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A Family Affair: Competing Sponsors of Literacy in Appalachian Students' Lives

Sara Webb-Sunderhaus

This article explores the literacy lives of students enrolled in English Composition courses at two open-admission universities in Central Appalachia and the complex role of immediate and extended family members as sponsors of literacy. Some relatives emerge as both sponsors and inhibitors—or perhaps more accurately, sponsors of competing meanings of literacy—and illustrate the larger social forces surrounding literacy in students' lives.

My aunt teaches me how to do school.

—Katie May

He wants to blame me going back to school for his problems, which it is not.

—Pamela, discussing her husband's drug addiction

Sponsors [...] set the terms for access to literacy and wield powerful incentives for compliance and loyalty.

—Deborah Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives*

Growing up as an Urban Appalachian¹ in Cincinnati, Ohio, I became painfully aware of the stories that some people tell about Appalachians: stories of hillbillies, rednecks, and white trash; stories of incest and other deviant sexual practices; stories of laziness, ignorance, and hatred. When I entered graduate school, I became aware of other kinds of stories about Appalachians. While there were stories of illiteracy and relentless poverty, there were also stories that idealized Appalachian families and that venerated the “pure” Anglo-Saxon whiteness of the Appalachian people. But I didn't recognize the Appalachian people I knew and loved, or myself, in any of these stories. These stories demonized and romanticized Appalachians; as folklorist Patrick B. Mullen writes, “[T]he Anglo Appalachian is a complex construction containing both romantic and ra-

tional scientific elements; hidden beneath a romantic view is a pathological one” (129). The multifaceted stories I learned from my family about Appalachia and its people—the stories I learned down on the tobacco farms of Lewis County, Kentucky—usually were not being told in my fields of study. It was my awareness of these other stories of Appalachia that inspired my research, which examines the interplay of literacy and identity among Appalachians enrolled in college composition courses.

Deborah Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives* posits that literacy is not only an individual development, but also an economic one, since “literacy looms as one of the great engines of profit and competitive advantage in the twentieth century” (18). The individual and the economic are intertwined, Brandt argues, and she frames her analysis by examining what she calls “sponsors of literacy.” According to Brandt, sponsors are “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way” (19). These sponsors are conduits for the larger economic forces of literacy, as Brandt writes that they are “the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners” (19). While interviewing the participants in the case studies that make up her book, Brandt found that sponsors were often individuals: “older relatives, teachers, religious leaders, supervisors, military officers, librarians, friends, editors, influential authors” (19). However, as Brandt notes, sponsors can include commercial entities, such as companies who award prizes in a jingle-writing contest and restaurants who offer gift certificates to children who read a designated number of books, as well as institutions, such as the African-American church.

I have found Brandt’s concept of sponsorship useful in describing the literacy beliefs of students enrolled in an English Composition course at Riverton University and State University-Sciotoville, two open-admission universities in Central Appalachia.² When I began my project, I was particularly interested in the role of educational institutions in shaping literacy beliefs and the students’ performance of identity, particularly their Appalachian identity. My research with these students led me to conclude that literacy beliefs and practices were part and parcel of the students’ performance of identity, representing an important stage on which their Appalachian-ness—or non-Appalachian-ness, in some cases—was portrayed. Institutional beliefs about, and rewards for, certain types of literacy help foster or sponsor certain beliefs and performances from the students. Yet schools are not the only, or even necessarily the most influential, sponsors of literacy in American lives. Brandt writes that “sponsors of literacy are more prolific, diffused, and heterogeneous” (197) than in the past, when schools played a prominent role in literacy education; she later adds, “Schools are no longer the major disseminators of literacy” (198). Thus, the question that surfaced during my research was, if educational institutions are a key sponsor of these students’ literacies, how do other sponsors impact the students’ performance of identity, and more specifically Appalachian-ness, with regard to literacy? Who are the “prolific, diffused, and heterogeneous” sponsors in these students’ lives?

This article will focus on one group of sponsors, namely immediate and extended family members, and the complexity of their sponsorship. Sponsorship is a messy process, one that cannot be neatly delineated. The same could be said of some Appalachian families as well. Appalachian Studies scholars often write of a romanticized Appalachian family that serves as a comforting fortress for its members; for example, Loyal Jones

writes, “Mountain people usually feel an obligation to family members and are more truly themselves when within the family circle” (75). Other scholars write of conflicts between the culture of family and the culture of school, with family culture being more acceptable to Appalachians, according to Michael Maloney: “[T]here’s a deep conflict between the values in school and the values at home [...] Appalachians expect relationships to be personal; they aren’t comfortable with functional relationships” (34). Yet for the students in my study, the Appalachian family did not function only in the comforting, supportive ways typically described by scholars. While many individual family members were encouraging sponsors of their students’ literacies, some of these same individuals also worked to inhibit the students’ emerging literacy beliefs and practices. Seemingly contradictory messages about literacy could come from the same person, such that the same person could be both a sponsor and an inhibitor—or perhaps more accurately, a sponsor of a competing meaning of literacy—in a student’s life. And it was through, and upon, these inhibitors of literacy that the larger social forces described by Brandt were often enacted. In other words, far from being a fortress from the outside world, the families of my participants created a space in which these social forces fostered particular kinds of sponsorship.

