DEFINING DIVERSITY:
THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY IN A RURAL COMMUNITY

by

Stephanie L. Kimball

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

APPROVED:

Jan Nespor, chair
Victoria Fu
Thomas Hunt

Jerome Niles
Thomas Sherman

April, 1995
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Diversity, Democracy, Rural, Education, Multiculturalism
DEFINING DIVERSITY:
The Politics of Identity in a Rural Community

by

Stephanie L. Kimball

Jan Nespor, Chair
Department of Curriculum and Instruction

(ABSTRACT)

This ethnographic study examines the meaning of “diversity” in a rural community, along with related issues of social identity. Data collected through participant observation, public documents, and interviews has shown that as in most places, “diversity” is typically defined in Montgomery County, Virginia in terms of ethnic differences. However, conflict and tensions within the county usually occur not between ethnic groups, but between the public associated with the university here, Virginia Tech, and the public of "rural" community members not associated with the university. Furthermore, there is little interaction between these two polarized publics. The dissertation shows how boundaries between them are created and sustained partly by discursive productions of categories like “rural” and “Appalachian” and partly by institutionalized mechanisms such as tracking in schools that redefine social differences as “natural” and unchangeable. However, these practices are functional for each group too, since they serve to maintain groups’ identities.

While democratic dialogue could produce new understandings and alter the polarized relations between the groups, it could also be threatening to those involved because either group could become subsumed by the other. One possibility for furthering the democratic project is to work through schools to develop multicultural education that
enables students to be critically reflective of their own publics. Such awareness could allow publics to define themselves in less rigid ways, opening possibilities for inter-public dialogue. But if the discursive practices operating in the community that separate groups are left intact, there is little hope that critical reflection learned in schools will be sustained as students grow up and enter the adult community.
Acknowledgments

Needless to say, this dissertation would not have been possible without the support, guidance, resources, and encouragement of countless people both in and out of the university. Although my appreciation of each of these individuals extends far beyond what I can express on paper, I do want to acknowledge at least some of the contributions they have made to my experiences of graduate school over the past several years.

First, I would like to express my sincere appreciation and gratitude to Jan Nespor: my advisor, mentor, teacher, critic, advocate, and friend. Jan always seems to know when to allow ideas to unfold and when to provide structure and direction for their development. Naturally, my plans and ideas have not always panned out, but with Jan’s encouragement I have been able to explore them to my satisfaction then move on with a clearer understanding of “where to go next.” It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with Jan, not only in the context of my research and dissertation, but also in exploring teaching, developing writing styles, presenting papers, and other aspects of professional development. Thank you.

The other members of my committee, Victoria Fu, Tom Hunt, Jerry Niles, and Tom Sherman, have also influenced the direction and quality of my education, and my life more generally. Victoria Fu made it possible for me to contribute to a book project she co-edited with her colleague Andy Stremmel, entitled Affirming Diversity Through Democratic Conversations. This project was a wonderful opportunity for me to discuss and think about democracy and multicultural education with people of varied backgrounds, interests, and perspectives, and also to witness the process of book publishing. Jerry Niles and Tom Hunt began influencing my thinking about schooling
and society years ago when they co-taught one of the first education courses I took as an undergraduate in elementary education. That course was significant because it offered a unique opportunity to critically reflect on schools as they are, and to imagine how they could be better. I am indebted to these professors for their role in opening this inquiry for me and nurturing it with additional courses and conversations over the years. Likewise, Tom Sherman fed my interest in schools and communities, first by making it possible for me to explore alternative schools as an undergraduate, then by enabling me to return to Virginia Tech for graduate school. Over the years he has given me opportunities to teach, research, write, and present our co-authored work. All of this has made a tremendous difference to me both professionally and personally.

I would also like to thank all the people who contribute to the collegial atmosphere of the Division of Curriculum & Instruction, most especially Tammie Smith whose knowledge, expertise, friendship, and genuine concern for students, faculty, and staff have made life much easier -- and much more pleasant -- for me and many others on a daily basis. I deeply appreciate my friends Linda Pacifici, Michele Connolly, and Karin Hauger, for offering invaluable feedback in our weekly "Writing Group" meetings, and also for your camaraderie and enthusiastic support throughout the year(s). Thanks also to Julie Meltzer, for all the reality checks, dinner breaks, and great conversations, and thanks to Stacy Zell for the adventures and moral support. I wish each of you all the best as you continue your programs. And special thanks to Jim Garrison, for advising, encouraging, and collaborating with me on papers, presentations, and teaching -- but most of all, thanks for your warm and steadfast friendship.

This project would not have been possible without the friendship and openness of the members of the Coalition for Community and Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens. I deeply respect the people who donate their time and resources to these and other groups working toward building community and making life better for all; thanks to
each of you for making me more aware of some of the issues and challenges inherent in such endeavors. Many thanks also to the high school students who donated their time to talk with me about their experiences and perceptions of student life in Blacksburg.

I also sincerely appreciate all the other people in the community who have made Blacksburg a wonderful place to live, work, and play -- especially the Hoorah Cloggers and old-time musicians, past and present, who have contributed so much to the richness of community life here. Thanks to Jeff Foster for believing in me and my project and my dreams even when I didn't; for listening when I needed to talk; for supporting me when I needed to work; and for distracting me when I wanted to quit. I deeply appreciate your love and friendship over the many years.

I would also like to thank my brothers, John, Ross, and Brian, whose many talents and interests and possibilities for the future inspire me and continuously remind me that there is much more to life than graduate school. Thanks for the music, the humor, and all the great stories. Here's to all of us as we go "flying into the clouds."

Finally, my greatest debt is to my parents, John and Lyla. For as long as I can remember you have encouraged me to pursue my dreams with passion, and you have made many sacrifices to help make that possible. Thanks for the phone calls, the visits, the dinners at Maxwell's, and, of course, all the laughs. With love and appreciation, this dissertation is dedicated to you.
Table of Contents

Abstract .............................................. ii
Acknowledgments ................................. iv
List of Figures ................................. viii

INTRODUCTION ....................................... 1

CHAPTER I:
Coal Miner’s Day ............................. 12

CHAPTER II:
Conflicts and Controversies:
The Montgomery County School Board ......... 25

CHAPTER III:
Community Organizations ................. 57

CHAPTER IV:
Drawing Between the Lines:
Conversations with High School Students ....... 76

CHAPTER V:
The Politics of Identity ...................... 108

References ....................................... 145
**List of Figures**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.1</td>
<td>Map of Montgomery County</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1.2</td>
<td>Demographic Information for Montgomery County, Virginia</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.1</td>
<td>Focus 2006 Task Force #4: Equity, Diversity, and Multicultural Education</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2.2</td>
<td>Montgomery County Public Schools: Goals</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.1</td>
<td>Coalition for Community: Mission Statement and Goals</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.2</td>
<td>Coalition for Community Action Plan: Objectives for 1994-5</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3.3</td>
<td>Organizations Represented on the Human Relations Council</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4.1</td>
<td>Summary of Social Categories and Their Characteristics, as Identified by BHS Students</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5.1</td>
<td>Terms Used to Characterize Polarized Groups</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Diversity is a growing concern among scholars, educators, community leaders, and policy makers everywhere.¹ Judith Hanna notes that the term is appropriated by a variety of people with a range of purposes:

American society uses the term diversity to refer to ethnic, cultural, racial, and gender groups, to multiculturalism and pluralism, to preferential treatment and quotas, and to other political agendas. Programs and activities are planned and implemented, articles and textbooks are written, bibliographies are prepared, discussions are held, and attention is given to the special problems of minority children.²

Most studies of diversity have focused on urban areas, where increasing concentrations of immigrants and ethnic minorities pose new challenges for communication and cooperation across differences in language, interests, values, and lifestyles.³ More rural areas like Montgomery County, Virginia, with populations that are ethnically homogenous relative to urban areas, are presumed to be immune to issues of diversity. Nevertheless, there are differences among people in Montgomery County which present challenges for communication and cooperation similar to those encountered among ethnically diverse populations. These differences, which include profession, level of education, and geographic location, are reflected in people’s language, interests, values, and lifestyles just as ethnic differences often are. Examining the issues that surround

²Hanna, 1994, p. 66.
³e.g. Weis & Fine, 1993.
these differences within a predominately white community reveals some of the subtle issues that underlie efforts to "value diversity." For that reason, this study has been an inquiry into the meaning of "diversity" in this southwestern Virginia county.

Methodology

Because my interest has been to understand how people make sense of themselves, others, and the issues that divide and unite us, I chose an ethnographic approach. Instead of using surveys and other instruments, I have gathered data through systematic observation and participation, supplemented by interviews and readings. As Sara Delamont writes,

The central method of ethnography is observation, with the observer immersing himself/herself in the “new culture.” Ethnographies involve the presence of an observer (or observers) for prolonged periods in a single or a small number of settings. During that time the researcher not only observes, but also talks with participants; significantly, the ethnographer calls them informants, rather than subjects.\(^4\)

I began by attending as many community events as I could, in hopes of gaining a broader perspective on the county and its residents. With this objective, I found myself at all sorts of places: Coal Miner’s Day, high school theater productions and football games, a church-sponsored discussion group, annual town festivals, and debates between candidates for public office. Even yard sales became opportunities for exploring the county and stopping in unfamiliar neighborhoods, in addition to bargain-hunting. I attended school board meetings regularly, and Board of Supervisor meetings on occasion, becoming familiar with the issues facing the county and getting acquainted with some of the community leaders. I joined a local organization, the Coalition for Community, in August, 1993, and as an offshoot of my involvement with that group I was invited to

\(^4\)Delamont, 1992, p. 6.
participate a year later in the organization of a more political group, Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens. At one point I enrolled in a mini-course offered by the YMCA to refresh my understanding of local history. Through all of this I recorded my observations and reflections on how people defined themselves and each other, both explicitly and implicitly. I was especially interested in issues which sparked controversy, since people tend to define themselves around conflict.

Another source of information has been documents produced for public dissemination. For instance, from two local newspapers I have collected hundreds of articles, editorials, and letters to the editor addressing relevant topics. Formal mission statements and plans of operation have provided information about specific organizations and their purposes; in addition, a high school yearbook, memos, brochures, and so on have all contributed to my understanding of people’s roles and positions in the community conversation while also providing additional perspectives on events and situations.

Finally, I interviewed ten students from Blacksburg High School to learn their accounts of social categories among their peers. Interviews provide opportunities to ask informants to elaborate on their views and interpretations, and to test emerging models or theories. As Charles Briggs suggests, however, interviews must themselves be considered as social communicative events, not as opportunities for interviewees to reveal their “real” views or feelings:

Interviews are cooperative products of interactions between two or more persons who assume different roles and who frequently come from contrasting social, cultural, and/or linguistic backgrounds. A mode of analysis that envisions interview data as, even ideally, a direct outpouring of the interviewees’ thoughts

---

5The philosophies and activities of both these organizations will be discussed in Chapter III.
7Ibid.
or attitudes obscures the nature of the interview as a social interaction and a communicative event. Such a perspective also misses the point that the interview situation itself is a rich source of data if it is viewed as an object of analysis as well as a research tool.\footnote{Briggs, 1986, p. 102.}

While it is not possible (nor necessarily desirable) to eliminate the effects of the researcher on the interview, it is desirable (and possible) to avoid imposing the researcher's vocabulary and frame of reference on the interviewee.\footnote{Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Briggs, 1986.} For this reason, my interviews were open-ended: I constructed lists of topics to address, but the format was flexible. This allowed people to speak at length, to define important issues, and to talk about them in their own terms.\footnote{Briggs, 1986.}

In soliciting student participation, I followed a method Delamont refers to as "snowballing"\footnote{Delamont, 1989.}: I began with the children of my own friends and acquaintances, as well as students I met at community events, who then put me in contact with their friends, and so on. These interviews addressed issues around students' perceptions of social categories in the school and community, relations among those groups, and the role of the school and other institutions in maintaining or changing those relations.\footnote{Throughout this work, pseudonyms have been used to mask the identities of all informants.}

Fundamental to ethnographic research is the recognition that "there is no way in which we can escape the social world in order to study it; nor, fortunately, is that necessary. ...we [cannot] avoid having an effect on the social phenomena we study."\footnote{Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 15.} Instead of attempting to avoid affecting the situations observed or to attain some state of "neutrality" from which to interpret, the ethnographer attempts to be reflexively aware of how his or her presence and non-neutrality affects the phenomena observed.\footnote{Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983.} Penelope Eckert comments that "my responsibility as an ethnographer was not to forget my own

\footnote{Briggs, 1986, p. 102.}

\footnote{Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Briggs, 1986.}

\footnote{Briggs, 1986.}

\footnote{Delamont, 1989.}

\footnote{Throughout this work, pseudonyms have been used to mask the identities of all informants.}

\footnote{Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 15.}

\footnote{Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983.}
story, but to know it well and to refer to it constantly to make sure that it was not blinding me to what I saw or focusing my attention on only some of what I saw.”

One way that my own positioning has affected this study concerns the accessibility of certain conversations over others. I am not native to this area, and as a graduate student, my residence here is temporary. University affiliation and the transience it typically implies positions me as an outsider to many local conversations from the start. Furthermore, I live in town, so my casual contacts tend to be with other town residents. While I know many people who live in rural areas of the county, I met them through our common interests -- and none of them is native to this area either. And although it has been close to eleven years since I moved to this county, I do not personally know anybody directly connected with farming in this area; in fact, I know very few people who are native to southwestern Virginia. This is ironic, considering that throughout my time here my primary social circle has not been centered on the university, but around old-time music and dance, which is the traditional form of music and dance of the southern Appalachian region. Rather than pretend to have a “balanced” or “neutral” view of this community, I acknowledge at the outset that my access to a substantial part of the population is limited by my own positioning. In doing so, these limits and boundaries themselves become part of my data: that is, my experiences exemplify how particular differences among people in this county serve as barriers to interaction.

Before explaining the organization of this work, I continue this discussion of personal positioning from a different angle. To orient the reader to my basic interpretive framework, the next section introduces some of the themes I will return to later in making sense of my data.

---

15Eckert, 1989, p. 27.
Theoretical Framework

This research is embedded in a framework that values participatory democracy. While there are numerous definitions of democracy, the model I find most useful depicts democracy as a conversation. John Dewey, a prominent American philosopher and proponent of this model, wrote that “A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience.” Thus, the ideal democracy is conceived of as a conversation which is accessible to all. In establishing the standards for democratic conversations, Dewey asks: “How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?” In other words, participants in a democratic conversation must have enough in common to make communication possible, and enough differences to make it worthwhile.

Dewey defined communication as “a process of sharing experience till it becomes a common possession.” He observed further that “there is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men [and women] live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common, and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common.” Conflict, however, is also a necessary part of community and communication. Jesse Goodman notes that “a strong sense of community is not achieved through the homogeneous consensus of its members. To the contrary, democratic participation increases as residents confront ways to improve conditions in their immediate environment, often causing social discord in the process.” Moreover, conflict can be creative in the context of democratic dialogue:

16 e.g. Goodman, 1992; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986; Gutmann, 1987; Bachrach & Botwinick, 1992; Benne, 1990.
18Ibid., p. 83.
19Ibid., p. 9.
20Ibid., p. 4.
"To understand democracy, the process of creation that comes out of the confrontation of conflicting viewpoints and out of the dialogic search for a common view needs to be emphasized."\textsuperscript{22}

For the individual, the benefits of participating in the ongoing conversation are twofold. First, participants get to contribute to the construction of their shared world by expressing their views, making decisions, and carrying out actions.\textsuperscript{23} Second, listening to others provides the opportunity to expand the horizons of one's own experience, enhancing understanding of self as well as others.\textsuperscript{24} Peter Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick expand on this educative function of participation: "Through learning to communicate and reflect and engage in dialogue, and to act in concert with others, participants acquire the capacity to become reliably and realistically aware of what their political interests are."\textsuperscript{25}

In practice, a number of social conditions complicate the actualization of this model. One is that what constitutes the conversation is not clearly defined, nor are its rules universally known. More to the point, this "conversation" is actually a collage of multiple, fragmented interactions, which differ in terms of accessibility (who is present? who can speak? what can be said?), mobilization (will the views expressed in this conversation be reproduced elsewhere?), and impact (what will be the consequences of this conversation?).

Again, these concerns are not trivial, especially considering how power shapes interactions, potentially resulting in the systematic exclusion of particular individuals or groups from participating. Cleo Cherryholmes defines power as "relations among individuals or groups based on social, political, and material asymmetries by which some

\textsuperscript{22}Benne, 1990, p. 39.
\textsuperscript{23}Bachrach and Botwinick, 1992; Goodman, 1992; Benne, 1990.
\textsuperscript{24}Kimball and Garrison, in press.
\textsuperscript{25}Bachrach and Botwinick, 1992, p. 11.
people are indulged and rewarded and others negatively sanctioned and deprived. These asymmetries are based on differences in possessions or characteristics, and power is constituted by relationships among those differences.26 Any analysis of democratic conversations, which value the inclusion of diverse voices, must attend to the historic workings of power in and through the community. Some contend that in a racist, sexist, classist society the unjust power arrangements distort communication such that democratic conversation is impossible.27 A more hopeful view is that although the conversation is inevitably imperfect, it is an arena for contesting injustices and educating its participants.28 From this point of view, “the best antidote to the shortcomings of participation is still more participation.”29

Focusing on power solely as an oppressive force casts a negative light on the existence of differences among people. But, as noted earlier, differences are essential to the creative capacity of democratic association. Even more fundamentally, assertion of difference is necessary for defining the Self.30 Carol Gilligan calls this one of the “paradoxical truths of human experience -- that we know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationship only insofar as we differentiate other from self.”31 However, since power arrangements tend to define norms, the creative capacity of difference is often overlooked. That is, when the standards of the dominant cultural group define what is “normal,” those who differ are likely to be marginalized on the basis of their “deviance” rather than valued as a source of new perspectives and knowledge for working toward solutions to shared problems.

26Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 5, italics in original.
29Bachrach and Botwinick, 1992, p. 29.
30Kimball & Garrison, in press.
One of the aims of multiculturalism has been to provide alternatives to the accepted norms of the dominant culture, sensitizing people to the ways they contribute to the marginalization of others, and possibly themselves.\textsuperscript{32} Jody Cohen points out that "multicultural education has been interpreted as assimilating students of color into the mainstream; improving intergroup relations; studying discrete cultural groups; promoting reform so that school programs reflect cultural diversity; and preparing students to challenge structural inequity."\textsuperscript{33} Inherent in each of these interpretations is a danger, however: that of essentializing "culture" as a definable, absolute descriptor.\textsuperscript{34} Treating cultures as fixed categories can become a tool of dominance\textsuperscript{35} and even disempowerment, in the sense that categorizing people leaves them less opportunity to define themselves. This is an ironic twist, considering the intent of multiculturalism.

A related problem with multiculturalism occurs when the meaning of culture is limited to race and nationality. As I will show in this work, people can be marginalized on the basis of countless other features by which they differ from the norms of the dominant group. This marginalization occurs in schools, both social and academically, and also in public settings where some groups report feeling less powerful than others. Furthermore, I argue that these non-racial differences are overlooked in the literature on multiculturalism, and in other conversations on diversity.

**Organization of this Work**

In writing about this research, I have attempted to address two audiences: the academic community and the local community I have studied. Margaret Buchman describes the dilemmas this situation creates about how to write:

\textsuperscript{32}Ogbu, 1992.
\textsuperscript{33}Cohen, 1993, p. 290.
\textsuperscript{34}Greene, 1993; Levine, 1993; McCarthy, 1993.
\textsuperscript{35}Kimball & Garrison, in press.
In the social sciences, researchers are caught in a crossfire of norms and expectations. They have to convince fellow researchers of their soundness while also achieving some communication with the public, for people rightly think that they ought to be posted on discoveries concerning their everyday lives -- the source of the researchers’ data and the (often mishandled) object of attempts at improvement. The technical language of research is not the language of everyday life, however; it serves to communicate specialized meanings in arguments that can be subtle and difficult.36

Since my research has been driven by experiences of the community, it is important that products of the study are accessible to any interested members of the community; therefore, I have written the first four chapters in a narrative style rather than following the more typical academic practice of embedding my observations in literature. This is not merely a matter of personal style, because choices about how to write are fraught with political implications. Margaret Marshall and Loren Barritt write:

...the separation of one group to study other groups creates a hierarchy that operates to make one dominant over the other. Those who study get to say how things are. Researchers have the data whereas practitioners are left with their opinions. This hierarchy and separation is reinforced by the pretension that the writing of research is not an act of persuasion, and that writers are free from the responsibility of considering the implications of their arguments and of the authority they claim.37

Saying “how things are” is inherent in any act of writing. To acknowledge that aspect of my role as author, I have made no attempt to remove myself from the narratives of the first four chapters.

Chapter I describes the first annual Coal Miner’s Day, a commemorative event held in the rural community of McCoy. I use this event as a point of entry into this discussion because it raised many questions regarding the meaning of diversity that later

became significant issues. Chapter I also provides a brief introduction to Montgomery County.

Chapter II considers some of the conflicts and issues confronted by the county school board between 1992 and 1994. In Montgomery County, there are seven election districts, and each one elects a representative for the Board of Supervisors. The school board members are appointed by the supervisors, with one member representing each of the seven districts, plus one member from each of the towns of Christiansburg and Blacksburg. This selection method will soon be changed to an election process, partly because of a state-wide trend toward elected school boards, and partly because the school board itself has recently become a target of hostility throughout the county. In Chapter II, I describe some of the issues that have contributed to the school board controversies, and examine how people define themselves around those issues. In Chapter III, I discuss three organizations which developed out of controversial events and issues involving tolerance for "differences," and explore how those organizations have defined diversity. For another perspective on the community, the accounts of high school students I have interviewed appear in Chapter IV. In Chapter V, I revisit each of these discussions as well as existing literature on democracy and multiculturalism in order to draw conclusions and offer an alternative perspective on defining diversity.
Chapter I
Coal Miner's Day

Come listen, you fellows, so young and so fine,
And seek not your fortune in the dark, dreary mine.
It'll form as a habit, and creep in your soul
Till the stream of your blood runs as black as the coal

Where it's dark as a dungeon, and damp as the dew,
Where the danger is double, and the pleasures are few
Where the rain never falls, and the sun never shines,
Where it's dark as a dungeon, way down in the mines.

- Merle Travis

It was around 1:15 on a sunny April Saturday when I headed to McCoy for Coal Miner's Day. The air was warm by then, and the morning fog had long since lifted. I drove past campus and over the highway, passing apartment complexes and grocery stores. Traffic typically thins out and speeds up once you get past the last student apartment complex, and the road narrows to two lanes as it winds toward the community of Prices Fork. There isn't much to Prices Fork these days, at least for someone just driving through: there's the elementary school on the left, and on the right is a church and the ugly green Grange Hall where my dance troupe used to practice years ago. At the A & J Quick Stop I veered right, heading down the road to McCoy.

Most university people seem to know McCoy, if they know it at all, as a place to go tubing on the river. College students hang out at the “New River Junction” a lot in the late spring, escaping the pressures of exams by drinking beer on the boulders surrounded by swirling waters. Every once in a while you hear about someone drowning out there. The water might be shallow enough to wade out to the big rocks, but if you fall asleep in the
water might be shallow enough to wade out to the big rocks, but if you fall asleep in the sunshine like a lot of people do, you might not notice that the dam has been let out upstream, making the current too strong for most people to swim back against. I've only been there during the summer once, paying my $4 to float lazily downstream in a big black truck inner tube. I prefer the more secluded stretch of the river several miles downstream which some friends showed me years ago, where there are sandy beaches instead of rocks, and the water is deep and predictable enough for swimming.

But on that April morning, any part of the river would have been far too cold to swim in. I was headed instead for the McCoy Ballpark to see what the newspapers had announced as an event commemorating the local coal miners. It surprised me to hear that there had been mines so close by; I'd thought the closest mines were in West Virginia, or in parts of Virginia farther southwest than Montgomery County. I confess, I liked the idea of living near coal mines -- probably part of my romanticized images of Appalachia. I wondered if there were any visible remains of the mines today, racking my brain to remember where I'd seen some old abandoned shafts. Was that around here, or on a trip through Kentucky?

Signs along the road warned of a bicycle race ahead, slowing traffic to half its usual speed. That suited me just fine, since I wanted a chance to look around for a change. Bold splashes of redbud lined the road declaring spring, while dogwoods floated delicately deeper in the woods. The green was still tentative, as if aware that we could still be hit with another snow storm before warm days like this one became common. Now and then the woods on either side of the road were broken by rocky pastures populated by horses or cows. Small houses dotted the roadside too, some in the old Appalachian style, but more in the newer brick rambler style. John Hiatt's passionate voice was loud on my speakers. "Come on baby, drive south," he sang, egging on that
adventuring spirit that seems to wake up whenever the seasons change. I could have
driven all day.

I didn’t know where the ballpark was, but figured it would be obvious when I got
there, and it was. A sheriff ushered cars up a gravel road and into a fenced field. Armed
with my big, clunky camera case -- the one big enough for a steno pad to fit in the side
pocket -- I followed a group of people across a neatly kept yard and into a fenced field,
heading toward a big blue and white tent. Now this is field work, I smiled to myself:
sunny, 70°, a light breeze... A bluegrass band was playing under the big tent, and there
was almost a festival-like atmosphere. Noticing everyone had a nametag on, I walked
over to a little tent to “sign in.” There wasn’t any admission charge, but they seemed to
want to know who was there. There was one tag for miners, a different color for miners’
wives and widows, and yet another color for visitors.

I wandered over to the tent and tried to listen uncritically to the band. A big
woman was bellowing some bluegrass gospel tune. A few people were seated in the rows
of folding chairs under the tent, and others were soaking up the sunshine on the periphery
-- that’s where I wanted to be. A young woman sitting by herself on the ground looked
like she might be an “outsider” like myself; as I wondered if she was also there for
research, I wondered what made me think so, too. Two old black women sat down in the
folding chairs near us and exchanged pleasantries about the weather, or something. One
asked to see a program. By then the young woman and I had both moved into the shade a
little, concerned about our cameras. She asked what brought me there, and I said
something vague about being interested in the community. It turned out that I had
guessed right about her: she was there on assignment, taking pictures for a local history
display for Special Collections at Virginia Tech’s Newman Library. We chatted off and
on as we waited for what seemed to be a very long time for the officials to get the
program underway.
Finally the "official program" began with a trumpet rendition of the Star Spangled Banner, followed by the Pledge, and then endless speakers. All the people who took a turn at the microphone seemed to try to outdo the rest with their praise for this community effort, all done without government involvement. A tall man in a cowboy hat sang "Dark as a Dungeon" to the tune of "Sweet Betsy from Pike" in a deep, strong voice, then followed it with "16 Tons" -- a moving, melancholy mining tune. I stole glances at the miners, who had been assembled in the chairs to my left (their wives and widows were across the aisle), but their faces seemed expressionless throughout. I wondered what they thought of all this.

