

GROWING UP APPALACHIAN: MARGINALIZATION AND PRIVILEGE

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The following narrative describes the cognitive and emotional processes experienced by the author as a child growing up in Appalachia in the 1960s and 70s. The author shares her personal experiences to illuminate the complexities of Appalachian life and culture, as well as the resilience of its citizens, particularly women. The processes that re-inscribe marginalization and privilege have shaped—and continue to influence—the author's identities as an ethnic minority, social worker, and educator. This narrative attempts to initiate authentic dialogue about "social culture" (Stewart & Bennett, 1991).

As I stand in front of students enrolled in my social work classes, I am constantly aware that the faces I see and the papers I read provide only a glimpse of the depth inherent in each learner. When classes commence, my students seem to give me their undivided attention. As we comb through the syllabus, I see that they are assessing me to determine how demanding or permissive I will be. They see an assistant professor of social work whom they've been told has spent the better part of a thirty year career as a practitioner and educator. They see in my teaching what my values and beliefs are with regard to the subject matter. What they don't see is the intersection of the historical marginalization of my Appalachian culture with my privileged identities, and how that complexity has shaped those values and beliefs.

Social Context

Appalachia has been in and out of the public eye over the years. The limelight has not, however, been generally favorable to Appalachia. The idea that this proud Appalachian ancestry and culture is considered by the larger society to be "underprivileged" is a difficult awareness to concede. As a member of this ethnic group, I have always understood that the larger society saw us as an anomaly. Natural geographic features and a unique history made us far different from those who were dwellers on the piedmonts and prairies. Our ancestors were rural by design; wanting freedom from the confines of societal rules, they made their

way to the area and lived off the land. Our area of the world was, until recently extremely difficult to transverse due to the rugged terrain and lack of suitable roads. We were a culture that was virtually cut off from the larger American society until the last part of the 20th Century. However, since life is not static, even topography can only keep the world from encroaching for a period of time. In our case, it lasted about 150 years.

In addition to devastating the Appalachian region, the Civil War also introduced "Yankees" to the area. Seeing the vast natural resources, the "Yankees" returned after the war as land developers and engaged our predominately Scots-Irish ancestors who did not like government and who believed that God preordained the circumstance of life. Weller (1965) describes the West Virginian's perceptions of government and bureaucracy, "[H]e has a certain fear of them, as if those who run them were out to get him or were interested only in doing things to their own advantage and at his expense" (p. 85). The combination of outsiders, anti-government sentiment, and predestination beliefs became a devastating recipe for many Appalachians. In their desire to be left alone, the mountaineers of the early and mid-1900s succumbed to the tactics of developers who threatened them with legal action if they did not turn over their land. Believing that they would be in trouble with the law, the mountaineers probably thought that God had ordained that these people arrive anyway, and found themselves at a loss.

Through this intimidation, these outsiders" cheated people out of their land and mineral rights; reaffirming my father's assertion that "they will take your land." The developers were shrewd and understood that the mountaineers were proud people who wanted to be in charge of their own society without intrusion. However, the developers needed laborers to work the coal mines and wanted to make sure that the local people would accept their meager terms of pay Smith (1983) indicated that developers made use of unsuspecting sociologists who wanted to study the Appalachian "ways" which were thought, at that time, to be comparable to those of the Middle Ages. The developers exploited these studies to stereotype and demean the people, with the goal of making them feel worthless. Once the people felt powerless, it was easy for the developers to have them work long hours for little pay. These outsiders had shattered the self worth of a very proud people in addition to taking their land, homes, and way of life.

Toynbee's Treatise

In high school, our history teacher told of an English historian named Arnold Toynbee (1935) who allegedly never spent any time in Appalachia but wrote an account of the types of people who lived in the region anyway His description read in part:

"The Appalachian mountain people at this day are no better than barbarians. They are the American counterparts of the latter-day White barbarian of the Old World, the Rifis and Kurds and the Hairy Ainu; but, whereas these latter are believed survivors of an ancient barbarism, the Appalachians present the melancholy spectacle of a people who have acquired civilization and then lost it."

