

# **Anthropology of knowledge: Rural women and lifelace learning**

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## **Abstract**

A study of learning in rural women's daily life was carried out with the purpose of establishing a framework to interpret learning as a sociocultural practice in the rural context. The theoretical framework was constructed of the following concepts: lifelace learning, knowledge and phenomenological methodology. The empirical study followed a qualitative paradigm of narrative research. Participatory observation and interviews were used. The research target group were women in their late middle years (between 45 and 65 years of age), living in a rural environment. Data was collected from 2013 to 2016. We found that learning as experienced by our respondents is influenced by various factors, which can be understood as a whole or an ecology of learning that undergoes constant development. The ecology of learning contains various strategies, content and the patterns of social power, which in specific narrations make up a subjective knowledge network and, in the local environment, an emergent sociocultural knowledge network.

KEYWORDS: sociocultural practice, learning, local knowledge, rural, women

## **Introduction**

Anthropological studies of local knowledge and learning have their roots in Geertz's works (Geertz 1983), followed by other authors such as Antweiler (1998), Lave (2010; 2011), Linde (2009) and Fabian (2012). Studies were carried out in connection with symbolic anthropology or with practice theory. Modern studies, however, deal with the digital production of knowledge (see Antonijević 2015). Local knowledge is usually based on learning in practice and forms the system consisting of data, skills, capabilities, practices that create a network of concepts about the world people live in. The system of local knowledge involves the ways in which people acquire data, how they evaluate it and how they use it to solve problems. This is a process that includes knowledge generation, storage, usage and transfer. Recent studies of learning (Harris & Chisholm 2013; Gherardi 2016) add concepts such as agencement, learning ecology, learning in everyday life or learning in situ, learning in the lifelace. The latter emerged as an analogy to learning in the workplace, which implies personal agency and activity theory as the interpretation framework.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS 24 (2): 41–55.

ISSN 1408-032X

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Our study is based on the concept of learning in the lifeplace (Harris & Chisholm 2013). The term denotes a dynamic transformative process that constantly takes place in a defined cultural context, covers all forms of learning (organised and non-organised) and is part of emergent social practices. Or, in Tim Ingold's words: 'To learn is to improvise a movement along a way of life' (2010).

The purpose of the study was to raise awareness of learning as a cultural practice in the local environment and thus to contribute to reflections on the plurality of forms of knowing. We researched learning in everyday life, where understanding and acting as well as obtaining information from different sources merge together. Our study is conceived as a phenomenological analysis, the data for which was collected among rural women in the western part of Slovenia. The key question was how these women learn in their daily life and how they themselves experience this learning.

## **Theoretical background**

The theoretical framework of our research consists of the following concepts: learning in the lifeplace and the pertaining local knowledge, countryside, rural women. Research on the countryside and the learning of the rural population is most often associated with deficits in goods, knowledge, and equality. More discussions focus on poor country folk, using the concept of a vulnerable target group, than on those rural people who are innovative, developing new projects such as agritourism and other types of entrepreneurship, and using local knowledge along the way. Foreign studies on rural women's learning most often describe the development of literacy (alphabetic or digital), healing and sometimes learning connected to entrepreneurship, such as ecotourism (e.g. Potočnik Slavič 2014; Sikkink 2010; Balasubramanian et al. 2010).

Various projects are placed in the rural environment (such as integrated rural development)<sup>1</sup>; Slovenia, too, is developing adult programmes such as study circles and education activities in associations (Ličen, Findeisen & Fakin Bajec 2017; Fakin Bajec 2014; 2016), to encourage nonformal education. However, this does not show all the learning that exists, which often takes place outside organised forms of education. Makovicky (2010) describes the formation of knowledge when groups of women make bobbin lace in Slovakia, and Grasseni (2007) describes communities of practice in cattle breeding. In Daša Ličen's study (2015) on gastronomic knowledge in the group of providers of Istrian food, it can be detected in the narrations that the family and transfer across generations are important for the transfer of knowledge (respondents mention grandmothers), that formal authorities are distrusted in the construction of local knowledge (they disregard the judgement of people who come from the capital). The people included in the study estimate their local knowledge as unique expertise, which they share and thus create their own lifestyle.