Institutional beliefs about, and rewards for, certain types of literacy help foster or sponsor certain beliefs and performances from the students. Yet schools are not the only, or even necessarily the most influential, sponsors of literacy in American lives.

The Study

During the summer of 2004, I conducted an ethnographic case study of two English Composition classes and the students enrolled in them. The data I gathered came from multiple sources including participant-observations, transcripts of individual classes, a brief demographic survey, formal interviews, and, in the case of one class, an extended survey based on my interview script. I attended each class twice a week, making audio recordings of class sessions and taking notes so that I could paint a rich portrait full of “thick detail” for each course. I also made audio recordings of the five interviews I conducted with each of my case study participants, as well as the interviews with the instructors and other students. I asked each student to complete a brief demographic survey, and from those surveys I selected two to three students from each course to be my case study participants. My selections were based on students’ willingness and availability to participate as well as their representativeness of their respective classes. While two students from each course became case study participants who were interviewed weekly for the duration of each five-week course, many other students participated in my research, thanks to their contributions in class and their participation in short, occasional interviews inside and outside of class. Particular student voices you will hear in this article include those of Mike, Michelle, and Pamela, all of whom were students at Riverton University; and Katie May and Julie, students at State University-Sciotoville.

Tables 1 and 2 provide demographic information about the two classes and universities that were the focus of the project:

Table 1: Riverton

| | Campus | Class |
|--|-------------------------------|---|
| Enrollment | 1,800 students | 14 students |
| Male-Female Enrollment | 40% M, 60% F | 14% M, 86% F |
| Average Age of Students | 33 | 23.8 |
| Race of Students | 93% white (all U.S. campuses) | 86% white, 7% African-Amer., 7% Asian-Amer. |
| Commuting Students | All | All |
| First Generation College | “Most” | 64% |
| Born and Raised in Local Area | “Most” | 86% |
| Identify as Appalachian (All Students) | Unknown | 64% |
| Identify as Appalachian (Students Raised in Region) | Unknown | 64% |

Table 2: Sciotoville

| | Campus | Class |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| Enrollment | 3,500 students | 18 students |
| Male-Female Enrollment | 40% M, 60% F | 60% M, 40% F (50-50 in regular attendance) |
| Average Age of Students | 25 | 26.8 |
| Race of Students | 86% white, 10% unknown, 4% students of color | 94% white, 6% African-American |

| | Campus | Class |
|--|---------------|--------------|
| Commuting Students | 90% | 75% |
| First Generation College | “Most” | 32% |
| Born and Raised in Local Area | “Most” | 62% |
| Identify as Appalachian (All Students) | Unknown | 28% |
| Identify as Appalachian (Students Raised in Region) | Unknown | 45% |

This demographic information confirms what I found in interviews: Riverton students were less likely to self-identify as Appalachian, even when they had been raised in the region, and had negative perceptions of Appalachian-ness; almost all of the Sciotoville students self-identified as Appalachian and performed Appalachian-ness in positive, even romanticized ways. These performances of identities would echo in interesting ways throughout the students’ discussions of their literacy.

Multiple Sources of Sponsorship

Spiritual influences

Interviews with all of my participants indicated several literacy sponsors at work in their lives. Michelle and Mike told of the influence of sports team and fraternity membership, respectively. Katie May, a 19-year-old pre-med student from State University-Sciotoville, shared intertwining stories of literacy and spirituality. Many Appalachian Studies scholars focus their attentions on the role of religion and the church in Appalachians’ everyday lives. Jones represents this approach to Appalachians’ religious lives when he writes, “Mountain people are religious. This does not mean that we always go to church regularly, but we are religious in the sense that most of our values and the meanings we find in life spring from the Bible. To understand mountaineers, one must understand our religion” (39). Thus, I was not surprised when the church appeared prominent in Katie May’s discussions of her literacy.

Some of Katie May’s sponsors include the church as an institution, as well as individuals (such as a youth pastor who encouraged her to take notes during church services) who were directly connected to the church and representative of the church’s role in her literacy beliefs and practices. Katie May’s descriptions of her brother’s sponsorship of her spiritually-based literacy practices led me to focus on the role not only of religion, but also of family, in the development of her literacy life. While work by literacy scholars such as Shirley Brice Heath and Denny Taylor points to parents

as significant forces in the development of literacy, my research points to multiple family members, including parents, as sponsors of literacy. This family sponsorship seems particularly important in the cultural context of Appalachia, since, as previously discussed, the work of many Appalachian Studies scholars emphasizes the value Appalachians place on family and extended kinship networks.