At the time, I did not know who the Rifi or Ainu people were, but I assumed that they were people with whom one would not want to be associated. Nor did I, at the time, recognize the racism inherent in what was meant to be a shaming description of the Appalachian people.

With years of being socialized into believing in my inferiority, I ultimately become so overwhelmed with humiliation about my cultural background that I began to make fun of myself. I would begin discussions by excusing my lack of intelligence: "I don't really know for sure, 'cause I don't get out much" was a common phrase for me. As a people, we seemed to be so powerless. The Blacks challenged the horrible treatment that they had endured for centuries in this country, but Appalachians did not seem to complain or object. I became very aware that I was different from my urban counterparts and just wanted to fit in. However, that was difficult when I had been so isolated that even my language sounded antiquated and was often hard for those outside of our culture to even understand.

Life Training

In Appalachian culture, stories are a vehicle used to teach morals and values. They provide entertainment as well as lessons about consequences and responsibility, and how to lead a good life. Looking back, I realized that the themes of marginalization and privilege were a constant part of the conversation in our home as I grew up.

Mother

My mother often told stories about her childhood in the 1920s and 30s during the Great Depression in Scott's Run Coal Camp located near Morgantown, West Virginia. "We didn't know there was a depression; everybody was poor, so it was normal," she would say. My grandpa was a coal miner He worked six 18-hour days per week, housed his family in "company accommodations," which were little more than shacks, and was paid in script (company minted money) that was redeemable only at the company store. Most of the script went to pay rent for the company

owned shack, with little left over to buy food at the company store. Mom told us about having only potatoes and fry bread to eat on any given day; as a result of her poor diet, she developed rickets, a disease that is associated with developing countries that do not have enough vitamin D in their diets. Mom's older sister died of meningitis; according to my mother, the death of children was a regular occurrence at the camp.

Mom also shared that First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt received word from a friend who had visited Scott's Run that, "Scotts Run was the worst place she had ever seen, with housing most Americans would not have considered fit for pigs." Mom said that after reading the letter, Mrs. Roosevelt came to see the camp for herself, and later told her husband about the dire conditions there. He was so appalled that soon thereafter plans were underway to help the poor coal miners and their families by creating the first *New Deal* community in Arthurdale, West Virginia.

My mother loved school and wanted to be a teacher. However, due to financial constraints, she was forced to quit school in the 8th grade to help her mother clean houses and wash shirts for the West Virginia University students. While my mother turned out to be a strong and resourceful person, education and money have always been difficult topics for her. The economic disparities and social injustices left my mother believing that her intellectual abilities were inadequate. When a parent learns these lessons, they are often conveyed to the children, leading to generation after generation of feelings of low self-worth and insecurity.

Father

My dad grew up as an only child in Randolph County. He owned a coal mine and was the proprietor of our general store. As a child, I was constantly told by my father that I was the recipient of a strong and proud heritage. My fifth great-grandfather, William Currence, was a Scottish renegade who was held prisoner by the British and shipped to this country as a slave. He became a scout, and a soldier in Lord Dunmore's War and in the Revolutionary War with England. In 1750, he

was charged by General Washington to build a fort as part of a line of defense against the British in what is present-day Mill Creek. William Currence laid the foundation for my early sense of cultural pride. As a child I walked by the house he built, where generations of my family were born. The town where I grew up was incorporated as Currence's Mill Creek—later shortened to Mill Creek—after the mill that my great-grandfather built. Land was inherited by the generations that followed William with the strict rule that it should be cherished by those to whom it was given. Most of my family obeyed the rule and stayed in the area.

As a child I would listen to my parents discuss many issues, most prominently the issue of labor unions. My dad's coal mine was small, employing about forty miners. It was a non-union mine, but he believed that he paid fair wages and suggested that all the miners seemed very happy to work for him. My dad would argue that if you treated people well there was no use for a union. My mother on the other hand, had endured the impoverishing consequences of non-unionism. While my mother agreed in part with my dad's ideas, she usually stood by the tenets of the United Mine Workers of America. She often reminded me about how privileged I was to live in our house and have the things that she never had.

