

The Journey of Support for Women in Agriculture

Michelle Borges

Oregon State University

COMM 516: Ethnography of Communication

Dr. Elizabeth Root

March 20, 2024

Introduction

According to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), there were about 51% of U.S. farming operations with at least one woman operator accounted for in 2019 (U.S. Women, 2024). Women have continued to increase a forward facing dominance in the agricultural industry by pursuing more leadership roles, entrepreneurship opportunities, and higher education. Women are advocating for themselves within the industry through groups like American Agri-Women, Annie's Projects, American National CattleWomen, and Women for Agriculture (Prominent Groups, 2020).

Women in agriculture can bring new perspectives and skills to the industry. Women are the backbone of the industry but oftentimes not at the forefront. With an increase of support and empowerment, women can increase their contributions in land ownership, finance, and technology. Despite the several benefits, women in agriculture face many challenges such as small farm size, land access issues, lower farm income, and childcare struggles.

Women are paving the future in agriculture ranging from the conference room to the production industry. Women are the driving forces of sustainability and community development to create a more prosperous agricultural industry (Casale, 2023). In this research, there are two research questions to address the level of support within the industry.

Research Questions

1. What ways do women in agriculture need to feel supported?
2. What skills have I developed to support women in agriculture?

The first question is to address how the interviewed women need to feel more supported with their identity. The second question is to address the autoethnography portion of this research on how I have developed the skills to support women in agriculture.

The purpose of this study is to navigate the strategies women in agriculture need to feel supported in their personal and professional lives. The second purpose is to reflect on how I have developed a skillset to support women in agriculture. Support is the key focus on addressing the participants' need for support and my own personal experience with support.

Literature Review

Women in Agriculture

Women are pursuing more entrepreneurship roles to show the knowledge and authority within an agriculture career. Women have challenged the rural gender dynamics by moving from a position of “farm help” to an “agricultural authority” (Wright, 2014). In rural areas, women were more likely to diversify business activities and create social ties with the community (Meutia et al., 2022). Women have a high sense of trust with agriculture-related duties and connecting with consumers.

Women have a leading role with community connection in agriculture due to the increase of involvement in agriculture (Savage, et al., 2023). Barbieri (2008) discovered that women are more likely to earn less than male operators due to the limitation of resources and disadvantages in the industry (Barbieri, 2008). In the U.S. women-operated farms earn an average of \$35,000 less compared to operations owned by men (Halim, et al., 2020). Women play an important part in the development of enterprises in a business, but there is limited access to financial resources (Barbieri, 2008). Women can bring new perspectives to bridge the gap of agriculture and the community (Savage, et al., 2023).

Women have a motivated entrepreneurial attitude with agriculture. In the past, women's identities have been tied to a role as mother, wife, and caregiver, but current research shows women have more responsibilities with business decision-making (Savage et al., 2022). A study by Savage and Barbieri (2020) shows women's values go beyond their own operation. Women care for the well-being of their local community, the farming environment, and the business (Savage et al., 2022). Women's roles as farmers and entrepreneurs contribute to their personal, community, and business aspirations (Savage et al., 2022).

Women have a strong involvement in agriculture production and entrepreneurship (Halim et al., 2020). With gender inequalities in agriculture, women have a hard time accessing resources such as land, technology, and inputs. Women are a driving factor to the longevity and success of agriculture because of the personal and professional goals to create a strong industry.

Support System and Network

Mentors and a support system can help women thrive in their career to help break down the barriers of systemic challenges (Kleihauer, et al., 2012). A supportive mentor can help women persevere through the obstacles faced in personal and professional lives. In a qualitative study about six women's journeys about becoming Deans in an agricultural university, demonstrated how important mentors were for career success. Each woman expressed in her interview that a mentor recognized their gifts and talents to encourage them to pursue higher education and leadership positions. Professional advancements were mainly influenced by the power of a mentor (Kleihauer, et al., 2012).

