Tie Formation and Cohesiveness in a Loosely Organized Group: Knitting Together

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the elements of tie formation and group cohesiveness in a loosely organized group with no clearly stated goal, commitment, or purpose. We employed participant observation and personal interviews to discover factors related to group cohesiveness. With inductive approach based on our thick description of the study sites, such as meeting space and group conversations, we found the nature of relationships within these groups is affected by how each group was started and organized. Having an expressive leader may increase group cohesiveness in a loosely organized group, especially when the leader has a long history with the organization which confers authority as a leader. In addition, use of humor by an expressive leader enhances group cohesiveness. Finally, the arrangement of the group meeting space impacts group cohesiveness. The focus of previous studies was to examine group cohesiveness of task-oriented groups with measurable goals; however, this study compares two loosely organized groups.

Keywords

Tie Formation, Loosely Organized Group, Expressive Leadership, Group Genealogy, Knitters, Inductive Approach, Participant Observation

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the elements of tie formation and group cohesiveness in a loosely organized group with no clearly stated goal, commitment, or purpose. We employed participant observation and personal interviews to discover factors related to group cohesiveness. With inductive approach based on our thick description of the study sites, such as meeting space and group conversations, we found the nature of relationships within these groups is affected by how each group was started and organized. Having an expressive leader may increase group cohesiveness in a loosely organized group, especially when the leader has a long history with the organization which confers authority as a leader. In addition, use of humor by an expressive leader enhances group cohesiveness. Finally, the arrangement of the group meeting space impacts group cohesiveness. The focus of previous studies was to examine group cohesiveness of task-oriented groups with measurable goals; however, this study compares two loosely organized groups. Keywords: Tie Formation, Loosely Organized Group, Expressive Leadership, Group Genealogy, Knitters, Inductive Approach, Participant Observation

Ashley, a young mother of three, said her husband was watching the baby so that she could come to the knitting group. The yarn flew through her fingers as she knitted a baby *kimono* in rich tones of green, black, and blue. She said she knits until her arm gets sore; her husband rubs her arm and asks her why she knits so long. She says because she loves it.

As this field note illustrates, knitters are enthusiastic about their craft. Knitters get together at knitting stores although they can practice their craft almost anywhere individually: in front of the television, on the bus, at rodeos or football games, even during class lectures. They can be regular individual customers at the knitting store; however, elements such as conversation style and meeting space make these people organize themselves as a group.

Knitting is often compared metaphorically to life (Klass, 2008; Murphy, 2002); while both life and knitting follow patterns, sometimes one has to improvise and hope for the best. Knitting involves a process of interlocking loops of yarn by using long needles to create fabric without knots. We consider knitting as a metaphor for a loosely organized group. Holding the yarn with the right amount of tension is important in knitting. If the stitches are too tight, a garment may be too small or it may be difficult to maneuver the yarn on the needles. Conversely, if the stitches are too loose, a knitter runs the risk of "dropping" a stitch off the needle, creating a hole in the fabric. Likewise, the members of a group are looped together, with a leader wielding just the right amount of tension to make a strong fabric.

This study explored the elements of group formation by using participant observation and interviews with two store-based knitting groups in a southwest metropolitan area in the

United States. Following Small's (2009) study, we define tie formation as a process of connecting with another person, whether the connection is intentional or unintentional. Unlike group sports or activities in which tie formation is an essential part of success in their activities, studying a group of knitters illuminates the nature of tie formation in non-task oriented groups, since knitting does not require any other participants. Small specialty businesses such as knitting stores often have loyal customers who are likely to attend group events at the store. Family-based organizations are expected to be less formal and more concerned about the well-being of customers. In fact, Lansberg (1983) discusses how the norms and family values of unconditional love hinder family-owned business in their pursuit of profit and efficiency. Thus, one might think any groups stemming from a family-based store or business tend to be friendlier, more inclusive, and more cohesive than other groups which were not established by a family-owned business. However, non-family based organizations may have advantages for creating inclusive and cohesive groups, especially with the presence of an effective and expressive leader. Other types of groups, such as volunteer groups and small businesses, may benefit from the findings of this study. We will discuss how the nature of a loosely organized group is shaped by the group genealogy, group meeting space, and the presence of a designated leader.

Background

Women have traditionally gathered together to work on quilts in the American colonial and pioneer era. The time-consuming process of quilting was often shared by female friends and neighbors at quilting bees which are social gatherings where people get together to work on a quilt. With many hands sharing the stitching work, the task could be accomplished more quickly, with the added benefit of a social event for the women. Unlike quilting, knitting is a solitary activity and it does not require knitters to get together to produce goods quicker. Yet, many knitters still gather as a group and enjoy the benefit of social interactions.

