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Understanding Appalachian Microaggression from the Perspective of Community College Students in Southern West Virginia

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The term “Appalachian” is wrongly understood to represent a single culture of rural White poverty (Keefe, 2005). This conception contains stereotypical images that obscure hardships many rural White Central Appalachians face. Similar to other oppressed minorities in the U.S., what it means to be Appalachian is a social construction based on what differs them from the White hegemony. Recent scholarship on discrimination recognizes the importance of microaggressions, small insults and slights experienced frequently by people from minority groups (Sue et. al., 2007). Microaggression may be an especially insidious mechanism in the oppression of Appalachian people, since the derogatory stereotypes are broadly accepted while their oppressed status tends to not be acknowledged. This study applied qualitative focus group methodology to understand perceptions of microaggression and oppression among a sample of college students living in rural Central Appalachia. Identifying Appalachian microaggression provides evidence of marginalized status and offers a framework for understanding how the social construction of White Appalachia perpetuates reduced status, stereotypes, and prejudice. Implications are discussed to consider how to foster resilience to oppression among rural White Central Appalachian people.

Keywords: West Virginia, microaggression, Appalachia

Patterns of poverty and oppression have existed for over a century in areas of rural Central Appalachia. In the U.S., counties with high rates of poverty are largely located in the South, with the most persistent poverty in regions of rural Appalachia, especially in the coal fields of southern West Virginia (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2017). In fact, none of the counties in this region have per capita incomes over \$23,000, which is well below the national average of \$28,000 (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2012). Congruent with negative outcomes known to be associated with poverty, this region ranks among the lowest in health-care access and educational achievement (Bennett, 2008). West Virginia, for example, in the heart of Central Appalachia, tends to have the lowest college graduation rates and the highest unemployment rates in the nation (Sugar, 2002). In addition, data demonstrate that social problems like opioid abuse and unemployment occur at dramatically higher rates in West Virginia (Rudd, Seth, David, & Scholl, 2016; Weiler, 2001).

It is impossible to understand the historical roots of poverty and hardship in rural Central Appalachia without recognizing the oppressive dependence people have had with the coal and lumber industries (Drake, 2001; Sarnoff, 2003). The coal industry has been the only choice of employment for many in this region (Bradshaw, 1992), leaving Appalachian workers vulnerable to the cyclic rise and fall of coal commerce (Cattell-Gordon, 1987). Extended periods of broad unemployment have been linked to devastating personal tragedies such as substance abuse and suicide, as people were left with no other way to find economic stability (Cattell-Gordon, 1987). The loss of coal industry jobs continues to impact the economic viability for many in this locale.

Along with the poverty and associated negative outcomes of health and well-being, pejorative stereotypical images of rural Central Appalachian archetypes have become infused throughout popular culture (Algeo, 2003). Most people in the U.S. would likely recognize the common Appalachian stereotypes and the stigma associated with them, e.g., the image of the patriarchal male portrayed as a “lanky, gun-toting grizzle-bearded man with a jug of moonshine in one hand and a coon dog at his feet” (Algeo, 2003, p. 2). Perhaps the most pervasive stereotype of Appalachians involves ridicule and criticism

related to their distinct dialect, pronunciation, and patterns of communication (Waldron & Dotson, 2000).

Even though it is clear stigma and stereotypes of Appalachian people are linked to historical and ongoing poverty and oppression, there rarely is any acknowledgement that this is an oppressed and marginalized population. Instead, it remains socially acceptable to deride and make fun of Appalachian people. There is an acceptance and expectation that people in this region are suffering and are demeaned, essentially placing the blame on the victim by attributing negative characteristics that justify how life will be for them. This is similar to the experiences of other oppressed groups. All out-groups experience lack of access to societal resources and are stereotyped and marginalized. And, like other oppressed groups, this can have detrimental impacts on well-being. Not only are the people of this area not provided adequate services needed to ameliorate health disparities, but they are also likely to struggle to cope with stigma and stereotypes toward them. In addition, Appalachian people are likely to struggle with their ethnic/cultural identities. If they are to embrace and celebrate the many positive cultural factors of Central Appalachia, they also have to accept and own the place in the social stratification system that stigmatizes, marginalizes, and places limits on their opportunities. Advocacy efforts to improve the quality of life and opportunities for Appalachian people need to be able to establish collective agency; this is difficult when there is not even acknowledgement of oppression.

Research is needed that examines how the Central Appalachian plight can be understood within the frameworks of oppression and marginalization that apply to other minority groups. One of the most current concepts explaining how discrimination occurs in modern culture is *microaggression*. The concept of microaggression has been gaining increased recognition as an important way to understand how small, often subtle, incidents containing messages of stereotypes and stigma, experienced in the daily lives of marginalized populations, reinforce oppressed status and can have detrimental impacts on well-being. Microaggression has been studied in other racial and ethnic groups (e.g., Black, Latino/Hispanic, Asian) as well as other demeaned groups (e.g., LGB&T, religious minorities) as a way of understanding their experiences of marginalization

(Forrest-Bank, 2016). Microaggression may be an important construct for understanding the experiences of Appalachians, however it has not yet been applied to Appalachian people. Research is needed that examines the lived experiences of oppression and marginalization among rural Central Appalachians and determines the extent that their experiences are congruent with the construct of microaggression.

