ABSTRACT

BODENHAMER, AYSHA ALLISON. Inequality in the Coalfields of West Virginia: Implications of Poverty, Paternalism, and Identity. (Under the direction of Sarah Bowen).

Coal continues to dominate the Appalachian region despite increasingly visible evidence of its negative consequences for individuals, communities, and the environment. This research explores why residents of West Virginia coal communities continue to support coal, despite the social, economic, and environmental degradation it causes. I use a theoretical framework that incorporates concepts of poverty, paternalism, and identity to investigate individual perceptions of the coal industry. Using data from 18 in-depth interviews and participant observation in three counties in West Virginia, I argue that the paternalistic power of the industry has reached a breaking point. This breaking point is largely due to the practice of mountaintop removal (MTR), which destroys place and employment opportunities, in turn making residents question the legitimacy and stability the industry once provided. The results of this research show that there are potential limits to paternalism and that place matters, especially given the connection of place to the larger social meanings of class, exploitation, culture, and structures of power.
Inequality in the Coalfields of West Virginia: Implications of Poverty, Paternalism, and Identity

by
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DEDICATION

In memory of Larry Gibson, and in honor of all those he inspired.
BIOGRAPHY

Originally from Mount Airy, North Carolina, Bodenhamer attended Radford University in Radford, Virginia for her undergraduate studies where she majored in sociology and minored in international studies and Mandarin Chinese. After her brief stent as an English and later business finance major, Bodenhamer found a love for sociology and Appalachian studies, thanks to Drs. Paula Brush, Jeanne Meckolichick, Grace Toney Edwards, and Theresa Burriss. Once she found her place in sociology, she was encouraged to continue her studies at the graduate level. Bodenhamer’s academic journey continued at North Carolina State University, where her goal was to study the impacts of coal mining on Appalachian communities. Bodenhamer currently resides in Raleigh, North Carolina with her partner, Caitlin Hennessy and their two dogs, Sadie and Harper. Her areas of concentration are rural communities and global change and development.
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INTRODUCTION

Coal has dominated the political, economic, and social fabric of West Virginia since the early 1800s (Lewis 1993). The concept of “Big Coal” or “King Coal,” commonly used to describe the coal industry in West Virginia, denotes the enormous political and economic control coal has achieved as a result of the mining companies, energy companies, railroads, and political leaders that work to maintain the industry’s power (Goodell 2006; Howard 2012). This power is signified by the ideological pull of the industry, as well as the physical violence, threats, and harassment often bestowed on those who oppose the coal industry (Bell and York 2010; Howard 2012). However, especially with the industry’s shift to mountaintop removal (MTR), the negative consequences of the industry are becoming clearer (Bell 2009).

The destruction of coal mining comes in many forms, including environmental ruin, economic decline, and social degradation (Scott 2010). MTR is a type of coal extraction that consists of blasting and leveling mountains using heavy explosives and then dumping this “overburden” into adjacent valleys resulting in buried rivers and streams (Appalachian Voices 2012; Austin and Clark 2011). The shift to MTR also causes mining employment to drastically decline (Bell 2009). In turn, MTR disassembles local ecosystems and communities by causing mudslides, flooding, housing damage, contaminated well water, dislodged boulders, loss of property, timber, and crop values, as well as releasing harmful particulates into the air (Austin and Clark 2011; Epstein et al 2011). Those living in heavily concentrated coal mining regions, display higher rates of heart disease, lung cancer, and mortality rates (Hendryx, O’Donnel, and Horn 2008). Additionally, researchers find that the burning of coal is the number one cause of global warming, contributing to 41% of CO₂
emissions (Epstein et al 2011). This culmination of environmental degradation caused by the industry directly affects communities by causing conflict between groups that support or oppose the practices of the industry (Bell 2009).

Yet, many residents appear to continue to support the coal industry. Coal is perceived by many as both historically significant and essentially permanent (Burns 2007). Coal has even become a source of pride and identity for many West Virginians (Bell and Braun 2010).

Thus, given the increasingly visible contradictions of coal, such as declining employment and environmental destruction, I set out to examine why West Virginians continue to support it. My theoretical framework consists of paternalism, poverty, and identity as possible explanations. By analyzing 18 in-depth interviews and participant observation, I show that the paternalistic power of the industry is beginning to decay. This trend is shown by participants’ questioning of the motives and actions of the industry as well as the reliance of the coal industry on intense propaganda to reproduce its ideology. Participants often displayed a love-hate relationship with coal because of the role coal once played in the region, but as the industry increasingly shifts to MTR, local support is beginning to decline. The majority of participants supported the coal industry, but did not support MTR. Most participants saw the future of coal as uncertain and were apprehensive about what the future may bring.