Social Networks Embedded Within Organizations

A social network "refers to the ways in which people are connected to one another and how these connections create and define human society on all levels: the individual, the group, and the institutional" (Eisenberg & Houser, 2007). Generally, social network research has focused on the benefits that individuals receive (or do not receive) from their participation in social networks (Small, 2009). Most people receive social support from a variety of people, such as friends, neighbors, and family, in their social networks (Wellman & Wortley, 1990). Small (2009) develops a new perspective on the context of social networks which has been neglected in previous research. Previously, social network researchers looked at the ties that were formed between two individuals, with the assumption that people were making ties because they expected to receive benefits; however, they did not ask how ties were formed, and by what sort of mechanisms (Small, 2009). Small goes beyond the usual studies of workplace, neighborhood, and school to show *how* people connect with others in childcare centers, hair salons, and other everyday organizations. These organizations shape the way that ties are formed and the types of ties that form. Small (2009) describes how networks are *embedded* in organizations, and how this affects how much benefit people get from their networks.

Most social network analysts proceed on the assumption that "actors invest in ties to eventually secure resources from them" (Small, 2009, p. 178). Small asserts that "[a]ctors encounter others in organizational contexts that shape the ties they form, their use of those ties, and the resources available through the ties" (Small, 2009, p. 178). Small puts the emphasis on

the organizational context, "[r]ather than conceiving of networks primarily as nodes and the ties between them, it conceives them mostly as sets of context-dependent relations resulting from routine processes in organizational contexts" (Small, 2009, p. vi).

Organizations broker social ties by the way that they affect social interactions. Small's study uncovered some of the mechanisms through which childcare centers brokered social ties between parents, which included providing "multiple opportunities to interact frequently, durably, or in a focused manner" (Small, 2009, p. 179). Focused interaction within a non-competitive environment was also conducive to tie formation (Small, 2009). The centers unintentionally facilitated tie formation with policies such as limited pickup times, ensuring that mothers would be at the centers at the same time. Some of the centers required more participation from mothers in the way of chaperoning field trips or helping to plan fundraising efforts. In varying degrees, mothers interacted with each other and had opportunities to form ties. Small (2009) focused on the ways that organizations affect social interactions; however, he did not fully discuss other aspects of organizations that affect tie formation, such as the group's origins or the group meeting space. Our study of knitting groups extends his work to include groups started by an organization and embedded within an organization. The two stores we studied provide a place and time for the knitting groups to meet every week. The interactions are frequent and of some intensity, with typical group sessions lasting up to two hours. Even though a knitting group may not have a particular goal or task, they have a shared focus and an interest in knitting in a non-competitive environment with no commitment or dues. Knitters who regularly attend the knitting group have frequent interactions with other knitters as well as store employees, creating conditions ideal for tie formation.

Knitters Form Loosely Organized Groups

Researchers have examined the various psychosocial benefits of knitting, but an exhaustive search found only a handful of qualitative studies focusing on knitting groups (e.g., Fields, 2004; Honig, 2007; Potts, 2006; Ruland, 2010). All groups in these previous studies met at restaurants or coffee/tea shops in large metropolitan areas. For example, in Honig's (2007) and Fields's (2004) studies, the knitting groups met in a coffee shop in Chicago and were made up primarily of young, professional women. Honig (2007) explored the fluid nature of social ties formed in the knitting group, maintaining that ties were at times strong and at times weak, due to fluctuating attendance, seating arrangements at the coffee shop, and the activity of knitting, which could serve as a way to avoid awkward lapses in conversation. In Ruland's (2010) study, members of an all-female group developed a social support network that extended beyond the group meetings, including an online connection between meetings. The group that Potts (2006) studied was task-oriented, making and donating knitted/crocheted items, yet was still primarily a sociable group. Although these studies offer important insights about knitting groups, some important areas of group cohesiveness were not fully discussed. For example, what makes one knitting group more "tightly-knit" or "loosely-knit" than another group? What elements are needed to constitute a group identity for a loosely organized small group?

