The Implications of Appalachian Culture for Social Welfare Practice

by Michael E. Maloney

Preface

This paper is one in a series to be published by the Research Committee of the Urban Appalachian Council as part of our effort to document the urban and rural realities of Appalachian life.

In 1972, the Urban Appalachian Council was organized to act as a regional resource and educational center for Appalachian affairs and to promote pride in cultural heritage among Appalachians in an urban setting.

The Urban Appalachian Council functions as an advocate and catalyst. It is a fundamental commitment to the concept of cultural pluralism which directs our work in research, advocacy, community organization; cultural affirmation and program development.

James Brown and Clyde McCoy have documented the migration streams which more than three million Appalachians have followed to various urban centers since 1940.[1] Gary Fowler has shown that Appalachian migrants practice residential segregation.[2] In this paper, I will describe the elements of the Appalachian folk subculture, and state some of the implications of the existence of these enclaves of culturally different people for social welfare practice.

Appalachian Settlements

Since there is no firm documentation that white collar and professional Appalachians settle in ethnic enclaves, I will only describe poor and working class neighborhoods. It should be noted, however, that a substantial portion of white collar, professional, and entrepreneurial classes in some urban centers are Appalachian. Their relative absence in the neighborhoods where working class mountain people live creates a serious leadership vacuum. One of the major concerns of Appalachian activists is to restore some of this leadership group to the "truncated society" which the migration process have created.

1. Inner City Neighborhoods

Probably at least twenty per cent of urban Appalachians live in slum or marginal neighborhoods such as Over-the-Rhine (Cincinnati), Fifth and Wayne (Dayton), and Uptown (Chicago). Displaced from pre-industrial rural areas or by automation in the mining camps and lacking the education, skills, and cultural orientation required to success in the city, many of these families have joined the urban underclass or the marginal labor force. Life is full of conflict and stress for such families. Conflicts with other ethnic group, the police, large and impersonal schools and social welfare agencies and exploitation by inner city slumlords, pawn shops, finance companies, and furniture stores seriously hinder any hope of upward mobility. In Cincinnati, many social welfare and school workers regard this group of Appalachians to be the most difficult group in the city to reach. A few agencies and schools have made efforts to adapt their programs to the specific needs and psychology of these low income families but perhaps even more often, members of the "helping professions" reject them and accept some version of the stereotypes mentioned by Fowler to explain their own failure. High rates of crime, juvenile delinquency, school failure, drug abuse, family breakup, and mental illness go unabated. In Cincinnati, Appalachian school dropout rates in some school attendance areas are as high as 75 percent.

 For a more complete analysis of the problems facing inner-city Appalachians see "The Causes of Appalachian Poverty" (Maloney, 1972, The Urban Appalachian Council.)

2. Blue Collar World

The Positive Side

Many Appalachian migrants have entered the primary labor force where wages are good and where unions and the seniority system provide a semblance of security. For these families, migration has been "system maintaining" to a large degree.[3] Along with members of their extended families and friends from the same area of Appalachia, they have established ethnic enclaves in which they maintain their accustomed life ways. According to Brown, the blue collar group has less social contact with native urbanites that either poor or upper class migrants. Occasional visits "down home" help maintain family and cultural ties and ease the pressures of urban life. Many of their children complete high school or even trade school or college.

The Negative Side

Joe Howell's excellent participant observation study of Appalachian settlement in the Washington, D.C. area confirms his own impression that all is not well with the urban Appalachian working class.[4] He describes a world in which traditional mores have broken down and have not yet been replaced by coherent new ones. Alcoholism, family breakdown and violence are rampant. A group of migrants, no doubt a minority, which he describes as "hard livers" are systematically destroying themselves. Cultural change, not poverty, is the problem for these families. The "psychic costs" paid by blue collar workers as well the sufferings of slum dwellers have to be considered together as part of the casuality side of our implicit national policies on rural to urban migration.

(This writer has provided a more detailed description of blue collar life in "The Mountaineer as Indentured Worker" by Maloney, and also *Blue Collar Life* by Arthur B. Shostak.)

The Elements of Appalachian Culture

In a paper of this length, I can only summarize some of the major aspects of Appalachian culture which need to be understood by social welfare practitioners. Further bibliographic assistance is available from the Council of the Southern Mountain Bookstore in Berea Kentucky, the Appalachian Centers at Berea College, and the Frank Foster Library on Appalachian Migrants at the Urban Appalachian Council in Cincinnati.[5]

The major thing that needs to be stated is that the Appalachian family is still the primary support group and the major unit of social interaction. James Brown[6] and Robert Coles[7] have written the best descriptions of the dynamics of Appalachian Family life. Weatherford and Brewer[8] and Nathan Gerrard[9] provide valuable insights in the function of religion in Appalachian culture.

Social workers would do well to develop an understanding, also of Appalachian history, the material culture, and the music and handicrafts of the region. "That the Appalachian belongs to a distinct subculture with its own unique value system and life style has been well documented. Those who subscribe to a positive concept of pluralism welcome the idea that we are a nation of such subcultures and that each has a contribution to make. The Appalachian value system, however, did take its unique shape during the three hundred years (1630-1930) of relative isolation in the southern highlands. It is not completely functional under the conditions of present-day urban industrial society. The Appalachian tends to be individualistic in an age that demands collective action, personalistic when others want functional relationships, traditionalistic and fundamentalistic in an age of pragmatism and relativism. His style of conversation, which is based on relatedness, may drive a conceptual-oriented social worker to distraction. The action-seeking life style of many young Appalachians does not fit the requirements of the urban opportunity system.

