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ABSTRACT

This paper describes current phases of two research projects: a completed one in southern Appalachia and another one to begin in North Dakota. The paper explains that the Appalachian project investigated the effects the widespread stereotype of Appalachian illiteracy has had on Appalachian literacy learners; while the North Dakota study is going to focus on cases of autodidacticism, looking at the role of reading and writing in self-education. The paper suggests several interesting questions to pursue in research on women's literacy raised by both studies. It also briefly describes a method that might be particularly well-suited to research on these issues. The paper begins with the concept of literacy as a tool to "manage" identity--specifically, to manage identity in terms of membership in, or rejection of, particular social groups. It states that the Appalachian research performed was an attempt to understand the literacy choices individual female interviewees had made when they had at least three very different "sponsors" of literacy to choose from. It finds that literacy itself played a role in identity management. The paper suggests another compelling question for research into women's literacy--that autodidacts are women, and emphatically "not" men. It explains that, besides the usual research methods, another newer technique might be called "epistolary research," since the researcher/author exchanged letters with some of the female interviewees, focused largely on issues of literacy. (NKA)

Women, Literacy, and the Management of Identity.

by Kim Donehower

"Women, Literacy, and the Management of Identity"

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Introduction

I currently find myself in between two research projects: a completed one in southern Appalachia, and one about to start in North Dakota. The Appalachian project investigated the effects the widespread stereotype of Appalachian illiteracy has had on Appalachian literacy learners. The North Dakota study is going to focus on cases of autodidacticism and look at the role of reading and writing in self-education.

Today I'm going to try to suggest a couple of interesting questions to pursue in research on women's literacy raised by both studies. I'd also like to briefly describe a method that might be particularly well-suited to research on these issues.

Literacy as a Tool to Manage Identity

I'd like to start with the concept of literacy as a tool to "manage" identity—specifically, to manage identity in terms of membership in, or rejection of, particular social groups. In my research in Appalachia, I was trying to understand the literacy choices individual interviewees had made when they

had at least three very different "sponsors" of literacy to choose from. These were groups who had come to the town to bring particular ways of literacy to what were perceived to be illiterate Appalachians.

Seeking affiliation with one or more of these sponsors necessitated internalizing the stigma that Appalachians were illiterate, and required making choices between remaining strongly identified with one's own culture or trying to join the culture of the sponsor. This is where the concept of "managing" identity comes into play. I borrow this idea from sociologist Erving Goffman's classic work in disability studies. *Stigma: On the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Goffinan argues that once one's sense of self is "spoiled" through a process of stigmatization, an individual must renegotiate one's relationship with both one's own-group and with the group that Goffman refers to as the "normals" who enact the stigmatization.

Once I started looking at how Appalachians' spoiled literate identity got managed by the individuals I interviewed, I found two significant things. The first was that the relationships that needed to be managed were not simply between the community itself and the outsiders who had come to the town to offer particular kinds of literacy training. There were more groups involved. The town had a complex set of class hierarchies within it, based on economics, occupation, family background, religion, and political affiliation. Each of these

groups stigmatized various aspects of the other, including each other's literacy. These relationships within the community had to be managed too.

The second significant finding was the role that literacy itself played in identity management. Reading and writing were used by individuals to manage their memberships in, or their rejections of, both the groups that were native to the community itself and the outsider groups. The best example of this is Pearl Sykes. Pearl was from a very low-status economic and occupational background—her father was a sharecropper and caretaker for a rich family's home—a medium-status family background, and a high-status religion. (She had converted to the Catholicism of her family's employers.) She had tried to affiliate with a Catholic literacy sponsor by attending a boarding school, but had been rejected for her poverty and had to return to her mountain town.

Pearl uses reading to maintain an affiliation with Catholicism. This gives her a certain degree of status within her town, without her having to actively participate in the local Catholic community, from which she still fears stigmatization for her relative poverty. As one of the town's librarians, Pearl screens donated books based on Catholic standards of decency—any that don't measure up, she sends on to the next town's library. In her own reading, she chooses primarily books with Catholic themes. In once case, where she checked out a book by Andrew Greeley because he was a Catholic priest, and discovered it to be a pot-boiler, she returned the book to the library and

insisted the librarian at the time white-out her name on the checkout slip, so that no one would know she had ever read such a work.