A strong, guiding mentor can advance the experience and opportunity of career success (Mcilongo, 2021). Faculty with effective mentoring will have greater self-confidence, career satisfaction, productivity, and self-efficacy in teaching, research, and clinical skills (Cardel, et

al., 2020). Mentors can help inspire women to be leaders in their organizations and to see the potential women may not be able to see in themselves. Women face many challenges in the workplace compared to men that advice and guidance from a mentor can help women navigate this challenge. Leadership development and career advancement are two key components mentors can assist (Mcilongo, 2021).

Women in Academia Challenges

In the U.S., women constitute half of those earning PhDs and 51.5% of assistant professors but women are generally less likely to achieve tenure compared to men (Cardel, et al., 2020). Women are mainly under-represented in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, and medicine (STEMM) programs. Women in academia leadership roles have the power to influence gender diversity to promote the highest profits, productivity, and creativity (Cardel, et al., 2020).

In the academia world, women face many challenges due to the underrepresentation within the field (Eslen-Ziya, 2022). Some challenges women face in the academia world are receiving less rewards and are promoted slower than their male counterparts. Women typically have a more challenging time gaining “reputational status.” These challenges may be different depending on the department and field of study but these are general challenges within the academia world (Eslen-Ziya, 2022).

Another specific challenge women in academia face is the effect of parenthood on womens’ careers (Beaudry, et al., 2023). Parenthood creates more demand for childcare with more time spent on housework compared to men. Women in academics have less time to focus on research and other career advancement opportunities because of the committee for childcare.

Social policies are recommended to create a better work-life-balance system to create a more equitable world in academia (Beaudry, et al., 2023).

Methodology

A branch of qualitative research, autoethnography combines characteristics of *autobiography* and *ethnography* (Ellis, et al., 2011). To break down the word of autoethnography, it is a personal experience in a cultural context through a systematic analysis. Autoethnography can be described as a process and product. The art of storytelling with detailed descriptions is used to create a dynamic story to add value to create personal or social change (Ellis, et al., 2011).

Autoethnography tries to bridge the gap between science and art by contributing to the literature through conducted research in a narrative style (Ellis, et al., 2011). The main concepts of autoethnographies with cultivating reciprocity is to embrace vulnerability, make contributions to existing scholarship, and provide input on cultural practices (Holman, 2013).

Autoethnography draws insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, emotions, and values (Poulos, 2021). Autoethnography is an observational data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research to focus on human social and cultural life (Poulos, 2021).

Data Collection and Analysis

Throughout the winter term of an Ethnography of Communication class (COMM 516), I collected personal data of my identity as a woman in agriculture. The first assignment titled *Show and Tell* was to choose a physical artifact to represent my identity. The artifact I chose to represent my identity was a sweatshirt from Wandering Maverick Boutique that says “Support

Women in Agriculture” on the front. I chose this sweatshirt because it represents the support and advocates for women in agriculture by being a walking billboard to increase awareness.

The second data collection assignment was titled *Memory Narrative*, the goal of this assignment was to reflect upon a memory when my identity felt genuine and authentic. I reflected on a time in my undergraduate during senior year giving a speech during a Women’s Leadership Conference on campus. Part of the speech was discussing my experience as a woman in agriculture and with being one of the first students to graduate in the new agricultural communications major at California State University, Chico. This memory reflected my identity as a woman in agriculture.

The final personal data collection assignment was titled *Ritual and Routines*. In this assignment, I discussed my own rituals and routines with my identity such as surrounding myself around livestock animals and appreciating the fresh, local food agriculture produces. With my knowledge of agriculture, I understand the process of agriculture production and all the steps it takes to have fresh food for the growing population.

In addition to my personal data collection, there were three interviews conducted with the same identity as a woman in agriculture. Two of the interviews were conducted in-person and the other interview was conducted over Zoom. All participants are faculty members at Oregon State University in the College of Agriculture. Participant A is originally from South Carolina where she grew up in a non-traditional agriculture setting where her family was not involved in the agriculture industry. She brings a new perspective with her identity as a woman in agriculture since she discovered it during her graduate program compared to growing up with this identity her entire life. Participant B is from California where she grew up in a more traditional approach with father involved as a high school agriculture teacher. Before becoming a professor at OSU,

she was a high school agriculture teacher. Participant C, interview conducted over zoom, is originally from California but lives in Montana, she grew up in the most traditional environment with her family directly involved in farming and ranching in Northern California. She provides an experience with her identity of living in multiple states including California, Texas, and Montana.