We define learning according to the studies by Jane Lave (2011), who considers it to be a changing participation in constantly changing practice. Learning as a socio-cultural process signifies not only accepting new information, but also developing new

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the LEADER programme, Capacities over 50s as a rural development tool project.

patterns of thinking and evaluating, and the development of new practices. In this regard we need such forms of activities that stimulate people to be actors in their transformative and innovative learning, to develop their own agency and identity, to connect into learning networks<sup>2</sup> and into communities of practice. From the theoretical point of view, we need new conceptualisations of learning and knowledge that will include rational knowledge as well as other elements. In describing learning, recent theoretical models of expansive learning were used (Engeström et al. 2013; Tynjälä 2013). The learning process in these models is surrounded with the field of sociocultural context. Not only is the latter a constituent part of the input elements in the learning process but also the entire learning is embedded in the sociocultural environment. When researching learning in daily life, it is impossible to separate the learning process from the environment in which it takes place. According to this model, learning and knowledge are not independent of situations in which they are realised, it is rather the connection of the actor with the situation that generates knowledge, and can be understood as situated learning. The emerging knowledge is the product of activity, experiences, active self, memory and the culture in which it develops and is used. With this, at least three processes can be observed, namely (a) knowledge transfer, (b) transformation of scientific findings into practice, i.e. knowledge translation, and (c) knowledge creation.

Knowledge includes four components integrated in a whole (cf. Tynjälä & Gijbels 2012): theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge, self-regulative knowledge, sociocultural knowledge. In our study we perceive learning as a situationally positioned process, determined through sociocultural and natural space (the local environment with its cultural and natural factors). Further reflection on knowledge transfer and creation of new practices in the local environment has to take into account the dynamism of knowledge or the transformation between tacit and explicit knowledge and innovative learning. The latter is understood as the development of new practices and the changing of all four above-mentioned knowledge components.

When studying learning in rural areas, we have to understand that the countryside is not a monolithic space, but a highly varied one (cf. Barbič 2005; Knežević Hočevar 2013). Rural settlements/areas can be distinguished as: (a) rural areas close to densely populated and highly urbanised places, i.e. big cities; (b) rural tourist areas in mountainous or coastal regions with good tourist infrastructure and rich natural heritage; (c) rural areas with mixed activities; (d) predominantly agricultural rural areas where farming is the main economic activity; in this category we distinguish two types of areas: an area with developed agriculture connected to an efficient marketing approach, and an area with prevailing traditional farming, inefficient due to low productivity; and (e) remote rural areas. According to this classification, our study was carried out in a rural area with mixed activities and growing unemployment.

This environment is defined by some other factors, such as globalisation, an ageing population, unemployment, changed working conditions, precarious nature of em-

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<sup>2</sup> In their Indian study, Balasubramanin et al. (2010) described the significance of networking among rural women.

ployment, and moreover there are specific developments, such as vegetation overgrowth, rapid industrialisation after World War II and later a decline of industry, privatisation and “tycoonisation” after 1991 and consequently changing lifestyles in the countryside in the post-socialist period.

The empirical study was set up as a question: how women learned, which intentional learning activities and projects they realised in the year prior to our interview and how these (learning) experiences changed their lives. The designation “project” is used to emphasise agency in an individual woman. Learning projects are defined as intentional activities in which the actor is aware of her own learning.

