



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 2
Issue 1 *Fall*

Article 10

October 1974

New Premises for Planning in Appalachia

Richard A. Ball
West Virginia University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the American Studies Commons, Rural Sociology Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Ball, Richard A. (1974) "New Premises for Planning in Appalachia," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol2/iss1/10>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



NEW PREMISES FOR PLANNING
IN APPALACHIA

Richard A. Ball

West Virginia University

The Appalachian Region, particularly Southern Appalachia, has lived through several hundred years of frustration related to its history and geography. The history of the area has become better known during recent years, and it is a history of documented exploitation and socio-economic disillusionment, a "biography of a depressed area" (Caudill, 1962). Geographically, the region has been regarded essentially as a barrier between the settled East and the fertile lands of the West, a place of rugged terrain and harsh conditions of life. This history and geography have played a large part in the problems which now afflict the region and which impede social change. It will be possible to plan wisely for the region only when these factors have been understood and when the goals of current social policy toward Appalachia have been re-examined. Since the deepest problems of socioeconomic development are frequently motivational (McClelland, 1961), having to do with modal forms of personality organization which are in turn rooted in the culture, and since a culture may be seen as a response to a set of environmental problems, perhaps it is best to begin with an analysis of the effect of the historical and geographic problems posed by the area and the cultural patterns which have generated in response to these problems.

It is apparent that the motivational structure characteristic of the Southern Appalachian folk subculture is quite different from that prevailing in the United States generally, so different that Weller (1965) has regarded the adherents of this "folk culture" as "yesterday's people." Their motivational structure constitutes both a problem and a possible solution. The basic problem here can be understood in terms of a distinction between "motivation-instigated" and "frustration-instigated" behavior. Such an understanding might do much to change our definition of the problems of the region, the means of solution, and even the goals of the planning process.

The Concept of Frustration-Instigated Behavior

Of the various motivational problems faced by social planners, one of the most serious is the recalcitrance of the very individuals whose lives they are attempting to "improve." At the root of this rigidity is the one common denominator in the experiences of all these people--intense and prolonged frustration. To explain, to predict and to assist them in breaking the vicious circles in which they are trapped, one must appreciate the extent to which their activities and cultural patterns are frustration-instigated.

This distinction between frustration instigated behavior and motivation-instigated behavior was first outlined in an effort to explain

the results of animal experiments conducted by Maier (1949). While motivation-instigated behavior is influenced by consequences and can be understood through learning theory, frustration-instigated behavior is stress-induced rather than goal-oriented.

It is especially interesting that the conclusion developed by Maier in his laboratory experiments with animals was offered independently in one of the best known speculative theories of human civilization--that of the historian Arnold Toynbee (1946). Toynbee, of course, views civilization as essentially a "response" to "challenges" including the challenges of the natural environment, and he makes much of the idea that the challenges must be neither too mild nor too severe. He describes the mountain people of Southern Appalachia as having "relapsed into illiteracy...poverty, squalor and ill-health" as result of environmental challenges which over whelmed their capacity for productive response (Toynbee: 1946: 149).

Toynbee has overstated the case, and this detracts from his thesis and makes it difficult to perceive the kernel of truth contained there. The truth is easier to see if generalizations are strictly limited to the folk subculture of the Appalachian Region. This folk subculture is the subject of the present analysis. Its adherents have been subjected to a history of unremitting physical, economic and social frustration. These people have been repeatedly blocked, pressured and defeated by their environment. The history of this frustration is described vividly by Caudill (1962) in Night Comes to the Cumberlands, where he writes that their past is "compounded of Indian wars, civil war, of intestine feuds, layered hatreds and of violent death." How have these people responded to such a history of physical and social frustration and defeat? Ford (1962: 9-34) interpreting data from the most comprehensive survey of the Southern Appalachians ever conducted, lists the principle cultural themes as (1) individualism and self-reliance, (2) traditionalism and fatalism and (3) religious fundamentalism. Weller (1965) gives special emphasis to individualism, traditionalism, fatalism, action seeking, fear psychology, person orientation, reference group domination and familism.

The description of the content of the Appalachian folk subculture is fairly complete, but many of the authors of these descriptions admit to difficulty in understanding and dealing with the values they have described. The values seem senseless and stubborn. Why are these people so little interested in improving their lives? Why aren't they more eager to leave their hopeless environment for urban areas of greater opportunity? Why the lack of ambition, the "episodic" view of life, and the inability to engage in sustained efforts? Certainly the recalcitrance of the mountaineer resists explanation in common motivational terms. The fatalism and apathy seem almost "Unamerican," and yet the region has ranked at the top in wartime troop deaths per capita, which to some suggests that these are the true patriots. Obviously, something is amiss with out standard categories of behavior analysis.