It must be emphasized that the Appalachian is not trapped in a closed world of his own which is incapable of change or interaction with other worlds. Appalachian culture is in process of change and adaptation. The act of migration itself represents this change and even the slum-dwelling Appalachian has made considerable adaptation. The gap between the mountaineer and the dominant society may not be narrowing rapidly, however, as the dominant society, too, is in a state of constant change. Changes in technology, the organization of society, and in urban life style are hard for any of us to keep up with. So it looks as if the Appalachian migrants' own "personality" will continue to create difficulties in his efforts to adapt to urban society. Not in themselves a problem, differing value-orientation and life styles can be complicating factors when other unfavorable conditions exist.

The Culture of the Outside World

In order to avoid the tendency to treat the personality of low-income groups as pathology, it is necessary to stress that other subcultures in the city have their own equally peculiar value-orientation and life style. The impersonality of most day to day exchanges in the city strikes the mountain man as cold and inhuman. The contrived optimism of the middle classes does not at all fit the Applachian experience of life. The city-dweller's view of politics and the law as a rationalized system embodied in regulations rather than in individuals is often incomprehensible to the rural migrant.

The inability of the middle class professionals to see the relativity of their own values causes them, to use Levine's terms, to confuse their technology with their culture.[10] He or she ends up trying to force the client into his way of thinking instead of trying to render his service in a way that would be more acceptable to the client. The policeman, employer, merchant, landlord, or civic leader can be similarly handicapped by his inability to respect ways and values different from his own."[11]

Implications for Social Welfare Practice

Social welfare workers need to develop a "cultural competence" appropriate for working with particular subcultural groups. Of all people, we should be proponents of cultural pluralism and should be able to heed Levine's call to "unravel our technology from our culture". The 3.3 million Appalachian refugees in cities outside the mountain region plus their children and grandchildren comprise one of the nations largest subcultural minorities.

Yet, little has been done either to provide individual professionals with the specific competence needed to work effectively with this group or to develop appropriate institutional responses to the existence of Appalachian slums and blue collar enclaves. At this stage in the game, we should probably stop referring to "Appalachian migrants" and start using the term "urban Appalachians" and appropriately consider the second, third, and fourth generations as part of a distinct urban ethnic group.

Most of the research cited by Fowler is based on studies of recent migrants. There is a great need now for multi-generational ethnographic and demographic studies of slum and blue collar communities described above. Studies of "recent migrants" do not give us an adequate view of the total population potentially "at risk" which may include, for example, elderly retired coal miners and their families who migrated in the 1940-1960 period. Social workers can play a major role in seeing that this important national agenda of research and program development is acted upon and that the urban community structure is opened up more firmly to one of our largest urban ethnic groups. The question of "program development" leads to a discussion of culturally specific approaches to provide social services, community organization, and educational programs. These approaches will be discussed in a forthcoming paper by this writer. In Cincinnati, we have twenty-five years experience upon which to draw in assessing future possibilities.

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1. Brown, James, "The Great Migration" in Ford, Thomas R., ed., *The Appalachian Region: A Survey*, University of Kentucky Press, Lexington 1962. Brown, James, "Southern Appalachian Population Change", 1960 to 1970, available from the author. Brown, James and McCoy, Clyde, in two papers soon to be published under the auspices of the Urban Appalachian Council and the Academy for Contemporary Problems.

2. Fowler, Gary and Davies, Shane, "The Urban Settlement Patterns of Disadvantaged Migrants", Journal of Geography, Vol. LXXI, No. 5, May 1972, and also a forthcoming article by Gary Fowler citing public school data from Cincinnati.

3. Schwarzweller, Harry; Brown, James; and Mangalam, George, *Mountain Families in Transition*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972.

4. Howell, Joseph, *Hard Living on Clay Street*, Anchor Books, 1972.

5. Recommended references include Marion Pearall's *Little Smokey Ridge*, James Brown's writings on the Appalachian family, Robert Coles' Volume II and III of *Children of Crisis*, David Looff's *Appalachian Children*, Maloney's *The Causes of Appalachian Poverty,* and Maloney and Huelsman's *Humanism, Scientism and Southern Mountaineers*, Loyal Jones *Appalachian Values*, and Gitlin and Hollander's *Uptown: Poor Whites in Chicago*.

6. Brown, James and Harry K. Schwarzweller, "The Appalachian Family" in John D. Photiadis, ed., *Change in Rural Appalachia*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Phila., 1970.

7. Coles, Robert, *Children of Crisis*, Volumes II and III, Little, Brown, and Co., Boston, 1971.

8. Weatherford, Willis D. and D.C. Brewer. *Life and Religion in Southern Appalachia*, Friendship Press, New York, 1962.

9. Gerrard, Nathan L., "Churches of the Stationary Poor in Appalachia" in Photiadis, op. cit.

10. Levine, Sol, Norman Scotch and George Vlasak, "Unraveling Technology and Culture in Public Health", AJPH, Vol. 59, No. 2, Feb., 1969.

11. Maloney, Michael, "The Causes of Appalachian Poverty", 1972, unpublished article available from the author.