the story not of a great man, but of the great women who affected this institution.

Despite these women's profound and far-reaching actions, the story of the contribution of women is always told as an anecdote or a slight embellishment on the story of the great man. The actions of these women have been eclipsed by the need to tell the "Highlander Story" as a great man narrative. There has not been a history written that puts women at the center of the narrative.

Purpose

This study does not deal with Myles Horton. We need a study which puts these women at the center of the narrative. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to uncover the roles of the women of Highlander and how these women influenced not only the curriculum but also the institutional structure of Highlander. The research questions are:

1. What are the roles that women played at Highlander?
2. How did these women's actions impact the curriculum and institutional structure of Highlander?

Theoretical Framework

Although this is an inductive study in which my primary goal was to let the data talk, my research was not without an orientation. Perhaps the most important organizing concept for me as I approached this work was drawn directly from the work of Robnett (1997) and the notion of bridge leader. Robnett (1997) conducted a qualitative, historical study in order to uncover the leadership roles of women in the Civil Rights Movement and concluded that the gendered roles

of women in the movement led to its success. Through this analysis, Robnett (1997) discovered the ways in which gendered roles and tasks formed two tiers of leadership. Robnett (1997) posits that women filled the role of “bridge leader,” connecting national or regional leadership to local constituents. She defines bridge leaders as community activists who used a variety of strategies to “foster ties between the social movement and the community” (Robnett, 1997, p. 19).

Robnett states, “bridge leaders did not simply deposit a message to potential followers; rather, they engaged others in dialectic relationship, allowing for individual reconstructions of identities and interpretations of action” (Robnett, 1997, p. 198). She attributes much of the success of the civil rights movement to the establishment of this “two tier” level of leadership which provided the movement with strong, educated and experienced leaders at both levels of leadership. Robnett (1997) also suggests that emotion should be analyzed in the context of social relations. These findings are based upon an analysis of differences in leadership roles due to gender. For the purposes of this study as well as Robnett’s work, gender is a social construct which delimits roles and responsibilities for women and men within a society. Robnett’s findings directed me to attend to the roles of women and to the ways in which they may have contributed to Highlander’s innovative educational practices and continued success. Therefore, as I approached both the data collection and data analysis, this idea of bridge leader was uppermost in my mind. This led me to look specifically for instances in the data that illustrated this in the specific context of Highlander.

Method

This research stems from collaboration between me and the Highlander staff. In May 2006, I offered to assist Susan Williams, Highlander’s education coordinator, with a history timeline project created to tell the story of Highlander for their 75th anniversary celebration fall 2007. In order to prepare to conduct interviews for this history project, I conducted a thorough review of past studies of Highlander and found that most of the literature did not discuss nor analyze the work of the women of Highlander. After reviewing the findings of Robnett’s (1997) investigation of the critical role of women in the Civil Rights Movement, I determined that a focus upon the role of women at Highlander exploring previously unexamined leadership roles and roles assignment at Highlander could be a fruitful and informative study. When I shared this interest with Williams and the current women staff at Highlander, they voiced excitement about a project which directly focuses upon the women of Highlander; therefore, I interviewed only women for my part of the timeline project.

In order to address the research questions a variety of data sources were collected and analyzed. Data sources included in-depth interviews with Highlander’s women educators and staff members, analysis of women’s correspondence from the 1930s and 1940s, review and analysis of video and audio-taped workshops and examination of educational materials used in the workshops. The data were analyzed using an iterative process of continuous coding of interviews and analysis of educational materials. Williams assisted me to construct a purposeful, theoretical sample (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in order to select workshop participants which represent the diversity of age, organizations, locations and time periods.

Findings

Women have had a profound impact upon the work of Highlander. The work of these women falls into two categories: “official” and “uncovered.” The official category relates to the

ways in which the women of Highlander and the official histories of Highlander identify “important” women and women’s roles at Highlander. These official roles are part of the known story and the traditional narrative of Highlander’s history. Although they are mentioned in some of the literature, they are not analyzed nor are they even described in much detail. The uncovered category relates to those women and women’s roles whose story has not previously been known.