Previous work (Ball, 1968) has attempted to explain these puzzling characteristics by the concept of an "analgesic subculture," a way of life which has evolved by success in avoiding overwhelming problems rather than by attempting to cope with them. One such avoidance response, perceived by both Maler and Toynbee, is stereotyped or "fixated" behavior which becomes very rigid and inflexible under pressure. Other typical frustration-instigated response patterns include regression, aggression and resignation. These, together with other human responses, have evolved into a unique subcultural blend emphasizing the premises and preoccupations described by many observers of Appalachian life.

The regressive nature of behavior in the mountain folk subculture is apparent when regression is defined simply as a retreat to more childish or less mature action. The early work of Barker, Dembo and Lewin (1941) has clearly linked conditions of frustration with regression responses, and later studies have supported the hypothesis of a relationship. As has been argued in greater detail elsewhere (Ball, 1968) many of the behaviors commonly cited in descriptions of the Appalachian folk subculture can be viewed as examples of regression produced by frustration. These characteristics would include the lack of aesthetic appreciation, anti-intellectualism and the preference of anecdote over abstraction, the insistence on a literal interpretation of the Bible and the entanglement of religious fundamentalism with deep superstition, characteristics which led Toynbee to conclude that the mountaineer has "failed to hold his ground," that he has "gone down hill in a most disconcerting fashion," and that he has "relapsed" into conditions of barbarism. Both the "welfare syndrome" and "neurotic familism" may be treated in these terms.

Of the frustration-instigated responses described by Maier, neither fixation nor regression has received the research attention accorded to the frustration-aggression combination. Since the initial publication of the classic, Frustration and Aggression, (Dollard et.al., 1944) intensive study has been pointed toward and an elucidation of the connection between these phenomena. Aggression can be viewed as a response to frustration in which the aggression is an end product which relieves tension or "blows off steam" rather than a means to an end. Such frustration-instigated behaviors frequently create a "vicious circle" by which the striking out results in increased frustration. Feuding behavior, for example, seems to be representative of an aggressive response which, while providing the momentary satisfactions of revenge, eventually exacerbates frustrations.

In addition to fixation, regression, and aggression, the frustration-instigated behavior hypothesis would lead one to expect considerable resignation to the hostile conditions of Southern Appalachian life. Seldom is an expectation more fully realized; resignation, apathy, and fatalism are a major part of the Appalachian problem. Since resignation consists in giving up, it is clearly not representative of goal-oriented behavior. In fact, goals have receded and motivation seems largely absent. Resignation is not a means to anything; it is an "end of the line" behavior.

Such a response may be difficult for the planner to comprehend, but it is quite likely to provide some relief from the tensions of extreme and prolonged frustration.

New Directions in Appalachian Development

The inability of many planners to comprehend the values and actions of the "target population" is not primarily due to faulty logic but rather to tacit acceptance of dubious premises about human behavior. Social planners are themselves products of a life style in which rational, motivated and goal-oriented behavior is a dominant theme. To face any "poverty culture" is to repeat the experience of the anthropologist studying another society, except that the obvious differences of language and institutional forms alert the latter to his biases and force him to think in terms of the premises and patterns of the way of life under observation. Planners who are not prepared to recognize a different way of life find it difficult to relate to behavior which seems so "senseless" when seen in terms of their own rationalistic premises, and the results for social policy are sometimes disastrous.

One typical product of social policy is the "boomerang effect" by which there are unanticipated negative consequences, often connected with incorrect premises. One assumption implicit in much of the effort at initiating social change in Appalachia is that people may be stirred by exhortation and example and that under this increased pressure they will begin to alter their behavior in the desired direction. If the "analgesic subculture" thesis is to any extent correct, however, one would predict that such increased pressure will result in greater frustration and will produce even more rigidity--given the low probability of immediate and dramatic success. This result may be observed among those whose frustration thresholds have already been exceeded. In this case the "middle-class" way of life held out by the mass media and by the local "change agents" as an example becomes not a goal to strive toward but a source of further frustration. This is so since deprivation is relative to aspirations. It is no accident that the "revolution of rising expectations" throughout the world results from increased frustration springing from a sense of relative deprivation. Nor should we be surprised by the "irrational" aspects of this new sense of frustration.