The keynote address was given by Dr. Michael Karmis, from the Mining Engineering Department at Virginia Tech. His speech was all about the history of mining in the area, delivered in a thick foreign accent (again, I wondered what the miners thought of this!) Apparently coal mines existed in this county as far back as the Revolutionary War. Coal became an important part of the region's economy with the development of the railroad, providing the main source of employment until the Arsenal opened in 1940. The mines began closing in 1936, and the last deep mines, in Wake Forest, closed in 1971. (I was surprised to hear that mining is safer today than many other occupations, including wholesale retailing!) The speech was interesting, but it did seem to go on forever. A couple of the miners left, no doubt uncomfortable after 1 1/2 hours on those unforgiving metal chairs. Dr. Karmis was followed by Dr. Betty Fine, the head of Appalachian Studies at Tech, who read "Only a Miner," which she described as the "national anthem of a miner":

The hard-working miners, their dangers are great,
Many while mining have met their sad fate,
While doing their duties as miners all do,
Shut out from the daylight and their darling ones, too.
(chorus)
He’s only a miner been killed in the ground,
Only a miner and one more is found,
Killed by an accident, no one can tell,
His mining’s all over, poor miner farewell.

He leaves his dear wife and little ones, too,
To earn them a living as miners all do,
While he was working for those whom he loved,
He met a sad fate from a boulder above.

With a heart full of sorrow we bid him farewell,
How soon we may follow there’s no one can tell,
God pity the miners, protect them as well,
And shield them from danger while down in the ground.¹

My mind wandered during all this, as I looked around and tried to make sense of it all. I guess that’s what all the speakers were doing too, making sense of the event from their particular perspectives. Dr. Karmis interpreted it in terms of the economic contributions coal mining has made to the region, and the evolution of mining technology. For Dr. Fine the day seemed to be a nostalgic celebration of the past. The life of a miner in the poem she read was simple, wholesome, and heroic; the miner was an icon of the rugged, independent Appalachian mountaineer. Ira Long and Larry Linkous, two members of the county Board of Supervisors, probably saw Coal Miner’s Day as a public appearance; they came in suits and ties, emphatically praising the committee for organizing the event and raising funds without help from the government. But in addition to being local politicians, both Long and Linkous have direct connections with the mining community: Long was a miner in his youth, and Linkous “comes from a

¹Green, 1972, p. 67.
long line of miners."² They must have felt some personal pride in this -- their own -- community, in addition to their more official public roles. Robert Fries, the newspaper reporter, spoke about Coal Miner's Day as the realization of a vision. The event had been inspired by a series of articles on the history of local coal mining Fries had written several months earlier, where he had mentioned the idea of having a day to memorialize the miners. Reflecting on all this in a later article, Fries wrote "...I had no way of anticipating the smoldering memories about mining held by so many. Nor could I have guessed how that story and later articles would relight the fuse. There's been -- as the miners say -- fire in the hole since then."³ Then there were the people in the audience. The photographer next to me was there as part of her job. I guess I was too, though my "job" as ethnographer was less defined and less directed than hers seemed to be. She was recording the event for the library archives, freezing each scene as she saw it through her lens; I was trying to understand something nebulous about the people of this community, listening as the scene shifted and changed with each moment for each person. And what about the miners themselves? Dozens of men sat in rows, dressed in suits or overalls, leaning on canes or sitting back in their chairs, staring ahead with ancient eyes. Were they remembering the sounds and smells of the mines? Did they think about friends who died in the explosions, or others no longer with them? What did they think of the people who would have them be heroes for the work that they once did to earn a living?

I left the big tent as the relatives of deceased miners began lining up to put flowers in the memorial wreath that would be placed at the new monument. I walked over to the "Exhibits" and "Items for Sale" area. A few T-shirts were left on the long wooden tables, along with an assortment of mining Christmas decorations, photographs,

and trinkets. I went inside a small building where artifacts and photographs told stories of mining life just 50 years ago. A teenage girl sat behind one table, chatting with people and selling an assortment of prints and booklets depicting local mining history. When she told me that she lived in Wake Forest and attended Blacksburg High School, I wished I were comfortable enough in my role as researcher to ask if I could interview her. But she did offer to call me if she could find one more copy of a particular book I’d seen others with, and I hoped by then I’d learn the logistics of consent forms and meeting places.

I headed back across the field to my car, feeling saturated. Even so, out of curiosity I took a few minutes to drive into Wake Forest, which was a black mining community I’d never heard of before that day. It was a pretty road, lined with small, old houses and two churches. I turned around at the end of the road, waving again to an old black man talking with a younger white man on the corner as I passed. Another John Hiatt tune came up on my tape deck, with a line just too compelling to ignore in light of the day’s events:

You ask how we got here, baby,
Don’t ask how,
‘Cause that was sometime other than now.

Okay, I thought. But even if I don’t ask how we got here, there are still two rich questions left: who are “we,” and where is “here”?  

My day was not over yet. I didn’t know it at the time, but I would eventually find myself trying to learn country 2-steps in a bar full of people in boots and cowboy hats -- in the local Marriott, of all places. (Was this still participant observation, or had I “gone native”? ) But in the meantime I had another obligation. Getting home with only two minutes to spare, I quickly changed into a blue calico dress and scrambled to find my leather shoes and water bottle. Moments later five others arrived at my house, the other
women also in calico and the men in baggy jeans and plaid shirts. None of us is native to this area, but together we make up the Hoorah Cloggers, the only dance group in the region dedicated to preserving traditional Appalachian dance. We were performing that night at Mountain Lake, a beautiful resort a few miles out of town (which is now best known for portraying a vacation spot in the Catskills in the movie *Dirty Dancing*) for a group of psychiatrists attending a conference called “Free the Fat Child.” The irony of it all was just too much. All day I’d played the role of the ethnographer, looking in from the outside -- yet there I was that evening, playing an equally familiar role, representing a bit of Appalachian folk culture to people from around the country.

*So what is diversity, and where do you go to find it?*

***

Most people agree that Montgomery County, stretched across the high central plateau of the Allegheny Mountains in Southwestern Virginia, is a beautiful place to live. It’s hard to find a spot here without a view of the surrounding mountains in at least one direction. Nearly forty percent of the county’s land mass is farmland, with livestock (mainly beef and dairy cattle) and forage production as the main sources of farming income.4 Interstate 81 cuts through the southern portion of the county, and state highway 460 runs east and west (see Figure 1.1). Commercial strips have sprung up predictably around the interchanges of the interstate and all along the business route of 460; even the “bypass” is now dotted with traffic lights. If you want to avoid the highways, though, you can find windy back roads to get you almost anywhere; and as long as you don’t get lost, taking those back roads can even save you time compared with the crowded business routes.

---

I live in the northern end of the county in Blacksburg, a small town now intimately tied to its university, Virginia Tech. This is a town that changes drastically with the seasons -- not only in its climate and scenery, but also in its mood. Summers are relaxed; the pace seems to slow to the style of a stereotypical southern town. With the start of the fall semester, though, the population swells. Traffic is denser, lines are longer, and although it would be stretching it to say this town is ever frenzied, the energy here definitely changes when school is in session.

About eight miles south of Blacksburg, via Route 460, lies Christiansburg, the county seat. Walking down Main Street, it is easy to imagine this town as the vibrant community it once was: the broad sidewalks could easily accommodate throngs of people visiting the post office at the top of the gentle hill and the shops, restaurants, and churches that line the street. But in the past ten or fifteen years, the development of strip malls along the outskirts of town has drained the downtown boutiques, forcing some out of business and enticing others to relocate in the more heavily trafficked malls. The town's character suffered another blow in the 1980's, when the old courthouse, built in the late 1800's, was torn down and replaced with a 7-story yellow brick box. Just recently, some neglected buildings on another block were razed, making room for a new asphalt parking lot. But the hills surrounding the old commercial district are still graced with huge old southern houses whose turrets, towers, and wrap-around porches take full advantage of the panoramic views.

Heading southwest from Christiansburg, Route 8 intersects with I-81 then winds through several miles of farmland to Riner. In the other direction is the larger community of Shawsville. Both these towns are growing, though this growth -- consisting mainly of trailer parks and housing subdivisions -- is not necessarily welcomed by the long-time residents. Living in Blacksburg, though, it is easy to be entirely isolated from the events and concerns of these other communities, especially Riner and
Shawsville. In fact, many Blacksburg residents know Christiansburg only as the closest access to I-81. And I wouldn’t be surprised if there were people in the county who think of Blacksburg as synonymous with Virginia Tech.

Montgomery County, like most communities, is a place where diverse cultures come together, conflict, merge, and resist each other. But those who look for this diversity in skin color are not likely to find it. According to the 1990 census, 92% of the 73,913 people in Montgomery County are categorized as white. Roughly 4% are identified as black, 4% as Asian, and 1% as Hispanic (see Figure 1.2). Furthermore, most of these racial minorities live in Blacksburg, and are associated with the University. Even so, “diversity” comes up as an issue in all sorts of community contexts. The Board of Supervisors established the Council of Human Relations, for instance, specifically to foster more harmonious relations among diverse groups. A similar goal is prominent in Focus 2006, the county’s long-term vision for school improvement. And grassroots organizations have formed in response to polarizing issues that have seemed to threaten diversity in the region.

To try to understand the issues around diversity that are relevant in this area I have spent roughly 18 months exploring the community, participating in the public conversation, watching events unfold, and listening as people make sense of them. Not surprisingly, I’ve learned a lot about the community through all of this. But in the process I have also come to understand more about the politics of naming the differences that comprise “diversity.” Many of the issues that have become important in this research can actually be seen in the event commemorating coal miners which I described earlier. To be honest, as I headed across town on that sunny April Saturday, I wasn’t sure that I should be spending an entire afternoon in McCoy. Could this “community event” reveal something about the county that I didn’t know before? Or could it be that these people, retired coal miners and their families, are part of this region’s “diversity”? Then
POPULATION (1990)

Town of Blacksburg 34,590*
Town of Christiansburg 15,004
Unincorporated area of county 24,319
TOTAL for Montgomery County 73,913

*In the 1992-3 academic year, Virginia Tech enrolled 23,637 students. The population figure for Blacksburg includes students living both on and off campus.

RACIAL DISTRIBUTION (1990)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Montgomery County</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SUMMARY OF INCOME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Montgomery County</th>
<th>Virginia</th>
<th>United States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per Capita</td>
<td>$10,979</td>
<td>$15,713</td>
<td>$14,420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Family</td>
<td>32,128</td>
<td>38,213</td>
<td>35,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household</td>
<td>22,949</td>
<td>33,328</td>
<td>30,056</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FIGURE 1.2:
DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION FOR MONTGOMERY COUNTY, VIRGINIA
again, maybe I would find out what these long time residents of the area thought about “diversity.” What is diversity in a county where the population is 92% “white”? What is a meaningful way to talk about diversity when it’s clear that subjects are “members” of multiple categories, and speak for or identify with multiple groups? University professors speak passionately about the history and culture of Appalachian mining, while retired miners listen; locally elected officials speak as county Supervisors, but also as community members with personal histories with mining; transplants like myself are dedicated to “preserving” a culture that was never ours. And who am I to study “diversity”? In McCoy, I am the different one, the outsider; at Mountain Lake I’m the object of observation; with the photographer from the library I fumble over how to define myself (researcher? citizen? tourist?); and when talking with the high school student selling books, I am unsure of research protocol.

These are some of the questions that fueled my inquiry as I listened to others talk about diversity and work through other community issues. Coal Miner’s Day set examiners apart from other county residents, somehow celebrating their unique heritage while at the same time remembering the tragedy of the mining lifestyle. But neither miners nor other long-time rural residents like farmers are considered a category of “difference” when it comes to “valuing diversity,” even though, as the next chapter shows, conflicts in this county tend to divide people along lines of profession, geographic location, and place of origin.
Chapter II
Conflicts and Controversies:
The Montgomery County School Board

Public school policy is one topic that affects the county as a whole, and as the largest expenditure item (76% of the county's 1991-92 budget) interest in education is compounded. This chapter looks at some of the activities of the school board between 1992 and 1994, to see how people define themselves and their interests in the face of controversial issues.

The date is February 1, 1994. Speeding from Blacksburg, running on fumes, with an inspection sticker that expired today, I try a short cut to the Administrative Building, get lost, and end up in the packed parking lot fifteen minutes late, vowing that I will learn the streets of Christiansburg soon. Cars are everywhere! I have to park on the street, along with quite a few other vehicles. Inside, there is standing room only -- a scene completely different from the last School Board meeting I attended, when only a handful of people was here to watch.

As I make my way over to an empty spot against the side wall, a man is introducing the seniors of the month. Every month, one senior from each of the four county high schools is named for this award; they all get plaques, and their portraits hang in the School Board meeting room for the rest of the school year. The young woman being introduced now has a lengthy list of accomplishments: she's been recognized for academic achievements, athletic involvement, and community service, in addition to participating in the science club, the school band and choral groups, etc. I am reminded of Penelope Eckert's book Jocks and Burnouts, a study of high school social categories where she argues that the political climate of schools influences how students participate
in school-related activities.\textsuperscript{1} These seniors here tonight are the epitome of the system’s winners.

It looks like a lot of parents are here, and perhaps some younger siblings of the students being honored. Someone at the front of the room announces a ten minute break so that the seniors of the month can go meet the Board members, prompting a mass migration of fresh faces, all dressed up in suits and ties, dresses and heels. The room, an English basement of the Administration building, seems to have been designed with much smaller crowds in mind. The board members, superintendent, and assistant superintendents sit in a horseshoe pattern at the front of the room, with five on each side facing each other and the chair and vice chair at the head facing the audience. Rows of metal chairs, with an aisle down the middle, offer a poor view of the meeting. And for those who have to stand off to the right, the view is limited further by four painted support columns. All the board members have microphones, but for the most part they either don’t talk into them or the volume is too low for the audience to hear consistently.

The art work on the walls near where I have planted myself is from Falling Branch and Belview Elementary schools. There are masterpieces of curled paper strips glued in geometric patterns to construction paper backings; a paper plate is painted colorfully, presumably to look like an “Indian.” At the front, I can see decorated bags in front of each of the Board members’ seats. It’s warm in here; I contemplate going to hang up my coat across the room, but inertia wins and I let it flop over my bookbag instead. Most people are dressed up -- suits and ties for the men, dresses for the women. I feel underdressed and feel a bit conspicuous. (But I guess if being conspicuous really bothered me I’d have to worry about my constant scribbling on the steno pad before getting too concerned about my rumpled pants and casual sweater.)

\textsuperscript{1}Eckert, 1989.
It's 8:05, and the meeting is resuming, but the commotion of people bundling up at the back of the room getting ready to leave makes it hard to hear anything. I have taken a seat in the back row, vacated by one of the Seniors and her parents. Someone is at the podium now, explaining the presence of the little bags on the Board members' tables: they have been placed there by the Elementary Council in honor of National School Board Appreciation Week. The spokeswoman thanks the Board members for the "windows of opportunity" they have created by providing a counselor at each elementary school, and explains that the glue they'll find in their bags symbolizes how counselors promote the idea that "if we all stick together like glue, all children will learn." I wonder what else could be in those bags.

The Public Address session is next. Only one person has signed up to speak, and he introduces himself as a resident of Blacksburg and the president of the Jewish Community Center. He requests that the 1994-95 school year not start the day after Labor Day as it usually does, since that day will be Rosh Hashanah, one of the most important Jewish holidays. Noting that this happens only once every twenty years, he asks instead that school start one day later, or before Labor Day if the General Assembly permits.² He also requests that snow make-up days not be scheduled for Saturdays.

As the meeting progresses, it becomes clear that in addition to the lack of visibility and the poor sound quality, the people in the audience are disadvantaged in that they do not have the documents the board discusses -- so we are left to piece together whatever clues we can pick up. It seems the bills have been paid without discussion, and as far as I can tell we've jumped over the items about the minutes and cancellation of checks. Somebody is reading a statement recognizing February 14th through 19th as

---
²The Virginia General Assembly has declared that school may not start before Labor Day, apparently in deference to the state's beach resort and theme park lobby.
Vocational Education week ("Whereas the community benefits from the preparation of students... be it resolved that...")

Other topics come up. There is some discussion about a field trip request; apparently some group is going to Germany. A Board member wants to know about chaperones, and someone else is concerned that there are no funding provisions for people who can't afford the trip. Something referred to as "sick leave bank" is "approved on first reading" by roll call without discussion. Next the Board addresses Item 2/94-114, Mission/Vision, which someone wants to move from the "Information" level to "First reading." Somebody comments that the document in question "summarizes very clearly what we want to achieve in Montgomery County. ...[It is] well-stated..." The chair clarifies to the audience that the Board has discussed this document in detail in about eight 3-hour meetings, so it's not as if they are just approving something they have not discussed. Someone else comments that she is impressed with people's efforts to work with the 2006 project.

The big item is 2/94-115, a proposal for the new attendance lines that would affect Blacksburg elementary students next fall. A new elementary school is scheduled to open in September, and school catchment areas are being redrawn to balance the distribution of students. Ray Van Dyke, the new school's principal, balances big maps on easels, and sets up an overhead projector. He comments that one problem with this task is that they couldn't find a map that showed the details of both the county and the town. Currently, Prices Fork is the only school that serves only county students; Gilbert Linkous has mostly town students, plus the affluent neighborhood of Laurel Ridge; Harding Avenue includes Mt. Tabor and Woodbine, rural areas that are quickly being developed into middle-class housing subdivisions.

Finally, after that organized but lengthy presentation, a new speaker is up preparing to unveil his recommendations for making up days missed due to snow. So far
this winter’s snow and ice storms have downed power lines, interrupted the water supply, iced the roads, and, of course, closed schools far more days than the calendar committee ever anticipated. The man in charge of proposing changes to the remainder of this year’s calendar is explaining his efforts to be sensitive to three concerns: 1) not scheduling make-up days on Saturdays; 2) not losing all of Spring break; 3) setting a definite last day of school so that seniors can plan their graduation date.

As the speaker begins going through charts and tables showing the different configurations of hours and days that could be used to meet the mandated number of school days, my attention starts to wane. A couple of Board members are nitpicking about the plan for making up future missed days. The main concern seems to be that meeting the State’s minimum requirements amounts to a lowering of Montgomery County’s standards, since the County has always gone beyond the minimum. This drags on and on, and I can neither hear nor see. I get out the pile of quizzes I brought and grade them all, then plan tomorrow’s lesson. There is a lot of talking in the audience. At 9:55 I have completed every useful thing I can think of, and the argument is still going on up front. In fact, I hear someone say, “Would you start again and tell us what it is you are proposing?”

* * * * *

Although this meeting seemed pretty benign at the time, within a couple of months at least four of the issues brought up that night had escalated to heated debates. The newspapers were soon flooded with letters from angry parents who felt they had been overlooked in the process of redrawing the elementary school attendance lines. Focus 2006, the plan for school improvements to be accomplished by the year 2006, became controversial when it began to look as though it would become a dust collector on a shelf rather than a guide for action. Even honoring National School Board
Appreciation Week would have an ironic ring three months later, when a survey of school personnel by an outside consultant revealed extreme dissatisfaction with the School Board and Superintendent. The disagreement over how to make up for snow days was relatively short-lived, but there was heated discussion over when the next school year should begin -- before Labor Day, so that school wouldn’t extend far into June if we had another rough winter, or after Labor Day so that families’ traditional vacation plans could stay intact.

Actually, the surprise was in what did not turn out to be controversial: the request not to begin the school year on Rosh Hashanah and not to hold make-up days on Saturdays. A year earlier the community had erupted in an angry debate over religion and the schools -- a debate that left many thinking there was little support in this community for accommodating any non-Christian religions. The issue in that dispute wasn’t about prayer in schools or invocations at commencement or other topics that are being scrutinized nationwide, but rather the names of the school holidays. I will return to some of the other issues mentioned above, but first, the school holiday name battle deserves some elaboration.

Religious or Secular: (Re)naming School Holidays

I have often heard the dispute over the naming of holidays on school calendars referred to simply as “the school holiday name-thing.” That phrase, and at least half a dozen variations of it, is enough to evoke a reaction just about anywhere in this county, even now. In my circles, the reaction is usually either rolled eyes (I can’t believe that was even an issue) or a groan (I can’t believe that happened in this community). The few who respond with question marks on their faces usually get a brief explanation, something like this: The Christian Coalition demanded that school holidays be named “Christmas” and “Easter,” rather than “winter” and “spring,” sparking a controversy
that led to the resignation of the one Jewish School Board member, and lots of newspaper stories. That synopsis might be embellished with a bit of commentary: *It was scary.*

This incident happened almost two years ago now, in the winter of 1992-3, so perhaps it's not surprising that the story has been distilled into a one or two sentence sound-byte. But as with most human interactions, the complexities of the "holiday name issue" are lost in the shortened version of the story. I was not personally involved in this conflict as it unfolded, so I have had to reconstruct it based mainly on newspaper articles, commentaries, and letters to the editor from that time period, supplemented by conversations with people who were involved. I have tried to look for multiple perspectives of the story, but I have no illusions of "neutrality"; rather, as a resident of this county, positioned in particular conversations, I am privy to certain views and information while denied access to others. But getting the story "right" is only part of my aim here. More important, for the purposes of this study, is to trace how various people have defined themselves and others around this issue, and have claimed to speak for the "majority" or "minority" in the struggle to influence the county's policy.

First, a little background. Most accounts agree that this issue erupted in December, 1992, after a local newspaper reported that a school system elsewhere in the state had switched to secular names for school holidays. "County board will take ‘Christmas’ out of the schools," the headlines read.3 Under pressure from that community, the superintendent there postponed removing the words "Christmas" and "Easter" from holiday observances until a committee had studied the issue.4 Here in Montgomery County, school holidays have appeared on student calendars as "spring" for at least the past ten years, and "winter" for at least the past five. For public school employees, however, the terms "Christmas" and "Easter" were still being used in

---

3*News Messenger*, December 3, 1992, page 5; from Wire Reports.
4*News Messenger*, December 4, 1992, page 2; AP.
handbooks and calendars until the spring of 1992, when the School Board passed a resolution changing them to the secular names -- without controversy. That resolution was proposed by School Board member Dan Schneck, who is Jewish.

During the fall of 1992 a local chapter of Pat Robertson's national Christian Coalition was formed in this county. Local chapters of this group are grassroots organizations initiated by one or two community members with the goal of influencing public policy through political activism. The new Blacksburg chapter is usually credited with mobilizing the three hundred county residents who appeared at the Board of Supervisors meeting on December 14, 1992, demanding that school holidays be named according to the traditional Christian celebrations of Christmas and Easter. With little debate, the Board passed a resolution supporting the change, although it has no authority to determine school policy. The next day, Dan Schneck resigned from the School Board, reportedly because he felt that "the board's action was just the latest evidence that he doesn't have the support of the supervisors, the people or his School Board colleagues."

The School Board soon announced that its January 5 meeting would be held in the auditorium at Christiansburg High School, in anticipation of a large crowd. It was a wise move, as about nine hundred people showed up. The public address session was extended by thirty minutes, allowing time for the Board to hear from twenty of the thirty-nine people who had signed up to speak. Thirteen of those twenty spoke in favor of reverting to the Christian names, while seven supported the existing secular names. The next day, the local newspaper quoted several of the speakers:

---

6William H. Williams, "The damage is in the undoing." Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 1-3-93
7Greg Edwards, "Holiday-naming issue expected to top board agenda." Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 1-3-93.
“The people of Montgomery County insist the birth of Christ be recognized on the school calendar,” said Jim Sutphin, after leading the crowd in a prayer.

Bill Smith, pastor of the Midway Baptist Church in Ironto, said the school board’s removal of the names corresponds with an "unfounded interpretation" of the First Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. "I see all of our rights and freedoms being taken away by this misinterpretation," Smith said.

County school parent Terry Griffith said America’s Founding Fathers did their work with God in mind. “George Washington took his oath of office with his hand on the Bible,” Griffith said. “And I believe when the Supreme Court decided to take prayer out of the schools, they themselves acted unconstitutionally.

...Supporting the current policy, Blacksburg resident Nancy Alexander argued against the reinstatement of Christmas and Easter. “I, as a Christian, applaud the school board’s decision,” she said. “Schools are a place where everyone should be accepted regardless of their faith or belief. ‘Do unto others as they would do unto you.’”

Roderick Sinclair, a Blacksburg minister, also said he was in favor of the school board’s action. “In this pluralistic world, we must put ourselves into the shoes of the minority,” Sinclair said. “I may be blind, but I don’t see how anyone would want to turn over to the schools the teaching of religion to our children.”

Since becoming involved in community groups supporting diversity I have heard several people describe the angry tone of that January school board meeting: apparently people booed and jeered at those who spoke in favor of the secular holiday names. This sobering image of 900 angry citizens unwilling or unable to reach an agreement over this issue has been used to motivate volunteers to step up their efforts to change the community climate -- but I am getting ahead of the story. I’ll talk in detail about the grassroots response to this and other issues later on.

9Todd Jackson, “Controversial holiday issue draws crowd.” The News Messenger, 1-6-93.
More people spoke at the next month’s School Board meeting, which drew a
crowd of about 200 residents. But during the weeks between those School Board
meetings, events continued in other arenas. The newspapers were flooded with letters to
the editor and commentaries expressing strong views on both sides of the issue. A
student from Blacksburg High School wrote to say that “the young, America’s future,
should be left to decide which God they trust without being forced by a militant minority
to choose their God.” Another Blacksburg resident, calling the issue “one of the more
inane demonstrations of the past year,” pointed out that it was technically incorrect to
say “Christmas break” or “Easter break” because “the breaks are in the winter/fall
semester and in the spring semester. They are not breaks in Christmas or Easter.”
But sentiments over the issue did not fall neatly along the Blacksburg boundary lines: yet
another Blacksburg resident defended the Board of Supervisors’ hasty resolution, saying
that “the board members vote their convictions in accordance with the voters who put
them in office. If the board members do not vote in accordance with the desires of the
voters who put them in office, they will be replaced at the next election.”
There were also accusations of anti-Semitism, and counter-accusations of anti-Christian bigotry. In
addition, the Montgomery County Human Relations Council voiced its support for the
more inclusive non-religious holiday names: “We deplore and oppose religious
intolerance in any of its forms,” the Council’s statement read. “...in a democratic but
pluralistic and diverse society, we see the issue as one of protecting the rights of the

---

12Richard Daub, “Montgomery action was voter driven.” Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 1-5-93.
minority against the tyranny of the majority."\(^{14}\) The Board of Supervisors had established the Human Relations Council in 1992 specifically to address divisive racial issues and, just months later, the Board and the Council were taking up contradictory positions in their public statements.\(^{15}\)

Meanwhile, though, the chairman of the local Christian Coalition invited Dan Schneck, who had resigned from the School Board just weeks before, to speak at his group's monthly meeting in order to find common ground. Asked what prompted the invitation, John LeDoux of the Christian Coalition responded, "I thought everybody needed to see both sides."\(^{16}\) They reported finding common concerns for school improvement and "morality in our schools."\(^{17}\) Unfortunately, these efforts at understanding each other and identifying common ground have been all but ignored by most people in their accounts of this whole conflict.