During each interview, participants were able to provide as much information each felt comfortable with. There were 14 set research questions conducted in a semi-structured format. An interview questionnaire was developed with associated questions relating to the two main central research questions. Semi-structured interviews are in-depth interviews where participants have to answer open-ended questions (Jamshed, 2014). Every interview was recorded to make it easier for the researcher to focus on the interview content and verbal prompts. After each interview, the transcription generates a “verbatim transcript” of the interview through a platform called Otter (Jamshed, 2014). Each participant was recruited based on availability and convenience sampling. A common method for selecting participants is called “purposive” or “convenience” sampling which means selecting participants based on research questions and receiving the best information to help guide the phenomenon of the study (Sargeant, 2012). The researcher and participants are housed in the same department of Agriculture Education and Agriculture Sciences at OSU. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes in length.

The academic setting swayed the interview with most of the questions answered in an academia context compared to a more industry focus and production agriculture approach. Each interview was coded using thematic analysis to find trending themes and categories to see similarities and differences within the data set. Thematic analysis is defined as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within data (Lawhaishy, 2023). Braun and Clarke

(2006) developed six steps of thematic analysis of becoming familiar with the data, generating codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and locating exemplars (Lawhaishy, 2023; Braun and Clarke, 2021)

Research Findings

By analyzing the data through thematic analysis, there were six themes that include Background Information, Misconceptions of Agriculture, Systemic Challenges, Women in Ag Support, Future of Women in Ag, and Community and Connection. With the six themes, three main categories were created of family relationships, professional relationships, and interpersonal relationships. The purpose of creating three main categories was to help analyze how the themes are similar or different. Initial takeaways from the data show that there are systematic challenges in society women face whether it be in the general context as a woman or a woman in agriculture, there is more of a lack of support in the academia setting compared to the industry (farm, ranch, or agribusiness), and Oregon is a more progressive state for supporting women in agriculture compared to other states.

Diving deeper into the first category of family relationships, the themes of personal background and misconceptions about agriculture fell into this category. For personal background, women growing up in a traditional family dynamics focused in agriculture tend to view their identity differently than a woman who came into agriculture later in her life. Examples of a traditional background include comments such as “I was born into a farming family so I have been around agriculture my entire life” and “I do not know if I was given much of a choice choosing agriculture as a career.” In a non-traditional background, a comment like “I was very late coming into my career in agriculture so it has always felt like a challenge” shows the struggle this participant feels not growing up in a traditional background. Depending on how

early the participants were exposed to the agriculture industry changed how they viewed themselves within the industry. There was more of a challenge for Participant A who did not grow up in the agriculture industry so she faces more challenges compared to the other participants.

For misconceptions about agriculture, comments such as “I get a lot of misconceptions about what I study” and “A bit of confusion but also a healthy amount of curiosity” show how individuals not directly involved in agriculture are unaware and unfamiliar with an academic or industry-related career. Participants explained that most conversations about misconceptions about agriculture were displayed when discussing their background and career with people unfamiliar with the industry. Participant C explained a time when she had to explain to her college roommates what her background and experience was with agriculture because they were unfamiliar this career path existed. Her roommates remained curious throughout her time during her undergraduate. Every industry and career has their own set of jargon, acronyms, culture, and norms so expressing curiosity is a great tool to help expand the awareness of women in agriculture.

The next category is professional relationships with themes of comparing to a male counterpart, discrimination, and academic support systems. Participants expressed that most of the questions asked about their career are centered around emotion-based questions starting with “how” and “why” compared to asking in a clear, straightforward way about their careers. Each participant said that they think emotion-based questions would not come up if they were a male in their profession. Examples of this theme of comparing to a male counterpart are “How do you feel about your position” and “I feel like I have to fight for things and prove myself more than

my male colleagues.” Emotion-based questions and the sense of having to prove oneself are examples of women being directly compared to a male counterpart.