Microaggression

Microaggressions are defined as “every day, verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages targeting persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 273). The term “microaggression” originated from Dr. Chester Pierce’s work with Black Americans, and the construct is grounded in critical race theory (Sue, 2010). From this perspective, discourse on oppression prioritizes the perspective of those being marginalized. There also must be an understanding of the concept of social construction and the system of social stratification that is integral to our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

In the U.S. we have a system of social stratification in which a small, elite class of people dominated by White, Christian, European-descended males hold immense wealth, power and privilege. Everyone else is ascribed a place of reduced status, determined by the extent they differ from that group. Since White Appalachians outwardly appear to represent the hegemony, their marginalization is harder to recognize. However, all of the things that make them different from the White male elite—depicted by the stereotypes—are the exact characteristics that define their reduced, “othered” status. This social construction of what it means to be Appalachian is broadly recognized and accepted throughout U.S. society and beyond.

To be clear, rural Central Appalachia is not a monolithic region. It is comprised of people from multiple heritages (i.e., Anglo-Saxon, Scots-Irish, African, European immigrants, and Native Americans), who vary in degrees of wealth, as well as the extent of ancestry tied to the locale (Obermiller & Maloney, 2016). However, “Appalachian” tends to be perceived as

representing a singular culture, diminishing the complexity of the region and people linked to it as belonging to a singular culture of rural poverty (Keefe, 2005). In other words, what it means to be Appalachian is defined by a generalization of what differentiates it from White majority—what places it in a reduced status in the social stratification system. People from the region are ascribed Appalachian stereotypes, and this construction of what it means to be Appalachian becomes part of their identity, whether the stereotypes apply or not. Even though it is not possible to identify static criteria, such as ancestry, place attachment, or possessing certain cultural traits, to define what constitutes an “Appalachian,” many people possess an “Appalachian identity” (Hooks, 2009) that is linked to the social construction of the minority group at least as much as it is to the region. Regardless of how fabricated and unrealistic the social construction may be, it has real meaning in society. The term conjures painful stereotypes and is linked to real oppression; at the same time it serves as a cultural identity and sense of pride for many.

Importantly, the social construction of Appalachia provides language and conceptualization for discourse about the marginalization and oppression of Appalachian people, allowing for collective scholarship and agency toward ameliorating it (Smith, 2016). Many rural Central Appalachians feel they struggle more than other Americans with legal, educational, employment and income injustices, while remaining the last ethnic minority group in America that is not even protected by political correctness or basic civility (Foster & Hummel, 1997). Individuals who in today’s world would actively avoid the defamation of other cultural and ethnic groups in America, seem to remain open to the stereotyping and marginalization of Appalachians (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008).

Taxonomy of microaggression. Sue and colleagues (2007) developed a taxonomy of microaggressions that includes three different forms: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. *Microassaults* are motivated by conscious attitudes or beliefs that are expressed deliberately with the intention to cause harm. They might be expressed directly and openly as derogatory statements about the inferiority of the group, or they might be acted out in a myriad of ways, for example by not permitting

one's child to date or marry within a marginalized group (Sue et al., 2007).

Microinsults, conversely, are typically not within conscious awareness of the perpetrator. They include interactions, either verbal or nonverbal, or environmental hints, that are disparaging, rude, insensitive, or insulting based on an individual's minority group status. Microinsults tend to be subtle, often even masked as a compliment aimed at a particular group or person that it is a compliment to be perceived as being an exception (Sue et al., 2007).

Microinvalidations occur when someone denies oppression toward a group exists or refuses to acknowledge lived realities experienced by groups that are not socially valued. To reject or invalidate the subjective thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, and realities of members of a targeted group denies that there are privileges assumed by the dominant group as a result of the -isms of society. The denial that oppression exists allows for the denial of personal accountability for participating in it, or being compelled to act (Sue et al., 2007).

Since microaggressions are small, brief incidents that are such a normal part of interpersonal communication, they often are ignored or unnoticed. They tend to be perceived as innocuous and intended to be humorous. However, microaggressions can be extremely psychologically stressful to the recipients who often struggle to interpret the intent behind the microaggressive acts and decide how to respond to them. Even the decision to confront microaggression or not is likely to have negative consequences (Sue, 2010). An emergent body of research has found the deleterious consequences of microaggressions include biological, physiological, academic, cognitive, behavioral, and emotional suffering (Forrest-Bank & Cuellar, 2018; Forrest-Bank & Jenson, 2015; Sue, 2010). The concept of microaggression provides an explanation for how stereotypes and stigma are communicated and effectively reinforced such that they help perpetuate disadvantage and social inequality (Forrest-Bank & Jenson, 2015).

Study Purpose

Microaggression is an especially insidious mechanism for perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing the diminished status of oppressed populations. On the other hand, when the concept of microaggression is discussed, people tend to readily recognize common specific microaggressive acts experienced by minority groups, and the reality of the oppressed status can be brought to the surface. No prior research has examined how this construct applies to Appalachian people although the stereotypes and reduced status are undeniable. Evidence and discussion regarding Appalachian microaggression may lead to a deeper understanding of how institutionalized discrimination of the people from rural central areas in Appalachia is perpetuated, and may provide a powerful tool for exposing and combating oppression (Forrest-Bank, 2016). In particular, we were interested with how college students who are actively in the process of establishing their roles and status in society might be impacted by microaggression. Therefore, the current exploratory study utilized qualitative focus group methods to gain understanding of the lived experiences of stereotyping and discrimination among rural White Central Appalachian community college students in southern West Virginia.