Group Cohesiveness

Researchers have defined and examined group cohesiveness in various ways (e.g., Evans & Dion, 1991; Forsyth, 1990; Mitchell, 1982; Mullen & Copper, 1994; Steiner, 1972; Stogdill, 1972). However, many previous studies in this area focused on task-oriented groups with a certain measurable goal, such as a group of workers, a sports team, or a problem-solving volunteer group. Carron and Brawley (2012) present a definition of cohesiveness which

applies to most groups, including "sports teams, work groups, military units, fraternity groups, and social and friendship groups" (p. 731). They define cohesion as "a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together and remain united in the pursuit of its instrumental objectives and/or for the satisfaction of member affective needs" (as cited in Carron et al., 1998, p. 213). The quality and characteristics of expressive leaders, such as concern for the well-being of the group members, and the beneficial effect of their leadership to the wellbeing of not only the primary group but also the secondary group, are also recognized (Etzioni, 1965; Rossel, 1970). Management gurus use humor in their public lectures in part to promote group cohesiveness in the audience (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003). However, there are few studies that focus on what contributes to group cohesiveness in a loosely organized group with no clearly stated goals, commitment, or purposes. Would merely the existence of an expressive leader who uses humor hold a loosely organized group together? Are there other elements which affect the cohesiveness of loosely organized groups? We analyzed qualitative data from two groups that met at different knitting stores and explored factors affecting group cohesion. We will describe the elements of a loosely organized group that contribute to tie formation, including group genealogy, leadership, and each leader's use of humor.

Data and Methods

The data were collected for academic training purposes with a class project with the emphasis on participant observation in two store-based knitting groups. Pseudonyms are used for names of the stores and participants according to the IRB approved conditions. Permission to observe the group activities was granted from both stores with the understanding that the senior author of this paper would tell the groups why she was there and that all information she gathered was confidential each time she started her observation. Participant observation was chosen as the primary mode of data collection to observe the group dynamics and social interactions among group members. Both groups met at knitting stores. The two stores, Fiber Fun and Yarn & More, are approximately five miles apart. These two locations were selected because they are dedicated to selling yarn and accessories for knitters; they are not chain craft stores. Both stores also have supplies and classes for other types of fiber arts, such as weaving and spinning. They are open at least five days per week, and offer a full range of classes. These are stores for the serious knitter, selling more expensive yarns that are not available in discount stores and chain craft stores. Not counting the shop employees, a total of 25 different women attended the regular knitting group meetings at Fiber Fun during the data collection period. At Yarn & More, a total of 16 different women and men attended the regular meetings. Demographically, all were white and nearly all were women, ranging in age from the 20s to the 80s. The group at Fiber Fun met in the afternoon, and drew older participants, with most over the age of 60. Some younger women (under 40) who were not employed or had flexible work hours also attended. In contrast, at Yarn & More, the evening meetings drew younger women who worked during the day, with most women under the age of 60. Being close to a large university, this group also attracted some college students. The senior author attended regular meetings held on a weekday afternoon at Fiber Fun and a different weekday evening at Yarn & More; the meetings were held on the same day each week per each store's schedule.

Four personal interviews were conducted with individual group members to collect supplemental information about the history of the stores, since participant observation does not provide such specific information. All interviews took place in participants' homes and were recorded. Three participants in two stores and one key informant, a leader of one group, gave a generous amount of time, between 40 minutes and two hours, to answer how their store and knitting group started, their experiences in the groups, their reasons for participating, and their perceptions of the groups. Interviews started with explanation of a consent form including the

purpose of the study, risks, and benefits, along with researcher contact information, and the interviewer went over the information with the interviewee.

The senior author transcribed detailed field notes after attendance at each knitting group meeting. She started to attend meetings (3 to 4 times a month) for several months in the two stores starting September 2010. Each meeting usually lasted about two hours or longer. The senior author is a knitter herself; even though she was not a member of these particular two knitting groups when she started to collect data, she was an insider in a larger knitting community as she was familiar with the knitting lingo, the major designers who publish books and patterns, as well as online knitting websites. The senior author felt that her status as an insider of the knitting community helped to gain access to those two store-based knitting groups which are located in a metropolitan area of the Southwest U.S. Although the senior author considered herself an insider to some degree, participants did not forget her purpose of attending in the knitting group as one field note describes:

> I got out my notebook and took notes on who was there, naming off the people I know by name. Someone said, "She's taking attendance!" By now, the regulars know who I am and why I am there.

The second author helped analyze data to identify the patterns of the two groups and developed the framework of how those two groups' characteristics developed. As an outsider of the knitting community, it was the second author's task to examine any possible biases on data analysis. She purposefully did not attend any meetings in order to read and analyze the transcribed notes objectively with an appropriate distance from the study subject. She questioned how the senior author felt in various situations at the study sites to incorporate the researcher's feelings as a valid source of data in the analysis. In second and third readings of field notes, instances and examples of themes were marked in the field notes and tallied. With an inductive approach, we identified that themes related to tie formation and group cohesion were conversation topics, humor and leadership, group genealogy as well as group meeting space.