## **Methods**

Our research design was within the narrative framework. The phenomenological paradigm of qualitative study (Mustakas 1990; Wertz et al. 2011; Creswell & Poth 2017) that takes the inclusion of the researcher into account was followed. The subjects and their narrations were the “objects” of the study. The principles of participatory research were used. The first source of data was open observation in two groups of rural women. One group was a study circle and the other a non-governmental organisation. Our presence at their meetings was occasional, taking place over two years (cf. Ličen, Findeisen & Fakin Bajec 2017; Fakin Bajec 2016); it served as an introduction to individual interviews.

The second source of data were nondirective narrative interviews that enabled a reconstruction of experiences. Interviews included women in late middle age (between 45 and 65 years): they live on farms, either actively engaged in farm work or they have abandoned it. They all live in Vipava Valley and Karst region in small villages, close to small towns (Nova Gorica, Ajdovščina, Sežana, Vipava), while their formal education is varied, as evident in Table 1.

*Table 1: The level of formal education of respondents*

<b>Level of formal education</b>	<b>Number of women</b>
Unfinished elementary school	1
Elementary school (8 years)	13
Vocational school (3 years)	3
Secondary school (4 years)	5
Higher education (2 years)	4
Higher education/University level (4 years)	3
Total	29

Interview data collection took place in summers from 2013 to 2016. Interviews were only partly structured. Our conversation started with an open question: “What were the most important learning experiences for you in the last year? What did you learn last year?” The epistemological position of the researcher followed the principle “surrender-and-catch” (cf. Gherardi 2012; Wolf 2013), which means that the listener or the observer submits herself to the narration. We focused on women’s stories as they were told by the

women themselves. The narrations were not additionally verified using other sources, since we were primarily interested in their own experience of learning.

Thirty five short unstructured interviews were carried out in the field research, and 29 narratives were used in our data processing as stated in the table. Later, we carried out in-depth narrative interviews (in-depth phenomenological interview) with four respondents; they were taken in two sessions, first as a narration and then as a reflection on the narration (cf. Seidman 2006). The four women selected are active persons and they do a lot of learning themselves alongside the changes they are introducing in their environment.

Their descriptions of experiences and our written observations were the basis for our reflection and structural thematic interview analysis, performed with coding and integrating in thematic clusters, according to which the data will be presented. The first thematic cluster was the areas of learning and organisation of learning, the second thematic cluster was the family's impact on learning, and the third thematic cluster obstacles to learning.

## **The areas and organisation of learning**

The first reactions of our respondents to the question of whether they (intentionally) learned anything in the last year were that they learned nothing in particular. After additional questions, they first thought of the forms of learning connected to an organised course (such as learning a language or how to use a computer). In general, they have low esteem of their own knowledge and perceive it as inadequate. They are also not aware of the importance of their knowledge and skills gathered in informal ways. Some of them expressed doubts in themselves. When one of the respondents who wanted to learn painting was told about painting study circles she said that she “was not up to it and that she would surely make a fool of herself” (Marija, born in 1952).<sup>3</sup> A great uncertainty is obvious in the women with a relatively low level of formal education. Their judgement is rooted in their estimation of formal education, and they “simply forgot” their own learning projects. Our respondents evaluate differently the knowledge acquired formally and informally, which is comparable to findings in other studies (Harris & Chisholm 2011; Williamson 2002). Findings originating in daily practices are rated lower than formal education.

In the continuation of our conversation (after sub-questions) they talked about many forms of education. All of them mentioned looking for recipes in newspapers and online, searching for data on herbs, and exploring information about health.

Below we present the topics they studied. Each of the women was able to mention several learning projects, therefore the number of projects exceeds the number of our respondents. The topic and the number of women who mentioned the same type of project are referred to.