Methods

Participants

A convenience sample of community college students was recruited via flyers distributed in social science classes. The community college chosen for this study serves students from the rural southern Appalachian coal fields. These students were selected for their lived experiences in the region and because community colleges tend to attract students from the local area (Inman & Mayes, 1999). The student body of the college is comprised mainly of Caucasian students (88%), with the remaining 12% of the student body being mostly African American.

Two focus groups were conducted. In Group 1, participants' ages ranged from 20 to 56 ($M = 38.3$, $SD = 12.9$). Participants in Group 2 ranged in age from 20 to 38, ($M = 25.8$, $SD = 7.5$). The

majority of participants in both groups were female (67% of Group 1 and 80% of Group 2); all participants were Caucasian. Out of the 11 participants, two were not born in West Virginia. One of the participants who was not born in West Virginia identified as West Virginian. Her parents and grandparents were from the region and she had lived in the state for many years. The other did not identify as West Virginian, having no parents or grandparents from the state, and having moved to the region at age four. All of the students except one identified as being West Virginian. See Table 1 for the specific sample data. It is important to note that findings based on this sample certainly cannot be generalized to represent all of the individuals in rural Central Appalachia or even southern West Virginia. However, these participants are likely to have crucial perspectives about White Appalachian stereotypes and oppression and provide a good starting point for discourse on Appalachian Microaggression.

Table 1. Sample Demographic Data (N =11)

Participant number	Group 1						Group 2				
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
Gender	M	F	F	F	M	F	F	M	F	F	F
Age	39	48	33	29	20	56	22	20	21	38	28
Born in WV	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
Years in WV	39	48	33	29	20	56	22	16	21	38	16
Parents WV	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Grandparents WV	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Plans to Move	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes

Procedures

University Institutional Review Board approval was granted for all procedures prior to initiating the study. Participants were recruited through the distribution of flyers to all social science majors ($N = 20$) ten days before the focus groups were held. Interested students signed up for one of two focus groups and provided their contact information. One of the social science faculty members contacted each student, who had signed up, by telephone on the afternoon of the focus group to verify attendance later that same evening. Twelve students volunteered to participate in the study, six for each focus group. All six students attended the first focus group and five of the six students were present for the second group. The groups began by signing informed consent forms, which included obtaining permission for both audio and video recordings. Participants then completed a brief demographic questionnaire to obtain generational standing in terms of living in rural Central Appalachia, gender, age, race, and if they planned to remain in West Virginia or not. This last question was asked to see if there was a commitment to remaining in the region after graduation.

Focus groups proceeded using a semi-structured interview format. The questions were open-ended to allow maximum freedom for the participants in their responses. Each group member was called upon to ensure no one dominated the discussion and everyone had a chance to participate. Prompts were used as needed to generate in-depth discussion. The schedule of questions was adapted from a previous study that explored experiences of individuals from other racial and ethnic minorities being discriminated against or marginalized due to their racial or ethnic backgrounds (Rivera, Forquer, & Rangel, 2010). The questions asked about the participants' experiences of discrimination or encounters of stereotypical comments or images. Questions were also developed to explore specific content about rural White Central Appalachian stereotypes identified from a review of the literature over the past fifteen years on Appalachian microaggressions using the search terms Appalachian stereotypes, Appalachian discrimination, Appalachian, and microaggressions. There were also questions about how the participants viewed themselves. The data pertaining to those

questions are not included in the current study. Participants received a \$20 gift card to a local grocery store to thank them for their participation.

Analytic Strategy

Prior to data collection, during the focus groups, and during data analysis, reflexive journaling was conducted by the primary author/researcher in order to bracket thoughts, feelings, and impressions regarding people living in rural Central Appalachian. The purpose of this was to identify and minimize potential bias, and therefore allow accurate description of the lived experiences of the focus group members to emerge (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Tufford & Newman, 2012). The focus group recordings were transcribed, verbatim, to prepare the data for text analysis. Inductive content analysis applying grounded theory strategies was conducted to analyze the data (Heath & Cowley, 2003; Kaghan, Strauss, Barley, Brannen, & Thomas, 1999). Open coding was used to examine the data, create codes, and to establish properties for each code (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Patton, 2015). Axial coding was then utilized to: identify relationships between the open codes; examine comments and descriptions about the participants' lived experience in rural southern West Virginia (located in Central Appalachia); and condense them into categories when there was overlap (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Kendall, 1999). Finally, selective coding was used to combine and reduce categories until no new concepts emerged (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The resulting five themes are presented next. The discussion that follows considers the implications of the concerns expressed by participants about the hardships faced by people of rural southern West Virginia, in addition to assessing the findings in relationship to the taxonomy of microaggressions developed by Sue and colleagues (2007).

Results

Analysis of the data revealed five major themes of microaggression: (1) accent and dialect; (2) non-acknowledgment of West Virginia as a state separate from Virginia; (3) ubiquitous negative perceptions; (4) coping with marginalization and

stigma; and (5) inaccessibility and hardship. A description of the dimensions of the data, along with the participants' feelings and reactions in the themes, is illustrated with examples of specific quotes.

