



2019

Thinking Outside the Girl Box: Teaming Up with Resilient Youth in Appalachia

Rolanda L. Ward
Niagara University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ward, Rolanda L. (2019) "Thinking Outside the Girl Box: Teaming Up with Resilient Youth in Appalachia," *Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal*: Vol. 11 : No. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw/vol11/iss1/9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Murray State's Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal by an authorized editor of Murray State's Digital Commons. For more information, please contact msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu.

Book Review

by Rolanda L. Ward

Thinking Outside the Girl Box: Teaming Up with Resilient Youth in Appalachia

Linda Spatig & Layne Amerikaner
2014

Athens: Ohio University Press

224 pages

Paperback, \$26.95

ISBN-13: 978-0821420607

The fortitude of an isolated community is lived through the words of the writers. While Spatig and Amerikaner sought to examine the cultural norms and experiences of girls in a community not on the radar of most, they were surprised to find themselves a part of the story. Their struggle with this unexpected development, ultimately leads the reader to the conclusion that community work is not only transformative for the youth who are served, but also the professionals who serve them, and the researchers who seek to work in partnership to record their journey. This text challenges social science researchers to see the Lincoln County community, not as participants, but as partners, and, at times, collaborative ethnographers.

Linda Spatig, an ethnographic researcher and university professor, collaborated with the Lincoln County Girl's Resiliency Program (GRP) in Lincoln County, West Virginia to document the life of their community-based program. Her collaborations extend beyond GRP to include graduate student researchers and her daughter, who co-authored the book.

GRP's focus on youth development proved to be an important component of the youths' lives in that rural community. However, the work alone could not sustain the organization, especially when resources began to disappear. As a result, the ethnographers became program assistants in order to keep the program afloat. The authors' decision to reveal the demise of GRP early in the text connects the reader to key stakeholders and their emotional decisions throughout the life of the program. In addition to revealing the outcome of GRP, Spatig highlights lessons learned throughout the 14 years she spent researching and writing about GRP. In particular, she struggles with what *doing* community means and what being an evaluator means in her own community. In the end, she is more concerned with framing the story correctly, offering support and resources, and collaborating with community members. As a reader, I was grateful to know these questions as I made my way through each chapter.

Spatig's training as an ethnographer is clear as she unfolds what it means to be an Appalachian youth and how youth is experienced through a gendered lens. In fact, her perspective on youth development appropriately challenges those working in the field. Spatig weaves an emphasis on culture and gender in the analysis of youth work and youth development. In addition, her understanding of youth development moves from a programmatic, homogenous intervention model to an intervention that is girl specific and youth driven.

As the book reads more like a “love story”, Spatig’s own description, than a traditional social science inquiry, the authors focus each chapter on specific girls. Instead of learning about a topic in each chapter, the reader learns about the experiences of each girl. This style of writing captures the essence of Spatig’s and Amerikaner’s two core questions: how has this girl experienced community, and what about their participation in GRP demonstrates program objectives? By doing so, meaning is found in each program activity, regardless of its success. For example, the reader learns about the role of family dynamics in goal setting and future planning for one girl. We learn that the girls’ choices are not always about themselves, but about the families they navigate, the resources that are inaccessible to them, and the systemic failures found in schools that create barriers for some of the girls. Furthermore, traditional outcome benchmarks (e.g., participant retention and program funding) are seen as lessons and not failures.

Chapter one sets the stage. In this chapter, the reader visualizes the geography and status of Lincoln County. Stereotypes are challenged in order to frame the story. In fact, the authors goes to great lengths not to reconstitute legendary tales and mainstream media representations of Appalachian living like the remote geography found in West Virginia, the impact of poverty, and the stereotype about girls being less than their male counterparts.

Chapter two elaborates on how community-based work is asset focused, strengths driven, and transformative. Spatig’s shares a writing exercise in which the girls share their thoughts about resiliency. The girls’ interpretation of resiliency is heavily focused on their connection to GRP; and GRP’s mission to support and challenge girls, while they use their innate, resilient ability to overcome the challenges in their lives.

Chapters three through five focus on the concept of voice and its role in the development of self-esteem. In these chapters, we meet a few of GRP’s girls and see their work as interns, program leaders, and collaborators in Participatory Action Research. In addition, the characteristics, roles, and outcomes of youth as program leaders are more thoroughly explored.

Although not a primary theme, but still very much worth highlighting, is Spatig’s use of graduate students throughout the research project. In chapter six, Spatig gives us all a lesson on what it truly means to train graduate students in social science research design, implementation, and analysis. As an academic, I kept thinking about my own use of students and how I could better train them to move from observers and documenters of phenomena to true servants of underserved communities. Spatig’s perspective on collaborative research and valid methodologies really does push the literature forward.

Chapter seven reminds the reader that community-based work is not insular, rather it is grounded in an interdependent and ecological perspective. Spatig’s longitudinal study affords her an opportunity to follow a few GRP participants into their early adult years. As the girls transition from youth to emerging adults, the impact of family ties, economics, educational achievements, and other relevant indicators of social outcomes are uncovered.

The love story ends with a discussion and questioning of the implications of collaborative research. In chapter eight, Spatig’s struggles, tensions, and choices related to research methodology are acknowledged as she explores the impact the research study may have had on

the organization's delayed demise. For Spatig, the research findings were not the product of the research project. Rather, she saw the audience of her research, the community itself, as the product. Therefore, it made sense to the reader that Spatig and her team stepped in to help and assumed non-official staff roles during organizational strain. She acknowledges the positive contributions of her graduate students when they stepped out of their researcher roles and assumed program leader roles when GRP's funding drastically declined. Had the graduate students not assumed these roles, the girls would not have had a program to attend. She ends the book reassuring the reader that she and the research team consciously reflected on their roles throughout the research process.

An interesting aspect of the book that generated doubts for me was the use of Spatig's daughter as a co-author. Given her daughter was not a social scientist and had not participated in the data collection, I sometimes wondered how close the descriptions of the characters and the research findings were tied to the actual data. However, this quandary took a back seat when I concluded that my connections to the characters in this love story were made possible through this literary style. Furthermore, my connections to the characters were strengthened through the inclusion of the girls' primary reflective writings.

Although neither author is a social worker, this book would be useful in an introduction to macro social work class, focusing on assets, engagement, and social planning. Excerpts from the text would also be beneficial in research methods and an elective course in human services management. Finally, this book might be helpful to urban social workers who want to work toward cultural competence pertaining to rural stereotypes as well as rural social workers who seek encouragement and written acknowledgement of the work they are undertaking each day.