Results

We conceive of the relations between knitters in a yarn store as a loosely organized group, which may result from the routine process of knitting and having conversation only within the yarn store. Groups which have a goal or task are categorized as secondary groups in which the group's existence is characterized as the means to an end. In contrast, the primary group, such as family and close friends, is defined as the end itself; the group itself is important, even though it has no task. The knitting groups do not fit either definition perfectly. The groups have no clearly stated official goals or tasks, and are therefore not secondary groups. Likewise, the groups cannot be considered primary groups because without the shared focus on knitting they would not exist. Group members at the store are individually working on their own knitting project while they are tuning in and out of the conversations. These two activities are the reason that knitters gather as a group at the store; the group has no dues and no task to accomplish. Thus, the ties between the members of a yarn-store-based knitting group can be best described as loosely organized without commitment or a clear group goal. Some members of the knitting groups actually prefer not to belong to a well-organized group. One of the knitters has gone to one of the "Meet-up" knitting groups in the past and she thought:

> they are more organized and have nametags which she said was kind of "anal."
> [Anna said] one woman there is a "ghost knitter" who knits things for someone

else to give as gifts (presumably made by the giver). The meetings are $1 per visit.

Even though loosely organized groups lack a clear group goal, their site characteristics (location), group meeting space, conversation topics, leader and humor, as well as group formation and genealogy, can create unique individual group characteristics. All together, these elements can affect a group's cohesiveness. In the following sections, we will discuss how each element affects group cohesiveness based on the thick description of the study sites and our analysis of data.

Site Characteristics

The appearance of the two stores is different. Yarn & More moved into its current location within the past few years, and the store maintains an uncluttered feel, with open space showing off the wooden floor. It is on the end of a strip of stores, and has windows on two sides, allowing plenty of natural light. Product displays in the center of the space are no more than four feet tall, while around the walls six-foot shelving is sectioned into bins to hold skeins and balls of colorful yarn. Samples of knitted sweaters, shawls, bags and purses, hats, and scarves are hanging on the walls or perched atop the shelves; new samples appear frequently. Instructional books, patterns, tools, and notions are displayed near the counter at the center of the store. Behind the counter area, curtains separate classrooms and storage areas from the retail area of the store. The knitting groups gathered around two wooden tables near the front windows—one long table with 10 chairs and a large oval table with 8 chairs.

Fiber Fun has been in its current location for much longer than the other store. The store is in the middle of a block in a downtown business district, and has a narrow floor plan with a front door and windows at one end and a back door at the other end. Tall shelving units line the side walls, with bins for yarn and knitted samples of blankets, hats, sweaters, socks, bags, and scarves on top. Shorter shelving is arranged around the center of the store, with a long aisle running up the middle of the carpeted space. The counter is about two-thirds of the way back on the left. Beyond that is an area with a couch and love seat arranged at right angles to each other. This is where the knitting group met. Folding chairs were added around the other two sides, with a coffee table in the center. Along the wall next to this meeting area are books about knitting, crochet, weaving, basketry, tatting, and other fiber arts. Patterns are displayed in rotating wire racks, and also stored in 4" three-ring binders with the books. Fiber Fun has a larger selection of books, patterns, and tools than Yarn & More. Classes at Fiber Fun take place at round tables located in the front and middle of the store, and sometimes in the back area away from the retail part of the store.

Group Meeting Space

Although Small (2009) revealed the importance of creating opportunities for social networking for individuals as a latent function of businesses, the importance of space management was not fully discussed in terms of group dynamics in social networks. Goffman (1959, 1967) maintains that the "props" and "set" provide the characteristics or nature of relationships within particular places. Social networks are not solely based on frequent interactions in a certain location. How the space is arranged for the interaction would make a significant difference in terms of group dynamics. For example, Honig (2007) found that seating arrangements dictated interactions at knitting groups in a coffee shop. Non-store based knitting groups may have more arbitrary effects of the seating arrangement on interactions since their space arrangement at each meeting depends on other factors such as how busy the