Contemplating Life

After hearing the differences in my parents' stories, I began to wonder just where I fit in. In 1962, I was 7 years old. All of my needs were taken care of; I always had new clothes, good Christmases, and traveled with my family on summer vacations. I would think about my poor mother at my age: freezing nights, holes in her shoes, and very little food to eat. I enjoyed the advantages of a comfortable life because I was born into this particular family.

When I began to work in our general store as an 8 year old in 1963, I would consider how the lessons I learned from my mom applied to our customers. Most of them were coal miners or lumberjacks that came in after work, purchasing groceries on credit extended by my dad. The biggest day was Saturday when entire

families would shop. Though I was busy gathering groceries, running the cash register and boxing up goods, I always paid attention to their conversations. I began to understand how difficult life was for many people in our area, both financially and socially. Kerosene oil was purchased to heat and light homes as well as kill head lice. I found that many families experienced issues with alcoholism and violence. Many of the kids I went to school with could not afford hot lunches. Instead, they would have a sandwich wrapped up in wax paper, carried in a paper lunch bag. Day after day they would refold the wax paper, place it back in their paper bags, and take it home to be used again.

Feelings about My Privilege

Because I was aware that many in my community experienced great poverty and social turmoil, I felt ashamed of the things I had. Although I was socially aware at a young age, I did not understand why everyone did not have as much as I had. Granted, I was not rich in the context of the larger society, but I was well-to-do compared to most of my neighbors. The house I lived in had a furnace; we did not heat with kerosene or wood. We had an indoor bathroom, not an outhouse like most people in our community.

At 8 years old, the emotional and cognitive dissonance I experienced led me to make the decision that I would try to figure out how to *really* help my community. I did not fully comprehend the problems or their complexity but I vowed to learn what they were and find ways to intervene.

Television

Several years before I was born, my parents bought a television set. Television reception was difficult in our mountainous area. Reception on the two channels was fuzzy and would frequently go out when wind or snow knocked over the mountaintop antenna.

I noticed that we were very different from the people I watched on television. We certainly did not dress or talk like them, with the exception of shows like *The Beverly Hillbillies* and *The Real McCoy's*. Anytime I met someone from the "outside" they would

compare me to one of the characters on these shows. This used to infuriate me because I felt I was being made fun of and could not understand why people wanted to be mean. Television also highlighted my realization that women were expected to be subservient to men, in general and within Appalachian culture. This came as a complete surprise to me, because my mother and paternal grandmother were matriarchs who were respected by their husbands. Most women in my community were equal partners in the home; men and women usually split duties such as paying bills, home repairs, cooking, and cleaning. Traditionally, women cooked and cleaned and had responsibilities with the children such as church, school, and gardening. The men traditionally worked outside the home, did repairs, hunted, and fished. The role of "bill payer" in each home was a decision that couples made together.

During my childhood, a Presbyterian minister wrote a book about the behaviors and opinions of West Virginians. In it, he made the observation that middle class couples shared household duties such as laundry, whereas Appalachian couples did not share housework; that the wife was "an obedient slave" to her husband (Weller, 1965, p.75). During the same era, Bott (1957) noted that the relationship between a husband and wife in Appalachia was "segregated" in contrast to the "joint" relationships of middle class urban couples. She maintained that, "segregation results in a separation of tasks, friends, leisure-time pursuits, interests, and activities." Weller (1965) further commented about the views of middle class urban persons regarding Appalachian couples: "They (sic) find it difficult to accept what seems to them a total unconcern of husband and wife for one another." (p75). He continues by explaining that this pattern of uncomfortable communication between the sexes is very much in line with survival of the family. Because many husbands are killed at a young age in coal mining and other work-related accidents, it is imperative for the woman to maintain the household along with the extended family. Conversely, women often died in childbirth, forcing the men to maintain the

family. He theorized that what he interpreted as lack of emotional closeness was a psychological defense mechanism against grief from loss, and was one of the many contradictions of the Appalachian culture. He explained that although Appalachian families frequently chose to live close to their relatives for generations, they also established psychological barriers against their loved ones as a type of protection against being emotionally destroyed when/if they died.