Immediate Family Members

Katie May's brother played an important role in the intertwining of literacy and religion in her life, since he recommended that she begin daily devotionals when she was in eighth grade.³ He also offered specific suggestions of religious texts for her to read. Katie May recalled, "My brother encouraged me a lot with books that he had read. He'd say, 'Hey, try this one; it's good.'" Her brother was four years older than Katie May and, at the time he began to take on this sponsorship role in her life, he was preparing to attend Bible college. Given their age difference, Katie May's brother was more mature and knowledgeable about both spirituality and literacy, making him an appropriate sponsor in her life.

Katie May's brother demonstrated his sponsorship in other ways as well. Her brother offered her a ride to church until Katie May was old enough to drive herself, and as Katie May stated, he "encouraged" her spiritual development through various uses of literacy. Describing his influence, Katie May said his communication came "through notes. I'd find a note in my school notebooks. I'd turn the pages and there would be something he'd written me a couple nights before. Also with the books [the devotionals]. He recommended a lot of things to me." The notes usually had a theme of encouragement, drawing on stories from the Bible to make a point. Katie May said, "I think he was trying to encourage me. He'd write things like, 'I've been praying for you.' He'd mention things from the Bible, about people who had gone through the same thing. He'd talk about characters from the Bible that I could relate with." After Katie May's brother moved across the country to become a youth pastor, they began exchanging e-mails once or twice a week as a way to stay in touch and to continue this spiritual sponsorship. The spiritual sponsorship Katie May's brother offered was inextricably tied to literacy, as almost all instances of sponsorship that Katie May shared with me involved print such as recommendations of specific readings, writing notes, making Biblical analogies, and e-mailing.

Extended Family Members

While for some students immediate family members exerted the most influence in their literacy lives, extended family members, such as Michelle's grandparents and cousins and Katie May's aunt, acted as significant sponsors as well. Michelle, a 19-year-old, chemistry/pre-pharmacy student who had just completed her first year at Riverton University, lived in rural Massie County, a 30-minute drive from the campus. This distance made it difficult for her to return home for lunch or studying during the day. Her grandparents lived in town, however, and they invited their grandchildren to come to their house during the school day. Several of Michelle's cousins also attended Riverton University, and all of those cousins would gather at their grandparents' house for lunch and study breaks. In an interview, Michelle described these visits to her grandparents' home:

Grandma will cook lunch for whoever's there, but we're all in and out at different times due to our class schedules, so we'll bring our own food to eat, too. But the main thing is that it's a quiet place to study. Grandma and Grandpa will ask how things are going and that sort of thing, but then they'll leave you alone so you can get your work done. And if they're not going to be home, they'll leave the door open so we can come in and do our work.

Michelle's grandparents did not sponsor her literacy through teaching her particular literacy practices, modeling textual interaction, and the like. Instead, Michelle's grandparents' sponsorship arose from their offer of material goods—namely food and study space—that would assist in the development of her academic literacy and education. Michelle's grandparents did not have the necessary academic literacy themselves to assist Michelle and her cousins with their homework; however, they could, and did, offer their approval of academic literacy by offering a warm meal and a quiet place to study. These acts, which on the surface may seem unconnected to literacy, were a powerful show of support for the educations of their grandchildren.

Michelle also commented on the role the cousins played in each other's educations, noting that since the cousins were at varying stages in their college careers and had different academic strengths, they could support each other:

There is always somebody around who can help you with your homework. Or you can help them. It's really nice to be able to talk with them, if I'm stuck on something or have a question. Or sometimes we just give each other advice about what classes to register for, which professors are good, that sort of thing.

Through this support, Michelle and her cousins became sponsors of each other's academic literacy practices and education, broadly speaking.

Other students also discussed the importance of family members who helped them learn how to “do school.” For Katie May, one of her aunts was a pivotal sponsor of literacy. Katie May stated in an interview that her aunt “teaches me how to do school,” and we later talked further of the specific suggestions her aunt gave her for “doing school.” Though Katie May was taking summer classes at State University-Sciotoville, she was actually a rising sophomore at Big State University, her state's flagship university. Katie May had a difficult time during her first two quarters at Big State. Always an A student in high school, she found herself struggling to make Cs in the chemistry and calculus courses required for pre-med majors—grades that put her in danger of losing her scholarships, which required a B average. Her aunt, a dentist who earned her undergraduate and professional degrees at Big State, sat Katie May down over a break and gave her a “talking-to,” which Katie May discussed in an interview.

Katie May: “I brought my grades up a lot last spring quarter, and she definitely influenced me in that area. I felt like I had what it took [to do well in school], but I didn’t know how to channel that. And so she really guided me and showed me, this is the way you do it. It really was. At first I didn’t believe her, because I’d never done study groups. But it really helped.”

Sara: “How did she, how did she show you, ‘this is how you do it’? Was it just the study groups, or did she give you other kinds of advice?”

Katie May: “She would talk to me, she talked to me at the end of fall quarter [Katie May’s first term of college], and said, ‘This is what you need to do and went down the list. And then...’”

Sara [interrupting]: “What was the list?”

Katie May: “Do study groups. Talk to the professors. Do all the homework. She asked me how I studied, and I said I read the chapters but then I’m usually too tired to do the homework, so I just read the chapters. She was like, well maybe you should do the homework first and then go back and read the chapter. So she really helped me with that.”