Theme 1: Accent and Dialect

Numerous mentions were made by participants about experiences they had related to their accents and speech patterns. Many felt they had been viewed as "stupid," "uneducated," or "dumb" based on the way they spoke. Some participants relayed interactions with friends who live outside of West Virginia. One stated, "That's what all my friends say about me. My best friend, she lived in Pittsburgh, and she said, 'Every time you go back to where you live...I don't know what happened to you...you turn into this hick' and I'm like, 'no, I don't.'" Another said, "I lived in Florida and was raised in West Virginia and then back and forth. I have a lot of trouble with my dialect because I speak the southern twang down there. I called a friend of mine, and she said 'Hold on you're going have to text me because I can't understand what you're saying...You sound like a hick. You need to check yourself'"

Some expressed feeling discouraged by not being understood.

I had taken a trip to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and we were trying to find the mall to go shopping and everywhere we asked, apparently they [they kept sending us up and down the same Airline Highway] didn't understand what we were saying... We never found the mall, we never got to shop. Every time we stopped and asked, they'd look at us like we were crazy...Do they not understand what we're asking? I even broke it down. I said we want to go shopping. It is very frustrating.

Others were angry: "[When] I worked at McDonald's, I always had a customer from upstate and he always tried to mock my accent." "Customer comes in from a different state, they try mocking me, mock my accent." "I just want to punch them."

Several participants talked about wanting to assert their intelligence when people outside of the region spoke to them more slowly, as though the participants were the ones who could not comprehend what was being said to them. "You don't know

who I am. You don't know what degree of education I have. I can understand you perfectly. And just because I'm from a region that has the perception of being uneducated, doesn't mean that I am." Some described how they altered their communication to make themselves better understood and to avoid being perceived as unintelligent. For example, one explained, "Even though I'm still speaking intelligently, it makes me slow down when I go to speak to people, especially out of state." Another described, "I try to make sure I pronounce [words] just right so that they can understand me, because if not, it makes me feel like they think I'm dumb because I have a twang or southern drawl."

While some participants expressed pride in the way they spoke as part of their Appalachian identity, some mentioned family members who were ashamed of their dialect and/or being from West Virginia, wanting to fit into the majority culture. One person stated,

And me, I know when it's appropriate to speak professionally, but when I'm around my friends, I let the West Virginia show. I don't care. I'm proud of my accent. I'm proud of the way I talk. To me, I don't think talking with an accent is unprofessional. I mean, I know when to say "ain't" and when not to. But if I'm in front of a group of professional people I'm not going get up there and say that "ain't right". If I'm with my friends, I'll use double negatives and everything.

Another participant shared, "I have an aunt who lives in Florida and she actually took classes to get rid of her accent and all of the dialect. She said she can't stand the way West Virginians talk." Another said, "Yes, my family, they're ashamed of where they come from."

Theme 2: Non-acknowledgement of West Virginia as a State Separate from Virginia

Several participants expressed frustration that West Virginia was often viewed by outsiders as not even existing. Rather, it is seen as an extension of Virginia, not a separate state. As one person stated, "Well, I mean, it's when you hear it all the time and you say West Virginia. 'Western Virginia?' No, West Virginia." Others in the group shared similar experiences. "I

watch football, basketball, any time the Mountaineers are playing, the commentators will say 'Western Virginia' or something like that because they just...don't realize." Another person interjected, "Well, I think a lot of people don't realize that West Virginia is a state." Another added, "There's a lot of people that don't know what to say, if you go out of state and you tell them you're from West Virginia, they're like 'Western Virginia? How close is that to Roanoke?'"

One person pointed out, "I mean we all ought to know how many states and what states there are. I actually did say that to somebody. I said, 'It is a separate state,' and I asked them 'How far did you go in school? Do you not remember how many states we had?'" Another participant stated she had a similar reaction. "I had this one lady at a hospital when I worked at in Florida, the same thing with West Virginia...when I was going back to West Virginia, and she said 'oh, well, have fun in Virginia'... 'no, I'm going to West Virginia.' She said 'You mean, there are two different states?' [She has] a college degree and doesn't know that West Virginia and Virginia are two different states."

Theme 3: Ubiquitous Negative Perceptions

Another theme in the data was that group members are bombarded by negative perceptions of people from West Virginia from multiple sources. Participants conveyed consensus that they frequently observed common stereotypes in the media and in interactions with others. Two subthemes are organized around the context in which the negative reports or stereotypes are portrayed: (a) in the media; and (b) interpersonal comments and joking.

Subtheme a: In the media. Negative messages about rural Central Appalachia were received by the participants via the media, both news and entertainment. For example, a few of the participants talked about West Virginia being portrayed negatively in the news as being among the laziest states. "I just saw in the paper that Beckley was named the most lazy city in West Virginia. It also talked about how West Virginia was the second laziest state, next to, I believe, Mississippi." The group members also observed West Virginia ranked high in terms of negative behaviors. "West Virginia gets on all the bad lists...most obese, most

unemployed, highest drug use." Another observation was that news reporters perpetrate stereotypes whenever there is a disaster or national story that takes place in West Virginia. "They find one person with curlers in their hair and have house shoes on and maybe one tooth...and whatever, their overalls, maybe the straw hat, whatever you picture West Virginians to be."