Official Roles

I found that, most often, women working at Highlander were hired to be educators or cooks. In addition, in both my interviews and archived interviews and in some of the literature, there are acknowledgements of the ways in which women have shaped Highlander’s educational methodology through their cultural work. In the 1994 Women’s Workshop, the participants discussed the ways in which these roles were shaped by society’s gender roles. They also renamed and expanded the official story of the cook to a fuller story of the caregiver who not only cooked but also worked to create the hospitable and welcoming environment. So, the official women’s roles are: women as educators, women as caregivers and women as cultural workers.

Like any social institution, Highlander is shaped by the society and culture in which it resides. Even though Zilla Hawes (1932) discusses the ideal of equality between the sexes in a letter (archival data, 1932), she states that she is the only one cooking for “the boys” and she hopes that some of the “new boys” will bring a wife, sister or girlfriend who can help with the cooking and the cleaning. So, from the beginning, women struggled with traditional gender roles while working at Highlander. My interviews with women educators working at Highlander in the 1940s and 1960s reveal similar struggles. They are hired to cook, but, shortly after their arrival, they take on roles which challenge traditional models of “appropriate” women’s work. The roles of these women as founders, innovators and leaders is largely unexplored and has only begun to be discussed recently at Highlander.

Uncovered Roles

Analysis of archival records of the 1930s and 1940s led me to look for previously unidentified women’s roles. In Zilla Hawes writings, I found evidence of three unacknowledged and unrecognized women’s roles: founders, innovators and leaders. First, Zilla Hawes was listed on Highlander’s Charter. Her letters welcome workers coming to the new Highlander Folk School. This includes Jim Dombrowski who is sometimes included in the list of founding members. In addition to her letters which complain about her cooking and cleaning responsibilities, there are also many letters which indicate she contributed to shaping the mission of Highlander. It is clear that she was a founder, leader and innovator at Highlander.

Expanding the traditional narrative beyond “Myles Horton as the founder” to include those women and men who worked to establish Highlander Folk School, leads to the inclusion of not only Zilla Hawes but also Lilian Johnson and May Justus. Lilian Johnson allowed Myles Horton and Don West to use her home and her land, but she did not disappear. There is extensive correspondence documenting her involvement in the mission of Highlander in those early years. Johnson had a history of supporting progressive educational efforts. In 1925, she hired May Justus and Vera Campbell to teach children during the day and adults in the evenings.

They both were involved with Highlander from its inception. Justus served on the board for many years. In an interview with Wigginton (1992), she recalls:

After Myles and Don came, we had a group that met in the public school and they organized a garden co-op Then Mom Horton, Myles' mother had a sewing co-op and ... they marketed things in cities.... Then there was folk music and that was entirely Highlander. Zilphia Horton, Myles' wife, was an accomplished musician and ... after, she came, the interest in music grew. (p. 75-76)

May Justus served on the board for years, providing connections to the local community and offering her expertise and sense of mission to shape Highlander.

While they stated (Glen, 1996) that the inclusion of culture was a part of the curriculum and methodology, in the first few years of the Highlander, Hawes, Dombrowski and Horton struggled to adapt their classical education to fit the needs of local labor organizers and community activists. In 1934, Zilphia Johnson arrived at Highlander to attend a six-week workshop for labor educators (Crawford, 1990, Glen, 1994). She had planned to attend this workshop and go work with a local union. She never left. Five months after her arrival, Johnson and Myles Horton were married. Johnson had just completed a degree in Music and Drama and she applied this expertise to Highlander's labor education programs. While Horton had desired to include music, art and drama in the educational methodology of HFS, neither he nor any of his Cooper Union colleagues had any experience or training in this. In fact, the earliest classes at Highlander resembled college courses in which they discussed Socrates and ancient labor education. Zilphia's arrival and expertise radically changed this. Testimony from staff who worked at HFS at that time, attest to the ways in which she could adapt music and drama for the students (Women's Workshop Tapes, 1994). Not only did she introduce songs and plays to workshop participants, but she also taught them how to write their own songs and plays which they then used on the strike line or in labor education with their own union local. The use of music and drama was so successful, Highlander became known as "the singing labor college" (Glen, 1996). Zilphia Horton's contribution to Highlander is mentioned frequently in the traditional narrative of Highlander, but it has not been analyzed. Her expertise in music and theater establish her as one of the first innovators in education.