With the February School Board meeting came more antagonism between the opposing groups. Supporters of secular names continued to argue that Christian names exclude people of other faiths and violate the principle of separation of church and state. On the other side, people argued that "problems such as teen-age AIDS, teen pregnancy and declining SAT scores are related to a decline in the influence of religion in the schools."\(^{18}\) One speaker noted that at the previous School Board meeting, all seven of the speakers in favor of secular names were from Blacksburg. "This is Montgomery County, not just Blacksburg," she said.\(^{19}\)

\(^{16}\)Madelyn Rosenberg, "Holiday-name combatants seek common ground." *Roanoke Times and World News* and *World News*, 1-22-93.
\(^{17}\)Ibid.
\(^{18}\)Greg Edwards, "200 hear holidays debate." *Roanoke Times and World News* and *World News*, 2-4-93(?)
\(^{19}\)Ibid.
Shortly after that meeting, the state General Assembly passed a resolution encouraging the use of Christian names in school calendars.²⁰ Locally, a new community group formed to voice support and respect for the diversity of the region's population. This group, calling itself the Coalition for Community, gathered signatures from about 400 supporters, and published those names in a newspaper advertisement under the following statement: "The undersigned residents wish to affirm their commitment to the richness of life and culture in Montgomery County. We call on all our public officials to recognize and consider the diversity of our people as they make policies and decisions that affect all our lives."²¹ This initial action earned the Coalition for Community a reputation as a radical "left" organization, which in the long run may have limited its effectiveness as a community-building group -- but again, I'm getting ahead of the story!

At the April meeting of the School Board, the county's policy was decided: school calendars would continue to use secular names to refer to holidays. About 100 people had gathered at Blacksburg High School to hear the outcome. (Ironically, this meeting was held on the second day of the Jewish Passover celebration.)²² Immediately after the vote, Lynn Linkous yelled from the back of the auditorium, "OK, fine. But when November comes, we will vote you out because we have enough signatures. The majority will be heard."²³ Linkous was one of the organizers of a petition drive seeking a referendum for school board elections to be on the ballot in the fall.

Two other events related to the name issue took place about that time, too. The YMCA sponsored a forum entitled "Tradition and Diversity: Living in a Multicultural Society," held on the Virginia Tech campus. The workshop included a panel discussion

²²Michael Stowe, "Holiday name issue resurfaces." Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 4-4-93.
²³Greg Edwards, "Schools stick with secular." Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 4-7-93.
as well as small group discussion and role-playing. In addition, the Coalition for Community and the Christian Coalition, along with other organizations, co-sponsored a forum to discuss issues surrounding religion in schools. The day after that forum, a local newspaper reported that “agreement rather than discord marked the continued discussion Monday night in Montgomery County of religion’s proper role in the public schools.” Again, though, that ability and desire to establish understanding and agreement seemed to be lost from the community’s long-term memory. Maybe the reporters were just too optimistic about the possibilities for consensual solutions to this conflict. Or maybe the conflict itself fed people’s perceptions of themselves and their foes, and those identities were too strong or too important to give up.

In fact, it’s almost peculiar how the community has characterized two opposing sides in this series of events. It is generally assumed that the cultural conflict in this community stems as much from tensions between Blacksburg/Tech and the rest of the county as it does from religious differences. One guest commentary described the two powerful opposing forces behind this controversy as the Christian Coalition and “the knowledge industry.” But really, those lines are not distinct. For instance, LeDoux and Scheckler, leaders of the Christian Coalition, are both Tech professors. One letter to the editor acknowledged that fact, and expressed appreciation for “men of science” such as Robert H. Miller and Robert L. Whitelaw for speaking out: “As a railroad maintenance-of-way worker, I am limited in speaking to anyone, particularly such organizations as school boards. I therefore welcome the learned men to speak for me. I feel that John LeDoux, another professor at Virginia Tech, will speak forcefully for

---

25 “Group plans holiday-names forum April 19.” Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 4-6-94.
religious teaching in the public schools."\textsuperscript{28} Similarly, "the county" is not philosophically homogenous, as there are those who support inclusiveness living outside the town limits. Nevertheless, there is a general perception of a Blacksburg/county split that persists in spite of all the "exceptions" to the rule, and an expectation that religious and political differences fall along those same lines.

**Focus 2006**

These Blacksburg/county tensions also surfaced in the context of the Focus 2006 project I mentioned earlier. A few months after the school holiday name battle, the School Board established a 25-member Strategic Planning Commission to "develop a long-range plan for our school system by defining issues of importance to Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) and appointing task forces to address these issues in detail."\textsuperscript{29} The Commission named 18 "issues of importance," including curriculum, classroom structure and organization, community involvement, technology, and school facilities. On average, 11 people were appointed to address each area.

By the time the final reports of the task forces were presented to the school board in the fall of 1993, 222 community volunteers had committed approximately 6000 hours to studying the school system and formulating a long-range vision. This monumental task could be examined as a local implementation of the national Goals 2000 initiative set in motion by President Bush, or as a case study of a community's view of educational reform. But for the purposes of this study, I will limit my discussion of Focus 2006 to what the report itself says about diversity, and how the county's diversity was reflected in the project's process and community response to it.

\textsuperscript{28}Marshall A. Abum, "Why not Yom Kippur in school calendar?" *Roanoke Times and World News and World News*, 3-7-93.
\textsuperscript{29}Focus 2006 Task Force Reports, Foreword.
According to the report, the 18 task forces appointed “represented all areas of the county and worked with a county-wide perspective, involving students, teachers, parents, and others.” Efforts to assure “geographic diversity” were described in the Commission’s introductory statement: “The Commission assured geographic diversity by appointing at least two persons to each Task Force from each of the four high school attendance areas. As applicable and possible, Task Forces were sensitive to matters of diversity, gender, and equity, recognizing the uniqueness of our school’s and communities.”30 An editorial commending the project also emphasized the broad county-wide participation.

A Blacksburg parent commented that this mix of committee members opened her eyes to “a perception that Virginia Tech’s hometown gets more than its share of school resources.”31 The task force she served on, which studied the county’s 19 school buildings, concluded that “there are definite disparities between the rural areas and the towns, and currently the school system has no organized plan to bring the former up to snuff.”32 While new elementary schools have recently been built in Christiansburg and Blacksburg, overcrowding in the rural schools has led to substandard conditions. For instance, at Bethel Elementary in Riner, which “tops the list in physical disrepair and overcrowded conditions,” all the classrooms have been designated as “below standard.”33 Likewise, one of the rural middle and high schools currently has “three mobile units, limited parking, inadequate physical education facilities and a full capacity of 500 students.”34

---

30 Focus 2006 final report, Forward.
32 Ibid.
33 Melissa DeVaughn, “Study seeks to address school crowding.” Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 8-11-94.
34 Ibid.
One of the 18 task forces was devoted to issues of "equity, diversity, and multicultural education" (see Figure 2.1). This group collected demographic data, listened to "speakers representing various segments of our county’s population," and read the work of scholars around the nation. In its final report, the task force named the following findings (statements in parentheses appear as footnotes in the original text):

1. Racially and religiously, the county is overwhelmingly Caucasian, Protestant, and of American nationality. (These skewed demographics serve to exacerbate the sense of isolation and frustration of the part of the minorities.)

2. Controlling for Virginia Tech students, Blacksburg is significantly more highly educated and more affluent than the rest of the county, and its workforce is significantly more likely to be engaged in higher paying professional, executive, or managerial occupations than is the rest of the county. (Indeed, almost all diversity within this county derives from occupational/economic differences.)

3. International students are clustered in Blacksburg and eighty percent of the Black students live in Blacksburg or Christiansburg. (This leads to the remainder of the county wondering “What’s all the multicultural ‘flap’ about?!”)

4. Female and Black students often fail to participate in the more challenging mathematics and science courses at the high school level. (Here we see the disparity falling along socio-economic/cultural educational aspirations more so than along gender/racial lines.)

5. Advanced courses are not equally available to qualified students in MCPS communities. (This is the case at Christiansburg Middle School, Shawsville High School, and Auburn High School.)

6. Within MCPS there is minimal sharing of ideas, personnel, activities, and resources which enhance sensitivity to equity issues and to an appreciation of multicultural diversity.

---

35 According to the Final Report, other Focus 2006 task forces studied the educational needs of the following groups of students: Gifted Education, Special Education, Underachieving Students, Students at Risk, and Mainstream Students. However, I have focused on Task Force #4 because it directly addressed cultural diversity and therefore is most relevant to this discussion.

7. Within MCPS there is no program in place which directly addresses the issue of insuring that there is equitable educational opportunity for all students. (In summary of this portion of the report, this task force has found that there is a lack of intentionality in addressing issues pertaining to equity and diversity. No coordinated, cohesive, sequential plan or program exists to implement our mission statement. Currently, there is no one charged to oversee the adoption of such a mission statement and its implementation. We do not feel this is a conscious omission. The issue of sensitivity to multicultural education and attention to the needs of a diverse population is just emerging as a primary educational movement. This task force commends MCPS School Board and the Strategic Planning Commission for recognizing that this issue is important and deserves attention, while pointing out the work that must be done.)37

Based on these findings, the task force recommended that the school system create a position for a Coordinator of Equity and Multicultural Education, who would be charged with “developing and coordinating... programs related to equity, diversity, and multicultural issues.”38 In other school systems, the task force reported, this coordinator “serves as an information source for the entire system, searches for materials to address the needs of the particular situation, models the use of the materials, and constantly strives to bring varying factions to consensus while seeing that individuals are not subsumed by the whole.”39 The report goes on to suggest specific ways to carry out those tasks with respect to gender, race, creed/religion, sexual orientation, national origin, ability/disability, geographic location, and socio-economic status.

In April, 1994 I went to a “Focus 2006 information session” that had been announced in the newspaper. It turned out to be one of several gatherings throughout the county where representatives from the Strategic Planning Commission briefly described the history of the project, then distributed a survey for each person present to fill out.

37Ibid., page 3.
38Ibid., page 4.
39Ibid., page 5.
I. Mission Statement. In principle and in practice, Montgomery County Public School System (MCPS) values and seeks to build upon the rich diversity within its school community. Educational achievement shall be promoted for each individual regardless of gender, race, creed, sexual orientation, national origin, ability or disability, geographic location, or socio-economic status.

II. Related to Mission Statement

A. Values Underlying Mission Statement
1. Diversity is a positive attribute.
2. All individuals and groups benefit by sensitivity to diversity.
3. Addressing the needs of the individual improves the entire community.
4. Diversity, used in positive and creative ways, will be a springboard for growth, for strengthening positive programs already in place, and for increasing educational productivity. Diversity, used in negative and resistant ways, will be destructive and divisive.
5. Educational achievement is the primary goal of the school system, but schools inevitably serve a socializing role as well.
6. Educational achievement should not be dependent upon gender, race, creed, sexual orientation, national origin, ability or disability, geographic location, or socio-economic status.
7. It is the function of public schools to provide both the atmosphere and the means by which each individual can reach his or her educational potential.

B. Assumptions Resulting from our Mission Statement
1. There should be an intentional, coordinated, and direct effort to achieve equitable educational opportunity, and the cultural majority must understand, support, and respect that effort.
2. Equitable educational opportunity should be intentionally accomplished in a proactive manner rather than in a reactive stance.
3. There should be a clearly defined process in place by which students, educators, and parents are informed of the value and need of equitable educational opportunity for all.
4. There should be understanding on the part of the school system that insensitivity toward differences is most often due to ignorance rather than to hatred or dislike, and as an educational institution MCPS should make an intentional effort to address this ignorance.
5. There should be support and leadership from the Board of Supervisors, School Board, central office administrators, as well as individual school administrators of Montgomery county for all the students, teachers, parents, and community members as they attempt to achieve equitable educational opportunity.
6. There should be equitable access to technology, teaching and learning tools, and educational materials.
7. Overall, there should be a pervasive intentionality to meet the educational needs of each unique individual.1

1 This task force wishes to emphasize that equitable educational opportunity to reach individual potential does not mean equalization. An equitable educational opportunity conveys a concern for the individual, not homogenization of the whole. We accept the premise that a role of public school education is to convey a sense of the cultural consensus. However, this sense is not to be conveyed in a manner exclusive of awareness, tolerance, and appreciation of the opinions and experiences of those who are apart from the cultural majority.

FIGURE 2.1  FOCUS 2006  TASK FORCE #4: Equity, Diversity, and Multicultural Education
The bulk of the survey involved ranking a list of goals for school improvement, in order of priority. Curiously, though, none of the recommendations regarding diversity appeared on that survey. I learned later that the survey had been distributed to 580 school personnel and 390 citizens, and the feedback from them was used to generate a list of 22 goals in order of priority (see Figure 2.2). The first 13 of those priorities were identified as "big ticket" items that would need to be gradually worked into the budget, but the remaining goals named changes that presumably could be made without significant spending increases. Diversity issues were not directly named anywhere on the list.

It's possible that in making the list, the Commission felt issues related to diversity could best be addressed indirectly through other initiatives; for instance, improving the rural school facilities might be viewed as a concrete way of reducing disparity, which seems to be one source of tension within the county. However, there are other sources of tension, such as lack of awareness of the beliefs and values of different groups, which were expressed in the task force's report but were not reflected in the implementation plans. It seems as though this opportunity to address the long-standing tensions among different groups within the county has been dismissed without explanation. Whose interests are served by this lack of attention? It might appear that Blacksburg has been slighted in this respect, since racial, ethnic, and religious diversity is concentrated in Blacksburg. But later I will explore the idea that, ironically, the rural residents suffer more from the lack of public conversation on diversity.

From the start, there has been concern over whether Focus 2006 as a whole would actually inform and influence policy, or suffer the fate of previous reform efforts which had been deemed wish lists rather than practical guides for action. An editorial printed in the local paper warned that while it's possible that people will look back on Focus 2006 as a remarkable turning point for public education, another scenario is that "...12 years from now, [county residents] may stare blankly at each other, asking: 'Focus 2006?'
1. Reduce the pupil/teacher ratio to 20:1 by 2006.
2. Fund educational technology.
3. Provide expanded curriculum in science and math.
4. Provide early identification and intervention for educationally at-risk students and expand alternative education programs.
5. Support and expand preschool programs.
6. Enhance vocational technical education programs.
7. Upgrade school facilities.
8. Ensure equal access to programs by all students.
9. Expand gifted program offerings.
10. Expand offerings in art, music and the humanities.
12. Expand adult programs to meet diverse needs.
13. Develop shared service capability with other human service agencies.
15. Acknowledge and accommodate varied learning styles, intelligences and experiences in classrooms.
16. Encourage use of school facilities by the community.
17. Monitor and adequately fund auxiliary serves to ensure quality.
18. Promote student and staff safety.
19. Involve community in decisions related to education.
20. Employ, train and adequately compensate quality staff.
21. Enhance communication and interaction between schools and the community.
22. Strengthen commitment and support of school volunteer programs.

FIGURE 2.2. Montgomery County Public Schools: Goals
What was that?" One speculation was that the project would ultimately fail because it was essentially a Blacksburg effort -- in spite of the Planning Commission’s emphasis on county-wide participation. In fact, in a memo to volunteers the co-chairman of the Focus 2006 commission wrote, “[the superintendent] commented to various individuals that Focus 2006 would not amount to anything because it was an all-Blacksburg project and would only be supported by Blacksburg folk.” Volunteers themselves have said publicly that “[the superintendent] has failed to support [Focus 2006] recommendations and has played on Blacksburg-rural rivalries to discredit the plan.” In light of these comments, it is not surprising that the superintendent himself is widely viewed as a champion of the rural schools and a foe of Blacksburg interests. While some rural residents reportedly refer to Superintendent Bartlett as “down-to-earth” and say fondly that he “just seems like a country boy,” others in the county, including many school employees and parents, say that “Herman Bartlett talks in circles, bullies employees, cozies up to the supervisors and favors rural areas of the county.” Bartlett’s apparent lack of support for Focus 2006 is the most frequently mentioned example of his “playing the county and Blacksburg against each other.” It is difficult to find concrete examples of this alleged favoritism, but evidence of distrust and dislike is increasingly common.

The Superintendent, the School Board, and Employee Morale

Currently, it seems that dissatisfaction with the superintendent is not limited to the town areas, but is now widespread throughout the county. The president of the Montgomery County Education Association (MCEA) “said that teacher dissatisfaction is

---

40“Montgomery’s school challenge.” Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 4-9-94.
42Ibid.
43Ibid.
44Ibid.
‘very definitely’ not limited to Blacksburg schools. She has received complaints from teachers in all 18 schools."45 This claim does seem to have been supported by the results of the morale survey conducted by an outside consultant in the spring of 1994. This survey, which had been administered twice previously (in 1990-91 and 1991-92), is intended to gauge the satisfaction of school personnel regarding the school system as a whole, the School Board, the superintendent, and the general climate of the public schools. More than 450 teachers, 16 principals, and 16 central office employees responded to the survey.46 When the results were announced in May, 1994 there was stinging news for the School Board, which was rated a C- by teachers and a D+ by principals, and the superintendent, who received a D- from teachers and a D+ from principals.47 Actually, these low marks were not “news” at all for most people. One school board member commented, “I can’t say that I was surprised... I have ears.”48 In the survey, teachers’ main complaints were that “no one listens to their suggestions, and that they are afraid to be too vocal against the administration for fear of losing their jobs.”49 Several school employees have told me that Bartlett is known for using phrases like “get your résumé ready” and “it’s my way or the highway.”

The consultant’s recommendations to the school board were twofold: first, “the superintendent, School Board and Board of Supervisors must recognize that there is a morale problem in the school division”; and second, “the superintendent must assess and modify his methods of communication with central office personnel, school-level

45Ibid.
47Melissa DeVaughn, “Mood survey review again put on hold.” Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 7-7-94.
administrators, and teachers.”50 But it wasn’t until September, five months after the survey results had been presented, that the board finally discussed how to address the concerns raised. The delay only fed the frustrations of teachers and others who perceived the board as unresponsive, indecisive, and unconcerned with the perceptions of school personnel. In light of the growing chasm between school personnel and the administration, one board member described the situation as a catch-22: “Part of the problem with the morale is that there’s an element of trust that is gone,” she said, and without that trust teachers are unwilling to voice their concerns, leaving the school board at a loss for how to address them.51

In spite of all these issues, in June, 1994 the School Board unanimously awarded the superintendent a 2.5% raise, which is the same rate of pay increase awarded all school and county employees annually.52 And three months later the Board extended Bartlett’s contract for three additional years.53 This second action was especially surprising to many parents and teachers, since Bartlett’s original contract would not expire for another two years. “I think there are a lot of parents who think the extension of [Bartlett’s] contract was a betrayal of public trust,” an active Blacksburg PTA member told the newspaper.54 Bartlett’s own response was that he needed this “vote of confidence” in order to act effectively as superintendent.55 But an editorial column pointed out that “The board will have done Bartlett no favor if it has turned up the heat for him, or left him with the impression that his communications and consensus problem is resolved.

51Melissa DeVaughn, “Forum useless if teachers don’t talk, School Board member says.” Roanoke Times and World News and World News, 11-3-94.
54Ibid.
55Ibid.
Resulting tremors could even aggravate the county’s Blacksburg vs. rural split, leaving public education at risk of falling in the cracks.”56

Frustration with the policy makers seemed to reach a boiling point at an October School Board meeting when a representative of the seven Blacksburg area PTAs publicly demanded the resignation of the Board’s chair, Roy Vickers. The PTAs’ main concerns were Vickers’ lack of communication with them, his failure to act on the morale survey, and his support of Bartlett’s raise and extension.57 The mood at that meeting was already tense as the Board was expected to decide the fate of a teacher whose story I’ll tell shortly. After a long moment of stunned silence, the audience burst into applause supporting the PTAs’ declaration of no confidence. Once again, though, undertones of a familiar rift resurfaced when Vickers responded in a newspaper interview that although he was Blacksburg’s representative, he was committed to acting on behalf of the county as a whole: “Vickers disagrees with the PTAs, and insists he works hard for Montgomery County. Furthermore, he said, it is not his responsibility to represent ‘just the special interests’ of the town of Blacksburg.”58

It seems that the issues with both Vickers and Bartlett could be defined in terms of their management styles, educational philosophies, or even personal communication skills. Instead, though, the issues tend to be framed as Blacksburg-rural conflicts -- or, more specifically, struggles for voice and representation where the two main antagonists are characterized as Blacksburg residents and rural residents. This is illustrated again in a letter which appeared in the local newspaper in June, 1994, signed by a woman from Riner:

---

57Melissa DeVauhn, “Montgomery county PTAs call for board chief to quit.” Roanoke Times and World News, 10-5-94.
58Melissa DeVauhn, “Montgomery School Board head says he won’t step down.” Roanoke Times and World News, 10-7-94.
I get so tired every time I pick up the paper and see someone from Blacksburg is downing the school system. If they are so smart, why don’t they file for charter for a city and leave Montgomery County alone. They let the children take over. They are so rude they interrupt a senior speaker. How much money have the taxpayers paid out because Blacksburg can’t get their way in the school system? That is why we have to replace superintendents so often. Is this an attack on the superintendent because he wants to be fair to the other schools in Montgomery County?  

It is not clear what specific incidents are referred to in this letter, so it’s impossible to judge whether the writer’s accusations are well-founded. But on the other hand, the veracity of her claims may not be as important as the perception of unfairness the letter portrays. Why has there been no systematic attempt to address concerns like these, to clear up misunderstandings, and to alter any actual inequities? Why is there no public conversation on diversity focusing on these problems?

Carol’s Story

The personnel issue under consideration at that October meeting illustrates the struggle for power in the school system, as well as the effect of that struggle on MCPS employees. Auburn Middle School (AMS), a relatively small school serving the rural community of Riner, became a site of controversy when Carol, who has taught health, physical education, and math at AMS for 16 years, showed her sixth and seventh graders over 300 slides depicting various aspects of outdoor living and survival. Among the slides dealing with outdoor hygiene were six which showed some degree of male nudity. A month after the slide show, a parent complained to the principal about the inclusion of those slides, and as a result, Carol was suspended for four days and placed on probation.

for one year. One of the terms of her probation required Carol to get her principal’s approval for any materials she intended to use in her classroom. Carol insists that she complied with these restrictions, but two touchy issues arose involving classroom videos: in one case she was asked to electronically edit a portion of a PBS program on heart disease, but since the technology was not available she fast-forwarded through the offensive portion, and in the second case she was denied the use of a video on eating disorders which included profile shots of a nude obese individual. Nevertheless, throughout the year, Carol was assured by her principal that her evaluations were positive and that she did not need to worry about her contract for the following year. However, within days of the end of the school year, the superintendent informed Carol that she would be fired. Carol followed the grievance procedures granted all MCPS employees, and called for a fact-finding panel to investigate her case. This panel, consisting of one person appointed by the central school administration, one appointed by Carol, and one “neutral” individual, decided unanimously that there was no just cause for termination of employment. However, a month later the school board voted 6-3 to fire her anyway.60

Among teachers, the feeling seems to be that the superintendent and school board were pressured by conservative parents who objected to Carol’s teaching style and materials. Many believe that Carol acted in poor judgment when she included slides showing nudity in the first place (in fact, Carol herself “acknowledged that she may have misjudged the appropriateness of the slides for her students”61), but most teachers also seem to feel that she paid the price for that indiscretion in her suspension and probation. Some parents, on the other hand, objected so strongly to Carol’s actions that they advocated her firing regardless. “‘What [Carol] did was wrong, not only because she had been told by her supervisor not to [show nudity] again, but because she tried to do it

twice,”’ one parent told a newspaper. “’I also think it’s morally wrong,’ ” he continued. “’They’ve taken the moral aspect out of this and put it into a procedural battle. This is not just a procedural issue.’” According to a newspaper story, Carol’s attorney “blasted what he called ‘the religious far-right activists’ whom he believes tried to influence the board, stating that he ‘shudders to think who the next target’ for this group will be.” Teachers are concerned about a school system where grievance procedures are disregarded, and where small but vocal groups of parents can exert disproportionate control over administrative decisions. Many view this incident as an example of the superintendent and school board’s lack of respect for teachers as professionals. But again, few seem to regard this as simply a breakdown within the school system; rather, for most people it is another example of conflict between the rural, conservative community and the teachers, who in this case are identified with the more liberal town/university community.

School Board: Elected vs. Appointed

At this point, many parents, teachers, and others are looking forward to the first school board elections as a way to exert more influence over the public schools. Currently, the nine school board members are appointed by the Board of Supervisors, which is an elected body, but in 1992 the General Assembly passed legislation allowing localities throughout the state to change to an election process. In Virginia, school boards have been appointed since the 1950’s, when the General Assembly passed a law abolishing the counties’ authority to elect school board members. That decision was intended to thwart the efforts of Arlington County’s elected school board to desegregate schools. Ironically, however, in recent years the appointment process has resulted in

---

much higher minority representation on school boards than election processes. According to Dr. Jerry Floyd of the National School Board Association, blacks in Virginia make up 18% of the population and 18% of the appointed school board members, whereas in the nation as a whole, only 2% of all school board members are black.64

In Montgomery County, the push for a referendum on this issue was headed by Lynn Linkous, described in the papers as “a housewife and mother of four.”65 She and other supporters collected the 2,929 signatures necessary to get the issue on the ballot, and in November, 1993 the county voted strongly in favor of elected school boards. In the end, support seemed to cut across geographic, socio-economic, and religious lines, but before the election, these factors both fueled the support for school board elections and shaped the opposition. Those who opposed changing to an elected process raised issues such as the following, published in a newsletter of the Coalition for Community66:

Arguments in favor of appointed school boards:

• Through interviews and public hearings, the supervisors are likely to have a better opportunity to find out about and compare candidates.
• Appointment is likely to produce a larger, and better, pool of candidates. People who do not relish spending the time and money needed for an election campaign.
• Women and members of racial minorities are more likely to be appointed than elected.
• Elections are likely to draw candidates who are interested in building political careers.
• Appointment provides a buffer -- a protection -- against apathy and lack of information among voters. Voters who are uninformed on school issues may

---

64 Panel Discussion: “What Does It Mean to Have Elected School Boards?” 9-30-93, Keynote address.
66 Coalition for Community newsletter, October, 1993.
be drawn to the polls by other races and issues. In the case of a small turnout of voters, an organized minority or pressure group could gain control of the school board.