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1 Public support for coal at this time varies. Some claim that without coal, they would have to move out of the region to find other employment elsewhere. Nonetheless, a public opinion survey of residents in coal regions of Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, and Virginia found that respondents were divided on their opinions of MTR: 38% opposed MTR, 24% supported it, and the other 38% were unsure (Lake Research Partners and Bellwether Research 2011). However, after respondents read a brief statement defining MTR, [“Coal companies in [STATE] mine coal from mountains through a process called mountaintop removal mining where the top of a mountain is removed to extract the coal and waste is disposed in nearby valleys and streams.”] those opposed jumped to 57% (Ibid.). Thus, it is unclear as to what accounts for these differences in opinion.
**Background and History of Coal Industry in West Virginia**

The discovery of coal in West Virginia during the 18th century fueled the American Industrial Revolution (Lewis 1993). The industry also created structures for domination through absentee ownership, coal towns, and scrip. Upon the discovery of coal, rich north-eastern bankers and industrialists, excited about investment opportunities and the chance to increase their wealth, bought large tracts of land in West Virginia (Ibid.). In fact, by 1923 50% of the land in West Virginia was owned by absentee owners, over 66% of the land in 1970, and 75% of the land by 1999 (Fox 1999). Absentee ownership, which still continues today, ensures that outside interests, primarily profits, undermine residential interests such as good jobs and environmentally safe practices (Burns 2007).

Along with absentee ownership, coal companies constructed coal towns and used scrip (a company-issued form of currency) as a way to establish control over miners (Burns 2007). Scrip established control because it kept miners obligated to the company they worked for since they could only spend scrip at that particular company store, which in turn made them dependent on the company (Brier 1988; Lynch 1914). Coal towns were also a way for operators to glean more capital gains from the miners (Williamson 1982). For instance, miners had to pay the company-owned store for their own equipment, rent, doctors’ visits, and other living expenses, which was typically 4-7% higher than stores outside of the coal town (Fishback 1986; Scott 2010). Thus, miners often owed more to the company store than they received in their weekly wages, which served to keep the miners indebted to the coal company (Payne 2010; Scott 2010). This company-owned model ensured the concentration
of power in the hands of the coal operators, established control and paternalistic domination over the miners, and served to halt unionization (Burns 2007; Williamson 1982).

Miners began the long and bloody fight to unionize in hopes of safer working conditions and better pay in the late 1800s and early 1900s (Payne 2011). The struggle to unionize actually resulted in warfare: the Mine War of 1912-1913 on Cabin and Paint Creek and again in 1920 in Mingo and Logan counties (Ibid.). Miners requested a number of rights and benefits such as the right of collective bargaining, free speech and assembly, the ability to buy goods somewhere other than the company store, fair wages, and checks and balances for the weighing of mined coal. Many of these requests were already technically honored by the state, but not by the coal companies (Lewis 1993). When the coal companies did not agree to these rights and expectations, miners began to strike in April of 1912 (Payne 2011; Wheeler 1976). Union membership was higher at times and lower in others, but the defeat of the miners at the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921 halted unionization efforts for the time being (West Virginia Archives and History 2012). It was not until 1933, with the passing of the National Industrial Recovery Act, that unions were legally protected in the coalfields of West Virginia (Ibid.). In recent decades union membership has drastically decreased (Bell 2009). In fact, as of 2011 only 7.2% of those employed in mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction combined are part of a union nationwide (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2012).

There have been a number of technological advancements in coal mining over the lifespan of coal extraction in West Virginia. World War II created an increased need for coal, which led to the development of long-wall and continuous mining techniques. Later, strip mining became a more efficient and preferred method because it increased extraction and
decreased the cost of labor; therefore increasing capital (Montrie 2000; Straw 2006). The first reported case of surface mining was in 1955 (Montrie 2000), which paved the way for the widespread adoption of MTR, often referred to as “strip-mining on steroids,” in the 1970s (Appalachian Voices 2012). MTR uses massive machines and explosives to mine entire mountains from the top down instead of traditional tunneling methods (Goodell 2006). From a coal operator’s perspective, it is more efficient and economical to strip an entire mountain away instead of doing the dirty, slow, and dangerous work required of underground miners (Ibid.). However, the aftermath of MTR leads to intensified environmental, social, and economic degradation.

The shift to MTR in the 1970s amplified environmental, social, and economic distress in the coalfields of West Virginia (Fox 1999; Goodell 2006). Ecosystems are transformed as mountaintops are flattened, streams are covered, toxic chemicals leech into well water, and carcinogenic particles float through the air (Austin and Clark 2011; Bell 2009; Epstein et al. 2011; Fox 1999; Goodell 2006). MTR covers miles of streams, poisons wells with heavy metals, and increases the susceptibility of communities to flooding, thus leading to great social unrest (Bell 2009; Reece 2006; Scott 2010). Furthermore, with the mechanization of labor, fewer and fewer workers are needed (Burns 2007). As shown in Figures 1 and 2, coal employment has drastically declined since the 1940s. The number of workers employed in West Virginia has declined from a high of 130,457 miners in 1940 to 22,599 workers in 2010 (Coal Facts 2011). These workers produced slightly more coal in 2010 than in 1940, but with over 100,000 fewer workers, hence the claims of efficiency and productivity accomplished with the use of MTR.
In response to what coal operators see as the waning acceptability of coal as the core industry in West Virginia, they are very active in creating a specific discourse in order to maintain the industry’s legitimacy (Bell and York 2010). This discourse often targets environmentalists, instead of industry representatives, as the catalyst for declining coal employment (Ibid.). In addition, coal companies have always contributed heavily to both state and federal political campaigns in order to maintain legislation that supports the interests of the coal industry (see http://www.sourcewatch.org). During the 2012 election, local and state politicians, as well as presidential candidate Mitt Romney, campaigned heavily in West Virginia stating that Obama had “waged a war on coal”\(^2\). West Virginia also hosts several annual coal festivals, in an attempt to amend the rift between the industry and surrounding communities\(^3\). These events further solidify the coal industry’s position in West Virginia, as well as maintain the interests of the coal operators, thus subjecting residents to patterns of dependency and poverty (Duncan 1999).