Other media sources such as television programs and movies were noted as frequently portraying negative stereotypical images that were distorted and exaggerated. Characteristics depicted in the media included: "black teeth or no teeth, long shaggy beard, unkempt, barefoot, and pregnant" and as "moonshiners, pill heads, drug addicts." The stereotypical behaviors were described as "we don't go to the dentist, have never heard of a dentist," "all the guys chew tobacco," and being "uneducated for sure." Children were reported as being negatively portrayed as "unsupervised and unkempt," "dirty" and "quit school in the 4th grade and go to work." Housing consists of living in "coal camps" or "trailer parks" and having "outhouses," with adults depicted as living in "a wooden house surrounded by nothing sitting on the porch in a rocking chair holding a gun and spitting dip tobacco in a can." Regarding this last image, one person expressed "Now that irritates me, every time I watch that on TV. That's how they portray us all the time."

Several programs on television were mentioned as being particularly egregious, including the reality show "Buckwild" (Poznick et al., 2013) on MTV, "Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia" (Doering et al., 2009), a documentary on Showtime (currently available on Netflix and YouTube), and the movie "Wrong Turn" (Winston, Gilbert, Feig, Kulzer, & Schmidt, 2003). Although presented as a "reality show," "Buckwild" (Poznick et al., 2013) was cited by the participants as portraying young adults in a particularly unrealistic manner. One person described, "...[they] go four-wheeling and attached something to the four-wheeler and just do something that nobody would ever think of...filling up whole back of the truck up with water and making a pool out of it." "They were doing really reckless things which is not unusual for MTV but it is unusual for the teens in West Virginia to be acting like that. They'd probably be scared their mom would get them [for] drinking and doing drugs. But on the show, the mom and

dad were relaxed because they has already gotten paid." "Yes, and I think the show would still be going on but one of the kids died in an accident of some type." Participants described their feelings about the show as "horrible" and "embarrassing."

"Wild and Wonderful Whites of West Virginia," (Doering et al., 2009) promoted as a documentary, was described as a family with one of the characters, Jesso White, as "tap dancing and saying that he's Elvis and in it he threatens to kill his wife and talks about hitting her and everybody thinks it funny." Another character was described as a girl who "had a baby and...she broke up a pill right there in the hospital and did a line while her baby was right there in the bassinet and the other lady watched. They featured it [a local drug rehabilitation center] and her going through it [the program]. These people were just ignorant. How they get away with being like that, I don't understand. I think all it was [because] they knew somebody famous or something." One participant expressed, "Yes, when they came out with the 'Wonderful Whites of West Virginia', I was outraged. That's not how we should be portrayed to America." Other participants mentioned the mayor tried to stop the show unsuccessfully.

The movie "Wrong Turn" (Winston et al., 2003) was also mentioned. "Apparently, it was about West Virginia because they're all inbred." "Inbred, to the point that they were severely deformed." It was described as "a big stigma for West Virginia" portraying people from the state as "mentally ill, engaged in domestic violence, and as inbred cannibals." Reactions included "It was horrible, and people associate West Virginia with that movie." "I'm thinking can they make more decent shows about West Virginia?" This last comment was met with one of the participants mentioning the miniseries "Coal." Although the show was described "not necessarily as a negative...it did show that mining coal is difficult work...you just don't go in there and pick up a bucket of coal," it had the unfortunate outcome of the coal miners on the show being fined. "There were citations that came out. The episode would show up on whatever night and the next morning, the inspectors were at the mine saying 'I saw on TV that you did not do this right, so here.'" It seems that even when there are positive portrays of life in Appalachia in the media, the people are still subjected to negative outcomes.

Concerns were voiced about the people in the region internalizing these messages. One person said "I think with anything over time when you're told you are a certain way or—" with another introjecting, "You're going start believing it."

Subtheme b: Interpersonal comments and joking. Participants also described numerous experiences of negative interpersonal exchanges. Comments were made by people from the majority culture, co-workers, and even relatives that perpetrated inappropriate, derogatory comments or jokes about people from West Virginia. One person shared, "My brother was in Tennessee getting a caricature done, him and his wife, and the guy that was doing the caricature asked him [my brother] where he was from, and he told him West Virginia. He responded 'Well, you have all your teeth.' And then of course they were asked if they were brother and sister and...he [my brother] was mad."

Others mentioned if you leave the state and others find out where you are from, they ask "Do you have [know] anybody in prison?" or "Do you have indoor plumbing?" At a college football game, one individual described the halftime cheerleaders as "making fun of us, dressed in hillbilly garb ...cheerleaders put on pregnant pouches and were barefoot. I am sensitive to some of that stuff." Another expressed her mother's feelings about being called a hillbilly. "My mom, she gets downright mad. She says 'I'm not a hillbilly, I'm a mountaineer.' I have seen her ready to come to blows over it."

Even in state, one participant expressed "When I worked at Subway, a lot of people would come in and say offensive things. It's like sometimes they wanted to get under my skin, which is not something I frequently allow. People would come in and ask for moonshine and pot a lot. This is in Subway. I mean, you are making the sandwich and they say 'It's amazing you have all your teeth.' I'm working my way through college." Another reported outsiders asking "'You're really from West Virginia? You don't look like you'd be from West Virginia.' What does that even mean?" One group member noted "It's almost as if everyone is lumped into the same bunk or put in the same pile ...we're all just pretty much judged as a whole instead of individuals."