The contents are classified in four groups. The first group of topics is connected to farm work and to vocational training – retraining, learning for a new job or a supple-

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<sup>3</sup> Anonymised name and birth year are added to each literal quote.

mentary (secondary) activity on a farm. Women on farms perform various jobs (beside housekeeping): they are active in supplementary activities, keep the books and carry out jobs previously reserved for men (for example work with a tractor). They are being trained for all these activities, as evident in the areas of learning in the first group. They mentioned learning projects in the following areas: computing (individual learning and participation in courses) (6), viticulture (3), Italian language (2) (in connection to agritourism), herbalism (training at the Adult Education Centre) (2), English language (2), agriculture (1), mechanics (use of tractor and other machinery/equipment) (1), wine (oenology) (1), sommelier skills (1), agritourism (1), selection of feed concentrates for farm animals (1), poultry farming (barn-raised) (1), technology (in the kitchen and on the farm) (1), slow food (offered within agritourism) (1), bookkeeping (1), training for social care at home (in connection with new possibilities for work) (1), and training for holding workshops (educational training) (1).

The second group of topics is linked to housekeeping, care for family members and home (“work in the house and for the family”). Women mentioned learning projects in the following areas: cooking (8), the use of kitchen appliances (1), fruit drying and preserving (1), patient care (1), attending a dying person (1), divorce (1), gardening (1), maintaining graves (1), flower arranging (1), house adaptation (1), and landscaping the area around the house (1).

The third group of topics relate to leisure time and physical activities. They mentioned learning projects in the following areas: physical exercise and body care (referring to weekly sessions of physical exercise, aerobics, swimming) (5), yoga (1), dancing (1), mountain hiking (1), driving a car and passing a driving exam (1), playing the organ (1), singing (in a choir) (1), how to write poems (1), how to write one’s own blog (1), cosmetics (producing natural cosmetics) (1), and making crocheted flowers (1).

The fourth group – other topics included: religious education (making one’s own prayer book, participation in pastoral meetings) (2), learning about legal procedures and legislation (“litigations” for land) (2), policy (partly within a political party) (1), and training for spiritual accompaniment (participation in organised educational events in a religious community) (1)

## **How did the educational projects start?**

Our respondents said that these projects did not come “out of nothing”, but rather “now and again” in their lives they “intuitively” felt the obligation of having to do something for themselves (regardless of their children and job or work on the farm). In these cases they wanted some change, such as writing poems. Even in previous periods, our respondents were actively learning.

Learning in daily life took place when their routines were unpleasantly disrupted (illness, joblessness), when they met with unforeseen problems and they had to develop something new. This may occur as a reaction to some deficiency (when unemployed she started learning accounting) or as proactive behaviour (she learned herbalism after she had retired). Learning is part of experience, part of activity, it is based on the subject’s agency.

These women looked for something new and, along with that, their practices (acting) or relationships (relational practices) changed as well. As a simple example they mention the way of cooking with a new pot, as a complex example attending a dying person. There was not a single big turning point in learning, but several small ones. After retirement, one of our respondents (she worked in an accounting service) started working on community projects. She found her talent for leading people and organising events. These projects transformed her lifestyle. Another respondent divorced from her husband after 35 years of marriage, which was a big shift in her lifestyle; in that process she developed self-regulative knowledge and sociocultural knowledge.

## **How did they organise their learning?**

When carrying out their learning projects, they used various learning methods. They attended courses (foreign languages, aerobics, yoga, cooking, etc.) and lectures organised by various providers (agricultural services, Hospice, Adult Education centre). For all topics, courses or lectures were combined with their independent search of sources. This search is connected with the Internet (looking for answers in chat rooms and also in online/YouTube lectures) and with listening to radio programmes.

They were helped by family members, children or grandchildren who are already students (with computer skills), they learned with the help of an older sister, mother-in-law, neighbours, professionals (such as sister Vendelina, sister Nikolina<sup>4</sup>), clients who came to agritourism (learning Italian with them simultaneously with the course).