Each participant expressed direct discrimination with their identity as a woman in agriculture. Participant A felt discrimination from another woman who was belittling her in her abilities of work ethic. She describes this as “ironic” because women should be there for each other for support and encouragement especially in an industry where gender inequality is present. Participant B was working an event for an internship and men attending the event asked why she was there and if she was with her boyfriend or husband. Once she expressed she was there for an internship, the men asked her for more coffee. Participant C was formerly a high school agriculture teacher and she would frequently receive calls from parents, specifically fathers questioning her teaching abilities for their sons. Participants mentioned it was difficult to decipher if the discrimination was made against their identity as a woman or as a woman in agriculture. Since agriculture is known to have less opportunities for women, discrimination can be a challenging step to overcome if there is a lack of resources and awareness for the work women do in the industry. Women face discrimination in some shape or form due to the lack of representation women traditionally have. Discrimination is present in the academia world and for women in agriculture.

The next theme of an academia support system demonstrated a highly supportive environment with a network of women encouraging participants to succeed. Specifically, in the agriculture communication field, it is mainly female-dominated so two of the participants expressed their high regard for the research teams, conferences, and other activities within this field being supportive. Participants expressed the collaborative relationship each has with their

network of other women in the same profession. When participants are surrounded by their network, they feel more supportive in their identities.

Moving to the next category of interpersonal relationships, participants elaborated with the theme of support. Women felt Oregon was a more inclusive environment and a great network of other women supporting each other for personal and professional success. Each participant displayed a growth mindset with an optimistic attitude towards the future of women in agriculture. Examples include “I am glad to be in a world with more women in agriculture,” “It is necessary to broaden our community to be more inclusive of other individuals,” and “Women are the leaders, movers, and shakers for the agriculture industry.” Each participant showed their excitement when discussing more women in leadership roles to help create change the industry needs. Participant C expressed that sharing women’s stories is one of the most powerful tools to prevent the feeling of isolation with their identity. She feels that the industry is changing and evolving with great strides with women pursuing their goals.

Since each of the participants are in the academic world, each one discussed the opportunities and experiences students deserve to create the most impact throughout their college careers. Each participant believes in a strong mentor system and support group to encourage students to reach their highest potential during college and in a future career. Communicating openly and asking questions, teaching self-promotion and branding ourselves in a way to highlight our work ethic and mindset is a way to advocate for women in agriculture.

Every participant shared their identity in thick details to paint a picture of their identity as a woman in agriculture and a woman in the academic world. Each interview was insightful with a variety of details to help answer the research questions guiding this study.

My experience in agriculture started when I was born. My parents were both high school agriculture teachers where they instilled in me the value of agriculture and education. Growing up, I was involved in youth-led organizations such as 4-H and the Future Farmers of America (FFA). I became an actively involved member pursuing leadership roles, joining various clubs, and participating in competitions throughout the state of California. My two older brothers pursued their college degrees in agriculture so I knew I had the same passion instilled in me.

My passion was shaped for agriculture through the leadership organizations I was a part of. This gave me the introductory knowledge of what careers and opportunities can look like in the industry. One of my favorite parts as a young child was watching the older girls be leaders in each of these organizations. I dreamed that I would be able to be like them as an influential leader and role model. I still have this same passion for women in leadership so I am constantly looking to network with women in the agriculture industry. I aspire to be an advocate for the industry to mitigate the challenges women face and to be the role model my younger self would look up to.

Focusing on the autoethnographic approach of this research, I have reflected the past winter term on what my identity means to me and my surroundings. Starting with the *Show and Tell* assignment, my sweatshirt symbolizes more to me because of the story I have the opportunity to share with individuals directly and indirectly involved in agriculture. Engagement and outreach is essential to bring awareness to the hard work and effort women are doing to create more space for their voices at the table from the farm to the board room. Being an advocate for women in agriculture, means so much more than a piece of clothing but I know I can use that to leave a lasting impact for women in agriculture support.