I also learned from watching television that we handled our relationships differently from the larger society. Many couples on television shows would display affection in front of their children and even other people. They would hug, kiss, and hold hands in public. This was never the case in our house, or any of my friend's homes. This type of behavior was absolutely against norms of Appalachian culture.

The observations of Bott (1957) and Weller (1965) regarding the differences between the relationship dynamics of rural and urban couples held some truth, but failed to recognize the cultural norms that dictated the reticence of many Appalachians to publicly display deep emotions or physical affection. These interpretations of behavior are excellent examples of well-meaning onlookers failing to understand the complexities of the Appalachian's subjective cultural experience.

The War on Poverty

Appalachian women are generally considered to be the leaders of their families. As Weller (1965) noted in his study of Appalachian subjective culture, the ability of women to network and take on decision-making roles was often a necessity for survival of the family. When the coal mines and lumber mills shut down in the 1960s, I watched as family after family was forced to either move to Ohio or Michigan for work, or "go on the dole." This displacement of the man as the "bread winner" dealt a devastating blow to the people of my community. If they were forced to sign up for "relief" (prior to the changes in welfare regulations), the man had to move out of the home and leave his family in order for the woman to receive assistance.

To be able to deal with the loss of livelihood, the loss of their partners, and to provide for their families, women had to be strong and resourceful.

I turned 10 years old in the summer of 1965. I was still working in our general store when a photographer came in to talk about the War on Poverty and ask about people in our town. I had a vague idea of what he meant, because I had watched President Kennedy declare that "War" on the news, after which we were inundated with VISTA workers from the Northeast to teach us how to plant gardens. Apparently, the photographer had heard that our community was in dire straits and wanted to show the world (once again) just how bad things were by taking pictures. He found a local family who agreed to be in the magazine. I'm not sure if they were offered money, but in December 1965, sandwiched between the cover article titled "The Mad New World of Julie Andrews" and "Jews and Christmas" was "Christmas in Appalachia," including ten pictures of that family. Needless to say, the article reinforced painful stereotypes.

Later as a college student, I began to see how these strange observations by the media had affected our community and state. I read that President Johnson sponsored the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 to continue the War on Poverty, and that the Appalachian Regional Commission was created as a funding source to assist counties in creating organizations in twelve geographical locations in Appalachia, including ours. The Commission was charged with helping the needy, who Dolgoff and Feldstein (1984) indicated were most often considered to have low intelligence, emotional problems, and the need for rehabilitative services. These views of the people of Appalachia were held by the policy makers who voted to fund the "War." The Commission was supposed to provide organizational services by funding health, housing, and education initiatives. Dolgoff and Feinstein argued that these initiatives were based on policymaker's distorted understanding about what people in Appalachia needed in terms of opportunities for self-advancement and involvement in societal decision-making. They stated that, "[S]ervices

were offered because one has not made it in society due to personal shortcomings and therefore needs assistance of a service nature" (p.83). After 30 years of such services, the Commission still has not met its goals (Appalachia Hollow Promises, 1999). Many underfunded nonprofit social welfare organizations in the Appalachian regions of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Ohio continue to underserve the health, mental health, housing needs, and education of the region.

Rural Education

When I was growing up in West Virginia, a very small portion of the local student body decided on post-secondary education. Most jobs in the area were affiliated with the coal mines and lumber mills which required great skill, but nothing that college could teach. Locke and Potter (2004) highlight that within the United States, West Virginia ranks last in the percentage of residents 25 years and older who have completed high school, and 48th in the percentage of those same residents who hold a bachelor's degree or higher. The United States Census (2000) reported that the high school I graduated from has the greatest discrepancy in the country between students who are interested in college (as determined by the numbers taking college entrance exams) and those who actually attend, 19.6%. Despite help with student loans, many of these students still can't afford to go to college because they have to work and help support their families.

Poole & More (2004) cites various factors contributing to the motivation and follow through of rural students from high school to college, primarily the influence of parents, most of whom were laborers. Men typically worked in natural resource industries and women who worked outside of the home were usually employed by "the sewing factory." More prestigious positions for women without a college background were at department stores in the county seat. Those who were fortunate enough to go to college frequently returned to the area to teach in public schools. Most public school teachers when I was growing up were women. In his work on Appalachian culture, Weller (1965) highlights that women were more likely to go to college, and that it was not

uncommon for a "college trained teacher to be married to a man who had not even finished high school" (p.110).