References to sexual deviance, including incest and bestiality, were another dimension of the content of interpersonal

insults described by participants. For example, one group member relayed a story about a relative which referenced incest.

I had an uncle, [who] lived in Michigan, and he told his granddaughter—his granddaughter was too little to understand— [when] she said she was going to marry her cousin, and he said “Oh, you can’t do that up here but you can in West Virginia, they marry their cousin all the time”...I used to hear it from him all the time.

A different person shared “I’ve lived on a farm and somebody actually asked my boyfriend ‘Well how often do you help the sheep through the fence?’ and I had to ask him what that meant and he said ‘Well you know, we’re all, we all sleep with sheep up here because there is not enough women to go around’...I hope not...there’s no sheep here.” Another mentioned someone joking with him when he was a chef’s assistant. “He would come in and say ‘Why was Jesus not born in West Virginia?... Because you couldn’t find three wise men and a virgin.’ Okay, now you’ve had enough of your fun.”

Theme 4: Coping with Marginalization and Stigma

While many participants experienced a wide range of feelings, from feeling sensitive, to confused, or angry, in response to comments and treatment by outsiders, resignation was also expressed. “No, I just, I mean it would hurt a lot of people, but I just, you know, I thought you just don’t know...I think in a way a lot of West Virginians are pretty thick skinned, you know, because we’ve gotten used to it.” “I feel like no matter where you go people are going to joke. We get picked on and get called hillbillies and stuff.” Other quotes verbalized a lack of being cared about by outsiders. “A lot of people don’t care whether they offend us or not because they don’t hold West Virginia people in very high esteem.” “They’re uneducated, they’re backward so why are you worried about offending. They’re not going to understand our joke anyway.”

Concerns regarding the perception of others, as well as feelings of not belonging or fitting in outside of the state of West Virginia, were voiced. Feelings of worry, anxiety, and stress about these perceptions were expressed. A student captured

the meaning of this theme by saying, "(You) go to Tennessee, we spend a lot of time at Dollywood, and it's a fun place for everybody. But you're so worried about how people going be and how the kids are going to be and you don't want them to act [up] ...to be stigmatized for their lives, you know what I'm saying." Another stated, "I mean even if you're vacationing...you're so stressed out because you don't fit in." One person expressed the comfort of returning to West Virginia and wondering if others felt the same. "Is it just me, or like when you guys vacation and if you're coming through the tunnels in Virginia back to West Virginia, or if you're coming the other way and you just see the sign West Virginia...you can breathe easier, you know, it seems that way. It's like wow, you're at peace because, even if you're vacationing, where you're so stressed out because you just don't fit in."

Other quotes conveyed feeling more accepted in the south and indicated West Virginians tend to move south if they relocate and join others from the state to feel less like outsiders. "Because...they are from us...you go up north and that's when it gets a little tricky."

Theme 5: Inaccessibility and Hardship

When participants talked about living in West Virginia, many of them described the lifestyle of people living in remote areas of the region, in which some of the participants lived. Some of the quotes in this theme convey positive sentiments about remote rural Appalachian life. "It's almost like a culture, I know. I have noticed meeting people that are from a hollow...the way that they interact with the world is different than somebody that was born, say, in [town] or in another state. It's just their upbringing. People in that area take care of you." "We help each other when we can." An observation made by participants was that some people move into secluded areas of West Virginia "because they are seeking a certain lifestyle." One stated, "Some people do enjoy that because it's a lot more calm and quiet and enjoyable for their lifestyle of living, but it's like away from everything too."

However, much more of the data in this theme relayed difficult experiences or voiced concerns about the daily hardships endured by people living in remote areas of rural southern

West Virginia coal fields. These hardships were perceived as a justifiable consequence of choosing to live remotely and/or a lack of motivation in those who live in outlying areas. As one participant put it, "And I think that whenever people are born that don't really have much in that area [where they are living] they're born into that, I think they get trapped there."

Another person stated, "It feels like things around here are not as accessible as they would be in another state so it just feels like we're kind of cut off at the knees...because, you know, if you come from [a remote town] you have come all the way to Beckley, and everybody sees that and they think you live out in a remote part so you don't do much [lazy, not working]."

There were three subthemes that emerged categorizing the types of hardship resulting from inaccessibility: (a) utilities; (b) health care; and (c) employment/education.

Subtheme a: Lack of utilities. Numerous quotes in this theme described people in living conditions without services such as plumbing and electricity. For example, one student explained, "Being back where people don't want to deal with [society], it's hard to get good water or electricity, and some people don't have the availability to get whatever they need, not because they don't want it." Some reported there were still outhouses in some areas, indicating the lack of septic tanks or access to public services. Participants relayed that people coped the best they could with these conditions, either by doing without, or using antiqued systems, such as outhouses. One pointed out, "You know, that's where they grew up their whole life. They can't afford to go somewhere else, and they can't afford to pay what it would cost to get the necessities down to where they're from."

Subtheme b: Barriers to healthcare. Another subtheme of hardship and inaccessibility occurred in a number of quotes about barriers to healthcare. Remote location made accessing health-care difficult for some as relayed in the following quote:

I think good doctors are hard to come by...it's just in order to get really good quality care, like for a good cardiologist you have to go to Morgantown [3 hours away] or Charleston [1 hour away]...a lot of people don't have access to those places.