- Under Virginia law, school budgets and spending are set by county supervisors. An elected board would have no power to provide its own revenue.

In the newsletter, these points appeared along with counterpoints supporting the election process. But as I participated in the discussion where this list of pros and cons was generated, it was clear that the underlying concern for those who opposed electing school boards was the prospect of the religious right gaining political power. For instance, many believe that the low voter turnout typical of local elections would make it relatively easy for a highly organized group like the Christian Coalition to mobilize support for particular candidates running on single issues such as prayer in schools, curricular changes, or school holiday names. The election process itself could make it relatively easy for candidates to conceal their positions on those “hot” issues, compared with the interviews and public hearings involved in the appointment process. Many who opposed elected school boards were particularly concerned about the holiday name controversy I described earlier, and the divisive, antagonistic atmosphere it revealed. During a panel discussion of the merits of elected versus appointed school boards, a former member of the Board of Supervisors made the following comments:

Districts in this county are quite diverse, and some of them are quite spread out. I think it’s quite possible though to get good people to run, but it’s going to take some work on the part of PTA’s and school advocates and people who are interested in the broader view to encourage and help those people when they’re running for office. Otherwise I think there is a real danger that certain special interest groups who have a particular issue will get a person to run, and just because they’re a hard-core organized group, will be more successful at putting their person in. So that people in the community who care about having school
board members with a broad view need to be sure to be involved in the choosing of the school board.67

Throughout the public debate on elected versus appointed boards, the issue of religious differences was rarely mentioned directly. Instead, "special interest groups" became somewhat of a code word for the "religious right." But in private discussions it was freely acknowledged that opposition to a conservative religious agenda motivated the campaign against elected boards.

However, those who supported changing to elected school boards tended to frame the issue in terms of geographic and political differences rather than religion -- at least in public. Linkous insisted that although she is politically conservative and a Christian, she is "not a member of the county's Christian Coalition and is as wary of that organization as she is of any special interest group."68 The petition drive occurred at the same time as the controversy over school holiday names only as coincidence, she told a reporter, explaining that her sole objective was "'for everyone to have a voice about what goes on in this county.'"69 Later in the same newspaper article it becomes clear who does and does not, according to Linkous, have voice in the system the way it is:

For Linkous, the essential issue in the elected/appointed school board debate transcends religious holidays or any other policy question. "It's all about power," she said.

Linkous said she and other county residents believe county schools are controlled by a small, powerful, unresponsive group. "They can do anything they want, and there's nothing you can do. People say, 'I have my children in the schools, and they can teach them anything they want.' Nobody listens to the parents."

---

67Panel Discussion: "What Does It Mean to Have Elected School Boards?" 9-30-93.
68Robert Freis, "Desire for voice in schools led mother to organize drive." Roanoke Times and World News, 10-24-94.
69Ibid.
Linkous describes those frustrated by the current system and the present School Board as "Everyday people, people who live in the boonies. At Shawsville, McCoy, Riner. The longtime residents of the county."

Those in control of the county school system are disproportionately from a white-collar, transient community of thought she identifies with Blacksburg. "These are the ones who have a say."70

These comments are ironic because those Linkous describes as "in control of the county system" seem as frustrated and powerless as the "everyday people...who live in the boonies." For instance, as discussed above, the Blacksburg PTAs feel so strongly about the unresponsiveness of the School Board that they apparently do not even want to wait for the upcoming elections to try to oust their representative.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed five issues involving the school board which have divided the people of Montgomery County. The dispute over school holiday names was framed as a conflict between rural residents, with conservative Christian views, and the Blacksburg/university community, which advocates tolerance and inclusion of diverse religions. Focus 2006 has been dubbed a "Blacksburg project" by some, in spite of efforts to secure county-wide participation in the task forces. The task force which studied issues related to diversity recommended that the county hire a coordinator to implement programs which would increase understanding and communication across the cultural differences in geographic location, religion, and socio-economic status; this recommendation was apparently ignored, and no alternative approaches have been offered. Morale among public school employees seems to be low throughout the county, but support for the superintendent reportedly varies, once again, along the lines of

70 Ibid.
Blacksburg/county residence. The dispute over Carol and her status as a teacher in Montgomery County has also been portrayed as a Blacksburg/county difference, with teachers generally siding with Blacksburg: county residents seemingly focused on Carol’s actions as a moral issue, while teachers and town residents seemed most concerned about the procedural aspects of her firing. Finally, what dispute there was about the referendum to elect school board members was also cast as a conflict between the county and some Blacksburg residents: some Blacksburg residents worried that school board elections could be too easily controlled by “special interest groups” such as the Christian Coalition.

In spite of this recurring conflict between the people of Blacksburg and the rural population, those who support “valuing diversity” do not address this particular set of differences -- or, as in the case of Focus 2006, those differences are discussed but not acted upon. I turn now to look at organizations that have formed specifically in response to the issues involving diversity, to see how their conversations have developed. Two of these are grassroots community organizations, while the third was established by the Board of Supervisors. I’ll begin with the Coalition for Community, an organization whose name has already come up several times in this story so far.
Chapter III
Community Organizations

In this chapter I describe my experiences with three community-based organizations: the Coalition for Community, Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens, and the Human Relations Council. Each of the three was founded within the past three years to address issues concerning diversity in Montgomery County. Here, I focus on how these organizations define “diversity,” both explicitly, through their mission statements, and implicitly, through their actions and the conversations among members and supporters.

The Coalition for Community

When I joined the Coalition for Community in August, 1993, I knew very little about the organization or the circumstances which had led to its formation -- and in no way did I anticipate how my involvement with this group would eventually help shape my thinking and my research. In fact, I heard about it in a chance encounter: a fellow graduate student, whom I did not know, had called to ask my opinions of some courses she was thinking of taking. When she asked about my research plans I described my interest in democracy and community -- although at the time I had no idea how I might study either one -- and she suggested I might be interested in this group, which would be meeting that week.

At that first membership meeting I learned that, as I mentioned earlier, the Coalition for Community had formed in response to the dispute over the naming of the school holidays. Citizens concerned about the exclusionary tone of the speakers at the School Board meetings in early 1993 initially had circulated a petition-like statement in support of diversity in the region, which they printed along with the 400 signatures in the
local newspaper (see Chapter 2). When that particular issue died down, though, several of the founding members decided to continue the group in anticipation of similar issues in the future. The purpose of the August meeting was to ask the membership to approve the Plan of Operation drafted by the Coordinating Committee, and to rally participation in the various committees and projects.

About 45 people attended the membership meeting in August, 1993. Looking around the hall of the Presbyterian Church where we met I recognized a handful of people, mostly professors I knew from Tech. As they signed in, everyone had picked up a four-page "Plan of Operation" which began with the following mission statement:

The mission of the Coalition for Community is to provide a network of organizations and citizens who together can (1) actively support respect for the diversity of ethnic groups, religions, and cultures of the New River Valley of Virginia, and (2) anticipate and identify public issues of conscience and work for consensual solutions.

A second statement followed:

Increases in the complexity, diversity, and rate of change of American society, including our community, are making the tasks of citizen and community leader ever more difficult. The Coalition for Community is intended to appeal to and enlist all people of conscience, whether or not members of religious bodies, to better cope with the requirements of citizenship and community leadership. The Coalition is intended to provide the community with a tool for coping with conflicting values and views on public issues.

Reading this, I felt as though I’d found a group whose mission exactly matched my growing concerns about and interest in community. But in the course of that first meeting, several comments and observations made it clear that "actively supporting respect for diversity" was a much more complex task than we perhaps realized. The first indication of this was a discussion of membership in the organization. The chair of the meeting defined a "member" as someone who agrees with the Coalition’s mission
statement and pays membership dues. The Plan of Operation stated more specifically that “membership...is effective upon written application to the Secretary of the Coalition, subject to confirmation by the Coordinating Committee.”1 Someone asked whether such a practice would serve to keep the group a closed circle, and suggested that it should be enough for a person to sign a declaration of support of the Coalition’s goals, adding that maybe there should be some democratic process for striking people from the group if their actions are inconsistent with the group’s mission statement. Someone else pointed out another potential problem, that a member could bring friends to meetings simply to vote against a particular action of the group. To avoid that situation, another person proposed a policy that people must be members for at least two months before voting on issues, or, alternatively, that members not be allowed to vote before attending two meetings. Those solutions were problematic because the group’s plan was to meet quarterly, so new members would have had to wait six months before they could participate actively. When another person questioned whether we were right to safeguard the group against other points of view, someone clarified that everyone should feel free to dissent, but not to sabotage. Finally, a motion was made to send the issue back to the committee to redraft the membership clause. But clearly, people felt a need to limit the scope of differences in views and beliefs that we would, or should, accommodate in the group’s operations.

Shortly after that discussion, someone commented that she was disturbed by the absence of any Blacks, and also that the group seemed “geographically skewed.” Since someone else had commented on the perception that “Blacksburg people are trying to run everything again,” I assumed this speaker meant that Blacksburg was over-represented; but as I looked around the room I wondered how anybody could tell where any of us lived. (Do “rural people” look different?) As for the lack of African

1 Coalition for Community Plan of Operation, “Membership” section: 7/15/93.
Americans, someone suggested that we invite the leader of the local NAACP to our next meeting. I suppose when you want a representative it is natural to look to the apparent leadership of the community in question; but what seems odd is that “we” are looking for representatives of “them.” Did I represent anybody besides myself? Was anybody assuming that I did?

When someone asked for clarification about the roles of the various committees, the meeting chair explained that the Issues Committee started out looking at school issues, while the primary function of the Dialogue Committee was to engage the Christian Right in dialogue. One man described his experience with the Dialogue Committee saying that the meetings offer a chance to discuss issues from different points of view, and that friendships had grown out of disagreements. As examples of people with diverse views who had attended recently, he named the wife of the Republican Committee Chair and a female Rabbi. The man characterized the meetings as learning, changing experiences. Someone else agreed, but pointed out that moderate people tend to attend, and it would be nice if more radical people (from both sides) would come. There seemed to be a concept of a norm operating there, a norm that did not encompass female rabbis and wives of Republicans -- even those whose views might be called “moderate.”

Next, somebody asked us to backtrack for a moment to consider the Mission statement again: was it too narrow? The person felt that “ethnic groups, religions and cultures” excluded certain “diversities” such as homosexuals. Several people answered to the effect that 1) the statement was intended to be concise, and 2) listing specific groups has the effect of excluding others, so it’s better to keep the statement as broad as possible. A group like homosexuals would fall under the general term of “culture”; a comprehensive list of all the different cultural categories would be endless, and any short version would imply exclusion of some groups. But why, then, were “ethnic groups”
and “religions” listed separately? Are these categories “diverse” in ways not related to culture?

After the Plan of Operation was approved and other organizational business was completed, we broke into small discussion groups to talk about our ideas for the Coalition. There were seven people in my small group. As we talked about the origins of the Coalition for Community and the need for such a group in this county, a fifth grade teacher in the group commented that she was apprehensive about teaching geological eras. When she had taught the “Roaring Twenties” she’d had the students play games popular at that time, and, she said, parents had objected to their children playing Ouija. A high school teacher mentioned that pressure comes from both students and parents.

We talked about the composition of the group there that night. Apparently about 700 mailings had been sent out to invite people to the meeting, and it was also announced in the Roanoke Times that day. When someone asked the group what reasons there might be for the absence of Blacks and Asians, somebody else added that it would be good to have Republicans there, too. “How do you know there aren’t?!” asked one surprised participant. “What does that have to do with it?”

As the small groups reported on their discussions, the meeting chair listed their ideas on poster board on the wall. The first group commented on the issue of African Americans, saying we ought to have our meeting in a location that their community identifies as a cultural place -- “on their turf with their agenda.” They also mentioned classism, saying that this is a big problem in Blacksburg especially. The second group suggested that we discuss topics like values and ethics in schools, the plight of lower-middle income students (they get no entitlements, yet can’t afford supplemental materials like band instruments that are meant to enrich their education), and the potential problems with elected school boards. The third group recommended that we get the NAACP to educate us about their issues; also, we could “recruit” through the Black churches, as well
as other centers such as the local Chinese Market. Also, they said something about bringing university students into the Coalition.

As the groups finished reporting, one man asked for more discussion of classism. The person from the first small group who had brought it up began by pointing out that the dropout rate in Blacksburg was the highest around, and that the students who drop out come from nonprofessional families. The questioner cut in to ask “What do you think we should do about it?” His tone sounded impatient, and seemed to put several people on the defensive. Someone pointed out that Blacksburg ranks 4th in the nation in terms of its percentage of PhD’s, yet 60-70% of the citizens are without high school diplomas.

This contributes to huge economic diversity, and we “don’t even know how to talk to each other.”

There were more comments along those lines, then someone suggested that all this talk about including/recruiting others (i.e. Blacks and “working class” people) amounts to pressuring people to be involved in something “culturally contrary” to them. Isn’t there something paternalistic, the speaker asked, about trying to figure out what issues would attract these “others” in order to woo them into being involved, supposedly for their own good?

The person who first brought up classism said that we would need to reorganize in order to be appealing to a broader range of people. Another stated that people don’t get involved unless there’s a burning crisis. “For whom?” asked someone else, pointing out that we are comfortable, but for those who, for example, are trapped in housing projects, there is a “burning crisis.”

As I reflected on this meeting afterwards, the comment about “Blacksburg people trying to run everything again” stood out in my thoughts. Who holds that perception, I

---

2According to figures released by the Virginia Department of Education, the dropout rate at Blacksburg High School was 4% in 1993, while the dropout rate for the county was 6%, and 5% for the state.
wondered, and where did it come from? Are efforts to get other people involved also seen as controlling? And are those efforts authentic? That is, does the group really want Others here in order to participate, or would their presence somehow simply legitimate whatever we as a group would be doing anyway?

And finally, what differences do constitute “diversity”? Is professional or occupational diversity important? What about experience with political organizations? Or length of residency in the New River Valley? I think these factors do make a difference in terms of one’s ability to participate in meetings like this and contribute to community decision-making, but they were never mentioned in this meeting.

All these questions intrigued me, so I signed up to participate in the “Issues Committee” and the “Dialogue Committee,” and made a point of attending all the Coalition functions held that fall and winter: a forum on elected school boards, a House of Delegates candidate debate, Martin Luther King celebration, a Board of Supervisors meeting, and all the Coalition for Community organizational meetings. Before long people noticed my habit of compulsive notetaking and began delegating the preparation of the minutes to me. At the time, I saw myself mainly as an observer, trying to get acquainted with the local political figures and the issues the community was facing. So I was surprised when I got a call one day from a founding member of the group who was leaving the area, asking if I would be willing to take her place on the Coordinating Committee. I accepted, and since March, 1994 this new role has enabled me to participate in numerous conversations on diversity and to contribute to the Coalition’s efforts to build community.

When I joined the Coordinating Committee, the Coalition for Community was beginning to grapple with what I came to see as an organizational identity crisis. To be effective as an organization we felt we needed to develop a new structure which would allow us to operate as a permanent, proactive entity rather than an ad hoc reactive group.
What resulted was an ongoing discussion on the two main components of our organization's purpose: diversity and community. What did we mean by these terms? What actions could we take to promote a community that respects diversity? We came up with a vision, mission, and goals (see Figure 3.1), which were approved by the membership in August, 1994. But six months later, we are still wrestling with how to enact our mission and fulfill our goals. One major obstacle for us as a Coordinating Committee is that each individual member is actively involved in at least half a dozen other community-oriented organizations, all of which must be balanced with commitments to job, school, family, and so on, leaving each of us with minimal time and energy to pursue the goals of the Coalition for Community. But beyond that, I think there may be other obstacles to our well-intentioned efforts, which we typically overlook. To explore those, I will discuss my perception of how diversity has been defined within this organization, both explicitly in its mission and goals statements, and implicitly through comments, discussions, and actions I have observed.

The new mission of the Coalition for Community is "Building community that respects the diversity of area ethnic groups, religions, and cultures." This statement is the result of countless hours of discussion in which the six members of the Coordinating Committee debated how to express our commitment to both community and diversity in a simple, straightforward phrase. As in the original mission statement, the reference to "area ethnic groups, religions, and cultures" was meant to be inclusive of all the citizens in the area. As we listed our sub-goals, however, we identified "different socioeconomic groups" as a specific dimension of cultural diversity (see Figure 3.1). All of us were well aware of the tensions between Blacksburg and the rest of the county, and believed that the cultural differences between the two could most easily be defined in terms of socio-economics. We agreed that if the people of the region could collaboratively "identify shared concerns and values" and "address conflicts," we could begin to
Vision: Building community amidst diversity.

Mission: Building community that respects the diversity of area ethnic groups, religions, and cultures.

Goal 1: Actively support respect for the diversity of ethnic groups, religions, and cultures in the New River Valley by:

A. Advocating the values of the Coalition for Community.
B. Involving different socioeconomic groups in identifying shared concerns and values and addressing conflicts.
C. Involving different socioeconomic groups in shared activities that benefit the community.
D. Fostering community leadership and citizenship.
E. Monitoring and responding to issues related to community and diversity within New River Valley.

Goal 2: To foster an inclusive community that constructively manages differences on public issues by:

A. Creating a vision of community that fosters quality of life for all.
B. Identifying and addressing formal and informal barriers to participation.
C. Facilitating dissemination of information and dialogue among individuals and groups.
D. Encouraging consensus-building that informs and engages the public.

Figure 3.1. Coalition for Community: Mission Statement and Goals
decrease the negative aspects of our differences and capitalize on our collective wealth of
knowledge and expertise. This inclusive tone continues in our second set of subgoals:
we recognized that there are barriers to participation, such as a lack of information or
perceptions of being unwelcome, which needed to be identified and dismantled in order
to involve all the people of the county.

But the plan of action (see Figure 3.2) which was supposed to have developed out
of these goals was strangely incongruent. While our intentions emphasized including all
people in political decisions, for instance, our plans for action only go so far as to hold
forums for hearing candidates' positions. Certainly, candidate forums are valuable to any
community, and as a group we are committed to organizing these as educational
processes for voters more so than sound-off opportunities for politicians. Even so, these
sessions do not typically lead to any sustained community dialogue -- or any community
dialogue, for that matter. It seems that those who attend events like candidate forums are
those who already participate in local politics; furthermore, it seems that people attend in
order to show support for a particular candidate as much as to learn the views of each
person running, leaving little room for dialogue.3

Perhaps the goals of the Coalition for Community simply sound idealistic; if so, it
may not be at all surprising that we have not been able to implement them. But that, I
suggest, is an important point. Within this conversation, we have defined "diversity"
and categorized the "other" in ways that seem to make it all but impossible to work
together, or even understand each other. Publicly we may resist listing categories of
diversity, acknowledging that no list could ever be complete, but even so we do seem
preoccupied with labels to identify differences -- Black, rural, Republican, non-

---

3As I entered the Municipal Building before a House of Delegates candidate forum, two people offered me
a campaign sticker for one of the candidates. How strange, I thought, as I accepted the sticker but slipped it
in my pocket instead of putting it on, that they would assume I'd already decided who I would support,
before the debate. And how strange, that thought continued, that, in fact, I had already made up my mind!
A. Annual Events

- Election Review Meeting
- Co-sponsor M. L. King celebration
- Awards/recognition Event

B. Political involvement

- School Board elections - 1995
  - co-sponsor forums with other organizations
  - circulate questionnaire, publicize information
  - surveys re/local public opinion on diversity issues

- Other local elections
  - Board of Supervisors
  - County-wide elections
  - Constitutional officers
  - General Assembly

- Get out the vote!
  - work with other local organizations

C. Build the Coalition for Community

- Recruit county-wide membership
- Diversify membership by race and religion

D. Work through community events and activities

- Focus 2006
  - work with the Focus 2006 Committee & PTA groups to see what we can do
  - focus on diversity issues -- "our issues"
  - monitor the School Board
- Present "Teaching Tolerance" in the schools, or to other audiences

E. Research

- Values and ethics; background of issues
- Dialogue with people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs

Figure 3.2. Coalition for Community Action Plan: Objectives for 1994-95
professional. "We" seek to include "them" in our conversation, but try to figure out in advance what they will value talking about, within the boundaries of our conversation. At the same time, we make up rules that protect us and our organizational identity from views that might be too different (i.e. sabotage our efforts). In the end, we are left talking to ourselves (without ever really examining who "we" are), about them.

Finally, in the existing conversation on diversity there always seems to be a third party in the shadows: besides us (an undefined category) and them (the diverse groups we wish to value and include) there is somebody from whom we are protecting "them." In our conversations this oppressor role is frequently assigned to the Christian Coalition or conservative politicians. Ironically, by casting such groups this way we avoid altogether the need to dialogue across differences in beliefs and values. Instead, we devote our energies to championing the causes (as we see them) of groups who differ from us in terms of color, socio-economic status, or sexual orientation -- in short, groups who do not challenge or cause us to question our own identities, ideas, or positions. To clarify this point, I turn now to a brief discussion of another nascent grassroots organization.

**Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens**

Whereas the Coalition for Community has sought to define itself as a non-partisan organization working to develop an inclusive community, Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens (MCMC) formed in reaction to the political scenario that developed in Virginia in 1994. With conservative candidates running for public office at all levels of government, Mainstream Citizens groups began forming across the state to try to mobilize "mainstream" voters by informing the public about many candidates’ connections with the Christian Coalition and exposing that organization’s political agenda. These Mainstream Citizens groups operate independently of one another, but
share materials, strategies, and information as desired. In Blacksburg, MCMC adopted
the following mission statement: “To preserve religious and personal freedom, to
maintain the separation of church and state, and to counter the imposition, through public
policy, of one set of religious values over any others.”4 Several of this group’s founders
had been involved in the initial activities of the Coalition for Community, protesting the
demands for using religious names for school holidays. The memberships of these two
groups still overlap, but many members of MCMC have expressed impatience with the
Coalition for Community and its reluctance to make public partisan stands on
controversial issues.

Currently, MCMC is focusing on the upcoming local elections for seats on the
School Board and Board of Supervisors. The group is committed to identifying and
encouraging potential candidates who express a “mainstream” stance, and to
interviewing all declared candidates about particular issues. However, within MCMC
meetings there is very little discussion about how our proposed actions might be in
conflict with our rhetoric about valuing diversity. One example of this tension came up
in a recent discussion on our role in the upcoming school board elections. There are four
districts which will be up for election next November: one covers the town of
Blacksburg5, the second includes part of Christiansburg and extends into the rural area on
one side of the town, while the third covers the Shawsville area and the fourth is in the
community of Prices Fork. In Blacksburg, we all agreed, it should be no problem to
replace Roy Vickers with a more progressive candidate (see Chapter II); and in the
Christiansburg district we would be pleased to support the current School Board member
if he decides to run for re-election. Shawsville and Prices Fork, however, appear to pose

5Since that meeting, I have learned that Blacksburg will no longer have its own school board representative
under the election process; the current representative, however, will be up for short-term re-appointment in
June.
more problems for us: they are both “conservative” districts, and collectively we have the fewest contacts in those communities. Nevertheless, as we brainstormed we were able to name a school principal who lives in Prices Fork and a minister in Shawsville who would likely support our agenda, and we agreed to contact them and encourage them to run for election in their districts. In all of this discussion, though, nobody mentioned the irony of our approach: in the name of supporting diversity in the school system, we intended to identify and endorse candidates who would be sympathetic to our agenda regardless of how well those candidates would represent their constituents. In other words, we are interested in electing officials who will talk about diversity rather than electing officials with diverse views; we seem to want to dialogue about differences, not across them.

In case this judgment seems harsh, I want to emphasize that I was a participant in this conversation (and, of course, in the conversations of the Coalition for Community), so this is a criticism of myself as much as any other person or group. But, in fact, my intent is not to devalue the work of any of these groups or individuals. After all, these assumptions about diversity and community are not unique to these groups; rather, as I will argue in a later chapter, they are embedded in the larger conversation that is our social historical context. Before moving on to look at some results of this cultural conversation, I offer just one more example of how these assumptions have been manifested in the community.

**The Human Relations Council**

While the Coalition for Community and MCMC are grassroots organizations, the Human Relations Council was established by the Board of Supervisors in 1992. The idea for such a Council had actually been under consideration by the Board for a couple of
years, but interest was rekindled in 1992 by a local Ku Klux Klan march. Once the Council was created, however, the Board of Supervisors relinquished any authority over it -- although the Council is funded by the Board. The purpose of the Human Relations Council is stated in that organization's bylaws as follows:

The object of this Council shall be to spread understanding, and promote education by holding forums, raising issues, issuing statements, and responding in a unified and proactive manner to racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation and other human relations issues as determined by the Council that threaten to divide the Montgomery County community.

The Bylaws specify that membership "shall be limited to 21 organizations within the boundaries of Montgomery County and are in agreement with the objects of this Council." Figure 3.3 shows a list of the organizations that are represented. Several committees have been appointed to address particular areas, including gender equity, labor and industrial relations, race relations, religious tolerance, and sexual orientation. Each committee is responsible for investigating concerns brought to the Council, preparing programs and statements, and making recommendations to the Council.

In December, 1993 the Human Relations Council petitioned the Board of Supervisors for funding to cover the costs of mailings and other low-budget projects. After a representative of the Coalition for Community read a statement supporting the Human Relations Council's request, the president of the Human Relations Council spoke. He began with some background, explaining that the Council had been formed by an act of the Board, but so far had received no funding. Their earlier request for monies had been tabled, apparently because of a lack of information. The Council had this information now -- essentially a budget and a list of the organizations that made up the

---

6 John Martin, 11-17-94.
7 Article II of Bylaws of the Human Relations Council of Montgomery County Virginia.
8 Article III of Bylaws of the Human Relations Council of Montgomery County Virginia.
• Montgomery County Board of Supervisors
• Town of Blacksburg
• Town of Christiansburg
• Montgomery County Public School System
• Greater Blacksburg Chamber of Commerce
• Christiansburg-Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce
• Cranwell International Center at Virginia Tech
• Montgomery County Branch of NAACP
• Blacksburg Ministerial Association
• Christiansburg Ministerial Association
• Office of Student Affairs at Virginia Tech
• Blacksburg Police Department
• Christiansburg Police Department
• Montgomery County Sheriff Department
• Montgomery County Human Services Council
• Virginia Tech Campus Ministers
• League of Women Voters (Montgomery County)
• Asian Community (representative)
• Jewish Community (representative)
• National Organization of Women
• Gay and Lesbian Community (representative)

Figure 3.3. Organizations represented on the Human Relations Council⁹

⁹Article III; Bylaws of the Human Relations Council of Montgomery County Virginia
Council -- and the representative distributed it to the Board members. What intrigued me were the questions raised by the Board regarding this new information. First, looking at the list of organizations, one Supervisor asked how various groups went about choosing representatives to the Council. He said that he understood how groups with definite memberships could democratically elect a representative, but was concerned about how more general categories ("the Jewish community" or "the Asian community") would go about that; did someone in the Council just happen to know "an Asian," who then became a spokesperson for that group? The answer was unclear to me, though the Council spokesman seemed to be saying that those were organizations, not just general or undefined categories.