They learned on study tours (5 respondents mentioned educational excursions) and by visiting fairs (3 respondents). Excursions were a desired learning method also in the study circle and the association (where participatory observation took place), since they integrate experiencing fun and learning something new. The respondents referred to books as an important source (they mentioned the mobile library, one of them mentioned books by Trstenjak), articles in newspapers (Kmečki Glas, Družina, Ognjišče, Primorske Novice were mentioned), radio programmes, Official Journal. The Internet was mentioned by all of them; however, its use varied a great deal. Some of them emphasised how participation at organised events (mostly fairs) and independent learning/reading (books, magazines, online) interconnect in reference to the topic, which was part of the fair's scene.

## **The impact of the family on learning**

In the introduction, we mentioned the study by D. Ličen (2015) on learning culinary skills, where the respondents pointed out the transfer of knowledge within the family. This study too exposes the micro environment of the family as important learning ecology. From the narrations we learn that the impact of the family environment on the learning of individual women is visible in various segments. In some cases it is expressed as impact on personal attitudes to learning, in other as encouragement for learning and for

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<sup>4</sup> Sister Vendelina (Marija Ilc) was a well-known cook who published several cookbooks; sister Nikolina (Rop) holds advisory cooking sessions on the radio, she also published her own cookbooks.

the transfer of information. Families form networks for knowledge transfer and for creating experiences, in which some women have a more active role, while others – according to their own beliefs – obtain knowledge mostly from other members.

The following excerpt from field notes indicates the influence of the spouse on shaping attitudes to learning and on motivation for learning:

In the village of B. we met in kitchens with wives and husbands. One of the men was telling us about his work on an oil rig. He is a mechanic by profession; he finished vocational school in the town of N.G. First he had a job in one of the larger industrial plants in the area, then he went abroad. His work on the oil rig was dirty, very dangerous; he worked in 12-hour shifts. As he commented, in that time he handled classical tools maybe for two hours, while he spent most of the time checking orders, documentation, reading manuals, making notes, minutes, measurements and records. His work was connected with constant learning. Incidentally he told us that he constantly had to learn English, because new incoming workers spoke different dialects, they had different accents... His wife commented on his words: “So I thought to myself, if he has to learn all that English, when I know that he wasn’t particularly good in school, then I can learn something else too...” (Notes, August 2013).

Asking who “brings knowledge in the family” or “who is the main source of knowledge”, we elicited interesting answers. Some respondents retained the traditional hierarchical (patriarchal) division in male and female roles, while others expressed their opposition to the hierarchical (patriarchal) role division with their statements. One of the respondents said that her main motivation for education was so that she could do something herself and “didn’t give a damn” for the husband. The phrase “not give a damn” was used humorously; however, she later said that everybody brings knowledge into the family, but she feels that her share is bigger and that she is the one who “pesters” men with innovations.

To our question as to who brings knowledge into the house, another woman answered that it was mostly her husband and son. She and her daughter read a lot, they sing in a choir, her daughter studies, but knowledge comes home predominantly through men (such is her belief). This woman connects knowledge mostly with the knowledge necessary to carry out farm work. In her view, singing is not part of it, and moreover reading literature cannot be counted as acquisition of knowledge.

Based on their statements about educational activities (such as participation in study circles, courses for business women, etc.) the women who are married into families and come to a new environment are more active. This phenomenon can be explained in the way that they are not familiar with old resentments (conflicts between neighbours, village quarrels) and the images they form of other people are new and circumvent the fossilised social limitations of gossip. Another reason is that women who have no acquaintances around them have to weave new social networks. Through their activities and education they come into contact with other people, come to know them and form their social support network.

Opposition to learning and education can emerge within the family when, for example the partner's parents disagree with woman's activity. A respondent told us that her father and mother-in-law expect her to work the land, drive the tractor and carry out all the necessary work as it had been done in the past. Since her husband has a job, they disagree with her looking for other sources of income and they are opposed to her education in order to introduce a supplementary activity. As we can see in this example there are obstacles for innovative methods for gaining new income and for new learning possibilities (e.g. entrepreneurial skills) if older family members (parents or in-laws) disagree.