coffee shop is at that time. On the other hand, the whimsical nature of space arrangement will be eliminated in store based knitting groups because the store has a designated space for the group to meet. The impact of the space and seating arrangement on the group's cohesiveness might be greater than non-store based groups. The organization, in this case the knitting store, decides on the type and arrangement of furniture the knitting group uses in the store. We will show that this impacts the interaction of group members and thus the types of ties that will form.   Zooming inside of the organization or the knitting store, furniture arrangement can unintentionally set the tone of the groups. The arrangements at each store were different, which made a difference in tie formation. The seating arrangements at Fiber Fun seemed more conducive to intimate conversation topics. People were oriented in a circle facing each other and could see each other. In addition, the area is a little smaller at Fiber Fun, so people sat closer to each other. At Fiber Fun, the knitting group area contained a couch, love seat, and folding chairs arranged around a coffee table. The stuffed furniture and coffee table were never moved, but folding chairs were rearranged and moved closer together to make more room for group members. With this type of seating, participants were sitting in a circle and facing each other, which had the effect of involving everyone in the conversation. Squeezing in more chairs did not seem to create a split in the conversation at Fiber Fun. In addition, people were sitting right next to each other on the couch and love seat, which is more intimate than sitting next to someone in a folding chair. This seating arrangement made group members feel more connected with each other and facilitated more intimate conversations even for a newcomer such as a researcher entering into this store for the first time. Kong (2012) describes the significance of space and relations of newcomers and old members in martial art practice; she writes:

> The authority of 'coming to practice' rests on its intersubjective approach where the practitioner immerses him/herself "in a space of dispersion, with an extending net of relations with 'others', that is, with nature and with other human subjects." (Zhu, 2004, p. 242 as cited in Kong 2012, p. 176)

Whether it is in martial art practice, knitting stores, or any other organized groups, seating arrangements are an important aspect of group tie formation because they help define each member's role in that particular context and space.

In contrast, at Yarn & More, the knitting group used two wooden tables. The table that was used most often had a top approximately 4 by 8 feet. A smaller oval table nearby was used when the big table was full. Folding chairs were added to make room for more people when needed, and the two tables were never pushed together. While it was nice to have a table to lay out knitting supplies, the table and chairs did not feel as intimate for conversation. In fact, the long table at Yarn & More encouraged two conversations, one at each end. Indeed, the groups at each end of the table were sometimes having separate conversations about two different topics.

Conversation Topics

A business may unintentionally provide the space and time for different types of friendships to form. While the knitting store provides a domain (knitting and other fiber arts) for conversation topics, group conversation goes well beyond that domain. However, it was noticeable that conversation topics were different in the two stores when knitters talked about something other than knitting and fiber arts subjects.

As Small (2009) notes, frequent and repeated opportunities to interact in a focused way enable individuals to form social ties. Both knitting stores did this by scheduling the knitting

groups at specific days and times each week and providing a place for the knitters to work and interact. Both stores also promoted the knitting groups in person and on their web sites. The group at Yarn & More met in the early evening. Accordingly, it attracted people who had jobs and classes during the day, while Fiber Fun's afternoon meeting time attracted people who were retired or had more free time during the day. They were mostly women over 50 years old and many were retired. This affected conversation topics as well as the nature of relationships between the members. For instance, participants in Yarn & More's 6:00 p.m. meeting often had not eaten supper yet, so it was understandable that the conversation would turn to food and drink.

On the other hand at Fiber Fun, the group met at 1:30 p.m., so members had usually eaten lunch before the meeting. The older women's conversation at Fiber Fun more often was about matters related to home and family. They were interested in the health of members and their families, and the entire group was involved in conversations. At one afternoon meeting, one regular member of this group asked everyone what they were going to fix for supper that night; she said she needed ideas. As one can see, even when food was discussed at Fiber Fun, it was more often connected to eating at home, while for the younger women at Yarn & More, restaurants were a more popular topic, along with other topics outside the home, such as the economy, politics, social issues, jobs, and education. This difference could be attributed to the difference in the members' demographic characteristics between two stores, but it also could be due to each store's characteristic as Fiber Fun espoused a quasi-family atmosphere while Yarn & More maintained more professional (store and customers) relationship.   Overall, the conversation topics and styles were more individualistic at Yarn & More, while Fiber Fun had patterned conversation topics and an inclusive group conversation style as a whole.

Small (2009) identifies three types of friendships: compartmental intimates, standard intimates, and non-intimates. In the case of this project, compartmental intimates are friends but only within the domain of knitting. Standard intimates are friends that transcend the knitting group—they do things together outside the store and they talk about more personal things in the group. Non-intimates just have superficial conversations. Both Fiber Fun and Yarn & More facilitated the creation of compartmental intimates, but Fiber Fun had more standard intimate relationships, especially among the regulars. When the senior author entered Fiber Fun for the first time as a researcher, the sense of community was immediately observed.   At Fiber Fun, the entire group heard one member talk about medical problems of her family members and difficulties she had coping with the situation. Other group members showed empathy by asking questions, sympathizing with her, and offering suggestions for ways to improve her situation. In contrast, Yarn & More had some of each, but many more non-intimate relationships, as one of the field notes at Yarns & More records:

> Five women were sitting at the long wooden table near the front window. I asked
> [Carol] if these were the "Lacy Ladies" she had mentioned the previous week,
> and she said "yes, the two at the end" were. There were three women sitting at
> the other end of the table near the window, almost as if they were segregated.