Katie May’s responses indicate the pivotal acts of literacy sponsorship her aunt took on. Her aunt directed her as to which academic literacy practices were most important—doing the written homework as opposed to the reading homework—and directed her towards other, more local sponsors of literacy like her peers and professors. Here we see a sponsor whose importance came in part from her recommendations of other sponsors of literacy.

Katie May’s aunt told her not only to seek out these other sponsors of literacy, but also how to approach them, and the aunt stayed in regular contact with Katie May so she could continue her sponsorship:

Sara: “Did she give you strategies about how to talk to professors?”

Katie May: “Yeah. She said, ‘Go up to your Chemistry 122 professor and say, I got a C- in Chemistry 121, and I struggled for that, and I don’t want to get another C- in this class. How can I improve?’ [...] And then she’d talk to me once a week and ask me, so are you doing the things we talked about? Are you doing the study

groups and talking to the professors? That sort of thing. [...] We have AIM instant messenger, so we talk at least once a week through that. At first it was probably two times a week, but then, as she saw I was doing what I needed to do, we went down to once a week.”

Sara: “How did she come to sit you down and give you the talking-to? Did you kind of come home and cry on her shoulder, or did your parents tell her something was up? Or did she just ask you about how you were doing in school?”

Katie May: “My mom would call her and say, ‘Katie May’s crying! What should I do?!’ That type of thing. And then I came home for break and we talked.”

Here we see another sponsor of Katie May’s literacy emerge: her mother, who first informed the aunt of Katie May’s struggles in school. As I shall discuss in the next section, parents were important influences on the literacy practices and beliefs of many of the participants in my study.

Parents

In studies of family literacy, it is often parents who receive the most attention, and our culture’s conventional wisdom places heavy emphasis on the role parents play in the development of their children’s literacy practices. While part of my intent in this article has been to illustrate that many family members can become sponsors of literacy, I also recognize that for most individuals, their parents are among the earliest and most primary sponsors of literacy.

Parents’ sponsorship can take different forms, however, as illustrated by the experiences of my case study participants. For some parents, such as Katie May’s mother, sponsorship meant connecting their children with more knowledgeable sponsors. In the last transcribed section of the Katie May interview, Katie May stated that her mother had informed Katie May’s aunt—her sister—of Katie May’s problems with school and had asked for assistance: “Katie May’s crying! What should I do?!” . Katie May’s mother did not attend college, whereas Katie May’s aunt held undergraduate and professional degrees. Katie May’s mother may not have had the knowledge of academic literacy practices to advise Katie May about difficulties in school, but she knew someone who did—her sister—and she asked her sister to work with Katie May. While this may have been an indirect form of sponsorship, it was incredibly important in helping Katie May acquire the literacy practices she needed during her first year of college.

Other parents engaged in indirect, as well as more direct, forms of sponsorship. Michelle’s father earned two associate’s degrees from Riverton University and worked at the local hospital as the supervisor of bio-medical engineering. He loomed large in Michelle’s discussions of literacy. One of her earliest memories of books involved looking at her father’s college textbooks when he was enrolled at Riverton while Michelle was a small child. After Michelle’s father earned his last degree, he did not put away his

books. Instead, he kept them displayed on the family bookshelf, and as she grew up, Michelle continued to read them:

I loved looking at his books when I was little. Still do. I look at them now sometimes to see if they might explain something a little better, something I'm confused about. I know he's got a physics book up there that I should look at. [...] He never showed them to me. They were just always there. [...] As a kid I looked at them, not knowing what they were. But as I got older and thinking about college, it hit me, what they were, and I looked at them to see what college would be like.

In addition to the textbooks Michelle's father kept on hand, he also subscribed to and read several science magazines, partly to stay aware of new developments in his line of work, and partly for the pleasure of reading about science. Michelle frequently read these magazines and stated that she enjoyed doing so. While her father did not directly encourage her reading the magazines, his modeling of a certain type of behavior—an interest in continued learning and a love of science, combined with the easy availability of texts — led Michelle to develop an interest in science and read the books and magazines. Michelle directly credited her skill and interest in math and science to her father, an unsurprising development given the types of print materials her father brought into the house via his work and education. As Brandt notes:

Though not always the focus of explicit instruction and not often school oriented, work-related reading and writing provided children real-world information about how literacy functions [...] and] brought at least some children into contact with the material assets and social power of major literacy sponsors—corporations, industries, merchants, governments, and universities. (199)

While Michelle's mother worked at the hospital as well, she worked in the data entry department. She attended a business college for two years and did not earn a degree. Though Michelle did note in interviews that her mother always encouraged her to go to college, she made it clear that her father played a more active sponsorship role in her life through his sharing of texts and, as I will soon discuss, his specific guidance about her education. In Michelle's family, there was an unstated understanding that her father would be the one to develop Michelle's interest in science and to advise her about her education, since he had two associate's degrees and work experience in scientific fields.