Changing a family from an economically connected to an emotionally connected group, where the affective link is the basic one, also influences learning, so we may speak of the need of social innovations and innovative learning in the field of mutual family relationships. Women in late middle age are already grandmothers and they often have to "calm down" quarrels in the family, they related in the interviews. One of our respondents revealed that in this respect she found a lot of help in the books (manuals) and that she could call this her learning project.

On a farm with a successful supplementary activity in the village of D. we heard the following story. The son has graduated, has married and is unwilling to participate in working the land (at least not to the degree desired by his father). The father longs for the past years when they planted and worked on 3,500 vines "just like that", while now his son is a babysitter. Men on farms are looking for their new image too. It is not only women who have to form new social roles that differ from mere housewives and mothers. Moreover, his mother worries that "the young ones" will move to Nova Gorica (Notes, August 2013).

In recent years in the Vipava Valley and Karst regions many people have lost their jobs (the restructuring of industry, the decline of the construction sector). Young people look for work in more distant places (Ljubljana, cities in Italy). Entrepreneurship has been encouraged recently, which influences women's learning. Some of them get involved in volunteering activities (associations) and develop new opportunities (selling fruit), for which they need theoretical and procedural knowledge.

At the same time, domestic violence increases when people become unemployed and stressed. The emerging problems require learning and looking for new solutions (formation of new family practices) and the development of sociocultural knowledge. In our conversations, we did not learn a lot about domestic violence, since such private topics are not openly discussed with strangers. We were able to learn about domestic violence indirectly from volunteering women who work in support groups for women who have experienced violence; however, but this was not a part of our study. Through interviews we learned that changing one's behavior or thinking and feeling as a consequence of violence is not understood as part of learning.

To summarise, the narrations on learning in the family are connected with three types of actions. The first set includes housekeeping, which involves concerns for food, clothing and cleaning as well as various maintenance work at home. The second set in-

cludes a so-called consumer and communication work. These cover purchases, the use of services, communication with various institutions, and managing resources in the most effective way to fulfil the needs of family members. The third set consists of relationship work, which covers bringing up children, caring for the sick and the elderly, soothing frustrations, school and job stress and creating a pleasant atmosphere. In our study, the majority of identified learning projects were connected to the first set of activities. This can be explained with the fact that our interviews were relatively short and that the respondents first thought of the learning connected with active life. A more detailed questionnaire should be prepared for other forms of learning so as to promote reflection on learning projects in other areas (for example, on relationship and emotional parts of learning).

## **Obstacles to learning**

Most of the obstacles mentioned by our respondents were connected to gender stereotypes, a lack of time and social control in the village setting.

## ***Gender stereotypes***

The first set of obstacles are the stereotypes women have about themselves, while the second set is connected to the first one and is evident in women's low self-esteem. Cognitive gender schemas or mental patterns form in the process of enculturation and build the reference framework of an individual woman. Gender stereotypes (as inappropriate generalisation of social reality) imposed on women create an unrealistic perception of them. The perception of self is formed under the influence of the stereotypes inbuilt in human identity. Our respondents often resorted to the explanations of differences between men and women originating in physical strength, while paying little attention to changing methods of work and knowledge.

Women with whom we talked are mostly convinced that a woman is a better housekeeper than a man and that it is mostly women who take care of family members. This is discernible in the following statements:

Frankly, men have no place in the kitchen (Alenka, born in 1962).

At home, we have our tasks clearly divided. There's no time to negotiate who will do what. The house and the garden are my business. And the children (were) too. Now it is the grandchildren (Jožica, born in 1951)

I learnt a lot when I took care of my dying father-in-law (Elena, born in 1955).

In the countryside where the study took place, the gender stereotypes are fairly persistent and contribute to women selecting the types of learning which preserve their position of mothers and housewives. Only one of the respondents doubtfully said that such a labour division (male/female work) may be "the luxury of laziness", so that we do not have to change.