At Yarn & More, personal conversations about family were likely to involve just a few people (or a smaller group), although this was not always the case. Overall, Fiber Fun had a more solidified and all-inclusive structure as a group than Yarn & More. What makes one store have more structure as a group and the other have less?

Expressive Leadership and Humor

Having a designated leader seems to affect tie formation in the knitting groups. At Fiber Fun, owned by two female friends, having a designated leader makes the group seem more stable — members know the leader will be there, even if no one else shows up that day. Kay, a widowed white woman in her 80s, is the leader at Fiber Fun. She has been knitting for over 70 years. She started going to the knitting shop when it was owned by someone else, and stuck with it through several changes in location and when it changed hands to the current owners. Kay knows the merchandise in the store, she knows the customers, and she knows knitting. During her interview, Kay explained how the knitting group was started and how she became the designated leader.

> Kay: I worked there, I worked the night shift, a couple nights a week, 'til Debra (store owner) finally, she fired me because [laughs] because it made her nervous my driving home at 10:00. And she used to have to … get my kid to follow me. And I said that's ridiculous, I've got my phone if something happened. So anyway… . Then they started that knitting group and wanted me to take that over, so that's what I'm doing. [laughs] It's fun.
>
> Interviewer: I think so too.
>
> Kay: I think it's fun, and I enjoy it. It's a good outing for me. They don't pay me, but I get an employee discount on anything I buy, so that's nice.
>
> Interviewer: That's nice. That's worth a lot, I'm sure!
>
> Kay: Yeah, it is, as much as I buy, yeah, it is. [laughs]

Because Kay knows that Debra was sincerely concerned Kay's safety, this episode of "firing" did not create any hard feelings or cause conflict between them. Besides, Kay was not working for the monetary purpose, but for the purpose of enjoyment. Kay gained institutional authority because the store designated her as group leader. Whether recognized or not, this was an important process of tie formation for the rest of the group members. Members want to go to the knitting group because they like Kay and know she will be there every week. The Fiber Fun group was inclusive of newcomers and old members. On the first day of attending the group for participant observation, Kay teased the senior author for not knitting the "right" way soon after she sat down with the group. Everyone laughed and a few people said that Kay tells everyone they're not knitting correctly unless they are knitting continental style (knitting with the yarn in one's left hand, a European method). This type of teasing, about not knitting the "right" way, was observed at several different meetings and with other first-time visitors. Kay's recurring teasing helped old and new members of the group feel more connected and part of the group, in the same way the senior author felt accepted by the group immediately after Kay's teasing followed by everyone's cheerful laughter. Just as management gurus use humor effectively to build cohesiveness in their audiences (Greatbatch & Clark, 2003), Kay uses humor to help group members feel included and create a stronger sense of cohesiveness. Even though the groups that business gurus and Kay manage are very different, humor is effectively used in both groups; it is an important part of creating cohesiveness, regardless of the size or type of the group.

There was a difference in humor at the two stores. The group at Fiber Fun had running jokes and good-natured teasing. In contrast, at Yarn & More, group members were more likely

to make a joke about something that came up during conversation that evening, but running jokes or teasing were not observed. Here are two excerpts from the field notes at Fiber Fun.

> Sue [a retired art teacher] also said it was the same thing every week. She'd been gone for six weeks and there was nothing new. I said, oh it's like a soap opera where you can tune in once a year and the same story lines are still going, which made everyone laugh again. She said, no she likes soap operas, but it was the same thing in the group every time, for instance Kay always tells everyone they knit wrong. Kay piped up and said that's because they do

> Donna [older regular member with intermediate knitting skills] said, "I had a psychic experience with Kay." She explained that she was in Minnesota and was working on a shawl. She kept making mistakes and ripped it out twice, then she heard a voice in her head saying, "Just do what the pattern says." Everyone laughs, as this is apparently something that Kay is known for saying

Notice how the following two examples of humorous incidents at Yarn & More are related to the conversations that were taking place that night, and do not refer to previous shared experiences at the knitting group.

> When I introduced myself as a grad student working on a project and asked everyone to introduce themselves, Rich [50-ish man married to a store employee] said, "Hi, I'm Rich, and I'm an alcoholic, I mean a knit-aholic, fiber addict", which made me laugh.

