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Creative Interventions to Facilitate Appalachian Career Choices

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Career counselors rarely consider Appalachian culture when designing interventions, yet these values should be taken into consideration in many areas of the country other than the original Appalachia. Appalachians, both Black and White, migrated into Midwestern urban areas after World War II and still form large subcultures in such cities as Detroit and Cincinnati, as well as being scattered throughout the country (Berry, 2000; Wilson, 1983).

During the time of the Great Society, programs proliferated and government workers and programs flooded into Appalachia (Drake, 2001). Now, in 2004, we see that little has changed. The culture and its people are durable, resilient, and obdurate. Just as the Chinese over the centuries have retained their culture by passively resisting and rejecting culture that others attempted to impose on them, so too the Appalachians have retained their basic culture in the face of inroads by mainstream America (Fisher, 1993).

What are the cultural differences? After all, we speak the same language, watch the same television and movies, read many of the same books and newspapers, hold many of the same kind of jobs, attend church and schools. With so much similarity to mainstream culture, I was interested in what constituted an Appalachian and what were the basic differences.

White, Black, and American Indian groups are well represented among Appalachians, but the Celtic peoples are felt to have had the predominant influence on the culture. Irish, English, and Scots are all present with their Celtic clan social framework (Crotty, n.d.). Other peoples, moving into the area or marrying into the clans, adopted much of the culture that was present. The Cherokee Indian tribe resided in much of the Appalachian area, and there was frequent intermarriage (Prajznerova, 2003). Some African Americans settled and were accepted there in the lean times after the Civil War, as well as workers from railroad building crews. They are well represented in the coal mines of Kentucky and West Virginia (Wagner, Obermiller, & Turner, 2004; Wilkinson, 1999). Family ties were strengthened by frequent isolation. Living far from cities and neighbors, often with poor or no roads, the Appalachian was dependent on his or her family and kin, often for his or her very survival.

Thus the bedrock of Appalachian values is the family and kinfolk, and knowing one's place within the community (communitarianism) (Little, 2002; Simon, 2002). An Appalachian's first loyalty is to the family, and all that responsibility entails. Education is valued, but not at the expense of the family. If a father dies, and the children are of an age to contribute to the family income, that is their responsibility and role. Education may need to be suspended or abandoned, but the family comes first. The family is also the first choice for career models and for advice on vocations.

Appalachian social relationships appear to be much flatter and less hierarchical than those of mainstream American culture. Social standing is dependent on family; equality is valued and being considered "better than others" is looked down upon. Many members share a basic mistrust of government and outside agencies. They prefer independence and being in control (Fisher, 1993). There is also a strong religious thread and commitment to the arts found throughout the culture. Crafts are a frequent choice of vocation.

Appalachian culture is predominantly patriarchal. Boys tend to be spoiled by their mothers; girls are expected to accept more home responsibilities than boys, but are valued less. Good women are expected to behave better than men, but if they do fail, they are treated with greater severity (which is not too different from mainstream American culture). A woman who is a poor housekeeper or neglects her children is considered as bad, or worse than a woman who is promiscuous. Traditional gender roles are valued and supported. A man should be a good hunter. Even today, hunting and shooting are popular pastimes for Appalachian males; and if he has a little too much to drink or "roughs up the wife a bit," this is fairly acceptable behavior as long as he is a good provider. Women are expected to cook, clean, and keep house for their families. Because of the strong family support ethic, they are also expected to work if necessary and if jobs are available. It is not acceptable, however, for a

wife to be better paid or to have a more responsible position than her husband (Engelhardt, 2004; Walker, 2000).

There are few gray areas in Appalachian culture. A person is either "good" or "bad." There is little in-between. Outsiders may not realize this about members of the culture, because they don't understand that the definitions of good or bad may not match their definitions. Children are highly valued in mainstream Appalachian culture, and few people are considered more deprived than childless married adults. Because of the traditionally large families, childless couples often borrow or adopt a relative's child to bring up as their own. Several of my study participants mentioned that this had happened in their families. Because of this value for children, many Appalachians go into education or some type of child care.

Religion, in many cases, plays a greater role in day-to-day life than in the mainstream culture. Most of the people in my research project expressed strong religious beliefs and indicated that they would never consider a job that went against the teachings of their church (Welch, 1999).

Catastrophic events seem to play a major role in Appalachian lives and conversations (Crissman, 1994). All of the people that I interviewed displayed great interest in rehashing traumatic events that had occurred in their families, to themselves, and to relatives. They did not seem to place much emphasis on traumatic world events if they were not personally affected. The exceptions to this were the events of 9/11 and the number of young Appalachians currently serving in Iraq. Lengthy stories were told of relatives with "the cancer," how much they suffered, who in the family cared for them; and it was recounted with pride that they hadn't been "shipped off to a nursing home." This may be one basis for the interest in vocations that provide medical support to patients.

Another minor cultural aspect is that of recycling, long before it was the "in" thing to do. Appalachians like to grow their own vegetables, to can, and to sew, and dislike throwing anything out. In the isolation was so much a part of the original culture, one never knew when one would need something that was no longer available, so goods were frequently recycled.

To review: the major hallmarks of Appalachian culture seem to be strong family ties and a sense of community, dislike of appearing better than others, strong gender roles and religious beliefs, education that is valued but in a somewhat more limited way than in mainstream culture, a strong interest in family health, and a basic mistrust of outsiders.

All of these factors affect how self-efficacy (the belief that you can do something successfully) is viewed and formed. Bandura's self-efficacy (SE) theory explores the impact of self-efficacy on behavior (Bandura, 1986). Lent, Brown, and Hackett's (1994) social cognitive career theory (SCCT) carried this forward into SE's effect on career behavior. Research has supported the predictive value of SE beliefs on career entry indexes (range of perceived options, academic achievement, and persistence), work adjustment outcomes (performance), vocational interests, and self-esteem. The Career Intervention model combines SCCT and ecological counseling, taking into account the context of the culture and how it interacts with mainstream American culture (Tang & Russ, 2004).

Members of the Appalachian culture tend to mistrust outside agencies, which often include schools and educational personnel (Fisher, 1993). Counselors providing interventions to increase career information and choice should be sensitized to, and work with, the strengths of the culture. A position of trust may need to be built up before students will accept vocational information. Whenever possible, families should be included in the sharing of vocational information and suggestions because of the strong emphasis on kin relationships. Appalachians appreciate concrete, hands-on career information. Programs that involve field trips to local community businesses and services where students can see and experience possible career choices are valued. Community partnerships in which workers mentor students and provide a closer, more personal relationship tend to expand students' career options and are a particularly good vehicle for Appalachians. Problem-based learning (PBL) has been found efficacious with Appalachian students, partially because they appreciate the increased feeling of control they have over their own education and learning, independent control being a prized quality. PBL also increases overall student self-efficacy, which leads to better career decisions. Appalachians, whether students or adults, also may need more information and exposure to the expansion of gendered opportunities in employment (Cook, 1993).

Career counselors have a great deal of information and support to provide to clients, but must keep in mind that if cultural considerations are not taken into account, clients may not accept what they have to offer.

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