Another Supervisor asked how new groups would be added to the council. If the list is fixed, he said, it might not be representative of the region ten years from now. But if membership is open to all, what if a local Ku Klux Klan group or Communist Party joins? Who will decide who can or can't join, and how? The Council president didn't seem to have a strong response, but given the statement in the group's bylaws that "membership... shall be limited to...[organizations] in agreement with the objects of this Council," the answer seems straightforward: if the local chapter of the KKK or Communist Party dedicated themselves to spreading understanding and promoting education on human relations issues that divide the community, they would be entitled to participate in the council! Nevertheless, the question of whose views and experiences should be included in community conversations on human relations is a recurring one. For, while the KKK and Communist Party are unlikely to request representation in the Human Relations Council, less extreme conservative groups may well be interested in participating.

The third question addressed the issue of inclusiveness more directly. Looking down the list of 21 organizations, a Supervisor said he was surprised to see that 50% of
Montgomery County's population was not represented. Why, he wondered, were there no agricultural groups on the Council? This prompted me to think of several other groups that had not been included on the list: Ruritans, Grange, Moose Lodges, Rotary, Lions, and so on. These groups provide community for their members through weekly meetings, social events, and service programs -- as do other groups that were included on the Council such as the Cranwell International Center, the Asian Community, the Gay and Lesbian Community, and so on. But apparently these latter organizations seem much more appropriate to include in a council on human relations. Once again, "diversity" had been defined in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, and religion, while omitting the rural/town differences which are the source of so much tension in this particular locality.

Summary

In my work with the Coalition for Community and Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens and observation of the Human Relations Council, I have observed again and again as the well-intentioned efforts of concerned, dedicated people get diverted away from their stated aims. Amongst ourselves, we often bemoan our lack of resources, including time, money, and volunteers; we regret how these shortfalls limit the scope of our projects. But, as I suggested earlier, I believe that much of that limitation is actually in "the conversation" itself: how we define diversity, our assumptions about self and other, and what we expect of ourselves as promoters of diversity in the community. I will argue later that these limiting factors have consequences not just for the movement toward "multiculturalism," but also for democracy.

But why, one might ask, should it be so important to address the particular differences between the town/university and rural communities? Perhaps it seems they are overlooked because the categories are in fact artificial, or the disagreements are not
significant after all. While I tend to agree that the categories are artificial, I think the fact that they exist is reason enough to pay attention to them. And since the lack of public conversation leaves me unsure what disagreements or issues do separate these communities, I hesitate to dismiss them as insignificant. Furthermore, as I interviewed a number of high school students about their experiences with social categories, I became increasingly convinced that something has gone wrong in our efforts to "value diversity." Chapter IV explores those students' remarks.
Chapter IV
Drawing Between the Lines:
Conversations with High School Students

Listening to high school students talk about the social categories found among their peers provides an additional perspective on differences among people in Montgomery County. What follows is a discussion of accounts given by Blacksburg High School students, ranging from sophomores to seniors.

Blacksburg High School (BHS) is located on the north end of town, about a ten-minute walk from the shops and restaurants that make up the “down town” area. Shortly after it was built in 1974, a local historian described BHS as “modern and utilitarian, ... constructed of brick and concrete.”¹ Today, with the help of landscaping and other improvements, the school has a slightly warmer appearance, but its lack of windows and boxy architecture are still its most salient features. Inside, the school seems comfortable and well-equipped. A large vocational training center occupies a wing in the rear of the building, where students can take courses in auto mechanics, cosmetology, business, food preparation, child care, agriculture, and so on. Academic classrooms are arranged in a square surrounding the library on the second floor. Downstairs there are music rooms, in addition to the cafeteria, auditorium, and gymnasium. Approximately 920 students are enrolled in BHS.

Many of the high schoolers I spoke with were the children of my own friends, or people those students suggested I contact. But my first informant, Duane, was not; in fact, I met Duane at a School Board meeting in June, 1994. Once again, the little meeting

¹Givens, 1975, p. 163.
room was packed — but this time, most of the crowd seemed to be high school students. Some, mostly girls, were dressed up, but the majority were in shorts and t-shirts. I asked the young man next to me if he knew what was going on; he said something about a teacher being in trouble for having said that more AP teachers were needed, or something like that. I didn’t understand. “An unlikely comment to bring out such a large crowd,” I said, confused. He explained that “she is a very popular teacher.” I was still confused.

As the public address session unfolded the situation became more clear. Superintendent Bartlett had spoken to a group of students at a leadership training seminar recently, and, apparently, had criticized a particular Advanced Placement history teacher for allegedly lowering her academic standards. Several people spoke in defense of the teacher and rebuked Bartlett for inappropriately criticizing a teacher at a student seminar. One of those speakers, Duane, introduced himself as an officer in the student government at Blacksburg High School. He spoke forcefully, describing the nature of Ms. G.’s class and the volume of work she required of her students. Several other speakers, including students, former students, and parents of students, echoed Duane’s remarks. When the Board moved on to the next item on its agenda, I followed the students as they filed out of the meeting room, hoping to catch up with Duane and invite him to participate in my study. A light rain was falling, and on their way to their cars students were stopping to congratulate Duane on his speech, so we didn’t talk long then. But we arranged to meet a couple weeks later at a sandwich shop in Blacksburg.

Most of my interviews began with questions about the students’ experiences in high school: whether they enjoy it, what activities they’re involved in, what classes they’re taking, and so on. I also asked about their previous school experience: where they went to elementary and middle school, what the transitions were like, and whether they have kept the same group of friends throughout. Their responses to those background questions gave me leads for asking about social groups, what commonalities
exist among group "members," and the interrelations among the groups. But in Duane's case this structure was unnecessary: he needed very little prompting to talk about the social categories of his school and his experiences in schools over the years. He began by commenting that "Blacksburg is such a different place." When I asked what he meant by that, he responded:

Well, for one, okay, we have Virginia Tech, and I mean that lends so much diversity, not only like Blacksburg High School but the community in general. Because I mean it seems like so many times you know your community shapes, like, what kind of like person, maybe, that you are... ...The resources of Tech make it so much different. Um, like the different opportunities, like just last night there was a concert just downtown on the Henderson lawn, and like, people playing. You might not get a lot of that in, say, Christiansburg or [Riner]. But that makes it different, Tech is definitely different. Tech brings in like the professors and what not, and you know, sons and daughters they tend to help out like at Blacksburg High School. I mean there's just a high percentage of people at BHS whose parents are professors and all that, and that helps out.

Duane seemed to view Tech as a provider of resources and opportunities, such as the event he described, but also suggested that the people affiliated with Tech enriched the community in and of themselves. But almost in the same breath, Duane described a downside of Tech's influence on Blacksburg and BHS:

And I mean, especially at BHS you seem to have like definite, like, I don't want to say cliques, but definite like different sections, maybe, of like the high school; I mean you have like your professor people and your professors' sons and daughters, and you have your well-to-do students. And then for some reason, and I don't know why, and I mean it's sort of disturbing to me, but I mean you also have like the local people from like the rural areas around Blacksburg. And I mean for some reason they're in a different like you know, sort of, they're thought of differently, like, you know, "Oh, look at them farmer boys," and what not like that. And, I mean, it's really disturbing to see, you know, I mean, to see people
who think that and call names, like “oh look at that redneck” and stuff like that. And I mean, I don’t like that. I mean I come -- I live on [a rural road], and no one in the world probably knows where that is, and my grandfather -- I live on a farm -- I mean if some of those people knew, like, what I did and where I came from, they probably, you know, would have different thoughts, I mean, that’s sort of, you know, bad to think, but I think it’s true.

For Duane, a rising senior who grew up on a farm, the presence of the university was a double-edged sword. It has provided him with opportunities, but for him the dichotomy he described between university and “local people” requires that he deny part of his identity in order to “fit in.” However, Duane downplayed the significance of the different groups later in the interview, emphasizing instead that the students interact across those boundaries, and even pull together to serve the community:

I mean, there are many sections -- I mean, you know. I hate this name-calling thing. But just think of it as, you know, you have your different sections here and there, and they mingle together, but I mean, you know, your different groups and stuff like that. And it always seems like, I don’t know, I don’t know what I was going to say, actually. It’s just the way they, you know -- The school itself works very well, like cooperatively, like -- We manage to do things like, Thanksgiving baskets, and we raised over 500 coats for the Christmas store. You know stuff like that works out very well. But, you know. So I mean, together we work very well.

As he changed the subject from the divisions among people to their ability to cooperate, I had the feeling that Duane had become self-conscious about portraying his school in a negative light. Nevertheless, his earlier comments suggested that a split does exist among BHS students, dividing “locals” from those affiliated with the university.

Other students reinforced this general picture of the social groups in the high school, acknowledging the existence of categories and differences but insisting that everybody gets along. Robin, a rising sophomore who spoke with me in her home over the summer, answered my question about cliques saying, “There’s, like, a couple big
groups of people, but generally I think they get along. They don’t exclude other people, you know, they’ll talk to other, you know, everybody. But there are some people who are better friends with one group of people, and stuff. But the cliques aren’t really bad at all.” When pressed to define these “big groups of people,” Robin named three categories: “There’s one group that would be, like the Preppy sort of group, and then the other -- more the country people, and uh, they don’t... I guess they don’t have the same interests, and they don’t hang around each other as much; and then there’s the people in the middle.” Robin described herself as one of the people in the middle, but her later remarks showed that she clearly identified more with the “Preppy” group than the “country people.”

Kevin, a sophomore, spoke mostly in terms of the social groups that form around athletics, but echoed Duane’s and Robin’s comments that groups are not very important:

Well, I guess most people like, they’re not really like groups, I mean everybody just kind of hangs out with everybody, but I guess, like, I don’t know. I think, I don’t know, I just got so -- I mean that’s how you get to meet people outside of school like through athletics, but I mean the groups aren’t really defined by athletic and non-athletic. I think it’s just, you know, everybody’s kind of together. You get to know people that do athletics if you do athletics. And most of our school is athletic.

But again, when asked about different groups besides those defined by athletics, Kevin was able to name several others:

Well there’s like the, the nerdy type I guess, it’s like all they do is school; they’re really smart... That’s like who would be on the Math team and stuff. And they’re really smart and everything. And then there’s like the athletic type, and then there’s the minorities, and then there’s the rednecks or whatever, and then there’s the skateboarders or whatever. This is the group that you find downtown.
Listening to Kevin’s account, it seemed that as an athlete, he did not necessarily experience the categories as barriers to social interaction. But his concept of “difference” seemed to fall along the same lines as the other students I spoke with.

I met Kyle through one of the other students I interviewed. Sitting in the living room at his home, Kyle described an elaborate, hierarchical social structure operating among high school students. At the top was the “High Popularity” group, with its set of “Followers”; some of those Followers were members of the “Medium Popularity” group, which had its own set of “Followers.” Kyle named the next group “Don’t Care,” in the sense that they do not appear to care about winning popularity among their classmates. Finally, there was the group of “Outsiders.” Since none of these groups seemed congruent with the preppy/redneck division other students had described, I asked him if “redneck” was a category he was familiar with. As we talked, it seemed that he was familiar with the group, but was uncomfortable with the label:

S You didn’t mention rednecks; that’s something other people have mentioned in interviews... Is that a group or category that you’re familiar with?

K Um yeah -- (pauses) -- suppose this is-- (pauses) I don’t know, I just kind of go away from it.

S Uh huh. So that’s a derogatory term.

K Yes.

S I mean that’s like a put-down to call somebody a redneck.

K Yes, definitely.

S Is there another name, is there something else that you could call the group that would be recognized as “rednecks” that wouldn’t be so -- you know, if you don’t want to insult them--

K Just for purposes of categorization, I suppose we can use that term.
Are they a category, or is that --

I suppose it could be a category, if-- um-- it's sort of a division in the "medium popularity" group. They don't really care that much about what the other groups think, but they're a definite group.

Okay. So they don't necessarily mix with other people?

Very little. They don't mix with other groups that much.

Is that by choice, or are they sort of --

Yeah, I think it's a lot by choice. 'Cause see, it's sort of a division between university people, and you know doctors and dentists and all that, and town people basically, and all the services that are around the university. And if you're friends with the university people but your parents don't work for the university you're still basically a university person. But otherwise you're a town person.

I found it interesting that for lack of a neutral term, Kyle had completely omitted the "rednecks" from his discussion of BHS students. And yet he, like others reluctant to use derogatory labels, was certainly aware of both the divisions and the tensions associated with them.

Two students I talked with had recently moved to the area. Neil, who had moved from an urban setting where he had attended a magnet school for the liberal arts, said that when he entered BHS everybody seemed to be in their own little groups. I asked him to say more about those groups:

It depends on what kind of person you are. There are people who are intelligent but don't spend their whole life studying. Then there are people who are intelligent and do spend their whole life studying and doing, like, academic competitions, debate, and stuff like that. So, that's the basic break-up between the two, um, children of professionals. And then there's, um, the more redneck
group, which is different. I don’t know, which, is -- separate. But basically they have little groups that interact with each other and know each other.

The group differences, according to Neil, are not merely social but also show up in academics.

As he talked about his transition to BHS and the differences between his old and new schools, Neil stressed the racial homogeneity of this area. He reported that there seemed to be little race-related tension at BHS, but responded to a question about non-racial tensions among student groups this way:

Among some of the lower classes there might be some friction. Um... the more redneck classes, I guess. But... I’m kind of, there’s kind of a segregation in that sense, between the people who are faculty kids, or the kids whose parents have businesses, or whatever, are professionals; and the lower class... And I don’t know if there’s really any tension, but there’s certainly different segregated social groups. There’s that more than there is racial stuff.

Of all the students I spoke with, Neil was the only one to complain about the academic standards at BHS. Specifically, he was upset with his Advanced Placement history course because he felt that it was taught strictly from a white European male perspective. He also mentioned that in his old school he had been one of the few white students who was friends with blacks and Hispanics in spite of the fact that some people shunned him for crossing those social boundaries. And yet throughout the interview he never expressed concern over the “segregation...between the people who are faculty kids... and the lower class.”

Carrie had moved to Blacksburg when she was in middle school, but for her the transition was different from Neil’s, in that her former school was racially more homogenous than BHS. I asked her how she would describe students at BHS.

C Um, there’s a lot of diversity in, like, the students. So there’s not actually, like-- There’s, like, social groups, but not like, you’re not going to be friends with these
people because they’re different or whatever. I think that the university makes the people closer.

S What kind of diversity?

C Um, people from a lot of different places, you know? Like I have friends from Nigeria, Brazil, all over the place. And in [my old school] you didn’t have that. I think because it’s a big college town you have a lot of professors from other countries and stuff, and so I have, like, I don’t know, I guess from different backgrounds and stuff. And that’s kind of neat. I had never been, um, exposed to that when I was in [my old community].

Carrie spoke freely about race relations at BHS, saying that race was not considered a significant difference or source of tension among students. But, while she acknowledged other categories, she seemed to find it more difficult to talk about them:

C But there are, like, (pause) other groups, not like color or whatever. (pause) Sometimes... There...um... People who are considered “preps” and people who. I don’t know, ...I mean there are like, groups other than ...color....too ...but, I don’t know...

S How would you know: ...would there be visible differences, I mean [if I walked into the school] would I see certain people hanging out together, or ...

C Um, somewhat, but I don’t think... that it would be really obvious, like these people only talk to these people and nobody else, you know? Like if I say, well, these are my friends, and I’m not talking to you because you’re not in my group, or whatever... I don’t think it’s like that.

S Uh huh--

C There are certain, like, groups, like the “brain group” but they’re not like, “I solely hang around with these people, I’m not going to talk to you because I don’t feel you’re classified as my friend group” or whatever. So... It’s not like, obvious, ... If you came in for the first time you wouldn’t see ... these people only
talking to certain people and ignoring the rest of the people. But... I think that that might go on, but not ... not the people that... are in my grade or that I ... whatever...

Carrie, a rising junior whose parents both taught at Tech, was an attractive, athletic girl who had played on the school basketball team and would be on the varsity cheerleading squad that fall. For her, “diversity” meant race and nationality, and these differences were boundaries she was willing and able to cross. Yet, like Kyle, she struggled to find even a name for the “groups other than color.”

Neil also downplayed racial tensions, offering his own theories of the racial harmony he perceived:

I think [racial minorities] are fairly respected, um, I don’t think they meet any kind of open discrimination. For the most part, the people, I think, the students are pretty good about that. Parents apparently a lot less so, but the students for the most part are okay.

But I think in general there’s just so few minorities here, that they feel, um, and there’s no historical reason for minorities to be here, and there hasn’t been a historical tension between, as in like black coal miners and white coal miners, or as in other areas, in agricultural communities and stuff, there’s some tension between races. But because there’s so few, the ones that there are, they can’t necessarily have their own communities, even if they wanted to, um, I don’t know some people say that at Virginia Tech that a lot of black students kind of keep to themselves and the white students, there’s not much... maybe I should put -- In the high school people just like kind of have to -- It really is pretty smooth. I think people generally respect each other, and each other’s ethnic/racial stuff.

Kevin had a different take on the relations between racial groups. And, unlike Carrie, Kevin did have a term for the “other” group:
I guess, a lot of [rednecks] are like racist or whatever. So I guess like, the Blacks, they don’t like the rednecks, and the rednecks don’t like the Blacks. But I don’t think there’s other, like... They usually just stay away from each other, so... ...all the people, like, everybody gets along. it’s like all the, the minorities and like the whites, they all get along. It’s just like, the rednecks are kind of racist, and then like the Blacks don’t really like the rednecks, and so... But I mean, it’s not like it’s, I mean they stay away from each other, they don’t like, fight or whatever.

While there might be some animosity between groups, according to Kevin, their ability to avoid each other sufficiently keeps these tensions in the background. Perhaps that pattern is what leads students to believe that everyone at BHS simply “gets along.”

Duane’s perspective on racism was less casual than what the others had expressed, but, like Kevin, he suggested that it might be for the best if students continue to keep to themselves.

D [Racism] will always have a niche, so to speak. Um, but, you know. I know that’s a very pessimistic attitude, but I mean it’s sort of naive to think that with everything, with all the diversity, you know, generations coming along and stuff like that, I mean as much as we’d like to think that racism will die, it’s one of those things where it’s continued to be -- You know, it’s taught, I think. It’s one of those things where like if your parents say stuff like, “gosh that car almost hit me, oh, well look who’s driving...” you know, “some Black guy...” As long as, you know, some little slips like that, it’ll still get into kids’ heads, they’re always gonna have like those ideas. And, I mean, it’s just, ooo, it’s very scary. But fortunately enough, everyone around the school, they seem to, I don’t know, very -- it’s one of those things again, the different sections sort of help out.

S What do you mean?

D Well, it doesn’t allow for like, a lot of, I mean, it’s sort of, each group stays with their own. I mean, that’s one of those things where it’s like a good and a bad, because say, if one group started mixing with another group and found out what they thought, and what they say, in like normal conversation, I mean, that might create a whole different thing. So in a way, it’s good, in a way it’s bad; because
you’d like everyone to, like, get along and mingle, and what not. I mean, it doesn’t happen. And I mean, I keep saying this, as much as we’d like for it to happen, it just won’t. You can think, oh, well how can they -- the kids these days, they saw what happened in the 60’s and what not, and they know what’s going on, and they know what’s happening. Well that’s right, they did see all that, but I mean, a lot of the people, they tend to ignore it, and like, you know, “blah blah biah, ...they created this situation for themselves” -- you know, speaking about minorities. And you know, you try to educate, you know, say like, how can you be so blind, you know, you can’t see. And I mean, it’s one of those things where you can’t be militant. You can’t be like, “you’re so stupid! why are you such a dumb ass?” you know, you don’t say that. It’s one of those things where you’re like, listen, you know, look at this. And stuff like that. And, I don’t know, it’s one of those -- it’s just diversity. Cultural diversity, so to speak, in the high school. It’s good, but it has its disadvantages as well. It’s kind of like one of those things where it’s like a double-edged sword.

In these passages, Duane and Kevin both seem to contradict themselves and the other students who downplayed the significance of group differences. Here, in fact, they not only acknowledge that there is little interaction among two of the groups (blacks and rednecks), but suggest that such separation is necessary for keeping peace within the school.

Kyle mentioned that one of his teachers had talked about the town/university split:

K That’s something our English teacher told us about who lived here 20 years ago; and actually I think he grew up here, he’s forty something now, and he went to high school 20 some years ago, and he was talking about the university people and the town people and how the division still existed back then.

S And what did he say about that?

K Um, well he said that he personally was a town person, and that he always disliked the university people.
S Did he say why?

K I don't know, I guess he figured that they were snobbish or something.

S Uh huh.

K That's the sort of attitude that I hear a lot of times from people who live in Christiansburg. You know, they think that all the people from Blacksburg are snobbish, and lots of people from Blacksburg think that all the people in Christiansburg are rednecks.

The differences Kyle named between Christiansburg and Blacksburg were also affirmed by other students. Duane, for instance, spoke of BHS saying, "It seems like that we are a liberal high school in a conservative environment." Yet some of the tensions, according to Duane, seemed to be based on misunderstandings rather than real differences.

D I mean I know people who, instead of their senior break went to build houses, like some sort of, like, programs. I mean, we're unselfish, but for some reason we have some sort of, like, snooty, like, attitude portrayal to the other people. And I don't understand why that is. I mean, I guess it's just, I don't know. It's not, it's not -- by no means like an inferiority thing, it's just one of those things where, I don't know, it's like, well "you work at Tech so you think you're all --" If we could eliminate that, I think there'd be a lot more, there'd be a lot more harmony. Ha! I'd like to teach the world to sing...

S (laughs)

D But, you know, I mean that sounds really sort of Shakespearish, but I mean I think if we could eliminate a lot of that animosity, we could work together and all this other stuff. I don't know.

S So it sounds like you think the animosity comes more from the people on the outside who see Blacksburg as being elitist, or whatever

D Well, by no means is it just solely the outside people --
S Right,

D I mean, I know a lot of the Blacksburg people who think, like, "oh look at Christiansburg, Ha ha ha," you know, and stuff like that, you know, it's always present. You know, because you think like, "oh, Christiansburg has cows roaming the school, ha ha ha." I mean, that's one of the things, it works on both parts -- I mean, it takes two, so to speak, to create that animosity. It's us, thinking that, you know, there are people in the school who think, "oh, we're so much better than everyone else." You know, and that's coming out, and over here [outside Blacksburg] we're getting like, "oh you people think you're so bad," you know, and I mean that's clashing, and I mean everything, it happens in everything. And it's just bad.

While Duane seemed to suggest that the Blacksburg/county conflicts could be reduced through better communication and mutual respect, Cory seemed to see the differences as more fundamental and persistent. In describing Christiansburg he immediately brought up Christiansburg for comparison:

C I think in Blacksburg in general there's a lot of diversity... Blacksburg... Cultural diversity... there's so many different influences, you know it's like, I don't know -- Blacksburg itself is a neat place, just because, look at Christiansburg right next door, there's so much more rural influence, and all the places around us, then it's like, right here in the mountains, just Bam! this piece of I don't know, pseudo-suburbia, you know it's, you know. Blacksburg isn't anything like any of neighboring areas around here, more like Northern Virginia in a way.

S Uh huh. How would you describe the differences between Blacksburg and Christiansburg?

C Um... It sounds judgmental --

S Okay,

C You know, for lack of a better term, there's a bunch of rednecks in Christiansburg, you know, rural influence... I don't know, the university has a lot
of influence I think, ...there isn’t quite as much emphasis put on intellectualism, you know, in Christiansburg, you know it’s just, ...

Kyle also used the north/south distinction to describe the differences between Christiansburg and Blacksburg:

We’re sort of a northern enclave here. ... The general view is that everyone in Christiansburg is a redneck, and we’re sort of surrounded. The views of people in Blacksburg are different from the general views around. I mean, Blacksburg votes Democratic all the time I’m sure, just from the opinions of the students and the opinions of a lot of their parents. But you know, Virginia always votes Republican. So, you know, we’re just sort of a different spot.

Kyle and Cory both portrayed Blacksburg as a refuge for “northerners” in the midst of an intellectual/cultural desert. While Duane had denied any “inferiority thing” in the Blacksburg/county relations, these other comparisons are far from neutral.

Kevin told me that he knew several students from Christiansburg High School through playing on regional sports teams. I asked about his impressions of the two schools.

K  I think Blacksburg has more minorities; Christiansburg has more of like, the rednecks or whatever, like that group; there are more like, country people. Then basically it’s about the same, besides that.

S  Same quality, and same --

K  Yeah. I like Blacksburg better, though.

S  Why’s that?

K  Christiansburg is more like a southern-type town, you know. It’s like more of a -- that’s what everybody says. A lot of the so-called rednecks, or whatever. All the -- Blacksburg has got better academics, better school, except for like one --
Christiansburg is better at track, like boys' track, but then every other sport we beat 'em in. And I think Blacksburg -- BHS is supposed to be one of the best academic schools in the state, so... Plus we have Tech here, so it makes it more -- there’s more people, and so...

When I asked Neil about his impressions of the other high schools in the county, he focused on perceived academic differences:

They’re like BHS would be if Virginia Tech didn’t exist. They’re similar in that very few people take the most challenging courses, they don’t offer a lot of them. And the ones they do, a lot of our courses are overcrowded like calculus and history and stuff, and in other schools it’s not even close to being overcrowded. Um, fewer people -- we have more National Merit Finalists and Semi-finalists; and we have the only National Merit Scholar in the region. We have the highest proportion of people going to college, we have the people going to the best colleges. Other places in the region, there will be a few people, but for the most part, they don’t. And so, I think, um, I think for the most part academically BHS dominates any other school in this area, and I think people think people who go here because of the -- generally have more money than people in other parts of the county and the region. So, I mean, since most people in the other areas are not academic, and not particularly intellectual, and they don’t for the most part also... and there isn’t a whole lot of interaction socially between people in different high schools, so... There is really nothing that any other schools or any of the people in the other schools have that make it worthwhile to really try [to get to know them], and they are kind of out of the way, so...

Carrie, who said she met a few students from other schools through cheerleading and sports, offered a similar comparison:

Mmm, I don’t think that -- this is going to sound weird, but -- the schools’ quality isn’t as good as Blacksburg, because -- I don’t know that for a fact, but -- because, Blacksburg’s like, one of the top schools in the nation, Blacksburg High School, or at least that’s what our principal says, and um, so... I think that the students, or
whatever, they're like... um... I guess more diverse students, like we have, um... people getting scholarships for forensics, people getting scholarships for sports, you know, we have people going to Princeton, Yale, Harvard, all these, um, all the big schools around, all kind of schools... And we have, like, um... scholarships to North Carolina... stuff like that for sports.