> At the long table, the talk turned to candy when Janice said she had been to Sweetie's Candy Warehouse, in a 5000 square foot building on [School Avenue and Chandelier Street]. She was talking about all the old candy that was sold there…Sugar Babies (One of the members said that he used those to pull teeth when he was a kid), and Sugar Daddy. Another member remarked drily, "I want one" and everyone laughed when they realized she was referring to a man.

Certainly, the pattern of running jokes and teasing at Fiber Fun created a sense of belonging. While it might seem that newcomers would feel excluded because they wouldn't know the running jokes, Kay "initiated" them into the group by telling them they were not knitting the right way. When another group member explained the joke, the newcomer felt included in the group; existing members were also reminded of times when they or others were told they were not knitting the right way, creating a sense of continuity. In contrast, newcomers at Yarn & More did not need to have a history with the group to understand the individualized jokes. The joking at Yarn & More did not create the same sense of belonging because it did not "initiate" newcomers into the group membership. Both groups used jokes and teasing to form group ties, but humor created a different tone and character for the groups. Kay looped the newcomers into the group at Fiber Fun, making them part of the loosely organized fabric. Individual group members at Yarn & More were more like snippets of yarn, not the continuous strand used to create a cohesive fabric of relationships.

In summary, the group at Fiber Fun had a different style of humor than the group at Yarn & More. At Fiber Fun, the group used humor in a repetitive manner, with running jokes and inside jokes used to help newcomers and existing members feel included. At Yarn & More, the humor was individualized and did not include running jokes. The two styles of humor contributed to different feelings of cohesiveness in the two groups, with Fiber Fun being the

more cohesive group because its members laughed more frequently as a whole compared to Yarn & More's members. Jokes and humorous moments were short-lived at Yarn & More because of the individualized style of humor.

Although a small, informal group like these knitting groups may not need to have a designated leader, having a leader with the right type of leadership role can affect the group's tie formation. Expressive leadership is focused on the well-being of the group, rather than completing tasks or achieving goals, which are the domain of instrumental leaders (Rees & Segal, 1984). Expressive leaders "are concerned with the elimination of interpersonal friction ...internal integration in this view is a function of leadership" (Rossel, 1970, p. 313). Group members feel affection for expressive leaders (Rees & Segal, 1984). Kay's personal quality as an expressive leader is enhanced by her long history as a knitter and with the store. Unlike at Yarn & More where the owners and some employees are real family members, Fiber Fun has an expressive leader who "acts like" a parent of the group or relative of the store owners, but is actually not related to them. At the meeting a week before Thanksgiving, not many knitters were there, and Kay suggested that the group could use a phone list so that someone could call and check on absent group members. The group members at Fiber Fun or Yarn & More may not know how their knitting group started. However, the presence of an expressive leader and her specialized knowledge as a result of her long association with the organization and the activity are an important aspect of leadership.

In Kay's case, she has a position as an expressive leader who knows the history and origin of the group, but is not in a position of power as a store owner or employee who has to be absent from the group conversations most of the time to fulfill other store duties. Kay's knowledge about the store history and her presence fostered the tightly-knit group cohesiveness. It exemplified how length of belonging in the organizational history, rather than the actual ownership of the organization or utilitarian function, is important for expressive leaders. Kay's long history with the store gave legitimacy to her role and clearly defined her as an expressive leader who can tease members without offending anyone. This helped create cohesion in the group. Expressive leaders are often understood as solely based on personal characteristics, such as being a peacemaker or caregiver. However, traditional authority does matter in small informal groups in modern society and gives additional dimension to an expressive leader.

Group Formation and Genealogy

The owners of Fiber Fun were two female friends, while the owners of Yarn & More were a wife and husband, and many of their employees were family members. Family relationships and interactions outside the family seem to impact the rest of the group members. When family members attend the knitting group, the conversation may be affected because employee family members may not want to discuss family matters in a public manner or in front of other family members who may also be in the store working. Perhaps that is why at Yarn & More, personal conversations about family were likely to involve just a few people, not the entire group. Ironically, the family-owned store had less family-like atmosphere and conversation topics due to the fact that this knitting group was organized by a family-owned store. It seems that the genealogy of the small group makes a difference in terms of how the group sets the tone for the members. Within the context of a family-owned store, the tone of the group was less intimate and insinuated more private conversations among group members. This "tone" may have worked as a mechanism to separate the family/private sphere from the public sphere for the owners and employees, as the rest of the group members started to make small conversation groups rather than making one big conversation circle while they were knitting.

