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# Asilomar: A Historical Study of the Intersection of Place-Based Learning and Women's Leadership Development

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Asilomar: A Historical Study of the Intersection of Place-based Learning and Women's

Leadership Development

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Scholarly research on human resource development (HRD) has largely focused on the process and outcomes of learning while paying little attention to both history and the role of geographical place (i.e., physical context) in learning. Callahan (2010) noted the importance of historical studies for HRD and suggested that history provides a vehicle through which the field can reflect on its own practices. She described historical manuscripts as a “class of literature” (Munslow, 1997) that explain the past by accounting for continuity and change through the use of innovative conceptual frameworks as lenses (Jordanova, 2000)” (p. 311). Yet, there are few historical studies in the HRD field that examine core HRD practices such as leadership development. In addition, the concept of *place* is now recognized as increasingly important for understanding a broad range of human development issues (Cresswell, 2004) although few studies in HRD theoretically incorporate place. Nissley (2011) specifically urged HRD scholars to explore the link between learning and location. This study answers these calls by analyzing the intersection among place, history, and a growing HRD area of inquiry—women’s leadership development.

The geographical context for this study is Asilomar, a 107 acre parcel of land on the central coast of California comprising a State Beach and Conference Center. The park and all facilities are owned by the State of California, with the conference center run under concessionaire license. Today Asilomar is largely known as a tourism destination, conference facility, and family-friendly resort located close to the many attractions of the Monterey Peninsula and nearby Big Sur Coast. Yet, Asilomar played a significant and largely unrecognized role in the history of HRD, and more specifically, women’s leadership

development. This paper examined the establishment and operation of Asilomar as a Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) training center from 1913 to 1934 and its subsequent role as a noted place for women's leadership development. The purpose of this study was to adopt a sense of place theoretical frame to explore the history of Asilomar as an example of an overlooked aspect of the establishment of formal leadership development programs for women in the United States. The overarching research question was: How does Asilomar serve as an example of an important place in the history of leadership development for women?

### **Method**

This paper used an historical research method framed from an interpretative approach. A number of methodological approaches to historical studies exist reflecting the this method has the "ability to analyze particular episodes, or empirical cases, and to explain broad-gauged patterns of social, cultural, political, and economic, and intellectual activity" (Smith & Lux, 1993, p. 595). Our method followed an adopted version of the three-step process described by Smith and Lux: (1) investigation method for the discovery and identification of historical facts; (2) synthesis of findings; and (3) interpretation to address the implications of the narrative for the research question.

Data collection included review and summary of a variety of books, articles, and published documents including pamphlets, promotional materials, websites, and reports related to the foundation and operation of Asilomar. In addition to literature review using Google Scholar, archives from local libraries in Monterey County, CA were searched for additional information found in newspaper articles, unpublished histories, and annual reports. Lastly, we conducted in-person interviews with the retired park ranger who served as the historian for Asilomar to learn more about the establishment and type of programs that operated at Asilomar.

## Results

The YWCA saw rapid growth and expansion throughout the United States following its founding in 1858. The goals of the YWCA were to “draw together for mutual help, sympathy, and instruction Young Women of all classes” and to “promote the moral, social and intellectual well-being of all through the various agencies” (Beaumont, 2014, p. 464). By the early 1900s YWCA facilities were found in most large US cities providing housing as well as educational and vocational classes in practical subjects such as money management, sewing, cooking, and typing.

The YWCA staff, students, and supporters met periodically at Regional Leadership Conferences to discuss women's issues of that time – and to find solutions, such as breaking into career fields dominated by men. The first YWCA Western Regional Conference was held at Mills College near Oakland, California in 1897 then at a hotel near Santa Cruz (1900-1911). Wealthy philanthropist and strong supporter of the western regional YWCA, Mrs. Phoebe Apperson Hearst then proposed a permanent “conference grounds” to hold annual conferences and other programs. With considerable influence from Hearst and several other women considered patrons of the YWCA, a section of land was acquired and Julia Morgan, considered to be one of the first and most important female American architects, was selected to design the buildings (Quacchia, 2005). Morgan designed and oversaw construction of 16 buildings on the property. Constructed in an Arts and Crafts style to foster a strong sense of place to create a nature informed built environment to facilitate the learning and spiritual development purpose of Asilomar.