In fact, in each decade, there appears to be women who significantly impacted the educational methodology of Highlander. The following bulleted list describes just some of the innovators and leaders of who shaped Highlander's institutional culture, educational methodology and its mission over the years:

- In the 1930s, Zilphia Johnson Horton brought music and drama to Highlander thus transforming the educational methodology.
- In the 1940s, Mary Lawrence constantly adapted and improved labor workshops to incorporate indigenous wisdom through constant evaluation and innovation.
- Septima Clark created the most influential and successful education program in Highlander's history in 1956, in which she developed radical educational methodologies similar to those espoused by Freire a decade later.
- June Rostan brought her experience as a working class feminist to Highlander thus incorporating specifically women's issues and women's needs into the curricula for the first time in the 1970s.
- In the 1980s, Vicki Creed and Linda Martin challenged the hierarchical power structure of Highlander by utilizing a collaborative leadership model.

- In the 1990s and 2000s, Suzanne Pharr and Pam McMichael became the first women to be appointed executive directors of Highlander. They broadened the direction of Highlander through their work to build coalitions across race, gender, creed, generation, sexuality and ethnicity.

Interviews with women working at Highlander in the 1940s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s and analysis of the 1978 and 1994 Women's Workshops revealed that women challenged the patriarchal structure at Highlander. Generally, they came to Highlander with significant experience as community leaders. They not only worked as cooks, educators and secretaries, they also helped to build not only the mission but also the actual physical buildings at Highlander. From the beginning they offered their leadership skills as board members and educators. Their expertise, passion and enthusiasm shaped Highlander from the very beginning in spite of traditional gender role assignments. These women's challenges affected the curriculum as well as the institutional structure of Highlander.

Significance

The significance of the study is twofold. These are both practical and scholarly. Organizations dedicated to social change can learn from this research. They can realize how, at those times they are trying to solve one problem, they may be perpetuating another. This study also highlights what women bring to these organizations. Often those involved in successful social movements only tell the story of successful campaigns and fruitful relationships. The story of struggling with power dynamics is not often told and frequently not overtly addressed during the social movement itself. The story of the women of Highlander can assist workers in other social movement organizations in dealing with their internal power struggles as well.

This study contributes to our understanding of the history of Highlander by reframing the telling of the history from the "great man" story of Highlander to one which focuses upon the communities of (in this case) women who shaped it as an institution and created its unique educational methodology. This study also makes a contribution to the field of social movements. Until recently, much of social movement literature analyzed formal leadership roles which were mostly filled by men. An analysis of the roles played by the women of Highlander should contribute to our understanding of the function of bridge leaders in other social movements and social movement organizations.

In addition, this research contributes to the field of Women's Studies. Many researchers who study the women's movement struggle to reframe the common periodization of the movement into first, second and third waves. These have been critiqued by women of color who suggest that these periodizations focus solely upon white and middle class women's struggle while ignoring the continued activism of poor women and women of color throughout the 20th century (Roth, 2004). In *Separate Roads to Feminism*, Roth (2004) chronicles how Black women and Chicana women negotiated feminism within race and culture-based civil rights movements. Her study documents the ways in which women of color incorporate the struggle against sexism while working within these movements. This study of the women of Highlander contributes to women's studies literature by chronicling the work of women in Appalachia and the South and how they also incorporated feminist principles in their work towards economic and racial justice.

Finally, the study contributes to the field of adult education by adding to our understanding of Highlander itself. Adult educators take pride in being a part of field which

supports social justice. Highlander is one of the few social justice-focused institutions of adult education which we study as adult educators and offer as an example of adult education as social action. It is a unique adult education institution which has educated activists for over seventy-five years. It is critical that we, as adult educators, continue to document and analyze this institution in order to further our understandings of the connections between education, community organizing and social movements.

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