Thus, it was Michelle's father who had the career path with more economic and cultural capital—one that a college-bound daughter would be more likely to emulate. Brandt writes that fathers are often overlooked in studies of family literacy, due to an

emphasis on “the nurture of preschool children,” a presumably “motherly” domain (200). But Michelle’s case is representative of Brandt’s notion that “[t]he historically privileged position that men have occupied in education and employment made fathers in many households the conduits of specialized skills and materials that could be of interest and use to other family members” (200). It was Michelle’s repeated exposure to the world of scientific reading materials, via her father, that set her on the path of a chemistry/pre-pharmacy major.

Her father also played a direct role in her educational goals, advising her to take particular courses in high school:

My sophomore year, I doubled up on math classes so I could go farther [take more advanced courses in high school]. I knew that I really wanted to go towards the medical field, and I knew, because my dad told me, that you had to have a lot of science, since obviously it’s the big thing in the medical field. So you gotta get that in. So I doubled up in that.

The “doubling-up” in math and science courses paid off, as Michelle was quickly moving through her courses at Riverton and was looking into transferring to a joint B.S./PharmD program at a large state university a few hours from home. Given her father’s educational background and work experience, he had the knowledge to tell Michelle what types of courses she needed to be taking and when—a critical factor in determining what careers would later be open to her and in enabling her success at Riverton. Michelle’s father’s ability to steer her towards particular courses—towards developing particular kinds of academic literacies, if you will—became a very important moment of sponsorship in her life.

Inhibitors of Literacy

While the students I interviewed told many positive and heart-warming stories of literacy sponsorship, as our interviews continued, other stories emerged as well. In these stories, a threatening side of literacy sponsorship emerged. Literacy, particularly academic literacy, became a dangerous force, one that could distance students from family members and loved ones. For a few students, their pursuit of academic literacy vis-à-vis a college degree put them at odds, in ways big and small, with some of the most important people in their lives. Some of these people sought to inhibit the students’ development of this literacy through their sponsorship of competing meanings of literacy. These individuals did not inhibit the development of the students’ literacy practices alone, however. Social forces, such as poor health care and stereotypical gender roles, played a significant part as well. Brandt writes, “Literacy spread last and always less well to remote rural areas and newer, poorer industrial areas—a geographic and political legacy that, even today, in the United States, helps to exacerbate inequalities by race, region, and occupation” (88). The forces at work in these students’ lives, sometimes presented in the form of individual inhibitors, reveal some of the inequalities still at work in parts of Appalachia.

Mike's Story

For Mike, attaining a college degree had been a long, drawn-out process. While he began college at the age of eighteen, at the time of our interview he was twenty-six and just entering his senior year. One reason why his college education had taken seven years to that point was repeated transfers between institutions, but his health was the factor that most slowed his progress to earning a degree. Mike developed a problem with his kidneys while he was enrolled in Riverton, a problem that required a minor surgery at the local hospital. The surgery involved inserting a stent into one of his kidneys to help

improve its function and to reduce the pain he felt every day. While this was not a life-threatening operation, Mike had to withdraw from school for a quarter as he healed. As it turned out, however, Mike's surgery wasn't so simple: "I got an infection. It was pretty bad. They put me in the hospital for four or five days. I don't even remember being in the hospital, I was so sick. It was a staph infection. It was pretty bad."

After his hospital stay, Mike returned

to his parents' home in a nearby town and continued to recover from the infection, which had left him weakened. During the course of his recovery, it was determined that the surgery had not corrected the problem with his kidneys. In fact, the condition had worsened. At this point, frustrated by the care their son was receiving and worried about his health, Mike's parents took him to the campus of Big State University so that he could be treated at the university's medical center:

I was still in so much pain every day, which is what the first surgery was supposed to fix. And then I developed that staph infection, which you get from the [surgical] instruments not being sterile. So when that happened, we decided that I should change doctors, and I went up to Big State. They couldn't get me in for the surgery for a while, so I missed even more school. But at least they fixed my kidney.

All told, Mike lost a year of school as he went through the first surgery and recovery, the staph infection and recovery, and the second surgery and recovery. When I asked Mike if he ever wanted to give up during this time and quit school altogether, he responded, "Yes. But what kept me going was my parents. My parents were dead set on me getting through college."

Mike's story illustrates multiple forces at work in his literacy life. His first surgery, at a small country hospital, turned into a disaster, with the failure of the stent to treat the problem and the development of a staph infection. Mike attributed both of these problems to the health care he received, and, given the state of health care in Central Appalachia and Massie County, Riverton's home county, it is quite likely Mike received

In studies of family literacy, it is often parents who receive the most attention, and our culture's conventional wisdom places heavy emphasis on the role parents play in the development of their children's literacy practices.

inadequate care. Massie County has been identified by the Appalachian Regional Commission as economically distressed, and, according to Richard P. Mulcahy, the “supply of doctors in the distressed counties is one primary-care physician for every 2,128 persons and one specialist for every 2,857 individuals” (1635). This is in comparison to one primary-care doctor for every 1,099 persons and specialist for every 588 in economically competitive Appalachian counties (1635). The lack of quality health care in the region caused serious hardship for Mike and very nearly derailed his college career.