Lack of access to medical care due to not having transportation, public or private, was prevalent in the data. To illustrate, one student shared, "I had three friends die in the last six months because of the ambulances [not arriving in time] and being in a remote area." Another mentioned, "Last year a girl died because the ambulance could not get to her. There were feet of snow. It got down the road but still was like a football field or so away."

Participants relayed a sense of desperation when they described coping with such incidents the best they could. One student provided an example of the creative problem solving that was sometimes necessary:

We had to send a girl down on a sled because she was having a baby. Yes, we had to make a makeshift sleigh and put her down the mountain so the ambulance could get her...it was either put her on the sled or catch the baby. We put her on the sled.

Another participant observed, "A lot of times people live so far out...the access to the hospital or clinic or a doctor's visit is not there. They probably rely on home remedies."

Concerns of being viewed as having a drug addiction or having inadequate insurance also created barriers for accessing care. One person stated:

You can't go...me, myself, I've got problems. I will not go to a doctor because I don't need that stereotype that I'm just a drug addict or a pill-seeker or whatever. "Oh, she's just out of her pills." So I will not go. I will not go to an emergency room for my back; they feel you're here for drugs. I had to go for my back and told them I don't want you to give me anything, I want to find out what is wrong.

Another student talked about her mother being denied medication because she did not have insurance doctors would accept.

My mom has tumors on her spine, they're noncancerous. She has Medicaid. She has tried four different...doctors to help her with her back, chiropractors, and nobody will accept Medicaid...She has nothing [to take for] pain so she has to

take ibuprofen, which, of course, ibuprofen is not going to help your spine that's being twisted because of tumors...she has no means. She suffers.

The impacts of these fears of being stigmatized as an addict resulted in some participants not seeking treatment for physical issues they were experiencing. Those who feared being stigmatized and those denied medical care had the same outcome: suffering. One participant, referring to the ability to obtain medication for pain, concluded: "people who are in chronic pain... there's no help for them."

Subtheme c: Lack of accessibility to employment. Another hardship discussed in the focus groups was inability to access sufficient employment and education in rural areas of the southern West Virginia coalfields. The majority of the participants verbalized concerns that coal mining was no longer a viable means of support. Many expressed they felt coal mining was an option in the past to make a living wage, yet was no longer was a choice since the mines were closing. One person explained:

[You] have to actually go and get a degree and a lot of kids don't...they don't have the money to go to college...to take it further...I know a lot of my friends just graduating high school, a couple years ago have said "no, it's just too much money, I can't."

The lack of opportunities for living wage was summarized by one of the participants: "I think you either rely on your family or financial benefits provided by the state if you drop out or don't further your education." Another stated:

There's not a lot here. We are an oppressed people...lawmakers don't bring in industry to help our situation, and a lot of people do live on welfare...[however,] if you were to go into that community and say "you're an oppressed person," they'd say "No, I am not." It's cultural thing to argue back "I'm not oppressed, you just don't understand the way things are."

Discussion

The purpose of this pilot exploratory study was to better understand the experiences and impacts of stereotyping and discrimination among White community college students living in rural Central Appalachia, with the intent to consider the appropriateness of applying the concept of microaggression to explain their experiences. Indeed, the participants, who are all residents of rural southern West Virginia, indicated they had been subjected to experiences that are congruent with the concept of Appalachian microaggression. Therefore, this study makes an important and first contribution toward confirming the concept of Appalachian microaggression has important relevance for understanding and explaining the experiences of marginalization and oppression of rural White Central Appalachian people. Further support for the concept of Appalachian microaggression lies in its alignment with the internal colony model which has been critically important in reframing the story of rural Central Appalachia from a derogatory one based on stereotypical images, to one that recognizes the plight of impoverishment as a result of the exploitation of lumber and coal industries (Anglin, 2016).

Clearly, the social construction of what it means to be Appalachian, infused with stereotypes and reduced status in relationship to the hegemony, is rampant and broadly accepted. However, it is also crucial to recognize the limitations in generalizing findings from the study sample. The sample size was small ($N = 11$) and specific to community college social studies students, that, although useful in preliminary work, cannot be utilized to draw conclusions or generalize to the larger population of rural Central Appalachia. There also could have been a response bias in that students who volunteered for the study may be self-selected because they were interested in talking about their experiences of stereotyping and marginalization. The topic of Appalachian microaggression certainly warrants further research with larger samples that represent the diversity of Central Appalachian people. For example, there may be important different nuances among people in the region outside of southern West Virginia, from different age, gender, and racial groups or from different generations of rural Central Appalachians.

Support for Construct of Appalachian Microaggression

There was evidence of all the types of microaggression in the taxonomy developed by Sue and colleagues (2007). Most of the microassaults described in the data explicitly expressed unfavorable perceptions of rural Central White Appalachians, based on antiquated stereotypes and reinvented for contemporary society. Participants also indicated they were made fun of or mocked for their manner of speaking and received other pejorative comments based on assumptions that they were uneducated or unintelligent due to residing in rural southern West Virginia. Another concerning issue found in the data was that participants experienced that their hardships were viewed as a consequence of their own choice to live remotely. As though if only they were not so lazy, they would move to a place with more resources. However, the reality is many people have no choice but to stay due to being trapped by poverty. In this way Appalachian stereotypes place blame on the people of the region, indicting them for tolerating impoverishment (Billings, 2001; Foster & Hummel, 1997).