The power of a saying on my sweatshirt leaves a lasting impression on my community to demonstrate my passion for the agriculture industry. My voice can become united with others to create a strong network and community to ensure women belong in agriculture.

My *Memory Narrative* assignment allows me to reflect on what core memory with my women in agriculture identity. The spring of my senior year, I had the opportunity to speak at the “Women Like You” Leadership Symposium. This event embodies women empowerment and highlights the journeys of students, faculty, and staff. Leading up to this speech, I felt so anxious and nervous about performing in this speech about my life in front of a large audience. After the ten minute speech, I received the best positive compliments which gave me the validation to feel proud of my journey so far. I learned that hard work does pay off and my influence can leave a lasting impression on others.

My speech allowed me to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for the audience. My goal is to be the role model for the younger generations to show what a successful woman in agriculture can look like. Self-doubt and discouragement can easily happen especially with not feeling good enough within an industry with systemic gender challenges. This assignment reaffirmed my belief women belong in agriculture to be their authentic and genuine selves.

The last personal data collection was the *Rituals and Routines* assignment which demonstrates two key components of growing up around livestock animals and the appreciation of fresh, local food. Since I was a young child, I had the opportunity to grow up with a backyard full of farm animals ranging from horses, cows, and goats. This has been instrumental to my knowledge of the livestock industry with raising and showing my animals at the county fairs. This taught me a tremendous amount of responsibility and respect. I was responsible for ensuring

my animals had fresh feed and water while respecting those who farm for a living to contribute to the food supply. Growing up around livestock, I expanded my knowledge about how to care for an animal's needs, basic veterinarian practices, and the meat butchering process.

The extensive process food takes to reach our plates creates a story needing to be told. The hard work, time, and dedication for food to be easily accessible at grocery stores and restaurants shows the impact agriculture has on the world. My goal is to use my communication skills to be the liaison between producers and consumers to help share the journey of farm to fork. I want to educate consumers on where their food comes from to increase agricultural literacy and support for the industry.

Discussion and Conclusion

My experience growing up in a more traditional background shapes how I view my identity in the industry. With being born in the agriculture setting, it feels more of a second language rather than being a newcomer. Since I was a little girl, I knew I wanted to be a successful woman in agriculture so learning about the challenges women face now will prepare me when I reach the workforce. My goal is to break down the barriers of the stigmas and gender inequalities in agriculture to create a more inclusive environment.

I am fortunate enough to have a strong support system of women encouraging me to follow all of my dreams and aspirations. I would not be in the place that I am today as a first year master's student if my support system was not here. The value of support and mentorship are key components to continue to encourage women to pursue leadership roles in the academia world and industry. Empowered women encourage other women to do and feel the same way as themselves. Creating a culture of women empowerment is essential for women in agriculture to continue the path of success.

There is a disconnect between the academia world and the agriculture industry. There needs to be an increase of resources for all people no matter their gender and geographical location. Each of the participants and myself are fortunate enough to live in a state where it is more progressive but the systemic challenges live globally. The power of storytelling can help increase the sense of community for women to pursue higher leadership roles. Women should not feel alone in their profession because of the systemic challenges that are embedded in the workforce. Storytelling can be an avenue for women to create more collaborative relationships with the same lived experiences.

Circling back to the research questions, women in agriculture need to feel supported through an increase of resources, advocate for policies to promote gender equality, increase access to work opportunities, and better recognition for the work women are currently doing in their professions. There is not one single woman or group that can solve these challenges. It will take a full group of strong women to create change at the core where the challenges were created. The awareness and advocates are key steps to start to create change for women in agriculture and women in academia.

For my own autoethnographic research question, the skills I have developed to support women in agriculture is learning my power of influence and advocacy I can do through my university and leading into a future career. I can play the role of bridging the gap between current and future generations of women in agriculture to create a wide network for all women to have their voices heard and understood where the decisions are made for the industry. I need to use my voice and my support system to continue to thrive on the success women are currently creating and will be creating in the future. My influence plays a major role in finding ways to support women in agriculture.