Social planners, often unaware of the depth of such feelings, have attempted to manipulate their "target populations" in much the same way as they manipulate one another and, for that matter, themselves. These means of manipulation are built upon assumptions of simple rationality which hold that human behavior is essentially instrumental in its mean-ends orientation and that modification is merely a problem of managing contingencies. Such a set of assumptions works well enough in propelling us toward our own ends in a relatively neat and "linear" fashion and in providing us the techniques by which we can manipulate others like ourselves. It is when we encounter those who have not organized their lives into neat means-ends packages that our plans collapse. Under these circumstances, what can be done?

One key to eventual improvement in the life conditions of Appalachia's people may lie in the socialization process. At present, for example, child-rearing practices in the folk subculture are heavily punishment-centered. Discipline is built upon a tradition that punishing an undesirable behavior is the best way to stop it. Research to date, however, indicates that punishment is a much less effective means than was once assumed. It is especially significant that punishing a frustration-instigated response seems to fix it even more persistently. If it is true that many of the values and behaviors characteristic of the folk subculture are of the nature of frustration-instigated responses, then it follows that attempts to correct by punishment will be counter-productive. Such effects may be observed not only in the interactions of parents and children but also in the disciplinary patterns to be found in Appalachian school systems and in other institutions of the region. The fundamentalist religious tradition, for example, holds the very meaning of life to be such that one must behave in order to avoid eternal punishment. What we find is a system of institutions by which conformity is gained at the expense of rigidified and self-defeating behavior, a social order where anxiety is fed until it becomes the source of an economics of scarcity and a politics of self-defense. Every institution--family, school, church, job and politics--is anxiety-centered, and each leads toward patterns of avoidance.

Following this analysis, the central task of the planner becomes the fostering of non-authoritarian social relations and the development of institutions in which order springs from the fact that actions are useful to the individual both instrumentally and symbolically, in which habits of behavior can build up out of that positive reinforcement "feedback" which research suggests is a more "natural" way to provide for self-organization, and in which threat is replaced with an opening of alternatives and possibilities. In terms of the socialization emphasis, the focus must be upon the children, but not exclusively so, for those involved must understand that unless adults are also led to such patterns of interacting, their relationships to the children themselves will be strained and "phony." The child may be reached through the family, school and peer group. Efforts must be mounted to support the newer patterns in each of these networks. Along with indigenous leaders and community workers, the mass media can be a crucial element. As a balance to the constant bombardment of middle-class life styles, it will be important to strengthen what might be called "mountain pride" in ways similar to those employed by some Black leaders in an effort to raise the self-esteem of the Black community. It ought to be even more simple to direct programs on mountain arts and folk heroes toward a population which lies within certain geographic boundaries than it is to provide such support to the Black identity throughout an enormous territory in which only slightly more than ten percent of available viewers, readers and listeners are Black. The beginnings of such attempts are present, especially through community festivals, public television, bookmobiles, etc.

The other institutions--religion, politics, and economics--are more relevant, although again not exclusively so, to adult programs.

There is much that organized religion can do. The religion of anxiety can be replaced by a clearer teaching of the New Testament, which is, after all, a gospel of hope and which is immensely applicable to the life problems of these traditional Protestant denominations and sects. The more escapist cults which feed the regressive and fatalistic tendencies inherent in the subculture will then have less strength. The "social gospel" can return in altered form and the church can become a more powerful force toward social change.

As to the political problems of Appalachia, much of the region is to a great extent controlled by external forces in the form of huge coal and land companies, leaving a situation in which local figures struggle over the power which remains. These struggles are intimately connected with a "scarcity politics" to which the "zero-sum game" model is especially applicable (Ball, 1970). The local political tradition is more nearly an individualistic "every man for himself" pattern in which politics is seen as the mobilization of power in a struggle for scarce resources than as a cooperative venture in which mutual trust can produce benefits to all. Since regional development cannot be imposed from outside, one part of the answer lies in returning power to the people of the region so that they can have an effect upon their own destiny. As the power is returned local leaders must be educated in its use, preferably by others from the region who have achieved some success. Political activists must be protected as they seek to break through systems based on patronage power with voter registration drives and "clean election" legislation.

The economic problems are closely linked to these others and, by virtue of the chronic disillusionment and frustration produced, lie at the root of the unfortunate pattern of subcultural response described earlier. The economy of the region is based on the extractive industries, mainly coal and timber. It is in the nature of mining that the economic base is slowly eaten away until the mine is abandoned, usually along with the community which had developed around it. "Strip mining" produces an even more obvious exploitation-abandonment cycle. The development of "clear-cutting" practices in timber can, unless carefully controlled, produce similar effects. The economic effects are obvious and do indeed resemble internal colonization. The psychological and social effects are less obvious, but there is reason to suspect that exploitative economics fosters certain personal and social orientations which interfere with cooperative relationships in a way which is as damaging to the delicate ecology of human interaction as to the more tangible systems of physical interrelationships usually termed "environmental ecology." Although coal and timber will continue to be vital to the economic base of Appalachia, it is important to develop economic programs which provide a base for cooperation and community. Development proceeding from the people of the region themselves will depend heavily upon a sense of unity, commitment and hope, and all of these are characteristics of populations with constructive rather than exploitative economies.