Congruent with the definition of microinsults, often derogatory messages were more covertly or subtly expressed, such as through teasing. At times, it is simply not possible to know whether the microaggression was a microassault or microinsult since negative bias toward rural southern West Virginians may or may not be within the consciousness of the perpetrator. The dynamics involved when a microinsult appears to be intended as a compliment, but contains a clear negative metacommunication, seemed to be particularly confusing and impactful.

Participants frequently experienced environmental microinsults received through various forms of media. News reports on disasters and findings of West Virginians as being the second laziest state, the most obese, the most unemployed, and the most drug addicted portrayed this group in a negative light. The participants tended to question the validity of such reports and seemed to experience the messages portrayed in the news as offensive and reinforcing stereotypical depictions.

Many of the experiences described by participants fit into the category of microinvalidations, the type of microaggression considered by some scholars as the most insidious and

damaging (Sue et al., 2007). For example, the theme of not acknowledging West Virginia as a state separate from Virginia was disturbing, especially for those participants who self-identified as West Virginians, yet not as Appalachians. Several of the participants reported correcting the perpetrators of this microinvalidation, which stood out as particularly compelling because rural southern West Virginian culture is often characterized by politeness and discomfort with direct confrontation. Perhaps the most damaging form of microinvalidation in the data was the denial that rural White Central Appalachians are oppressed as a group. Yet, as the theme of hardship and inaccessibility reveals, there are many in the region who clearly experience problems accessing even basic resources.

Impacts of Appalachian Microaggression

Microaggressions seem to be an effective vehicle for conveying and perpetuating Appalachian reduced status by delivering frequent reinforcement of what the images, expectations, and social status of Appalachian people are. Even participants who did not identify as Appalachian experienced Appalachian microaggressions. Consider that it is not possible to know why the participants were subject to microaggression. That is, they may have been targeted based on the assumption they belonged to a lower socioeconomic class, or rural lifestyle, as opposed to being targeted solely based on Appalachian identity. From this vantage, the social construction of White Appalachians that conflates Appalachian stereotypes with rural poverty provides society's rationale for the ever-widening divide between the wealthy and poor in the United States.

Importantly, even though the focus group questions did not directly ask participants about how they were impacted by their negative experiences related to stereotypes and discrimination, each theme contained some data to that effect. Participants seemed to struggle to not internalize negative perceptions and to try to cope in practical ways such as modifying the way they speak. However, some voiced concern that receiving messages that they all embodied the negative stereotypes ascribed to them would result in believing what they hear, in other words, become self-fulfilling prophecy. In addition, several of

the participants reported feeling like outsiders, not fitting into mainstream America, and even feeling stress while on vacation in nearby states due to concerns about perceptions. At the same time, more than half of the participants indicated they did not plan to remain in the area ($N = 6$), and, of the five participants who indicated they did not plan to leave, two would leave, only if necessary, to find employment.

It is not clear to what extent microaggression and other forms of oppression played a role in the participants' desire to leave the area beyond the severe lack of employment opportunities. However, prior research has found that high school students who used Appalachian stereotypes were more likely to say they wanted to leave West Virginia (Towers, 2005). These findings raise concern for the well-being of those who seek to integrate in other regions of the country. Moreover, our sample of college students represent crucial emergent potential to contribute to innovation, advocacy, and economic growth in the region. It is concerning that so many are likely to leave.

Implications and Conclusions

Appalachian microaggression is a concept that offers an understanding of how small subtle forms of interpersonal discrimination play an important role in perpetuating oppression. Further advocacy is needed that encourages positive identification with being Appalachian and collective action toward combatting microaggression, along with efforts to create new opportunities for economic growth. Additional research is needed that examines the motivations of college students to leave or stay in the region, including the role of microaggression in order to inform and propel these efforts.

Moreover, the findings point to the critical need for intervention and policy to alleviate hardship by providing access to resources currently denied in rural Central Appalachian regions that may be remote. The data indicating people avoid health care due to stigma they are likely to experience should be especially concerning. Mental health practitioners, healthcare professionals, and educators should become familiar with the historical oppression and the cultural heritage of rural White Central Appalachians, as well as having an awareness of the

diversity of this group and their special challenges. Additionally, becoming knowledgeable about common microaggressions can provide the opportunity to prevent clinicians and agencies from perpetrating them. Awareness of the pervasiveness of pejorative stereotypical images and the marginalization of this group continues to face needs to be a part of cultural competency training in working with people of this region. Increasing recognition and knowledge of rural Central Appalachian mountain dialect rather than demeaning the communication patterns would be a starting point. Special attention should be given to accessibility issues in making treatment recommendations to assure clients have adequate transportation and access to resources. Becoming conscious of microaggressions and their impact could lead to policies in which more industry is brought into the region as well as making efforts to ensure college accessibility is available, both fiscally and regionally, to the people of the rural Central Appalachian region.

Lastly, there is also a need for policy and intervention that eradicate microaggressions occurring widespread throughout media and entertainment. For example, the word "hillbilly" needs to be viewed for the negative moniker it is. Like any other socially unacceptable term for oppressed people, it is inextricably linked with creating a disparaging stereotypical image and should be eliminated from American discourse.

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