Duane also praised the accomplishments of BHS students and alumni, listing awards won and prestigious universities attended. Only Robin offered a different point of view:

S What impressions do you have of those other schools?

R Um, well I've heard some of those other schools have some better computers than we do, some better computer systems -- I'm not sure where it was, I forgot, but they said they were actually doing some better stuff on their technology in the classrooms, that they had more computers... Um, 'cause we didn't deal with computers very much at all this last year, 'cause there wasn't much for us to do, but in the library there are some computers... But, um, I don't know too much about the other schools.

Throughout each of these interviews, the students were clear about their preference for living in Blacksburg over other parts of the county, and their appreciation of BHS as compared with other schools. Only Cory, who has no connection with Tech, mentioned a negative aspect:

I don't know. Growing up in Blacksburg, I don't know if it's a good thing or not. Because with so many of the professors' kids running around, snobbishness is something I encounter a lot.

He continued:

There's so much emphasis put on success... I don't know... You know, so many of the people are professors' kids... Even in the elementary school, you know, it was obvious, they're very cliquish.
The students consistently attributed the differences among student groups to intelligence and academic interest. Sometimes this was expressed in their descriptions of the groups themselves, as Neil did when asked to elaborate on the groups he named:

"Um, the children of professionals are the ones who are taking the classes I'm taking, which are the most challenging classes. And so, they're the ones I always see at parties; they're the ones who ... eat lunch together, and belong to social groups, cliques, stuff like that." When Robin described the "other," the non-Preppy students, she said, "Well some people call them hicks, you know, the country people, but, just, I guess most of them aren't as smart, they're in the lower level classes, but, a lot of people just call them hicks, rednecks... There are several names." Later she continued:

I think you can tell more of the people who are in the lower level classes, who need more help, a lot of them don't -- I know a lot of people don't like, really care about learning and stuff, so they don't do very well in their classes; and, uh, I think, ...they also live out more, you know, in the country, farther out, and I think that -- you can tell more the people who are more into studying, more into doing their work and getting good grades, I think, more the people from Tech, parents from Tech, or just um, being around this area. I think you can tell that there's more influence there, on some of the people. I guess, uh, it's just, the people, you know who work at Tech or work around Tech, can tell... the parents... I think they have more influence on their kids, to tell them, you know, sort of showing that you want to work, you want to do good in school, and stuff. I know my parents have always done that.

Robin's response suggests that a person's geographic location influences his or her academic achievement. She also voiced the assumption that rural parents are inherently less supportive of their children's academic efforts than are parents who live closer to Tech.

Kyle refined these assumptions somewhat, emphasizing that the correlation he sees between parental occupation and student achievement are not hard-and-fast rules:
So, do you see there being a real difference between these people, or just --

I don’t know, I think it’s more in their minds than anything else, and a lot about their attitudes toward school work. I mean, it’s easier for town people to shift into the sort of slacker class than it would be for the university people. Because you know, if your father or mother or both are professors at Tech, then they’re not going to let you you know, get F’s on papers and things. Otherwise you might get away with it.

So it’s not necessarily that the people associated with Tech are smarter, but they’re just more motivated or more encouraged or something?

Yeah. Lot’s of times they’re smarter, but other times they’re just more motivated. You know, motivation is pretty much a constant, whether it comes from within or without. They’re motivated by something.

Hmm. And the town people aren’t?

Well sometimes they are. I mean, there are lots of them that are quite intelligent and do well in school, but it’s easier for them to you know, a greater percentage are in the sort of slacker group.

For Kyle, academic achievement was one key to fitting in socially among students at BHS. When I asked whether the students he identified as “Outsiders” were in that group because they rejected the others or because they were rejected by them, he said it was the latter:

That’s basically what the outsiders are. They sort of hang out with the Don’t Care group, because they don’t really have a chance anywhere else.

And could that be because they maybe aren’t as outgoing or extroverted, so that they’re not going to fit into these groups?

Yeah. And lots of times they aren’t as intelligent.

Oh really.
You know, they don’t tend to do as well in school. So um, if you do well in school generally you’ll fit into some group here [on the upper end of his diagram].

According to Kyle, involvement in school sports also can influence a student’s social standing:

Athletes are generally up there (pointing to the “Popular Group” on the diagram he had drawn), especially if they’re stars. Then they’re almost automatically there.

Is that for all sports?

Um, except for things like golf. I mean, golf doesn’t automatically make you popular or things like that. But football or basketball; baseball doesn’t really have a lot of influence. I guess soccer has some influence. But mainly the most popular sports have the most influence.

Other students corroborated this perception: for instance, Neil mentioned that “athletes run the school,” especially football players.

I asked Kyle if there was any correlation between students’ popularity and their parents’ income.

It’s not always directly related. But generally the popular people tend to be higher income, but not necessarily. And there are plenty of high-income people that aren’t popular. And that’s just another trend, not a real rule.

Uh huh. And are there also low-income people who are with the popular group?

Um, not as many. Right now in the high school there’s sort a low-income popular group, and a middle- to high- income popular group.

Oh, so there’s like, two separate --

As well as, you know, some low-income people that are with the high-income group, but not as many high-income people with the low-income group.
I also asked about any correlation between parents’ income and academic achievement.

K Well, um, generally the lower income groups tend to be more toward the slacker end, and the higher income groups more towards the brown noser end. But it’s not really a rule, you know there are plenty of exceptions to that. And um, I don’t know it’s just a trend, I guess.

S Do you have any idea why that is?

K Well, um, generally I guess it has to do with since they don’t have as much money their parents probably don’t have as much education and probably don’t put as much value in it. And whether they do or not is you know, influenced a lot by what their parents think. And, you know, what their expectations are from the beginning, you know, what they think they can be. You know, if you don’t think you can be an astronaut then you’re going to be a postman or something.

It was evident that although most of these students believed there was little animosity among students, that did not necessarily mean that there was open interaction across group lines. To get at this distinction, I asked Kevin if he could conceivably go through four years of high school without having much contact with particular students.

I can imagine not hanging out with people like, out of school. I guess in school, ‘cause the way my schedule is, I have classes with like, all different types of people. ‘Cause I mean, like you’ve got the really smart people in Algebra II and Biology. And then the band people are in band, so I know them. And then like, the normal people would be in my college English class, or whatever. And then, auto mechanics has like the, not really necessarily rednecks, but you know, the southern people. ‘Cause there’s like tons of them in that class. You know and then, in Spanish II, that’s like a bunch of juniors. Last year I took Spanish and it had like a bunch of juniors and seniors too.

I asked him to elaborate on the “rednecks” in his auto mechanics class.
K They’re not necessarily rednecks. But they’re, there are some people that you’d most likely not like, hang out with or something like that. ‘Cause you know they, they have like their own group. They’re all like, I don’t know. They just have their own group. But. I mean they’re fine. They’re nice or whatever. And most of them are in my auto mechanics class. A lot of people take auto mechanics ‘cause it’s like easy or whatever. Plus you have to take a vocational class. You have to take at least like one or two years of vocational classes.

S Hm mmm. So how are those people different from you and the other people that you hang out with?

K Well, I mean... They’re more... They don’t really care like, much about school or whatever. They just, I don’t know. They’re more like southern, and like country or whatever. It’s hard to explain. I’m not, like, trying to say I think they’re -- I’m not saying like, redneck. It’s easiest to describe them as like redneck. But it’s not bad or anything, it’s just what they are. You know? It’s hard to explain.

S Yeah I know.

K I guess you got to do it like, if you see them you know who I’m talking about. You know they have like, racing shirts like, “Dale Erhardt” or whatever, always wearing caps, and they dip a lot, and they have like either really short hair, or like long hair here and short hair here, you know? Kind of like that. I don’t know.

S But they don’t show up in your other classes?

K ‘Cause usually, like usually they’re not too smart or whatever. So they usually take like, basic classes, like below college. So they wouldn’t be in my Algebra II or biology class or my English class. I guess they could take Spanish II, but I’ve never had one in my Spanish class. And then they definitely wouldn’t take band. So I mean, I don’t know how many classes... Gym and PE, and auto mechanics, and that’s it.

S Do they play on sports teams?

K Not usually.
S Okay. So, what do you think -- do people who don’t do well in school end up hanging out with that group, or do people --

K No --

S -- or do people who hang out with that group not do well in school?

K It’s not like, it’s just -- I don’t know, you don’t really hang out with that group unless you’re already, it’s hard to -- They’re not really like a “group.” It’s just how they are, like how they were raised or whatever. They’re just, it’s hard to explain. I mean no one... People that hang out with them are already like part of them. They don’t like, they’re not like, um, they don’t like.... I don’t know, they’ve always been like that their whole lives.

According to Kevin’s account, students do not become classified as “rednecks” on the basis of achievement or interest; rather, from Kevin’s perspective they are born into this social group. At one point Kyle made a similar point, saying that group “membership” happens very quickly, and that it’s very difficult to change initial affiliations.

For a different perspective on the formation of these social categories, I cite several excerpts from my interviews with Duane. Duane had gone to Prices Fork Elementary, which is the only Blacksburg-area school whose attendance area includes only rural communities. He explained that most of his friends from elementary school were tracked into lower level classes when they entered middle school:

...what happened to my other friends were, they were grouped with some of the same people from the other elementary schools, in like, the Level 2, or whatever. And they got new friends, they became closer friends with people that, from the elementary school that maybe they hadn’t been as close before. They managed to be right there, and we managed to be up here. And from right there, it was sort of like, non-racial segregation. You see what I’m saying? It was, intellectual segregation, or intelligence segregation. I mean, it was one of those things where, lunch time was like the only time -- lunch time, and electives. You never had classes, you never were able to do in-class assignments with some of your friends.
and stuff. And it was strange, because it was like being in a whole new town, not knowing anyone. You had to mingle and something had to happen. And fortunately enough for me, something did happen.

But as Duane continued describing his transition from elementary to middle school he expressed doubt that tracking decisions were based solely on students’ academic ability:

D  And, you know, it was, I was lucky enough to meet people that knew, and you know, didn’t think that I was some redneck from the country. Um, then again, there were the people who like came from Prices Fork or whatever, and they were you know they were put into these different levels, and you know, the community, and I mean all around... it seems like from the very outset, that we were put into classifications that weren’t exactly justified. You see what I’m saying?

S  Yeah.

D  So I mean even from elementary school we were sectioned up, and we were put into this and that. And I mean I didn’t...

S  Well, how do you think you avoided being classified with the people you had gone to Prices Fork with?

D  Well, in elementary school, I was, I made good grades and what not, I studied and stuff like that. And you know, a lot of this stuff came easy to me. And I can understand that, you know, a certain degree of it, a certain degree does go with you know your intelligence -- The only thing, I look back now and wonder, how did they know where to put us. It seems like for me and a couple other people I know, I mean, I was always the outgoing type.

... I was always outgoing, you know, making jokes, blah blah blah, you know; I always seemed to, you know, lighten things up, and I did fairly well in school, so I mean -- I wasn’t your typical class clown, you know, like, I make jokes because I be bad, you know, stuff like that, it wasn’t anything like that. It was just, you know, I had a -- I was very gregarious. And I think that that in a way helped me get out of the stereotyping of the Prices Fork student. That and I have had tremendous support from my home, you know my mom and dad always
supported me. And I carried that over into what I did, like my assignments and what not, so I was a fairly good student coming out of elementary school. I mean, you know, I could draw within the lines, I guess. But, that was fairly easy, I think that helped me too...

But some of the people like, you know, some of my best friends, -- I was always like, you know we'll have class together all the time, we'll be best friends forever. But then right in the middle of school we get mixed up. They start -- I mean, it was so, I don't know, bad. I didn't like it at all. And I mean, it was sad. I thought my mom could tell me everything. But, you know. She was at that point where, you know, she knew what was going on, and I was too young to understand. So, thankfully, everything worked out to where I got put into the advanced group, or the head group or whatever it was. But I just didn't understand why it was. And I think part, it was in part that I was an okay student, and you know I think it was also that I was very outgoing.

As an example of his gregarious personality Duane mentioned his speech to the School Board:

And, if you think about it, I mean how many high school students do you know that would -- I don't mean to toot my own horn here, --but I personally don't know anyone who get up in front of all those people. A lot of my friends play football, and what not, and I don't mean to stereotype football players, but, I mean they can't get up in German class and give a dialogue. So I know that some of them wouldn't be able to speak in front of -- especially high-ranking school officials, and stuff like that, in front of all those people. So, I mean, I think it's paid off, being very outgoing... I use that word a lot.

In large part, then, Duane credited his personality for his success in school. At the same time, he was aware that others didn't necessarily need such a gift to secure the same opportunities and recognition.

Duane told two stories describing specific points in his transition to social and academic acceptance in the middle school:
One day, we were reading the book called *Tuck Everlasting*. I don’t know if you’re familiar with that, but the plot is, these people discover a fountain of youth, and they drink from it and they never age, okay. And our teacher gave us a writing assignment in class, you know, “would you like to do this, yes or no, and explain why.” So she gave us 20 minutes to go through and write. And I wrote for like 5 minutes and I was done, and I was waiting and I was waiting... And she goes, does anyone want to read their responses. You know, I raised my hand right off. And I said, “No, I would not want to be like, I wouldn’t want to have eternal life and never age.” And she wanted to know why. And I said, “Well, because I wouldn’t get those free drinks at Hardees.” And so right there, the entire class busts out laughing, you know, the teacher, Ms. B. was great, I loved her, and she was like, okay, alright. And that, that right there sort of broke the ice for me. There was a group of guys that sit over here in the corner. You know, they were cool. ‘Cause you know I’d walk in and they’d laugh. And, you know, it was cool, because that sort of broke the ice.

And then one day, I went to get out of my desk, right, and for some reason I got stuck, and I went over. Bam. So the desk was propping me up, and I couldn’t move. So I was like, ehh, ehh -- it was kind of strange. I managed to tilt the desk over and get up, and you know, the whole class is laughing, and ... And so one of the guys ... walks in front of my desk and I go, “hey watch out there’s a big crater there,” from where I fell. And I always made fun of that. And he’s like, “oh yeah, oh yeah.” So from then on, you know there for a couple of days the joke was “hey, crater,” ha ha. So that right there, those series of events managed to get me into this little group, the group of the guys, right. So I mean, from there on I was with them, I did things with them, you know we had sleep-overs, we played basketball, and all this other stuff. And it was really cool. Because that -- you know, I’ve been fortunate to have, you know, to be able to blend in with people and to mingle. So, you know. That was cool. Right there I managed to get in with them. And that’s what helped me.

While many students seem to assume that “country people” are inherently different from the children of professors, Duane had seemingly little difficulty making friends with people who had not grown up on farms, once the ice was broken.
In large part, Duane attributes his success to parental support, in spite of their different backgrounds.

I owe a lot of it to like my parents, because they’ve always been like, “do whatever you want. We’ll support you, even though we might not like it.” They’ve always been like that. I mean, I could tell my mom that I’m in AP history; she wouldn’t know that from like, Advanced Dog Sledding, but she’d be like, “oh great, how are you doing, you better study,” something like that. Because, you know, neither of my parents finished high school, okay. And so it’s one of the classic examples like, “well, I want you to turn out better than I ever did.” But you know, I mean that’s good -- I mean, there’s nothing, there’s no sympathy, I know this is going to sound mean but there’s so sympathy because my mom and dad have done very well for themselves being from the background that they came from, and what not. I mean, I’m -- that right there is an example, I mean -- If I go to a 4-year college and graduate, I will be the first Walters in my family to do that. Which is always nice, ... But, it’ll be fun, I look forward to it...

Hopefully, well...

In Duane’s case, at least, his parents’ educational level, occupations, and geographic location did not make them unsupportive or disinterested when it came to Duane’s academic achievement, as other students had assumed.

In a follow-up interview with Duane I asked him to elaborate on his views of the tracking that he observed in Middle School.

S

In that transition from elementary to middle school and then to high school also, people are being put at those different levels, and they say that it’s academic-related, but you don’t feel that’s true necessarily?

D

Well I feel that, not necessarily, yeah. I mean, some of the things I can understand, like you know, you know if you have accelerated students, a student that does exceptionally well, then you know, by all means, regardless of elementary school or whatever... I do feel that even the teachers, the administrators, have preconceived ideas of the students, where they get them. you know, what they’re like, and what have you. I mean I’ve heard certain instances...
where people are like, "oh yeah, I teach this general class, it's terrible, they never do anything..." And actual teachers saying that! You know, that just reinforces my idea that you know, it is sort of the students' ability, but it's also a matter of preconceived ideas coming. I don't know. That's personally what I believe. It might be ten miles away from the truth.

S  Do you think many people realize that that goes on?

D  Probably not, because they're so used to seeing it all the time. So I don't think it's -- it's one of those things that's subliminally happening; I mean, not that I'm special because I notice it, I mean, a lot of people notice it, but uh, I mean, it's just one of those things that people have pushed like I said, back into the corner of their minds, they don't want to talk about it.

S  Uh huh. But why do you think that you've noticed it; because you went through it?

D  Yeah. I mean I was right there as it happened, I mean... I went from geeky kid who wore ringed socks that matched his outfit, to uh, you know, student council president. I mean, that didn't happen overnight. I think there was a point, honestly, I mean this is going to sound really dramatic, but I mean there was a point in my life where I just said, it's what you have. You know, I mean... When I was in middle school I was a little chubbier, a little chunkier, so you know -- Whatever I had to do to make friends or whatever, I mean, not sacrificing like, morals, and stuff like that to make friends, but you know, it's what's going to happen. There's no use in having an attitude about some things, and that's what I realized. So I just say you know, basically to hell with it, I'm just going to be myself, and I mean I don't care what other people think. And I mean that's paid off great! Many dividends has that paid. So I think it's just one of those things where individually you have to experience it. I mean if you went out here and talked to a professor's son or daughter, I mean they've been with their little group all the way through high school, I mean of course; I mean personally I think they wouldn't notice it at all, because they haven't been there. But I've experienced it, I've lived it. (laughs) So, you know, I see what they're talking about.
Duane had made efforts to keep in contact with friends from all the different groups he interacted with, including the people who had been in his classes in elementary school. I asked whether he felt he had sacrificed a lot to do so.

D Yeah! I sacrificed, you know, not necessarily... It was one of those things where I knew what I was giving up... I was giving up a good time with my other pals, and I was afraid -- the thing that scared me most was um, you know, the fact that maybe, maybe I would lose these friends. So no matter what, you know, I always tried to stay friends with everyone. I mean I do stuff with this group, I talk to this group at Church or whatever, you know... Intermingling is good, I mean, friends and pals, I mean for me there are no groups. I have friends in, you know, I have friends everywhere. I don't mean to sound, like, arrogant, but I mean, it's the truth. I work with people that a lot of my friends in high school would never talk to. You know, I work with them, I talk to them, and everything.

S So has that worked out in the end, that you've been able to keep those friends that you went through elementary school with, and there's no resentment or anything like that?

D No. At most, they probably see it as.... I like to see it as being an example almost. Something like, never get caught up in like, "oh well, you know, I can't do student council, because I have auto mech." That doesn't matter to me! I mean, you have ideas just as much as the next person. I mean if it has to do with hats in school, to helping out the needy, you know, it's still important. And I try to emphasize that every time I see them, because there's not a day goes by that I don't see one of my friends, any one really, I ask them, just like those guys up there [referring to 3 guys he'd been talking to in line a before the interview]. You know they were talking about student council. So I was like, sure, you guys gonna sign up? They were like I don't know. I was like, hey, why not? It's gonna be a fun time, I'm gonna be in there, and um.... You know, so it's just one of those things where I encourage them to do the same things. I don't think there's any resentment. Or there might be, but I haven't heard of it. I'd certainly like to hear it... They don't seem to be...
In that second interview I asked Duane what he thought might account for the reluctance most students seem to have about discussing the social groups and their interrelations.

Could it be that people are simply unaware of these tensions?

I don’t think so at all. I think it’s, It’s very present. It’s very well defined. Um, see, that’s where -- see, personally, and this is how I view it for myself, I’m one of those people who, and this is how I think that some of the people even administrators you know, at the high school, see me. I was a redneck who made it. That’s basically the bottom line. I shed that stereotype, and I sort of built my own sort of personality or not like clique, but rather, you know I shed the you know, country boy type of thing, and I slowly you know, adapted to, you know, what was considered to be normal. But you know before I was normal. But the thing is, I think it is very well defined. And I think that as far as my circumstance goes, it’s one of those things where I really, I really sort of blame the educational system for a lot of the stuff, now that I look back at it. Because from the moment we leave our elementary school, you know, being pals, I mean I went to Prices Fork, and I mean that was looked upon as being one of the worst places to go, even though I loved it. But coming right out of Prices Fork, me and I think 3 other girls were placed in Level 1, which was the advanced level. All the rest of my grade -- really, my best friends, were placed in like Level 2 and even Level 3. And you know I sort of understood that, because, you know some people progress at a slower rate or a faster rate, or what have you. But as far as you know, my friends go, I was sort of upset about that. I tried to ask my parents, and it was just one of those things where, “oh you know, you learn better than them” or whatever. So from the moment we got into middle school it started. The sort of stereotypes. I’d like to say, like, educational segregation, I think I’ve used that term before.

Why, then, are people reluctant to talk about it?

I think a lot of people are reluctant to talk about it because they have ridiculed the other people. You know? They might have said something like, “oh look at that redneck over there,” or “look at that redneck, he’s dipping” or whatever. You know whatever, or what have you, whatever you say, offhand comments, you know and I mean people have consciences, you know, those things might bother
them, and I can understand why they might be sort of apprehensive before they say that, but -- I mean I really don’t know why, I mean it’s there. If they can’t see it, evidently they’re just pushing it to the back or whatever.

Summary

In general, students seem reluctant to talk about social groupings among their peers, and tend to downplay their significance. But when pressed, those I spoke with named differences between the “preps,” who are associated with the university, and the “rednecks,” who live in the rural parts of the county. The main distinction among their peers that these students name is academic ability: preps are smart and do well in school, while rednecks are dumb and/or don’t care about school. Figure 4.1 summarizes the categories named by students and the characteristics associated with them. In their accounts, students attributed these differences to natural rather than social circumstances: rednecks do not acquire their characteristics through participation in social contexts like schools, but rather, according to one student, they have “been like that their whole lives.” Ironically, these views are expressed by students who are quite articulate in expressing anti-racist views as well as openness to religious differences among people. The next chapter explores this construction of social categories as well as issues raised in previous chapters.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Category names</strong></th>
<th><strong>Characteristics</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>professors' sons and daughters</td>
<td>intelligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preppy</td>
<td>take most challenging courses; college-bound</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>children of professionals</td>
<td>parents have more influence on them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brain Group</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nerdy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>country people</td>
<td>don't have the same interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rednecks</td>
<td>don't mix with other groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hicks</td>
<td>racist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>aren't as smart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>slackers; less motivated in school; don't care about learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in lower level classes, take automechanics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lower income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>southern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>wear caps, dip (tobacco)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>not college bound; not athletes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>minorities</td>
<td>don't like rednecks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blacks</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skateboarders</td>
<td>hang out downtown</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4.1.** SUMMARY OF SOCIAL CATEGORIES AND THEIR CHARACTERISTICS, AS IDENTIFIED BY BHS STUDENTS
Chapter V
The Politics of Identity

The purpose of this chapter is to revisit questions raised throughout this work, discussing them this time in terms of a theoretical framework based in participatory democracy.

Introduction

Each of the narratives of the last four chapters shows how groups define themselves and each other in various contexts. Overall, there is a divide between the university community and the rest of the county which persists rhetorically in spite of the evidence that those boundaries are not fixed, and in spite of the commonalities and common interests among members of each group. The university community tends to characterize itself as progressive, liberal, diverse, professional, well-educated, affluent, and "cultured," while defining those outside its boundaries as conservative, homogenous, blue-collar, less educated, less wealthy, and religious fundamentalist. The rural community, on the other hand, describes itself as down-to-earth, Christian, "ordinary people," in contrast to the university (Blacksburg) community which is transient, controlling, powerful, and unresponsive (see Figure 5.1).

Although these two groups and the differences between them are widely recognized as sources of local tension, conflict, and disparity, they rarely are mentioned in the context of discussions on diversity. The Human Relations Council discussed in Chapter III, for instance, consisted of twenty one community organizations but did not include any groups associated with the rural parts of the county or agricultural interests. Furthermore, when town/country differences do surface in discussions, they are not typically addressed in action. In the Coalition for Community and with Focus 2006,
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements made ABOUT people identified with the UNIVERSITY public</th>
<th>Statements made BY people identified with the COUNTY/RURAL public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mainstream</td>
<td>special interest group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inclusive, tolerant</td>
<td>anti-Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more educated, more affluent, higher paying professional,</td>
<td>downing the school system; cost the system money by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>executive, or managerial occupations</td>
<td>demanding own way; concerned with procedures, not morals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diverse</td>
<td>small, powerful, unresponsive group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>trying to run everything</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anti-semetic</td>
<td>concerned with morals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>religious far-right activists</td>
<td>everyday people, people who live in the boonies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>special interest group</td>
<td>long-time residents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>militant minority</td>
<td>majority</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5.1. Terms used to characterize polarized groups
disparities and tensions between the university and rural populations were described as important local issues, but neither the School Board nor the Coalition for Community have included these concerns in their plans for action.

In Chapter II I asked, Why is there no public discussion of the apparent differences between these polarized groups? Here, however, I reframe that question by examining the assumption that there must be “a public” for such a discussion to take place. In doing so, I draw on the work of Nancy Fraser, who suggests that there are, in fact, multiple publics instead of one public, and that this is healthy for pluralistic democratic community.¹ If one accepts the idea of multiple publics, which I will elaborate on momentarily, the task is to look at how these publics are constructed, how diversity is defined within each, and how interactions between and among different publics are facilitated or limited.

In this chapter, then, I look again at some of the questions raised throughout this work, discussing them this time in terms of multiple publics and participatory democracy. In the first section, I introduce Fraser’s theory of multiple publics, and discuss what that idea might mean in terms of participatory democracy. The next three sections examine some of the mechanisms which generate multiple publics and sustain the boundaries between them. Those sections are followed by a discussion of how multicultural education might contribute to interaction among multiple publics in ways that foster participatory democracy.