Implications/Recommendations

An implication for this research is that I am a young student still in the university system. After my undergraduate, I started my master's program right after so I cannot personally compare my experience with the academia world and industry. Since I am young, I feel I have not been exposed to the systemic challenges such as promotions, feeling under-represented, and balancing a career as a mother with the childcare system. A student in the academia system serves as a safety net. This study would be interesting to revisit after a few years working in the industry and if I got my PhD in the coming years.

Another implication is each participant is housed in the same department in the College of Agriculture. There could be similar experiences between each woman since the administration and top leadership of the college are the same people. In this study, the sample size is small with three participants. To diversify this study, participants could be from the academia setting and the industry to compare and contrast between those two fields.

A future recommendation is to look deeper into the mentoring systems women in agriculture have and direct examples of what that mentor did to encourage career development and advancement. Another recommendation is to review academic policies and regulations to find the gaps on women receiving less opportunities and resources to better serve the academia world women are in.

Women in agriculture will continue to bring new perspectives, skills, and leadership to the industry. Providing more resources and support for women will continue to make the industry stronger from the farm to the boardroom. The women in the agriculture population and I will strive to break down the barriers and create an belonging environment for all voices to be heard and respected.

References

- Beaudry, C., Prozesky, H., St-Pierre, Mirnezami, S (2023). Factors that affect scientific publication in Africa—A gender perspective, *Frontiers in Research Metrics and Analytics*, **8**. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frma.2023.1040823>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. *SAGE*.
- Cardel, M., Dhurandhar E., Yarar-Fisher, C., Foster, M., Hidalgo, B., McClure, L., Pagoto, S., Brown, N., Pekmezi, D., Sharafeldin, N., Willig, A., Angelini, C., (2020). Turning Chutes into Ladders for Women Faculty: A Review and Roadmap for Equity in Academia. *Journal of Women's Health*. 721-733.
<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/jwh.2019.8027>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An Overview. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *12*(1), Art. 10.
- Eslen-Ziya, H., & Yildirim, T. M. (2022). Perceptions of gendered-challenges in academia: How women academics see gender hierarchies as barriers to achievement. *Gender, Work & Organization*, *29*(1), 301–308. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12744>
- Holman Jones, S., Adams, T., & Ellis, C. (2013). Introduction: Coming to know autoethnography as more than a method. In S. Holman Jones, T. E. Adams, & C. Ellis (Eds.) *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Excerpt, pp. 22-37). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Jamshed S. Qualitative research method-interviewing and observation. *J Basic Clin Pharm*. 2014 Sep;5(4):87-8. doi: 10.4103/0976-0105.141942. PMID: 25316987; PMCID: PMC4194943.

- Kleihauer, S., Stephens, C., Hart., W. (2012). Insights from Six Women on Their Personal Journeys to Becoming Deans of Agriculture: A Qualitative Study. *Journal of Leadership Education*. 11:1. https://journalofleadershiped.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/11_1_Kleihauer-Stephens-and-Hart.pdf
- Lawhaishy, Z. (2023). Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis - An Overview. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/thematic-analysis>
- Mcilongo, M., & Strydom, K. (2021, June). The significance of mentorship in supporting the career advancement of women in the public sector. *Science Direct*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07321>.
- Poulos, C. N. (2021). Conceptual foundations of autoethnography. In C. N. Poulos, *Essentials of autoethnography* (pp. 3–17). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000222-001>.
- Sargeant J. Qualitative Research Part II: Participants, Analysis, and Quality Assurance. *J Grad Med Educ*. 2012 Mar;4(1):1-3. doi: 10.4300/JGME-D-11-00307.1. PMID: 23451297; PMCID: PMC3312514.
- 7 of the most prominent groups for women in agriculture. (2020, May 7). AGDAILY. <https://www.agdaily.com/lifestyle/prominent-groups-for-women-in-agriculture/>.
- Wright, W., & Annes, A. (2014). Farm Women and Agritourism: Representing a New Rurality. *Sociologia Ruralis*, 2014, 23, pp.38 - 499. [ff10.1111/soru.12051](https://doi.org/10.1111/soru.12051)ff. Ffhal-01564767