But Mike’s story also reveals the larger social forces that worked to help him return to college. His parents had the economic means to support him throughout his illness, to care for him in their home, to seek out second opinions, and to take him to Big State for further medical treatment. His parents also had the means to support him financially following the second surgery. Prior to these health problems, Mike had worked full time and gone to school. But Mike stated that after he recovered from his second surgery, “my parents told me they wanted me to focus on finishing school and staying healthy. They were afraid working would get me run-down and sick again. So they’re paying for my school now and helping me with money to live on.” The importance of this type of economic sponsorship, as well as his parents’ insistence that he finish his degree, cannot be overrated. Simply put, without the sponsorship of his parents throughout this challenging time, it is highly debatable whether Mike would have returned to school or if his health would have permitted him to return.

Women’s Stories

While Mike’s story reveals some of the economic forces that sponsor or inhibit academic literacy, the stories of Pamela and Julie reveal how traditional gender roles can inhibit academic literacy—or, at the very least, sponsor competing notions of that literacy. I will first discuss Pamela, a thirty-three-year-old student at Riverton University.

Pamela

When I met Pamela during the first week of class, she was eager to participate in the case study, but she explained to me that she might have to drop the class due to problems at home. While she had just been accepted into the nursing program—a rigorous and competitive program at Riverton—she was considering withdrawing from it as well. Pamela was going through a divorce and was worried about its impact on her sons, who were nine and thirteen years old: “The kids, especially the little one, really need my support right now, and I’m worried he’s not going to have that if I have my nose stuck in a book.” There were also financial considerations. In order to accommodate the class schedule and homework the nursing major demanded, Pamela, who worked as a licensed practical nurse at the local hospital, would have to limit herself to sixteen hours of work a week. Given the pending divorce, she literally could not afford to make that change.

Pamela did in fact drop the course the following week; she also delayed her admission into the nursing program. Thus, what was to be our first interview became our only interview. During our short time together, Pamela explained why her plans for school were in a state of transition:

I started here two years ago, full-time, but then last year I took a couple quarters off to deal with stuff at home. And now my status fluctuates. I can't predict what it will be. So much depends on my husband. Soon to be ex-husband. At first he was *very* supportive. And then his insecurities. . . [trailing off]. That's why we're getting a divorce. I'll just tell you: he's got a prescription drug abuse problem. He's buying them from the street.

Pamela's estranged husband suffered a back injury at work and, in the course of his treatment, was put on prescription painkillers, including OxyContin. During his disability leave from work and recovery, he eventually grew addicted to Oxy. His addiction is sadly representative of the problems facing many Central Appalachians. Oxy has become the drug of choice in the region, to such an extent that it is commonly referred to as "hillbilly heroin." And like heroin, Oxy can have a devastating effect. To give one example of the severity of the problem, the Appalachian Regional Commission states in "Substance Abuse in Appalachia" that "Appalachian Kentucky is experiencing drug related deaths at about four times the rate of the rest of the state"—deaths that, for the most part, are attributable to OxyContin. Though Pamela's estranged husband was alive, his addiction caused serious emotional and financial hardship for the family: he had difficulty keeping a job, and he had emptied the joint bank accounts he had with Pamela in order to buy more Oxy. The consequences of his actions were mortgage and car payments so far behind that Pamela feared she might lose both her home and her car. Pamela continued to discuss her estranged husband and his addiction, directly relating his addiction to her pursuit of a college degree:

And at first he was really supportive. In fact, before I went back to school, I actually wrote a paper about this for my first English class. It was something like, 'Why are you here?' And I had said, to my kids and my husband, I had said, 'Okay, here it is. I'm gonna go back to my school, you're going to have to help me pick up the slack with the house,' and everybody was in agreement. If one of them had said, 'No, I'm not willing to do that,' I probably wouldn't have come. But it was a family decision. And now his insecurities . . . [trailing off]. He thinks, he wants to blame me going to school for his problems, which it is not. It has nothing to do with me going back to school.

Indeed, even before we sat down for this interview after class, Pamela had related her estranged husband's attempts to attribute the cause of his addiction to her schooling. When she approached me after class, she told me that her husband had "problems" and stated, "He says it's my fault for going back to school. Because as the man, he should be the one to provide for the family, not me." Apparently, he was despondent over the

loss of his income (due to his work injury) and threatened by Pamela's emergence as the breadwinner and most highly educated member of the family. In arguments with Pamela, her estranged husband connected these losses—both of money and of status—and perceived them as the cause of his subsequent addiction.

As this last anecdote suggests, gender roles can play a large part in circumscribing the opportunities available to men and women within the Central Appalachian region. More women go to college because they are deemed to “need” it, since it is hard for them to find a job that offers sustainable pay without a college degree. Men traditionally have not gone to college because jobs that could support a family were available to them without a degree. Yet given the exodus of jobs from this region, as well as changing life circumstances, gender roles are in flux. Whether it is due to a job being outsourced or being out of work due to workplace injury and subsequent addiction—as was the case in Pamela's marriage—many men are no longer the primary breadwinners for their families.