Multiple Publics and Participatory Democracy

In “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” Nancy Fraser critiques Jurgen Habermas’s notion of the public

¹Fraser, 1990.
sphere. According to Fraser, the “public sphere” in Habermas’s sense “designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction.” While calling the general concept of the public sphere “indispensable to critical theory,” Fraser argues that Habermas’s particular conception needs reconstruction. Here, I briefly describe two main points of Fraser’s reconstruction, and suggest how those concepts might be helpful in understanding the dynamics of the community I have described so far in this work.

Fraser’s critique is based in a concept of democracy where broad participation is a chief concern. While she does not specifically invoke John Dewey, Fraser’s views seem compatible with his two criteria for democratic association. Dewey asks, “How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association?” Fraser’s discussion of the public sphere concerns how to maximize the number and variety of interests and the interplay among “forms of association.” The primary problem for Fraser is that the “public sphere” where democratic dialogue is assumed to take place can never be a neutral space in which inequalities among participants can be effectively bracketed and set aside; rather, there remain “informal impediments to participatory parity that can persist even after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate.” For instance, in any society where relations of dominance and subordination exist in the forms of racism, classism, and sexism, those relations persist in “public” arenas and affect interactions among participants there. In Montgomery County, public discussions and decisions are officially open to all on an equal basis, but there is a general perception that those

---

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 57.
4 Ibid., p. 57.
6 Fraser, 1990, p. 63.
affiliated with the university have a stronger voice than others. Several examples of this perception can be seen in the dispute over the naming of the school holidays described in Chapter II: at a School Board meeting, one speaker complained that all those who spoke in favor of secular names were from Blacksburg, and reminded the Board members that "this is Montgomery County, not just Blacksburg"; a man who identified himself as a "railroad maintenance-of-way worker" wrote a letter to the editor claiming that he welcomed the "learned men" of the university to "speak forcefully for religious teaching in the public schools"; a woman from the county organized the petition for electing school boards because "she and other county residents believe county schools are controlled by a small, powerful, unresponsive group" -- namely, the people of Blacksburg. In each case, citizens expressed that they did not perceive their voices to be equally as powerful as others', even though all are officially welcome in the public arena.

Fraser's second point builds on the argument above. Given that "it is not possible to insulate special discursive arenas from the effects of societal inequality; and that where societal inequality persists, deliberative processes in public spheres will tend to operate to the advantage of dominant groups and to the disadvantage of subordinates,"7 subordinate groups benefit from constituting separate publics. Fraser uses the term subaltern counterpublics "in order to signal that they are parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."8 The Christian Coalition, the Coalition for Community, and Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens might all be considered subaltern counterpublics, since each developed around issues or philosophies that seemed not to receive adequate attention in the dominant public sphere. Multiple publics, then, expand the discursive space by

---

7 Fraser, 1990, p. 66.
8 Ibid., p. 67.
allowing groups that are marginalized or excluded from the dominant public an arena to define themselves and develop collective voices.

The point above is especially applicable to stratified societies, whose "basic institutional framework generates unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination." But multiple publics are also essential to more egalitarian societies, which Fraser defines as "classless societies without gender or racial divisions of labor" but which are not necessarily homogenous. The reason for this is that public spaces have cultures of their own: they have languages, styles of interaction, and other rules which are not "equally hospitable to any possible form of cultural expression." Fraser writes:

...public life in egalitarian, multi-cultural societies cannot consist exclusively in a single, comprehensive public sphere. That would be tantamount to filtering diverse rhetorical and stylistic norms through a single, overarching lens. Moreover, since there can be no such lens that is genuinely culturally neutral, it would effectively privilege the expressive norms of one cultural group over others, thereby making discursive assimilation a condition for participation in public debate. ...In general, then, we can conclude that the idea of an egalitarian, multi-cultural society only makes sense if we suppose a plurality of public arenas in which groups with diverse values and rhetorics participate. By definition, such a society must contain a multiplicity of publics.

While all publics have discursive rules which govern interactions, two aspects of school board meetings exemplify how these rules can restrict participation. The first is the board's provision for hearing citizens' comments. The first meeting of each month begins with a thirty minute public address session, during which individuals are allowed

---

9 Ibid., p. 66.
10 Ibid., p. 68.
11 Ibid., p. 69.
12 Ibid., p. 69.
up to three minutes to address the Board. Clearly, some topics cannot be adequately expressed in three minutes. And since the public is not invited to contribute to the Board’s deliberations, speakers are only able to express concerns after the board has discussed or acted on an item (i.e. at the next month’s meeting). Although restricting citizen input in these ways may ensure orderly meetings, the policy essentially limits “participation” to an observer role. Another policy, to conduct meetings according to “Robert’s Rules of Order,” can even limit effective observation for some. In the Foreword to a manual on these rules, Henry Robert III explains their intent:

Parliamentary procedure, properly used, provides the means whereby the affairs of an organization or club can be controlled by the general will within the whole membership. The “general will,” in this sense, does not always imply even near unanimity or “consensus,” but rather the right of the deliberate majority to decide. Complementary to this right is the right of the minority -- at least a strong minority -- to require the majority to be deliberate -- that is, to act according to its considered judgment after a full and fair “working through” of the issues involved.\footnote{Robert. 1971, p. iii, italics in original.}

Robert’s statement implies that these rules are meant to facilitate participation and ensure a hearing for as many viewpoints as possible. But it can be difficult to follow what is happening and why in a meeting, when the procedures have not been explained to the audience. While those whose cultural experiences include participating in business, legal, or academic meetings or similar situations may be familiar and comfortable with these rules, those who do not know these procedures often find the meetings incomprehensible and may eventually choose not to even attend. Even if these particular policies were changed, school board meetings would still be non-neutral spaces where some styles, issues, languages, and backgrounds would be favored over others. Given these inevitable constraints, it is important that other publics exist, such as parent-teacher
associations, student governments, teacher organizations, the NAACP, and the Coalition for Community, where non-School Board members can deliberate over school policies and issues.

It is not enough, however, to create subaltern counterpublics where people and groups can deliberate amongst themselves around particular issues and interests. In a democratic society, inter-public interaction and contestation is essential, in order to provide channels for subaltern counterpublics to challenge the discourses of the wider public. Without such interaction, marginalized groups and interests remain marginalized, and discourses which create inequalities are allowed to persist. For instance, if alternate publics such as parent-teacher associations, student governments, teacher organizations, and so on discussed school policy issues only amongst themselves, the existence of those publics would have no impact on actual policy decisions. The power of these groups depends on the opportunity for inter-public interaction -- in this case, interaction between the subaltern counterpublics and the school board, which has the authority to make policy decisions.

But one of the most striking observations to come from my research on the Montgomery County community is the general lack of substantive interaction between the two “main” publics, namely the university public and the rural public. In actuality of course, neither of these categories is monolithic and they are not mutually exclusive. But I use these broad labels because the distinction between rural and town residency was brought up most often when people described differences within the county’s population -- and especially in conflicts where the county’s population polarizes. In fact, interaction between these publics seems to occur only in the event of conflict, and on those occasions, such as in the school holiday name controversy, the interaction tends to consist of shouting slogans instead of dialoguing. In the following three sections I draw on my
data as well as relevant literature to explore some of the mechanisms that create and sustain the separate publics.

**Discursive Definitions: Rednecks and Appalachians**

University and rural publics use “discursive practices” to distance themselves from one another. By this phrase I mean the practical and rhetorical processes of defining those who are “different” from oneself. “Discourses” are vocabularies, categories, and practices that divide the world up into meaningful units. “Rural” and “Appalachian” are categories in what is by far the most powerful national discourse utilized in Montgomery County. Quoting Lick, Sullins, Vogler and Mays note that “rural America suffers from an image problem stemming from the perception that ‘... ‘rural’ often connotes a lack of ability, of culture, or of other qualities rather than a viable alternative to an urban setting.”

This negative image of rural life is compounded for rural Appalachians: “In the past century a stereotype has emerged portraying Appalachian people as ‘“hillbillies”: poor, ignorant, lazy, and sometimes violent.”

According to Allen Batteau, “most of the image-making took place in the discourse of an educated elite outside of the mountains. The image makers had their own motivations, and the southern mountaineers were convenient pawns for them in some larger games they were playing.” Sally Ward Maggard elaborates on that idea, pointing out that while the “Appalachian problem” is due in part to the fact that the residents do not control the region’s natural resources, the situation is more complicated:

The economic and political power associated with patterns of ownership and control is integrally related to another form of power -- the power to set the terms of a community’s self-understanding. People with that power fashion the tools

---

14Lick, 1985, p. 5.
16Shapiro, 1978.
we use to interpret everyday life. They control access to information, and they influence values and self-perceptions. In short, through a series of subtle and complex processes, they wield a form of cultural power.

The processes involved in shaping consciousness and situationally defining knowledge are complicated. As powerful interests strive to universalize their own beliefs, they attempt to use and influence a whole range of social structures and institutions -- such as schools, churches, unions, the family, and the media. Taken together, these institutions -- the cultural apparatus of a society -- produce commonsense notions of what "reality" is like.  

One example of such outside interests "shaping consciousness" is what Batteau calls the "mass production of 'Appalachia,'" which occurs through television programs like the Beverley Hillbillies and Dukes of Hazard as well as movies, country music, and "handicraft" stores.  

Although my informants often referred to the non-university people as "rural," they did not use the term "Appalachian" (see Figure 5.1). Nevertheless, since this region is considered part of Appalachia, examining the category of "rural Appalachians" in particular provides insights into the way a national discourse, which both romanticizes and disparages its members, affects interactions at the local level. The boundary that is generated by the discourse’s contradictory images of Appalachians distances "us" (the university community) from "them" in two ways: 1) by defining them in an aesthetic fashion, as an art form to be viewed from a distance; and 2) by defining them as people with different needs, values, and attitudes from us.

The "aesthetic view" of Appalachians is one which romanticizes the hardness of the region’s history and celebrates the pioneering traits of the people who endured it. This was certainly the primary theme at Coal Miner’s Day, where images of hardworking miners were conjured up through songs, stories, photographs, and memorabilia. In the

---

Foreword to *Appalachian Ways*, a book prepared and published by the Appalachian Regional Commission, Harry Teter sums up this image as he characterizes Appalachians as "a proud, independent people, bound to the land and their past by a strong sense of place and belonging, people who tended to regard the rest of the world with equal portions of shyness and suspicion."\(^{20}\) This image is affirmed by Loyal Jones, a teacher, administrator, writer and storyteller from Berea College in Kentucky. In a piece entitled "Appalachian Humor," Jones names the following as traits that characterize the Appalachian: religious devotion, modesty, independence and self-reliance reinforced by stubborn pride, personalism, and strong family ties.\(^{21}\) Apparently, this image of self-sufficiency and moral righteousness is not new. Over one hundred years ago, Thomas Bruce wrote this of the people who settled in what is now southwest Virginia:

> In the earlier days, before civilization fled westward and carried in its train the comforts and luxuries of life, these people were crude and primitive in the extreme. Necessarily, having no courts of justice, they were in a measure of law unto themselves. Did any member commit a crime, or injure a neighbor, he was treated with such contempt by the rest of the settlers that he either amended his ways or left the community to avoid the open contempt exhibited towards him. Every man was expected to uphold law and order, and the small number of people living in this section in those earlier days made each and every one a conspicuous character in the eyes of his neighbor. It was impossible for him to commit a civil or moral wrong without his being seen and known by all near that settlement.\(^{22}\)

Teter's more recent overview of Appalachian history seems to build on that same theme with a nostalgic view of mountain culture:

> Two hundred years ago when the United States was a fledgling nation, Appalachia was its first frontier. Appalachia challenged the new Americans with

---

\(^{20}\)Teter, 1976, pp. 4-5.  
\(^{22}\)Bruce, 1891, pp. 18-19.
its rugged and beautiful mountains. Only a few more adventurous men, like George Washington and Daniel Boone, had penetrated the mountains by 1776.

When the westward movement began in earnest, thousands crossed the Appalachians. Many, however, remained there to make their homes in the narrow valleys and along the winding rivers. They were settlers for whom the growing cities and the promise of the West held little romance. They chose, instead, the isolation of the mountains and the right to live according to their own rules.

As the nation became increasingly mobile and sophisticated, Appalachians maintained their traditional ways. Family was more important than the broader society; freedom to live where they chose more important than the prosperity of the cities. Even hard times could not sever the bond between the people and the land their ancestors had settled.

In the early 1960s, Appalachia's economic problems became a national cause. Out of that public attention came a stereotyped image of isolation and poverty which was, in large part, the result of a decline in the coal industry, the region's major natural resource and primary industry.23

A later chapter in the same book, entitled "The People and the Land," opens with this statement: "Those who discover the people of Appalachia through quiet patience and open friendliness will rediscover something characteristically American. Part of it is awareness and appreciation of the individual, which have characterized every aspect of Appalachian history and culture."24 This romantic image even looks towards the future, albeit cautiously and with a sense that Appalachia has preserved some sort of wisdom that has been lost in other segments of society: "...the Appalachian region emerges today not as a melancholy hinterland waiting to be saved by a technological society, but as a rejuvenated frontier whose natural and human resources may serve as tokens to help save other parts of a frustrated, searching society. Each has something to share with the

23 Teter, 1976, p. 4.
other." Perhaps it is this sense of a "rejuvenated frontier" that people look for in mountain crafts -- the quilts, wooden ornaments, and simple handmade toys that symbolize Appalachia. And perhaps it is the wholesomeness of this selected memory that my dance group tries to capture and portray through clogging performances. The point is that this is an image of Appalachia to look at from a distance: it is an art or a history or a performance to be appreciated by outsiders on special occasions, rather than a vibrant culture to interact with as equals in the present.

By contrast, the image of Appalachians that seems to operate in the university community on a day-to-day basis is that of the redneck. In fact, while this area is considered a haven for old-time music and dance as well as arts and crafts and even the simple living praised in the image described above, none of the high school students identified their rural classmates in those terms. Instead, they used terms like "redneck," "hick," and "country people," and described them as "less intelligent," having "different interests," and not caring about school (see Figure 4.1). Richard Blaustein points out that "Regardless of all the other ethnic and racial pride movements which have taken place in the United States since the early sixties, low-status marginal Southern white social types like hillbillies, crackers and rednecks are still fair game for stereotypic put-downs." Duane, a BHS senior I interviewed, mentioned the jokes he heard among his classmates about "cows roaming the schools" in Christiansburg, for example. Students who referred to the rural people as poor, lazy, less intelligent, unmotivated, and uninterested in academics attributed these characteristics to the rural parents' lack of interest in their children's schooling, and the fact that they live outside the town limits and so have limited access to town and university resources. While several students insisted that their use of the term "redneck" was not intended to be derogatory, they

---

25 Ibid., p. 34.  
tended to describe people in that category in terms of their deficits (i.e., they lack intelligence, motivation, and interest). Furthermore, very few of the students who identified themselves with the university claimed to know any “rednecks” personally -- yet they readily offered accounts of those students’ home lives, aspirations, and interests.

Of course, these characterizations of rural people are not unique to Blacksburg or Montgomery county. Rather, they exist within a larger cultural context or discourse in which “rural” is either romanticized, as seen above, or connotes a negative image. An example of the latter appears in a report entitled “The Condition of Rural Education in Virginia: A Profile,” published by the Appalachian Education Laboratory (AEL), which characterizes rural students as follows:

In general, most rural public school students -- especially those in the most isolated areas -- begin the day with a fairly long bus ride, may have parents who are unemployed or underemployed, are more likely to need special education services and less likely to be classified as gifted than the urban students, and are likely to have parents who did not graduate from high school or have only a high school education. Rural students who complete their education are under considerable pressure to leave home for employment, especially if they have postsecondary education, because well paying jobs requiring specialized skills are almost nonexistent in most rural areas. Thus, in Virginia, a rural student is apt to belong to a family whose income is below the state average. In part because of the family’s low socioeconomic status, the isolated rural student is apt to do more poorly in school than urban students and to value education less.27

According to this passage, there are fundamental differences between “us” and “them” which translate into different needs, attitudes, and interests -- a characterization that becomes an excuse for exclusion and non-interaction. Julie Kailin states:

Categories as social constructions arise with a view to serving the interests of certain groups that created those categories in the first place. The empirical

\[27\text{Appalachian Education Laboratory, 1989, pp. 8-9.}\]
validity of such categories may not be a critical issue to the groups that construct them. What is important to the groups that create the categories is whether one can selectively incorporate certain characteristics of a group and then project such an image as a portrait of what a group is "really like." 28

Whether those in the category "rural Appalachian" are observed as artifacts, appreciated for aesthetic or historical value, or dismissed as unintelligent and unable to cope with mainstream society, a boundary is maintained between "them" and "us." Assigning different cultural traits also provides an explanation of sorts for why rural Appalachian children achieve less in schools -- a topic that will be addressed in the next section.

Segregation in the Schools: Institutionalizing Social Categories

My interviews with BHS students suggest that the stereotype of the "redneck" discussed in the previous section is learned early. Duane, for instance, described how separations among students began as they entered middle school; Cory remembered "cliques" forming even in elementary school. Furthermore, several students told me that there is little interaction between the "rednecks" and the "professors' kids." As Neil put it, "...there's kind of a segregation... between the people who are faculty kids, or the kids whose parents have businesses, or whatever, are professionals; and the lower class. And I don't know if there's really any tension, but there's certainly different segregated social groups." When I asked why there was so little contact, the students generally replied that the two populations take separate academic classes. Again I quote Neil, who told me that "the children of professionals are the ones who are taking the classes I'm taking, which are the most challenging classes." And Robin described the non-Preppy students saying "...some people call them hicks, you know, the country people, but, just, I guess most of them aren't as smart, they're in the lower level classes..." While these

students explained this segregation in terms of differences in intelligence and interests, I suspect that to some degree at least, the university/redneck split is created and sustained by the institutional structure of the school. Policies like tracking are discursive mechanisms that institutionalize the categories described in the previous section.

There is a substantial body of literature documenting social-class bias in schooling.\textsuperscript{29} In her study on social categories in the high school, Penelope Eckert focuses on two student groups: the “Jocks,” who are invested in and rewarded by the structure of the school institution, and the “Burnouts,” who reject the school institution and shun participation in school-sanctioned activities.\textsuperscript{30} Eckert argues effectively that students’ disparate reactions to school do not simply reflect their individual differences in ability or disposition. Rather, the categories correspond to community-based class differences, and the oppositional relation between the categories is a product of the structure of the school institution. Eckert describes the relations as follows: “The Jocks and Burnouts are adolescent embodiments of the middle and working class, respectively; their two separate cultures are in many ways class cultures; and opposition and conflict between them define and exercise class relations and differences.”\textsuperscript{31}

Studies of rural school children suggest that the characterization of them as “rednecks” affects their chances for success in school in much the same way as the class differences examined by Eckert. Reck, Reck & Keefe report that “in Appalachian schools, those students exhibiting mainstream American culture and identity tend to do well in school, take more academic courses, and frequently go on to college, while those students with an Appalachian culture and identity tend to do poorly, take more vocational courses, and frequently drop out before graduating from high school.”\textsuperscript{32} While the

\textsuperscript{29}cf. Willis, 1977; Brantlinger, 1993; Hollingshead, 1949; Sexton, 1961.  
\textsuperscript{30}Eckert, 1989.  
\textsuperscript{31}Eckert, 1989, p. 5.  
\textsuperscript{32}Reck, Reck & Keefe, 1993, pp. 117-118.
designation of a separate Appalachian culture seems to ascribe to the idea that there are essential differences that set them apart from us, my data do support the claim that students are looked upon differently according to the way they dress, the way they speak, and their interests. As Kevin tried to explain the category "redneck," for instance, he told me. "...if you see them you know who I'm talking about. You know they have like, racing shirts like, "Dale Earnhardt" or whatever, always wearing caps, and they dip a lot, and they have like either really short hair, or like long hair here and short hair here; you know?" Reck, Reck & Keefe argue further that this stems in part from "the creation of institutionalized versions of social dominance hierarchies" by which "perceptions and attitudes become substantiated by a real social system in which members of the dominant and subordinate groups ultimately begin to behave according to stereotypical expectations."33 In other words, the stereotypes which have evolved over the past century shape not only how "mainstream culture" constructs and treats rural Appalachians, but also influence how these people perceive themselves and ultimately affects what they do, the choices they make, and so on. These socially constructed identities and cultures perpetuate themselves through continued participation in the social contexts which created them.

In their study of schools in a predominately rural Appalachian county, Reck, Reck & Keefe found "a tendency among the teachers to perceive Appalachian and nonAppalachian students as homogenous and opposing categories."34 One teacher's description of "Rednecks" has a flavor surprisingly similar to the descriptions offered by students I interviewed in Blacksburg: "They are county students who are in the lower tracks. They chew tobacco, have long greasy hair, are not clean and smell, use bad grammar and profanity, and their dress is not acceptable."35 This study also found that

---

33Ibid., p. 117.
34Ibid., p. 119.
“over 80% of the teachers stated that students were treated differently depending on their group identity,” yet most teachers claimed that they personally did not treat students according to their group identity. The authors conclude that “evidently, teachers view [their statements about differences between the groups] as reflecting reality rather than prejudices.”

Several authors note that enrollment in higher education is low among rural Appalachians, and that the high school drop-out rate is high. At first glance, these data may seem to support the popular construction of the “redneck” as uneducated and uninterested in formal schooling. But some studies offer alternative interpretations through their examinations of school policies and economic opportunities. For instance, Marcia Baghban claims that there is a “strong oral tradition” among Appalachian people which clashes with the schools’ typical approach to literacy as a “silent, private act,” and suggests that such cultural mismatches act as barriers to academic success for many Appalachian students. There are also incongruencies between culture and curriculum. In an analysis of 35 textbooks used in grades 2-12 in an Appalachian community in North Carolina, Reck, Reck and Keefe found that most books contained no explicitly Appalachian content. Furthermore, they found that when there were references to this region, the texts tended to stress “the deficiencies of the area -- poor farmland, poor people, and poor roads. For example, the section on the settling of Appalachia emphasizes that not many people settled in the region because the farmland was poor and remote, rather than discussing the positive reasons why people did choose to settle in the

---

36Ibid., p. 119.
37Ibid., p. 120.
40Baghban, 1984, p. 80.
mountains.”42 The authors suggest that in light of the negative school experience reported among Appalachian students, these findings are significant:

Rural Appalachian parents and students frequently complain that the schools are run by and for “outsiders.” The content of the textbooks confirms this judgment. If the educational experience is to be improved for rural Appalachians, school textbook material should be made more “culturally congruent” with the experience and culture of Appalachian students.”43

One impression that non-rural students in my study seemed to hold was that the low achievement of “rednecks” results from a lack of interest in education. As Robin put it, “I know a lot of people don’t like, really care about learning and stuff, so they don’t do very well in their classes; and, uh, I think, they also live out more, you know, in the country, farther out.” According to Kyle, placement in lower-level classes “has to do with since they don’t have as much money their parents probably don’t have as much education and probably don’t put as much value in it.” Some studies, however, argue that “many low-income families recognize the importance of training and/or higher education,”44 but believe they do not have control of circumstances that would allow access to those opportunities.45 Gray and Sullins make a similar claim: “While many educators have assumed a devaluation of post-secondary education among rural residents, the studies refute any such lack of interest. Clear evidence exists that many rural people want to participate in lifelong learning opportunities. They recognize the need for further personal and professional development.”46 Sullins, Vogler & Mays list a number of barriers to post-secondary education commonly found among rural people nationwide.

42Ibid., p. 9.
43Ibid., p. 11.
44Kuipers, Southworth & Reed, 1979, p. 10.
These include “cost, lack of child care, lack of transportation, inflexible scheduling, lack of information, and financial support restrictions.” On the other hand, these authors also report that for rural populations in general “the absence of a cultural appreciation of the value of education” is a major barrier to adult participation in higher education, and that that barrier is “compounded by the Appalachian sense of fatalism.” I find this statement to be particularly puzzling because the authors seem to dismiss the circumstances they report (cost, lack of child care, lack of transportation, inflexible scheduling, lack of information, and financial support restrictions) in suggesting that a personal or cultural trait (lack of appreciation, fatalism) can explain the social phenomena of low participation in higher education. If people do recognize higher education as an important step towards economic advancement, yet simultaneously view it as unattainable, perhaps it should not be surprising if they report valuing it less than others for whom higher education is more accessible.

Another finding is that Appalachian children’s aspirations for education and future occupation decline as they progress through school. Kuipers, Southworth, and Reed studied the changes in aspirations and expectations of students in a low-income rural Appalachian area in Tennessee. At the time of the first interview, conducted in 1969 when the subjects were in 6th grade, 42% of the boys and 62% of the girls aspired to professional-technical jobs, but six years later those percentages had dropped to 22% and 26%, respectively. Likewise, aspirations for attending college dropped from 56% for both males and females in 1969 to 24% for males and 20% for females in 1975. In their conclusions, the authors suggest that the actual availability of jobs and job training in Tennessee at that time probably influenced the students’ aspirations, as did other

---

48Ibid., p. 52.
49Kuipers, Southworth & Reed, 1979, p. 15.
50Ibid., p. 23.
factors such as the lack of information about financial aid for college. Their discussion affirms statements of other researchers cited above: “It has been found by several investigators that Appalachian people tend to believe in the importance of higher education despite what appears to be inability to accomplish such goals. Many Appalachian families apparently attribute lack of success to a lack of higher education rather than lack of hard work because they believe that obtaining a higher education is beyond their control.”

Another major barrier to higher education faced by rural Appalachians is the inadequate preparation for postsecondary learning. If the authors cited above are correct in their assessment that school curriculum, methods, and culture combine to create a hostile environment for Appalachian youth, and that environment inhibits academic success, then there is a “vicious circle” at work: students are inadequately prepared for postsecondary education, which lessens their chances of attending or succeeding in college, which in turn perpetuates the image of the rural Appalachian as uneducated.

In summary, the institutional structure of schools, and the education system more broadly, serve to separate students by creating and reinforcing social and academic boundaries. In light of this literature, attempts to simply increase understanding across specific differences will not likely have any long-term impact. That is, the particular students involved may gain greater appreciation for the qualities of their “different” classmates, but if the divisions between the groups are created and sustained by the community and the school institution, the groups and their tensions will surely resurface. It is not enough, writes Cameron McCarthy, “…to talk about changing attitudes without

51ibid., p. 33.
addressing the structural and institutional impediments that exist in education and society which continue to marginalize particular groups.\textsuperscript{53}

Paradoxes of Publics: Identity and Interaction Among Communities of Adults

So far I have discussed how boundaries are generated and maintained between the university and rural publics through the discursive definition of rural (and especially rural Appalachian) people, and through institutional structures of schooling such as tracking, unbalanced curriculum, and unequal educational opportunities. Within the adult communities, though, these boundaries are functional: they make it possible to resist the influences of others and maintain group identity.