My Story, Continued

As a young person I aspired to go to college, and had no idea of the barriers that would hinder the attainment of that goal. My primary and most of my secondary educational experiences were generally good ones. However, during the later part of high school my personal life underwent great turbulence.

Weller (1965) discusses the tight knit structure of most mountain families and the desire and expectation that we will take care of our own. And so it was for me, even though I felt disconnected from many of the "typical" aspects of our culture. Unlike other families in the area whose maternal and paternal extended families stayed in one area, my mother had moved to the area where my father's family had lived since the 1750s. Most of my encounters were with my father's family, especially my paternal grandmother, "Nanny." I spent much of my life with Nanny who lived about 50 yards across a one-lane road from my parents.

Nanny had a massive stroke when I was 12-years old. Her partial recovery left her weakened, and when she returned home I took responsibility for her care. My duties were to be with her after school, on weekends, during the summer, and on holidays. We did not believe in formal institutions, especially nursing homes. Medicare services such as home health care had not yet been established, so our family had no outside assistance. This schedule left me very isolated from others, although my parents allowed me to participate in the high school band. However those were the only outings I could attend besides going to school, so socialization with friends was rare.

When I became old enough to have a boyfriend, only one boy met with my mother's approval, and I was not allowed to date anyone else. My boyfriend was allowed to visit me at Nanny's without supervision, and I became pregnant at 15. My parents and in-laws told me that I could not go back to high school. The unspoken rules about teenage pregnancy maintained that this embarrassing issue did not

need to be publicized in the public school system.

School had been the one constant in my life and I was very scared about being forced to quit during my junior year. I was almost resigned to this fate when my new husband's grandmother, a longtime educator, insisted that I should return to school regardless of my pregnancy. Her edict was upheld and I was allowed to continue my education. In November of that year my daughter was born. Complications during her birth left her with a severe disability. Throughout the remainder of high school, I took care of my daughter (who rarely slept) and my grandmother. I also became a survivor of domestic violence.

There were no services for battered women in the area at the time; domestic violence was considered to be a private matter. Under the circumstances of "having to get married," I was seen as something of a harlot who had entrapped a very fine upstanding young man. I felt humiliated and assumed that people thought I deserved whatever I got in the marriage. Although many knew of the emotional and physical violence, they were unable or unwilling to help either of us because of cultural norms.

Fortunately, the strength and resilience that the women in my family had modeled for me as a child proved to be the most valuable aspect of my identity: I did not give up on my education. By taking correspondence courses and attending summer school, I graduated with the class of 1973. Though my new husband and I had a difficult relationship, his grandmother remained an invaluable support to me as a young woman trying to better myself. She provided support to me throughout the ordeal and will always remain in my thoughts as one of the most dynamic women I have ever known.

As a teenage mother of a child with severe disabilities, I spent many hours with pediatric neurologists at West Virginia University and The University of Virginia Medical Centers to find help for my daughter. I began these visits when I was 16 and took my daughter to be examined on a regular basis until I was 21. I was told that she would not progress beyond her current level of

development and was advised to institutionalize her. My family was very much against that and made their opinions known.

I tried everything I could think of to assist my daughter. I remember going to the Department of Welfare to ask if there was someone to teach me how to exercise her limbs because she could not sit up, hold her head up, or walk. But there were no early intervention services at that time; all they offered to give me was food stamps, which I didn't need. Once again, the help that I needed was not available.