For couples steeped in the region's traditional gender roles (Bush and Lash 170), this break from tradition could have significant consequences. In her book *Whistlin' and Crowin' Women of Appalachia: Literacy Practices Since College*, Katherine Kelleher Sohn introduces us to Sarah, a former student of Sohn's and a woman whose marriage had been affected by her education, much like Pamela's. Sarah said of her husband, “He was a traditional man who wanted me to be more passive. He felt that he should be the breadwinner and felt that my being in college was a threat to his manhood in providing for his family” (131). Drawing on the old Appalachian maxim that “whistlin' and crowin' hens always come to no good ends,” Sohn writes that in parts of Central Appalachia, “Women are not supposed to whistle or crow; those who objected [to women's changing roles] were threatened by these women's growth and change” (77). As we see from Sohn's study of Sarah and the example of Pamela in this study, some husbands may be intimidated by their wives' educations, given the confluence in the region of traditional gender roles, limited economic opportunities, and medical issues such as disability and addiction.

Julie

Like Pamela, Julie was also under a tremendous amount of pressure to live up to traditional gender roles and to abandon her pursuit of a college degree, though unlike Pamela, Julie's pressure came from multiple sources. Julie, a twenty-four-year-old mother of a kindergartner, first attended college as an eighteen-year-old fresh out of high school. Julie had been a good student throughout high school, and her mother and stepfather were generally supportive of her college plans. Thus, Julie enrolled at a community college in her hometown (while Julie is from Central Appalachia, she is not a native of Sciotoville or its home state). Soon after the fall semester started, however, Julie discovered she was pregnant, and her life quickly changed:

I was under so much pressure. My mom and step-dad told me that I had to drop out of school, now that I was going to become a mother. I had to focus on my child and what was best for it. And he [the father of her child] and his mother

said this, too. They all just wanted us to hurry up and get married. I really wanted to stay in school, but there was just no support for it at all. My ex-husband always went along with whatever his mother said, so there was no support there. And then I had terrible morning sickness and was constantly getting sick; I was so afraid of throwing up in class. Eventually, it seemed easier to stop fighting everybody and to quit, so I did.

For the first year of her son's life, Julie was a stay-at-home-mother, and while she enjoyed being home with her son, school was always in the back of her mind: "I knew I never should have dropped out." Then economic demands began taking a toll on the family. Julie described her ex-husband as young and irresponsible, and he lost several jobs. Julie found a job at a call center and went to work, eventually out-earning her husband—a fact that added stress to an already shaky marriage. When her son was four, Julie and her husband divorced. Shortly thereafter, Julie moved to Sciotoville and enrolled at the university. At the time of our interviews, she had just completed her first year.

Julie's family was aghast at these developments. Julie stated in interviews that numerous relatives told her she was "abandoning her child" by returning to school. Julie saw her return to school as a way to provide a better life for her son, but her relatives, especially her mother, did not agree:

Julie: "Mom is always telling me that my place is in the home, that I should be taking care of him, that school is robbing him of me."

Sara: "But you worked before you went back to school. So how is being away from him for work different from being away from him for school?"

Julie: "That's just it. It's not. Well, I am working now, part-time, while I go to school, and they say it's too much, that I shouldn't be working and going to school. But I try to arrange my schedule so that I'm not away from him any more than I would be then if I worked full-time. Mom and my step-dad are always telling me that it's selfish for me to be in school, that I should just be working full-time and supporting my son. 'You made your bed, now you have to lie in it.' That's what they're always saying to me. It was one thing for me to go to school before I had him, but now it's something else."

Julie attributed her family's response to their strong religious beliefs, since "their church teaches a woman's place is in the home." But traditional gender roles were at work in

complex and contradictory ways here. On one level, Julie's family recognized that her place was *not* in the home, since they felt she should be working full-time to support her son. Yet they also faulted her for not being home with him and told her she was "selfish"—an accusation typically hurled at working mothers. There was no way for Julie to win her family's approval, short of re-marrying and becoming a stay-at-home mother again.

Adding to her family's disapproval was the fact that Julie had come out as a lesbian. Shortly after moving to Sciotoville, Julie met Shelly, with whom she began a romantic relationship. They moved in together soon after they met. Her family's disapproval of homosexuality added to the already strained relationship and increased the tension in Julie's life. When I asked Julie in our first interview if Shelly had been a source of support for her during these trying times, she replied:

Julie: "Oh, God, no. She's just as bad as they are about school. She tells me I have no business being in school. She says she was attracted to me because I was very femme, and she says school has changed that."

Sara: "How?"

Julie: "Well, she thinks it's my job to do all the stuff around the house, the cooking, the cleaning, and of course there's my son, who *is* my responsibility. She gets so mad when things aren't clean the way they should be and says that if I wasn't so busy with school I would take better care of the house."