But Where Do We Really Want To Go?

The social planner tends to be very goal-oriented and his training supports his approach to problems in these terms. This orientation accounts for his difficulty in comprehending the behavior of those whose lives are not customarily so tightly organized into instrumental patterns of ends and means. All of this, however, says nothing about an equally serious problem, the question of valid goals in the first place. As social intervention becomes more effective and the probability of achieving developmental goals increases, we must give more attention to these ends. There is a good reason to believe that ends of Appalachian planners should be scrutinized even more carefully than their techniques.

If the goals of the planning are considered together, I submit that the vague vision of Appalachian Utopia very much resembles the ubiquitous middle-class suburb. When one considers the forms of education, occupation and family life toward which programs appear to be directed, this becomes even clearer. After all, what other model do we have? Furthermore, if we admit to some such vision, what could be wrong with it? Even given the inadequacies of the middle-class way of life, would not this be an improvement over present conditions among the "hard core" problem population of Appalachia? In terms of such indicators of the good life as income or health care, this is undoubtedly the case. But in other terms it is questionable. More to the point is the recognition that our options do not come down to a choice between Appalachian poverty and middle-class suburbia at all. There are many other alternatives, and the best of these are likely to lie in a direction which builds upon the strengths which can be found in the Appalachian way of life.

Some of these strengths are outlined by Weller (1965). In a few thoughtful passages in the last pages of Yesterday's People he pays tribute to the "deep feeling of belonging and of loyalty" and to the fact that the mountaineers "are at home here in a unique way." Having contrasted the "person-centered" orientation prevalent in the mountains with the "object-oriented" pattern typical of the larger society where the tendency is more to assign one a number, he goes on to point out that the inhabitants of the region are "not driven by the clock or the appointment book" nor by the "avid and grasping materialism which is apparent in some places" and that, for example, "the old are not shuffled off in a corner to die alone."

There are other virtues deeply imbedded in Appalachian traditions and sometimes these features which have become problems simply represent too much of a good thing. The problem of "extreme familism" which I have described elsewhere (Ball, 1967) as a "clinging behavior in which many never really establish themselves as separate individuals" is a case in point. What has happened is that the adherents of the folk subculture have, in their need for some escape from the unending pressures upon them, attempted to extract from the family more than any human institution can render. The burden fell to the family precisely because it was one of the strongest and most rewarding of institutions.

Similarly, the easy pace of life may be regarded as a positive factor in itself, one which carries over into apathy only under inordinate pressure. It is therefore a mistake to fix the blame on the family and to come to regard it as a barrier to progress, just as it is wrong to equate the easy life style with laziness.

In order to avoid the ultimate fate of homogenized suburbia, it is necessary that our planners think in terms of "alternative futures." We must actually plan systems which are to develop in different directions, for only then will we be able to compare and select among them. The Utopian models, as offered by such writers as Skinner (1971), move in the opposite direction, substituting the ideals of order and control for those of diversity and flexibility. Little wonder that they bear a mark of totalitarianism.

Since the future is largely unpredictable in its specifics, we must keep our options open. We must plan with the goal of open options specifically in mind, and we must develop systems which probe various alternatives. At present almost all of the exploration is being conducted by those on the margins of established systems, without the help of these systems. So it is with the new movements in communal living, alternative educational possibilities, liberalized sex roles and the new view of work. The latter offers a good example of a different and perhaps healthier approach which has grown outside established institutions and which is anathema to most of them. Yet there is every reason to believe that this newer orientation may be more suitable to the future than the almost frantic emphasis upon competitive achievement which currently provides the thrust for our social institutions. Again, the last few unelaborated pages of Yesterday's People (Weller, 1965) reinforce the argument that our efforts should be directed toward assisting Appalachia's development as an alternative to our usual goals. Weller alludes to the "cybernetic age" which is to come and points out that when the newer problems of leisure become even more pronounced the mountaineer whose life is not centered on a job may well be an example for the rest of society.