Women themselves cultivate stereotypes and barriers, which is noticeable when they reject for example women who are politically active or express intentions of being involved in ambitious projects, particularly when they have small children. Women who would opt for political commitment are subject to the pressures of social control and female aggression (visible particularly when they are gossiped about and in the way this influences the “good name” or reputation of the woman in her environment). Our respondent also told us that her son was scolded by his colleagues of both genders for having a wife who was too ambitious and has enrolled in higher education studies during her maternity leave.

### **Lack of time**

Rural women have no time to be actively involved in social life, which holds particularly for political life; at least in their own opinion.

Women are under the double burden of a job or farm work together with house-keeping and children or grandchildren. In the interviews, they told us that once their duties are completed, they use their free time in a rather passive way – sometimes they watch TV (at night), they do handiwork (knitting, crocheting), some read books or women’s newspapers. They do this with the main intention to gather new energy for the ensuing obligations. Some said they had a feeling of being constantly tired:

Sometimes I’m so tired that I can do nothing but fall in bed (Vanja, born in 1965).  
I have a constant feeling that I’m running out of time and that I’m always  
in the wrong place (Jelena, born in 1963).

The stereotype that housework is done by women is preserved. This is connected with a large quantity of (unpaid) work which women are expected to feel “obliged” to do, so that they impose it on themselves, in spite of the fact that they take over work in other areas.

### **Social control**

Rural women are tired and moreover they are subject to strong social control. In the countryside one cannot choose anonymity as is possible in a city:

They know when I do my laundry, when and how long a light is turned on,  
when I leave with my car, when I return ... everything is under the neigh-  
bours’ surveillance ... they know that I have a computer in my bedroom  
(Marija, born in 1959).

The respondent who described her feeling of being under surveillance said that she would need specific knowledge to get rid of that feeling. In such cases, a person needs the knowledge of quality living in a cultural environment and the knowledge of how to conduct oneself. If we heard a lot about the first and the second groups of knowledge when learning was described (theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge), in these cases the third and the fourth groups of knowledge are involved (self-regulative knowledge, socio-cultural knowledge). Gossip is annoying if women do not know how to deal with it, since

it functions as “gossip terrorism”. They feel uneasy when they are the object of gossiping. When women start a new venture, such as a learning project noticed in their environment, they have to expect gossip. Gossiping, slandering, defaming are the acts feared by our respondents as this is the way that “local public opinion” is created, often based on gossiping networks. In the business environment, the management of innovation may be introduced so that among other things people’s creativity will not be impeded by social control. It would be wise to consider such a measure in the rural environment as well. Women who are active in associations are bolder in introducing novelties, which can be explained with their experiencing a supportive group environment. Conversation networks are not necessarily “gossip networks”. In fact networks of memories, narrations, etc. could be established in order to encourage reflection on social practices. We found that there were various women’s networks in villages, for example volunteering associations, caritas (charity) groups, church decorators, choir, self-help groups for the elderly and also informal “gossip groups” (which are currently moving to virtual networks such as Facebook and similar). The latter influence the formation of unpleasant social control.

There are three findings representing obstacles to women’s learning, that can be highlighted. First, women in villages actually wish for more socialising, but they fear being gossiped about; they lack organisers for various activities and premises for meetings. In villages where the voluntary associations of rural women or study circles are active (e.g. study circle Sivka/Lavender in Podraga, Association of housewives and a drama group Planina near Ajdovščina) many women are active in cultural and educational activities.

The biggest obstacle is fear of gossip if they do something differently and violate the rules of the game. They could overcome this type of social control through awareness raising and dialogical knowledge (sociocultural knowledge), and life skills in the emergent society. A stronger awareness of the significance of changes and the courage to defy social control was shown by women who in their (extended) families met persons successful in other environments as scientists, artists, business people, politicians, and who showed the family a role model; out of that they developed their own learning through following the example.