Later in the same interview, Julie explained the other reasons why Shelly does not support her schooling:

She says I don't have any time for her or our friends, that I'm always busy with homework. She says it can't be that hard, that it doesn't take that much time to do school work, that I just don't want to be with her. But how would she know? She came here a quarter when she was 18 and flunked out because all she did was party. So she never tried. (Sigh, then a short pause) She also says I think I'm better than everybody else now. She says I use big words and act all superior. And it's true, I do have a really good vocabulary, I've always been really verbal. But that's just the way I talk! It's not because I think I'm better than other people. I'm tired of fighting about it, though. So now I just don't talk about certain things, or say things in a certain way, just so I won't have to hear that.

Thus, Shelly emerged as an inhibitor of Julie's attempts to gain academic literacy, one who attributed academic literacy with other meanings. For Julie, her development of academic literacy was a way to gain a "better life" for her son. For Shelly, Julie's development of academic literacy was seen as an infringement on Julie's role in the home and their time together, as well as a force that distanced Julie from her, making her "upppy," to use another label Julie said had been applied to her by Shelly.

Shelly's disapproval of Julie's education had a noticeable impact on her schooling. As the summer term went on, Julie attended class less and less; she missed two classes to go on a camping trip that Shelly spontaneously announced, telling me, "I couldn't deal with telling her I couldn't go because of school." She also began a new job, one that required her to work more hours, because of pressure from Shelly that she wasn't contributing enough money to the relationship. The training for her new job overlapped with a couple of classes, and Julie missed class so she could attend those sessions. Before these absences, Julie was earning an A in the course. Between the penalty she earned due to the strict attendance policy and the self-admitted lack of time she put into doing assignments after she began her new job, Julie earned a B- for the course.

At the end of the summer, I met Julie for a follow-up visit, at which time she told me that she was taking fall quarter off: "I'm hoping it will make things better with Shelly," she said, sharing the details of their most recent argument about school. Throughout the summer, Julie had told me that she would not "give up" school for Shelly, noting, "If I have to choose between school or her, I'm choosing school." Yet, as fall approached, Julie's position had shifted: "I don't think it's worth it anymore. All the stress. All the fighting. I can't do it. Things are better now that I'm just working, and I want to keep it that way." I haven't been successful in contacting Julie since that day, and, as of the spring following that final conversation, her university e-mail account had been closed.

The Interplay of Literacy and Identity

The stories of literacy sponsorship presented here illustrate the complexities inherent in a discussion of literacy and identity. The sponsors profiled vary a great deal and at times exhibit contradictory or conflicting influences. The readily identifiable social problems discussed above affected my participants' literacy experiences in notable and dramatic ways. More pervasive, though harder to pinpoint, are the ways in which Appalachian identity—and the ways in which an individual performs that identity—affect his or her literacy beliefs and practices.

As noted in the introduction, familism is a value often constructed as part of a performance of Appalachian identity. Yet some of the most striking examples of those values in this article—Mike's relationship with his parents and Michelle's relationship with her grandparents—come from students who often sought to distance themselves from Appalachian identity in our interviews and in the classroom. What do the lives of these students suggest about Jones' construction of Appalachians?

Those students who most readily performed an Appalachian identity during my fieldwork evidenced ambivalence about their relationships with family members. While Katie May's mother was a sponsor of her literacy in important ways, Katie May also expressed a worry about being perceived by her mother as "rising above my raising"—similar to Julie's designation as "upppy" by her partner—when she talked about concepts

she learned in school. Similarly, Julie appeared to embrace a romanticized performance of Appalachian identity more consciously and skillfully than any of the other students, yet in relation to her family and academic life, she stated, “All my life I’ve tried to do the absolute best I can do, and I never got the gratification from the people who love me. Most of the gratification I’ve got is from people who don’t love me, my teachers and the students around me.” This statement stands in stark contrast to Jones’ description of Appalachians as “more truly themselves” when among family, a conceptualization that essentializes Appalachian-ness and assumes there is a stable, authentic Appalachian identity. Julie’s comment undercuts this notion and reveals that the

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metaphor of the Appalachian family as a fortress is also a performance, much like the facets of Julie’s romanticized Appalachian identity. But what might this “undercutting” reveal about overlapping and contesting performances of identity? How much of Julie’s conflict, for example, is rooted in her performance of gender—a performance that clashes with the expectations for gender performance by Appalachian women? These are the questions that remain with me as I conclude.

Notes

¹ Urban Appalachian is a term that refers to a subgroup of Appalachians who migrated out of the Appalachian region and relocated to urban centers; the term also includes the children of these migrants. See Borman and Obermiller’s *From Mountain to Metropolis: Appalachian Migrants in the American City* for further discussion.

² Pseudonyms have been substituted for the names of all locations and individuals in order to protect participant anonymity.

³ Devotionals are short books designed to reinforce daily prayer and reading of the Bible. They direct readers to read a particular Bible passage and to use the devotional as supplementary material that encourages further reflection. Finally, the readers are to conclude the reading with prayer. Some devotionals even include suggested prayers for the day, though not all do, thus blending silent reading of the devotional with the reading aloud of prayers.

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