One boundary marker which defines a public space is constituted by the set of assumptions, values, and beliefs held as unquestionable in that space. For instance, within the Christian Coalition, a particular interpretation of the role of religion in politics and history is presented as "given":

Not only are we who live in the United States blessed by the freedoms and liberties that are ours as citizens of this country, those of us who are also Christians have the authority to be the ambassadors of our King, Jesus Christ. ... This citizenship is of a higher order than our U. S. citizenship, and it requires of us much more. We live in two kingdoms at once, the earthly and the heavenly. As residents of the earth, we await our King who will come and give us a residence in our heaven. While here on the earth, we serve as ambassadors of our heavenly King. It is as if we have been given the responsibility to see after the earth until our King returns. ...

The government of the United States was founded upon a belief in God and a recognition that no government can fulfill its role of punishing the wrongdoer and commending the upright if its values or right and wrong are not informed by religious values. A government built upon the Judeo-Christian principle that law

\textsuperscript{53}McCarthy, 1993, p. 329.
is firmly anchored in absolute values that do not change with each new age will be a fair government. One that is founded upon any other principle will be a terror to the upright and the wicked alike.\(^{54}\)

Within this public, there is no space for debate over whether the government should be involved in questions of morality, nor for discussion of whose morality should prevail.

On the other hand, the Coalition for Community is built upon the idea of "building community amidst diversity." While the members of that organization might not agree on how to accomplish its stated purpose, there is no disagreement over the importance of "valuing diversity." In fact, the emphasis on members' commitment to the group's mission statement was highlighted at the first meeting I attended in the lengthy discussion over how to limit the range of differences in views and beliefs that would be accommodated in the Coalition's operations (see Chapter 3). One participant's comment that the organization would tolerate "dissent" but not "sabotage" indicates that there are some fundamental shared beliefs that would simply not be open to discussion or question.

Another topic that is not open to discussion within the university public is a set of assumptions about what it means to value diversity. For instance, among groups that "value diversity" certain differences tend to be welcomed while others are either overlooked altogether or reduced to a label and dismissed. The list of organizations in the Human Relations Council -- and its omissions -- is a prime example of the types of differences that are assumed to constitute "diversity" (see Figure 3.3). Similarly, Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens and the Coalition for Community seek "representatives" of different races and religions, but the "conservative" voices of the rural communities are not welcomed into the conversation. Often it seems that organizations look for diverse memberships and associations in order to mobilize the

---

\(^{54}\) The Christian's Charge and Challenge, "Christian Coalition Leadership Manual" (1990), p. 2.11
voices of those other groups for that organization's own purposes. For example, the Coalition for Community seeks representatives from the NAACP, the Republican Party, and non-Blacksburg residents, in order that it may be a "diverse" and "inclusive" organization. There seems to be an underlying assumption that "they" (the people who would make our group diverse) should be sympathetic to our cause, at least as individuals. We do not acknowledge that their views, values and styles of interaction may differ from ours. We also fail to acknowledge that variety within groups makes it impossible to predict (control) what specific differences will emerge as we "diversify" our membership. While diversity in views, values, and backgrounds can provide a richness of ideas and information that improves the creative processes of problem solving, such differences can also make discussions messier, longer, more complex, and less comfortable. It is probably for that reason that when others do have identifiably different views we tend to label them and exclude them on the basis of that label, rather than including those voices for the sake of richer dialogues. Nobody can be expected to support every individual's or organization's outlook and agenda; but perhaps those who claim that diversity is creative and valuable ought to be able to include the Other in the conversation.

One result of the ideological boundaries of these two publics is that the groups are unable (or unlikely) to engage each other's issues when conflicts arise: instead, each interprets the issue in terms of its own central beliefs. For example, whereas those supporting Christian names for school holidays based their argument in the need for moral instruction in schools, that same debate in the other public's conversation was not about morals in that sense, but about inclusion and tolerance of diverse perspectives. I suspect that one reason that dialogue between the two polarized publics was downplayed in this debate is that each needed to maintain a position on one side or the other in order
to perpetuate its group identity. Dialogue, where the aim is to find common ground for mutually acceptable solutions, threatens the integrity of a public’s identity.

A related point concerns the delineation between common (public) concerns and private interests within a public. Fraser writes, “The point is that there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries here. What will count as a matter of common concern will be decided precisely through discursive contestation.”⁵⁵ And, as Bachrach and Botwinick point out, “it is an exercise of power that prevents dangerous issues from even gaining access to a relevant decision-making arena.”⁵⁶ Therefore, what is and what is not open to public discussion can serve to reinforce relations of dominance and subordination. For example, the discourses that construct low track placement in schools as a function of students’ lack of interest close off debate over whether there should be such differentiation. In general, we allow topics into public discussion that leave our power structures in place. It is easy to acknowledge one’s privilege and power, or at least the source of that privilege and power, without challenging the structures that position a person powerfully. For instance, in Coalition for Community meetings we sometimes observe that we are all white, middle class citizens, and discuss how we could build a more diverse membership -- presumably non-white middle class citizens. We bracket these “power attributes” by acknowledging or even apologizing for them and assume that we can operate as a fair and equitable public space in spite of our positionings. But according to Fraser, bracketing such differences is not an effective way to create an accessible public space:

Insofar as the bracketing of social inequalities in deliberation means proceeding as if they don’t exist when they do, this does not foster participatory parity. On the contrary, such bracketing usually works to the advantage of dominant groups in society and to the disadvantage of subordinates. In most cases, it would be

⁵⁵Fraser, 1990, p. 71.
⁵⁶Bachrach and Botwinick, p. 52.
more appropriate to unbracket inequalities in the sense of explicitly thematizing them.\textsuperscript{57}

I began this discussion agreeing with Fraser's suggestion that interactive multiple publics are healthy for the functioning of participatory democracy. At this point, though, it appears that sustaining multiple publics and interacting across the boundaries of those publics are incompatible goals. Dialogue, with its prospects of creating common understanding, threatens to break down the very boundaries which constitute the various publics' identities. Achieving interaction between publics requires becoming critically reflective about one's own community. Whether this can -- or should -- be undertaken among adults remains an open question for further research to investigate. Another possibility, though, is to work towards this inter-public interaction among students, with the hope of nurturing a more democratic community for the future. The next section reviews some of the literature on multicultural education to see what it has to offer in terms of developing the critical reflection that could open possibilities for interaction among multiple publics.

\textbf{Multicultural Education: Opening Silenced Domains}

Since the late 1960s many movements in the United States have attempted to make education more equitable for various groups.\textsuperscript{58} Among those movements is multicultural education, which began as a response to the specific problem of racism in schools, but, for some, has since become a venue to address issues of sexism, classism, and handicappism as well.\textsuperscript{59} During the past three decades, agendas regarding diversity have fluctuated with political, social, and economic changes.\textsuperscript{60} Although there is no

\textsuperscript{57}Fraser, 1990, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{58}Sleeter & Grant, 1987:421; Field & Labbo, 1994; Ravitch, 1990.
\textsuperscript{59}Sleeter & Grant, 1987:421.
\textsuperscript{60}cf. Field & Labbo, 1994.
agreed-upon definition of multiculturalism, some argue that "...no matter how multicultural education has been defined, a central goal has been to promote equity in educational outcomes across diverse populations of students." Sherry Field and Linda Labbo claim a more specific commonality among multiculturalists: "Advocates of multicultural education value the attributes of cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity, as well as human rights, social justice, equitable distribution of power, and equal opportunity." But there does not seem to be any consensus regarding what other types of diversity, if any, merit attention besides race and ethnicity. In their review of the literature on multiculturalism, Christine Sleeter and Carl Grant found that race and ethnicity were addressed as "the main form of human diversity," while some works included references to language and gender, fewer addressed social class, and very little attention was given to handicap. Perhaps not surprisingly, differences among people concerning variables such as rural/urban location or level of formal education were not mentioned at all.

Besides disagreeing over who should be included in multiculturalists' efforts to "promote equity in educational outcomes across diverse populations of students," authors have different ideas regarding how to accomplish this goal. For example, Greenleaf, Hull & Reilly identify a number of different approaches:

"increasing the recruitment of minorities into the teaching profession; sensitizing teachers to better human relations with diverse students; providing diverse field placements for prospective teachers to give them enriched experiences of cultural diversity; expanding the curriculum to include and to honor a diversity of cultural perspectives and different types of knowledge; tackling issues of diversity, prejudice, and equity directly in order to mobilize student energies for social

62Greenleaf, Hull & Reilly, 1994, 523-4; see also Baptiste, Baptiste, & Gollnick, 1980; Grant & Sleeter, 1986; Trueba, 1989.
63Field and Labbo, 1994, p. 396.
64Sleeter and Grant, 1987, p. 437.
change, and educating teachers about the specific cultural, ethnic, and linguistic
groups they encounter in their classrooms."\textsuperscript{65}

A category system offered by Sleeter and Grant\textsuperscript{66} is helpful in distinguishing the
different philosophies underlying these and other approaches. They identify five types of
approaches: \textit{Teaching the Culturally Different, Human Relations, Single Group Studies,}
\textit{Multicultural Education,} and \textit{Education that is Multicultural and Social}

\textit{Reconstructionist.} As I discuss each one here, I consider what impact these approaches
might have on students identified in my study as "rednecks," if "rural" or
"Appalachian" were to be included among the diversities addressed by multiculturalism,
and what each approach offers for opening interaction across publics.

The literature that Sleeter and Grant classified as "Teaching the Culturally
Different" focuses on efforts to "assimilate students of color into the cultural
mainstream and existing social structure by offering transitional bridges within the
existing school program."\textsuperscript{67} While this view advocates providing the knowledge and
skills that people of color need in order to successfully compete with whites, it does not
address white people's need to know more about racism, classism, other cultures.\textsuperscript{68} This
would be the equivalent of teaching "rural" students how to fit in with their
"university" classmates so that the former could have equal chances of academic success
in high school and postsecondary schooling as well as equal access to the professions.
"Fitting in" might include social factors such as dressing alike, speaking without a
"southern accent," listening to pop music instead of country and western, and
participating in school athletics, in addition to learning skills and attitudes that more
directly affect academic achievement. Ironically, this approach seeks to ensure

\textsuperscript{65}Greenleaf, Hull & Reilly, 1994, p. 523-4.
\textsuperscript{66}Sleeter and Grant, 1987.
\textsuperscript{67}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 422.
\textsuperscript{68}\textit{Ibid.}, p. 426.
"success" among disempowered groups by erasing the differences between them and the
"cultural mainstream." Instead of interpublic interaction, this approach seeks to bring
everyone into one public -- the dominant public -- by dismantling the identities of
subordinate groups.

The second approach, which Sleeter and Grant labeled "Human Relations," also
seeks to minimize the effect of differences among groups, but takes a different route to
that goal. This approach is "used to help students of different backgrounds get along
better and appreciate each other."\textsuperscript{69} Sleeter and Grant point out the major limitation of
this approach: "None of the books and articles adopting a Human Relations approach
addresses concerns about social stratification. This approach seems to suggest that
people should get along, communicate, and appreciate each other within the existing
stratified social system."\textsuperscript{70} To some extent, the university/county divide in my study
might be seen as an example of the outcome of this type of approach. For instance,
several of the students I interviewed claimed that they get along well with "rednecks,"
and that there is "nothing wrong with them"; yet they seemed to accept that "rednecks"
take different classes in high school and generally do not go on to college. Likewise,
within groups like the Coalition for Community we focus on increasing communication
(i.e. by establishing a "Dialogue Group") without investigating possible structural or
systemic reasons for the existing lack of communication. Julie Kailin's claim regarding
racism seems relevant to this issue: she states that attributing problems of racism to
"lack of understanding" depoliticizes it, and leaves structural sources intact.\textsuperscript{71} As
discussed previously, practices like tracking and ability grouping are structures that
sustain differences between groups in schools -- and the powers of those served by such
practices keep them out of the public discussion, safe from critique and reconstruction.

\textsuperscript{69}Ibid., p. 422.
\textsuperscript{70}Ibid., p. 427.
\textsuperscript{71}Kailin, 1994, p. 172.
In contrast to the first two approaches, the “Single Group Studies” approach focuses on the boundaries between groups not as barriers to overcome, but as differences to celebrate; it “fosters cultural pluralism by teaching courses about the experiences, contributions and concerns of distinct ethnic, gender, and social class groups.” 72 In the existing literature, advocates of Single Group Studies focus mostly on ethnic differences; 73 but again I will apply the concept to the marginalized groups in my community in order to hypothesize what would happen if “rural” and/or “Appalachian” were accepted categories of difference. First, it seems clear that the image preferred by Single Group Studies would be the romanticized ideal of the hard-working, independent, make-do-with-nothing Appalachian pioneer, rather than the stereotype of the lazy, poor, dirty, sometimes violent redneck. Lessons might focus on the history of the people of Appalachia, told similar to the way the Appalachian Commission did in the passage from Appalachian Ways cited in the previous chapter. Other lesson contents might include traditional Appalachian food, crafts, games, and music. One danger in this approach is that it could degenerate into one of the curricula Field and Labbo describe: “‘The Tourist Curriculum’ trivializes cultures by only exploring traditional holidays, costumes, and customs. ‘The Cuisine Curriculum’ adds a little spice to experience by inviting children to eat their way around the world. ‘The Folk Art Curriculum’ explores cultural lifestyles through a basket-weaving and native-arts approach.” 74

A related critique is that this glorified but narrow presentation of a particular group may seem as irrelevant to present-day members of the group as it might to those with different cultural backgrounds. For example, while in the process of writing this I was invited along with another dancer and some local musicians to perform for an elementary school audience here in Blacksburg. (The “cultural arts coordinator” had

72 Sleeter & Grant, 1987, p. 422
73 Ibid., p. 428.
74 Field & Labbo, 1994, p. 401.
already organized “International Day,” which was recognized in the newspaper the next day with a large, color photograph of students in dressed in native costumes from other countries; we were to represent Appalachian culture.) The principal, coaching the student council president on how to introduce our group, asked me about pronunciation: “is it App-a-lay-shin, or App-a-latch-in?” Looking out at the 400 elementary students squirming on the tile floor as I demonstrated the rhythmic elements of clogging steps, I wondered whose culture we were celebrating. Certainly the old-time fiddle tunes were “authentic” in that they have been passed down for many generations, and the style of our footwork can be traced to Celtic roots; but, I wondered, who among our audience experienced any such connection? It is hard to say whether these young people relate to our “traditional Appalachian” performances any more than urban youth who have also evolved their own forms of step-dancing.

Sleeter and Grant, however, note the most significant shortcoming of this approach to multiculturalism: “although there is value in teaching about cultures, the failure to address issues of current social stratification and social action ignores a major component of what many scholars deem essential to Single Group Studies.”75 Studies of particular groups could aid those groups by drawing attention to their relations to the dominant public, but instead advocates of this approach focus on different cultures as isolated entities. In fact, in some cases these efforts may have effects opposite to the intended results, in that teaching about different cultures can lead to stereotyping76 -- thus, reinforcing groups’ places in the existing social stratification. Teaching old time dance, music and crafts as “Appalachian culture” stereotypes the region and its people as archaic and irrelevant to modern life. And, as Hanna reminds us, there may be an

75Sleeter & Grant, 1987, p. 429.
"antithetical relationship between preserving symbols ... of a cultural group and socioeconomic mobility in mainstream society." \(^{77}\)

The fourth approach, "Multicultural Education," promotes "cultural pluralism and social equality by reforming the school program for all students to make it reflect diversity." \(^{78}\) This approach might include the following:

...school staffing patterns that reflect the pluralistic nature of American society; unbiased curricula that incorporate the contributions of different social groups, women, and the handicapped; the affirmation of the languages of non-English-speaking minorities; and instructional materials that are appropriate and relevant for the students and which are integrated rather than supplementary." \(^{79}\)

Again, this approach emphasizes the differences among groups, and assumes that those groups are stable and homogenous. Sleeter and Grant allude to this limitation in their critique of this approach: "There needs to be more discussion about whether multicultural education should deal with other status groupings in addition to race and ethnicity, and such discussions should recognize the interrelationships among status groupings so that, for example, Blacks and women are not viewed as discrete and separate groups." \(^{80}\) In Montgomery County, this overlap of category membership is also evident. For instance, anybody who teaches in the county schools must have a college degree, so even those hired to represent the local rural population also have some college or university affiliation. Category membership is, at least to some extent, a matter of acceptance. As I mentioned in Chapter II, for example, the school superintendent seems to have been hailed by rural residents as one of their own, in spite of the facts that he did not grow up in this community and he holds a doctorate -- two factors that usually seem to brand people as "outsiders." On the other hand, Duane, the student who calls himself

\(^{77}\)Hanna, 1994, p. 72.
\(^{78}\)Sleeter & Grant, 1987, p. 422.
\(^{79}\)Ibid., p. 422.
\(^{80}\)Sleeter & Grant, 1987, p. 433
“a redneck who made it,” claims both his rural upbringing and his current status as a college-bound honors student and an officer in the student government. When categories overlap and membership is liable to change over time, and there is as much variation within groups as there is between them, the meaning of this sort of representational multiculturalism becomes obscure.

The final category identified by Sleeter and Grant is “Education that is Multicultural and Social Reconstructionist.” This approach, which “prepares students to challenge social structural inequality and to promote cultural diversity,” suggests most like what Kailin refers to as anti-racism. According to Kailin, “the focus of anti-racist education becomes the system of dominance rather than difference alone as in most conventional multicultural perspectives.” However, Sleeter and Grant’s label for this approach is broader, implicitly acknowledging that there are other social structural inequalities in addition to racism which also need to be challenged. For rural or Appalachian students, this approach might entail examining the discourse that constructs them as rednecks (as well as the one that romanticizes widespread problems like poverty), understanding the consequences of those discourses, and recreating their cultural identity in more empowering ways.

As Carole Edelsky and Susan Harman point out, however, attempts at “emancipatory” pedagogies and curricula can potentially disempower students in the long run, if those practices prompt students to reject (or be rejected by) the cultures of their families and communities. While Edelsky and Harman refer specifically to the dangers of the “Whole Language” approach to literacy, their suggestions for avoiding student alienation are applicable to “education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist,” as well. Briefly, these authors’ proposal includes four points: “The

---

81Ibid., p. 422.
82Kailin, 1994, p. 173.
first is to treat all discourses as if they were equally interesting and legitimate objects for scrutiny. The second is to act on the results of that scrutiny. The third is to stretch dominant discourses into accommodating more subordinate discourses. And the fourth is to reconnect literacy learners with their communities." Students, then, would examine critically both the dominant and subordinate publics, and act together to "change what is oppressive in both discourses." As part of this change, the dominant discourse could become more inclusive, accommodating the styles, languages, and worldviews of subordinate groups. Finally, students could be encouraged to find ways to reinvest in their communities, so that education for members of subordinate groups would not necessarily mean leaving home -- a prospect which often causes alienation from schooling. With Edelsky and Harman's suggestions in mind, "education that is multicultural and social reconstructionist" seems to be the most promising of the five approaches identified by Sleeter and Grant, in terms of developing critical reflection on one's own culture and publics, and increasing inter-public interaction.

Conclusion: The Politics of Identity in Participatory Democracy

As springtime creeps back to the mountains again, my thoughts return to Coal Miner's Day and questions about the history of the university/rural conflict I have been investigating. How did we get here? In 1881, C. R. Boyd described Christiansburg as a thriving town of 1,200 inhabitants, with "quite a number of hotels, stores, and establishments for the manufactory of saddlery, tin ware, boots and shoes, etc.," while the village of Blacksburg was a "delightful summer resort." But Boyd advised that the "unfortunate institution" situated in Blacksburg should be converted to "an asylum of

---

84 Ibid., p. 136.
85 Ibid., p. 138.
86 Ibid., p. 139.
some sort” in light of its financial failure: “This college, erected by the State at a time when her financial embarrassments were such as to render it impossible for her to put enough money into it to either complete it in a manner to meet the objects for which it was organized, or to maintain it properly when so built, has practically proven the grave of an estimable faculty.”

That college, of course, is now Virginia Tech, a prosperous and increasingly powerful entity in the region, both politically and economically. Today it’s easy to think of a variety of contributions the university has made to the community: agricultural research has increased farm productivity; students spend their money in local shops, bars and restaurants; corporations are drawn to the research resources; and plays, concerts, lectures, and sporting events are open to the public.

In fact, the success of the university may be partially responsible for the polarization of these publics. In a newspaper column printed shortly before the first annual Coal Miner’s Day, Robert Freis shared some of the insights he had gained while researching this community:

...for example, I have a new insight about why divisions sometimes exist between the “old” and “new” residents of the county. And why someone whose family grew up in a mining town might not share the attitudes of a university professor. Montgomery County has changed so much during the past 30 years. The college communities affiliated with Virginia Tech and Radford University have grown while the manufacturing jobs held by many of the people who once were farmers or miners have declined.

Freis continued, pointing out one example of how the groups sometimes make decisions based on quite different interests:

...Back in the mid-60s, when the Appalachian Regional Commission was formed, Montgomery County refused to join. Community leaders shunned the ARC because they didn’t want to be associated with Appalachia, a region stigmatized

---

by poverty. Looking back, this seems foolish -- particularly in a county where so many people fed their families by digging coal. Now Montgomery County has asked Congress to include it in the ARC because contemporary leaders recognize the economic benefits of joining.89

Both publics claim the right to power and control in local political, social, and economic decisions: the university cites its contributions to growth in the region, and the county claims its long-time heritage and historical investment in the land. And both publics exert power to influence outcomes -- in spite of the perception of some that "Blacksburg is trying to run everything." I am reminded of that each time I drive west of Blacksburg on Route 460, where wooded rolling hills stretch on each side of the road unmarred by development -- at least for a little while longer. The Board of Supervisors recently granted one landowner's request to rezone a portion of that land in order to establish a farm equipment repair business. Many Blacksburg residents were vocally opposed to opening that area to the same sort of haphazard development that has turned the eastern portion of Route 460 into a continuous stretch of strip malls and traffic jams, but the Board of Supervisors was swayed by the property owners' arguments for the right to do as they pleased with their land. Land use issues generally seem to be resolved in favor of the individuals making requests regarding their private property, often in spite of the recommendations of the county Planning Commission and others concerned with long-term effects of rapid development.90

As in most of the university-rural conflicts, each side has legitimate claims and concerns. As such, finding common ground usually means more than simply clarifying misunderstandings; in addition, each side may need to modify the boundaries of its public

identity and discourse, in order to accommodate the needs, values, and interests of others. It seems that since such risks are inherent to democratic dialogue, publics often avoid interacting with each other at all. But without dialogue, conflicts are reduced to contests of power, which offer little hope of achieving mutually acceptable solutions. The need for democratic dialogue is heightened, not diminished when publics have conflicting interests and the stakes are high. And while democratic dialogue calls for "valuing diversity," naming and bracketing differences in power is not sufficient. Part of valuing diversity must include reflecting on the discourses of one's own public, recognizing the inevitable biases and exclusions, and disrupting the mechanisms and silences that keep the Other at a distance.
References

Appalachian Education Laboratory (1989). "The Condition of Rural Education in Virginia: A Profile."


Blaustein, Richard (1990) "Hegemony, Marginality and Identity Reformulation: Further Thoughts Regarding a Comparative Approach to Appalachian Studies."


Fraser, Nancy (1990). "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy." *Social Text,* No. 25/26.


Kuipers, Judith L, Louis E. Southworth, and Helen M. Reed ( ). Occupational and Educational Goals of Rural Appalachian Children and Their Mothers.


STEPHANIE L. KIMBALL

Work: 300 War Memorial Hall
      Virginia Tech
      Blacksburg, Virginia 24061-0313
      (703) 231-8348
      E-mail: skimball@vt.edu

Home: 214 McDonald Street
      Blacksburg, Virginia 24060
      (703) 951-3056

EDUCATION

Doctorate of Philosophy, Curriculum & Instruction, Social Foundations, May, 1995
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Blacksburg, VA
Dissertation: Defining Diversity: The Politics of Identity in a Rural Community
Advisor: Jan Nespor

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Blacksburg, VA

Bachelor of Arts, Curriculum & Instruction: Elementary Education, May, 1988
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), Blacksburg, VA

RESEARCH INTERESTS

- The social construction of diversity
- Democratic education
- Dialogue across differences
- Conflict resolution in schools
- School/community relationships

TEACHING INTERESTS

- Social Foundations of Education
  (undergraduate and graduate)
- Qualitative Research Methods
  (graduate)
- History of American Education
- Multicultural Education
- Contemporary Issues in Education
- Democracy and Education

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Dissertation: Ethnographic methods
- in-depth interviews with high school students and community leaders
- participant observation of community events, school board meetings, Board of
  Supervisor meetings, community organizations, and high school events
- collection of documents including newspaper articles, organization bylaws,
  census data, historical records, and meeting minutes
- organization and analysis of field notes, interview transcriptions, and documents

"Residential Success Program" evaluation project: Quantitative methods
- used JMP software (Macintosh) to perform analysis of variance
- generated histograms, scatterplots, and tables
- interpreted results of statistical tests
- summarized findings in both graphic and narrative formats
TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Graduate Teaching Assistant August, 1994 to present
Division of Curriculum and Instruction, Virginia Tech
EDCI 3024, Social Foundations of Education
- instructed 60 prospective teachers (juniors and seniors)
- designed syllabi and selected texts emphasizing the following themes: historical development of American schools; origins of multicultural education; local, state, and federal government and education; religion and the schools; purposes of schooling; legal and financial aspects of public schools; teacher rights and academic freedom; student and parent rights and responsibilities; equal educational opportunities; schooling of minority Americans; women in education; democracy and education.
- developed and implemented activities to foster reflection and active engagement of concepts and issues

Graduate Teaching Assistant August, 1990 - August, 1994
Division of Curriculum and Instruction, Virginia Tech
EDCI 1004, College Success Strategies
- instructed 50-70 undergraduate students (freshmen through seniors) in two sections for each of eleven semesters
- planned and implemented lessons on study skills, memory, test-taking, reading, note taking, and related topics
- designed and evaluated tasks involving application of skills

LD/ED Classroom Teacher September, 1988 - June, 1990
Accotink Academy, Springfield, Virginia
- instructed learning disabled and emotionally disturbed students, ages 8-18
- planned, organized, and executed lessons in language arts, math, life skills, science, social studies, music, and art
- wrote Individualized Educational Programs, quarterly reports, and final reports
- consulted with psychologists, counselors, language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, art therapists, and social workers
- conducted parent conferences

CURRENT PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIPS

Philosophy of Education Society
American Educational Studies Association
American Educational Research Association

CIVIC ACTIVITIES

Coalition for Community, Blacksburg, VA
- Member, August 1993-present
- Coordinating Committee, February 1994 - present

Montgomery County Mainstream Citizens
- Founding member, August 1994 - present

151
PUBLICATIONS


PAPERS PRESENTED