When I turned 21, I went against my family's opinion and made the decision to institutionalize my daughter. After years of sleepless nights and of being physically and emotionally abused by my new husband, I realized that I could not help my daughter if I didn't help myself. I called the Collin Anderson Center, which was a state institution for children with mental retardation. I was told there was an 8-year waiting list. I was devastated, but determined to take control of my life. My father had strong political ties – another aspect of my social class privilege. I summoned the courage to contact a friend of my father's who was very powerful. I had known him since I was a child, and he was familiar with my situation. I told him my thoughts about institutionalization and about the long waiting list. The next day, the Director of what was then known as the State Department of Crippled Children contacted my dad to say that we could bring my daughter to the institution. My father was furious, but I stood my ground and explained that I needed to do something with my life, and that this would be the best thing for my daughter and me. It was the hardest thing I have ever done. I am not prone to giving up on anything and it felt like I was giving up on her. I also felt as if the community looked upon me as a bad mother for doing such a callous thing. Looking back, I recognize that this would have never happened were it not for the social class privilege I had. How would my life have turned out had I not been able to make that phone call?

I decided to make it a double header and divorce my abusive husband. I incurred a bad reputation with many people in the area

(including my own family) for these actions, but I was finally free. I moved to Morgantown, got a job, and enrolled at West Virginia University.

After years of fearing for my life and having a low sense of self-esteem, I finally felt empowered. That sense of empowerment was one of the most important aspects of my identity. Knowing that I could make such a huge change in my life gave me the confidence to finish both a master's degree and a doctoral program. Looking back on my actions, I realize that I have a strong survival instinct, which was modeled by the women in my life; by those who were formally educated, as well as those who – because of life circumstances – had to turn down educational opportunities.

With the passage of time, and because I went away and achieved my professional goals, my reputation has recovered in the eyes of my family and the community. However, because of my love of the mountains and my family, it has been a difficult journey for me to have spent the better part of my adult life away from “home.” I believe I have assisted many people during my career as a social worker, but I have failed to assist the very people that I dedicated myself to so long ago. Weller (1965) ironically discusses this aspect of Appalachian perception, indicating that no matter how far we go or how long we are away from our communities, we frequently experience psychological attachments to the land and to our reference group, and dream of the day when our personal and financial issues are settled and we can return “home.”

Conclusion

Important life lessons are not usually neatly packaged. I have come to understand that my basic identity has been forged by the social awareness gained in my childhood home. Because life is dynamic I have developed other identities that have evolved from those initial years. The inherent tensions between my identities as a child from a marginalized culture, a young mother of a disabled child, a young adult from a privileged family with political connections, a social worker, and an educator have given rise to great learning and teaching experiences throughout my life. My

experiences are still difficult to share with acquaintances for fear of ridicule. It has been made clear to me over the years through remarks, jokes, and condescending questions that I have often been considered inferior. Interactions like these both infuriate and sadden me, because although my culture is considered to be underprivileged by the larger society, I know the aspects of cultural strength that are also part of it. Coming to terms with the concept that my culture is economically, politically, and culturally powerless has been difficult.

Acceptance

I have come to consciously acknowledge the historical marginalization of my culture as I review my childhood perceptions. I was witness to the development of well-meaning, yet inept social and educational programs in Appalachia, based on the erroneous perceptions of my culture by those in power. As part of my resilience, I have attempted to ignore the painful aspects of powerlessness in my culture in favor of discussing our rich cultural values and beliefs. However, I now recognize that there has to be balance between seeing one's culture as solely marginalized or solely privileged. Discovering this balance has led to the realization that efforts must be made to competently assist Appalachians with using their resources, knowledge, and resilience to enhance the social, political, and economic aspects of the culture.

My identity as an educator has enhanced my understanding of the inherent problems facing our culture. As a result, I have focused my research on assessing organizational effectiveness in rural social welfare agencies, efficacy in rural social work practice, and design of rural social work educational delivery systems. As an educator, I am fortunate to be able to influence my students to become competent social workers. I regularly incorporate aspects of my identity in the classroom to assist my students in becoming knowledgeable about cultural disparities and cultural nuances of their clients. I structure my lessons with the idea that the students take into consideration that what they initially see

in their clients is only a glimpse of the depth and complexity inherent in each person.

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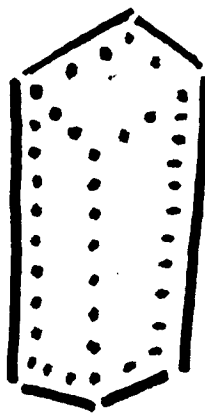
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