All of this most definitely does not mean to imply that the Southern Appalachian folk subculture should be left alone. Some have made this mistake. Being very sensitive to "outside interference" and deeply proud of that which is praiseworthy in this way of life, they have expressed considerable resentment toward any attempt to plan for the region at all. This perspective simply overlooks the fact that there are serious problems in the area and the possibility that they might be solved without the destruction of Appalachian traditions. In terms of the argument advanced above the problems are twofold. First, there are severe inadequacies in the basics of life; income, health care, education, etc. These must be solved, and the means are available if sufficient priority is assigned. Secondly, the basic patterns of frustration-instigated behavior must be attacked. This can be done through three coordinated means: (a) the reduction of environmental pressures which are implicit in the first problem, (b) fostering of desirable behavior patterns and institutions so that they provide rewarding rather than anxiety-based life experiences and (c) specific programs

which through the various social institutions teach and encourage flexible responses to the frustrations of life.

Conclusion

Just as there is much that the so-called "developed" societies can learn from their "underdeveloped" neighbors while engaged in a partnership directed toward improvement in the material conditions of life, so is there much that the larger American society can learn from Appalachia. The "hard-core" problem of the region, what has been referred to here as the "folk subculture," represents a distortion of certain basic patterns which in themselves have much to commend them. Individualism rather than other-direction, a feeling for tradition instead of a chronic novelty-seeking, and an orientation to existence ("being") as contrasted with a compulsion to achievement are inherent in the life of the region and are options which should be supported by social planners. The tendency to avoid status seeking and the detachment from work represent other characteristics which may turn out to be ahead of their time by being behind the times. That is, these modes of social interaction may be more basic than we have tended to believe. It would be ironic of the patterns of occupational "success," educational "performance," "deferred gratification," and repudiation of the "extended family" which action agents have been urging upon the region in one form or another for several generations turned out to be applicable only to the peak years of the Industrial Revolution with its unique population growth, highly congested urbanization and demand for heavy investments of labor. Yet something like this may be the case, and we should allow for the possibility.

Our inability to perceive the value of many Appalachian traditions may, then, be traced in part to a view of human history in which our own institutionalized means are seen as social necessity. A close look at our actual achievement and the price which has been paid calls both the ends and the means into serious question. Both the urban ghetto and the middle-class suburb have become something less than the promised land, and it is appropriate to observe that those who are busily intervening in the lives of others so often seem little pleased with their own.

Certainly part of the current planning bias lies in the tendency to mistake a distortion of a cultural pattern for a basic characteristic of that pattern. Many patterns of Appalachian life have been twisted under severe pressure, and the frustration-instigated behaviors which can be observed to characterize the folk subculture must not be regarded as necessary or even normal features inherent in the traditions of the region. The fact that the folk subculture as described is not representative of the entire region is proof of this. Elsewhere in Appalachia we can observe the traditions in their more normal form. If we can replace our common reliance on a single developmental model with an approach emphasizing a diversity of social ends and a variety of acceptable means, we may be able to assist the Appalachian region to develop along its own valid lines. Success here would provide the larger society with tangible alternatives to evaluate as it gropes toward the future.

References

- Ball, Richard. (1968) "A Poverty Case: The Analgesic Subculture of the Southern Appalachians," *American Sociological Review* 33 (December): 885-895.
- Ball, Richard. (1970) "Social Change and Power Structure: An Appalachian Case." Pp. 147-166 in John D. Photiadis and Harry K. Schwarzweller (eds.) *Change in Rural Appalachia*. Philadelphia; Pennsylvania University Press.
- Barker, R., T. Dembo and K. Lewin. (1941) *Frustration and Regression*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.
- Caudill, Harry M. (1962) *Night Comes to the Cumberlands*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Dollard, J., N.E. Miller, L.W. Doob, O.H. Mowser and R.R. Sears. (1944) *Frustration and Aggression*. London: Kegan Paul.
- Ford, Thomas R., ed. (1962) *The Southern Appalachian Region*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press.
- Maier, Norman R. (1949) *Frustration*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- McClelland, David C. (1961) *The Achieving Society*. Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand Co.
- Skinner, B.F. (1971) *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*. New York: Knopf.
- Toynbee, Arnold J. (1946) *A Study of History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weller, Jack E. (1965) *Yesterday's People*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press.

* * *

SUBSCRIPTIONS

SUBSCRIPTIONS

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions to the Journal may be obtained by writing to:

Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare
University of Connecticut
School of Social Work
1800 Asylum Avenue
West Hartford, Connecticut 06117

Individual subscriptions are \$7.00 per volume (4 issues)
Institutional or Library \$10.00 per volume (4 issues)
Student \$5.00 per volume (4 issues)

Individual copies of the Journal may be purchased at \$2.50 per copy (include postage and handling).

Please include check with order.