The opening conference sessions for Asilomar were on Sunday, August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1913. Classes and lectures – on topics ranging from the international work of the YWCA to the power of the

American common schools – were scheduled over the next ten days. While some of the week was devoted to Bible study and training for missionary work there were also a wide variety of formal lectures and informal talks from women in leadership positions as well as recreation and social activities (Hunt, 1963). Asilomar was able to accommodate 500 people and continued to host the annual conference as well as several summer camps attracting women from both professions and university study. A report by Margaret Hall (1921) described the attraction for attendance from the participants' perspective:

we have come to realize that by virtue of our professional standing, we will be called upon to assume positions of leadership and responsibility, and that we cannot do this creditably unless the latent powers of leadership and initiative have been developed. (p, 875).

Asilomar was never financial self-supported and with the deepening Great Depression the YWCA decided to close Asilomar in 1939. Yet, it is important to note that a legacy of learning has continued to permeate the operation of Asilomar after the ending of YWCA ownership and transfer to the State of California in 1958. Research and higher education institutions have traditionally relied on Asilomar as a preferred site for important conferences (Hunt, 1963). Continuing the primary role of Asilomar as a place to train and develop girls and women to become leaders, women's groups and conferences have continued to convene in this beautiful and unique learning environment. For example, the Asilomar Leadership Skills Seminar started in 1984 was created by leaders in the American Association of Women in Community Colleges. In addition, Asilomar leaders sought out and worked with the Women and Leadership Affinity Group of the International Leadership Association (ILA) to host a global conference held onsite in 2013 for scholars, practitioners, and leaders. This was one of many events designed to

celebrate Asilomar's 100 year anniversary with its rich history in women's leadership development. Conference materials stated: "Dialogue will be heightened as we meet together at the Asilomar Conference Grounds, with its rich history and unique connection with nature. The peaceful, rejuvenating, rustic setting will provide distinctive opportunities for learning, discussion, networking, reflection, and renewal" (ILA, 2015, para. 1). This perhaps suggests that Asilomar is recognized as more than simply a convenient conference location and rather it may serve as an example of place conscious education that occurs at the intersection of landscape and learning (Gruenewald, 2003).

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

The historical analysis of Asilomar highlights intersections between the natural and built landscape and its connection to learning and women's leadership development. This supports the contention of Nissley (2011) for deeper exploration of the emerging conceptualization of the links between learning and landscape. Our findings support this emerging theme of HRD research as it explores the connections between theories of place and learning by framing a historiographical study in a specific geographical location while also embracing the meaning making processes that guide learning and leadership development in non-work settings.

Although there has been research published on women's leadership in specific countries and regions (e.g., Ngunjiri & Madsen, 2015), literature linking a particular physical setting (i.e., place) to women's leadership development programs and initiatives is scarce. There have, however, been a host of studies that have explored the environments of women-only leadership programs and the settings that lead to learning experiences. For example, Debebe (2009) specifically explored the critical role of environment in learning in a women-only classroom. She concluded that transformational learning can occur in the context of leadership development

training through the merging a women-only learning environment and gender-sensitive teaching and learning methodologies. The theory of place can clearly matter in certain learning situations, and this paper addresses one such topic and location.

In terms of HRD literature, our finding support the position advocated by Bierema (2009) and others (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014) to reject contemporary “HRD’s narrow masculine rational orientation that is endangering the field’s relevance and impact” (Bierema, 2009, p. 86) to consider a broader perspective of the development of human resources within a specific historical and cultural context. Further, this study of the leadership development associated with Asilomar challenges the traditional narrative on the origin and historical influences of HRD (Alagaraja, & Dooley, 2003; Ruona, 2001). Framed with elements of the theory of pedagogy of place, this paper identified Asilomar as a context for future historical study of women’s leadership development, training in response to social change, and the role of HRD in the movement for social and economic change.



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