Second, women in our study underestimated their knowledge; in their opinion they did not learn much and they also underestimated their abilities to learn. Their frequent exclamation was: ‘What do I know? I’m not educated!’ Although they experienced difficult ordeals with illnesses, loss of employment, in courts, etc., women without formal education think they know nothing. They underestimated their own abilities, in their modesty their self-evaluation turns in the circle of low self-esteem and low self-confidence. This is contrary to the findings by D. Ličen (2015), whose young adult male respondents highly valued their “expert knowledge”. Many women in our study, however, did not strong enough to try new paths. With such beliefs, they sometimes hampered younger generations, because they disapproved of changes in the family. In one case, the young would like to rearrange the garden for organic gardening but the mother (65 years of age) resisted the idea, justifying her attitude with doubts about innovations which did not bring any profit. Her statements (according to narratives) were usually as follows: ‘If we don’t spray the vegetables, there will be no harvest.’

Some women feel too old (at least they declare so) to start education. They are victims of the old age prejudice. Consequently, the education of the older adults should be encouraged in the countryside too, to break prejudices on the inability of learning in old age.

Women put great emphasis on family life, which required emotional and caregiving work. This was perceived neither as work nor as a source of learning, in spite of the fact that in the division of knowledge, self-regulative and sociocultural types of knowledge are equivalent to theoretical and practical knowledge.

## Conclusion

In researching lifelace learning as a sociocultural practice, we found that women use different forms of learning and that the integration of different forms of knowledge (theoretical, practical, self-regulative and sociocultural knowledge) is important to them. Their learning is influenced by the family environment and the local social environment as the ecology of power relations connected to the female gender. In their narrations, the family and the role of those entities (family members) who break the circle of self-limitation proved to be important for their learning.

To mention the limiting factors in this study, all the narrations were positive cases of learning in the local environment, the narrations originated in a geographically limited area (western Slovenia) and one type of countryside, therefore a continuation of this study should be upgraded with cases from other sociocultural environments.

The knowledge positioned in the local environment can be the source of mutual connecting, changing and encouraging the development of a rural area as an emergent system. For this to develop, we need to loosen social control as it perpetuates stereotypical ways of thinking, as well as to encourage innovative thinking. The theoretical challenge resulting from the research is demonstrated in the lack of concepts that cover various types of knowledge. We focused on the “non-canonical” nature of learning or lifelace learning but the narrations lead us to conclude that, besides the concept of knowledge, more complex concepts that cover assessing, deciding, feeling, and all that changes during the learning process are also needed. One of the possibilities seems to be the development of the concept of wisdom.

## Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Slovenian Research Agency (P5-0174).

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## **Povzetek**

Raziskava učenja v vsakdanjem življenju podeželskih žensk je bila opravljena z namenom oblikovati okvir za interpretacijo učenja kot sociokulturne prakse v ruralnem kontekstu. Teoretski okvir so tvorili koncepti: učenje v vsakdanjem življenju, znanje in fenomenološka metodologija. Empirična raziskava je sledila kvalitativni paradigmi narativnega raziskovanja. Uporabljeno je bilo participatorno opazovanje in intervjuji. Ciljna skupina sodelujočih v raziskavi so bile ženske poznih srednjih let (med 45 in 65), ki živijo v kmečkem okolju. Podatke smo zbirali od 2013 do 2016. Ugotovili smo, da na učenje, kot ga doživljajo sogovornice, vplivajo različni dejavniki, ki jih lahko razumemo kot nenehno razvijajočo se celoto ali ekologijo učenja. Slednja vsebuje različne strategije, vsebine in vzorce socialne moči, ki v posameznih naracijah sestavljajo subjektivno mrežo znanja, v lokalnem okolju pa porajajočo se sociokulturno mrežo znanja.

**KLJUČNE BESEDE:** sociokulturna praksa, učenje, lokalno znanje, ruralno okolje, ženske

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