Pearl's writing also helps her manage her relationships to a variety of groups. As self-appointed town historian, she has published three books. They focus on two subjects: the two wealthy families who once lived in the town, and the history of local men's and women's clubs. By inscribing their stories, Pearl dramatically alters her relationships with these groups, gaining literary control over them by representing their identities to an outside audience.

While I was doing this analysis, I found folklorists' theories of group membership and the role of performance in establishing group identity to be especially helpful. I don't have time to go into the particulars here, but the abbreviated version is that I came to see reading and writing, even when practiced privately, without a physical audience present, as the kinds of "performances" that folklorists say establish, maintain, and modify individual performers' relationships with particular groups.

This seems to me to be a particularly useful concept to apply to studies of women's literacy. I am at a point in my own life where most of my female friends from childhood are having children. About half choose to be stay-at-home mothers; the other half continue with professional careers. The relationships between these two groups are often highly charged, with a sense

of each being stigmatized by the other—even if such stigmatization is not actually occurring. One of the spaces in which I have seen this sometimes difficult relationship mediated is in book discussion groups, which seem to create a kind of even intellectual playing field in which stay-at-home mothers and career women can address a number of issues of difference, and similarity, through the books under discussion. I would like to suggest that one direction research into women's literacy should take is investigating the role of reading and writing activities in managing the identity and role conflicts inherent in being female in this culture.

Female Autodidacts

I'd like to briefly suggest another compelling question for research into women's literacy. In both the work I've completed in Appalachia and the study I'm beginning in North Dakota, I've found that the autodidacts—those who seem driven to engage in extensive reading and writing for self-education outside the literacy demands of their everyday lives—are women, and are often emphatically not men. Why? How can we explain that interest in literacy development often seems to be heavily gendered in rural communities, as much research in Appalachia demonstrates? Women in these communities are often much more open to continuing literacy education than men, while the men reject such opportunities and are often unsupportive or openly hostile to the women in their lives who attend adult education programs, or book groups, or who try other means to increase their literacy skills and exposure.

Here is one area where literacy research could promote social change. We need to study both women's and men's distinctive literacy experiences in these situations, to understand why many rural women seem drawn to these kinds of literacy practices, and why many rural men don't or feel threatened by them. If there is a female predilection towards lifelong literacy development in these kinds of communities, one of the stumbling blocks in these women's pursuits of literacy can be the men in their lives. If our research can suggest ways to make literacy pursuits more palatable and less threatening to rural men who lack formal education, we may open up more possibilities for women's literacy development in the process.

A Few Words on Methods

Now I'd like to offer just a few words about a method I've been experimenting with. In most of my research I use standard interview, data coding, and analysis techniques, mixing the kind of narrative analysis piloted by folklorists and the sorts of grounded theory coding and analysis methods used in sociology.

Epistolary Research

A newer technique I've tried, and which I've found particularly useful in investigating women's literacy, is what might be called "epistolary research." After my interviews in Appalachia were completed, I exchanged occasional letters with some of my female interviewees. In these letters I wrote of my

own difficulties and tentative ideas in trying to understand the data they had given me, and they wrote back of their own understanding of what the things they had said to me "meant." These letters also shared basic details of our lives, but focused largely on issues of literacy.

I should mention here that I already had personal relationships with the women with which I exchanged these letters, which made this process seem very natural. It may well be more awkward or contrived for me to add an epistolary component to the research I'm beginning in North Dakota, where my first contact with any interviewees will be the interviews themselves. But the exchange of letters between women has a long history as a particularly intimate means to communicate thoughts, and I suspect that even with women that I've just met, letter-writing may produce useful information that would not be communicated in the standard interview format. In addition, the letters themselves serve as a kind of literacy sample. They also let interviewees comment directly on the researcher's analysis. They can foster a relationship between researcher and interviewees that breaks down the traditional roles of interviewee as object of study and researcher as a supposedly objective observer—especially when the researcher uses the letters to purposely expose and make vulnerable her or his analysis. I think there may be great potential for this method of research into women's literacy.

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