Yarn & More did not have a designated leader. The store employees helped people with knitting problems, but they did not sit down with the group for the whole time; they came around and asked if people needed help as part of their job duties. One of the employees at the store said she does not feel like she is a part of the group. In fact, when the members had a group conversation as a whole at Yarn & More, at times it became uncomfortably controversial or even confrontational since there was no leader to implicitly regulate the conversations. On two separate occasions the atmosphere was noticeably tense when the conversation turned to religion or educational policies. One woman who attended a meeting at Yarn & More and later visited the group at Fiber Fun said "it is much nicer here" because of the all-inclusive, non-confrontational, friendly atmosphere at the Fiber Fun group.

At Fiber Fun, a designated group leader, Kay, said "I feel obligated to be there" and this structure helped create stronger ties in the group, a more solid network: she was the anchor of the group. As leader, Kay sat in the same spot every week at the "head" of the knitting area. Her folding chair sat higher than the chair and love seat, further lending her an authoritative air. Kay knew only a few group members from outside the store, whom she had known for many years; most of the group members were new to her. Store employees sometimes interacted with the group during meetings, but they were usually too busy to sit down and knit.

One might think family-based stores and organizations are friendly, inclusive, cohesive, and less formal because of the positive meanings people attach to the word, "family." However the "family" can create the opposite effect in organizations when there are unclear private/public boundaries. When a loosely organized group stems from a family, it is difficult to implant someone from outside of the family to designate him/her as an expressive leader because it may cause confusion of roles and authority in the organization. The family members also feel insecure about having an outsider in the circle of family business because it increases the chance of disseminating private family matters to outsiders.

The expressive leadership of Kay was necessary for Fiber Fun to create and maintain an all-inclusive atmosphere at Fiber Fun which is not a family-based store. The store was able to successfully and artificially implant a designated and expressive leader for the loosely organized group. With the clear separation between family relations and work relations, non-family based organizations and business may have advantages in creating cohesiveness in small loosely organized groups.

Conclusions

From our observations, we have learned intangible elements such as humor, expressive leadership and group genealogy as well as tangible elements such as furniture and its arrangement can make a difference in terms of tie formation and group cohesiveness. Social network research suggests that individuals participate in networks because of the rewards they will eventually receive. This study found that the institutional practices of the site where individuals gather to knit impact how cohesive a group becomes, even within loosely organized groups.

We propose that having a long history with the setting confers authority to an expressive leader. The long history of a particular activity and association with the group contribute to one's leadership by conferring authority on the leadership. While personal characteristics and likeability are of course important, authority is an essential facet of expressive leadership. With implicit authority, an expressive leader can wield the right amount of tension so that group members can make tightly looped interactions within a loosely organized group. As Thrift (2006) describes, every space resembles "the process of cell growth [which] relies on a sense of where things are to produce particular parts of an organism, a sense that is more than just the provision of a map but rather is a fundamental part of the process of growth, built into the

constitution of organism itself" (p. 140). Our study suggests the importance of seating arrangements in a store-based setting to set the tone of the group, including disseminating the appropriate distance, closeness, and characteristics of the group based on group genealogy to the newcomers. Unlike previous studies of non-store based knitting groups, this study is unique because we used multiple sites of store-based groups to compare meeting space arrangement as well as the genealogy of the two groups and the effects on group cohesiveness.

The nature of relationships is also affected by group genealogy—how the group was organized and begun. The ownership of the group by a married couple with their relatives may create ambiguity in private and public spheres. We propose the ambiguity sets the tone of the group and its members tend to avoid talking about "family" matters. The context of the family-based organization makes it difficult to artificially implant an effective leader; therefore the group has to wait until an effective expressive leader develops naturally to become more cohesive. On the other hand, when a group has clear separation between the private and public spheres, it is easier to artificially implant an expressive leader in the group without concern for family relations. This particular condition also sets the tone of the group and allows its members to be more intimate within the group. When a group has an expressive leader, even though it is a loosely connected membership, it anchors the group and its activities.

This is an undeveloped area of study, and results may not be generalizable to other handcraft groups or other loosely organized groups. The group members of both stores were homogeneous; with more variation in kinds of activities, members' genders, and socioeconomic status, findings may have been different. Future studies are needed to examine tie formation in different groups in other contexts, or more heterogeneous groups. Nevertheless, this study adds a new perspective on tie formation with the new dimensions of expressive leadership and group genealogy in a loosely organized group. By theorizing social interaction and offering a new perspective on tie formation based on our findings, we may be able to offer solutions to build group cohesiveness effectively and systematically in various social groups or even volunteer organizations.

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