\(^3\) See Charleston Daily Mail September 8, 2009 “Peace, Love, & Rock n Coal.”
Figure 1: West Virginia Employment 1900-2010
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the historical dominance of the coal industry in West Virginia, residents face a number of oppressive structures in the coalfields. Persistent poverty has plagued Appalachia for centuries and could provide one answer as to why Appalachians are torn between the destructive practices of the coal industry and their loyalty to it. Coal towns serve as the foundation of a paternalistic ideology, but this ideology also appears to shift overtime. Additionally, Appalachians display a longtime love of place, yet they are dependent on a destructive mining industry. I use poverty, paternalism, and identity to explore the theoretical reasons as to why West Virginians continue to support the coal industry.
Poverty and Dependency

Most of central Appalachia is characterized by persistent poverty, which is defined by having at least 20% of the population below the poverty line for a minimum of three decades (USDA Economic Research Service 2012). Rural regions like Appalachia are constrained by limited opportunities and remoteness which makes it difficult to find stable and secure jobs (Tickamyer and Duncan 1990). Some scholars even describe West Virginia as an internal colony (Walls 1978); which implies the constant outflow of natural resources and capital gains to the owners and operators of extraction. This outflow keeps West Virginia in a constant economic struggle (Gaventa 1980); thus making their population vulnerable and dependent on the one thing that keeps them somewhat afloat—coal (Duncan 1999). This model of extraction creates a cycle of poverty, which maintains the power of the industry by keeping occupants dependent much like the addictive economies discussed by Freudenburg (1992). Hence, I hypothesize that poverty could make West Virginians more supportive of the coal industry, simply because there are few alternatives.

Interesting enough, Appalachia is rich in natural resources such as coal. However, despite this wealth, its people are poor because wealth flows outward to absentee owners (Gaventa 1980). Poverty becomes normalized and considered part of everyday life, which gives the coal industry more legitimacy by offering some relief from the region’s vast poverty (Ibid.). However, one cannot assume that dependency is a natural occurrence; instead, it should be viewed as contingent upon power relations embedded in structures of paternalism and traditional power (Newby et al. 1978). In this way, one can see that
dependency represents the social reality between those who have power and those who remain powerless (Gaventa 1980).

Power maintains structures of inequality and therefore creates persistent poverty (Duncan 1999). West Virginians have become dependent on the coal industry for jobs and for its contributions to the economy; therefore, Appalachians remain loyal to the industry (Bell 2009). The coal industry, by providing some relief from poverty, “buys allegiance” in the form of acceptance of the coal industry (Gaventa 1980:194). Freudenburg (1992) describes extractive economies as “addictive economies” because they make communities vulnerable by creating a dependence on one industry, thus leaving them coming back for more much like a drug addiction. Consequently, financial insecurity and dependence implies that West Virginians are going to remain supportive and loyal to the coal industry.

*Paternalism and Power*

Paternalism and power offer another potential explanation for why people remain supportive of the coal industry. The most widely used logic of power is that “A has power over B to the extent that [s]he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do” (Dahl 1957:202-203). Thus, one has to have control, authority, or influence over another in order to establish power. Paternalism is a form of power based on traditional authority, meaning that it is based on historically powerful actors and a strong class division—primarily the owners and the workers (Newby et al. 1978; Shulman and Anderson 1999). Another way to conceptualize paternalism is the ability to present an altruistic agenda that appears to

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*At the same time, as indicated in Figure 1, the number of coal mining jobs continues to decline, thus making it apparent that coal does not provide as much relief from poverty as it once did. Nonetheless, there are few industries that can help fill this void, thus West Virginians are still dependent on what jobs the coal industry continues to provide.*
protect subordinates on the surface, but in reality, serves to further exploit them (Jackman 1994). Loyalty to an industry, therefore, is indicative of a paternalistic relationship.

Two entities regulate paternalism: ideology and institutions (Jackman 1994). Ideology serves to self-regulate subordinates by molding them to adopt the ideas of the ruling class, while institutions serve to seize resources from the working class (Ibid.). Furthermore, institutionalization legitimates ideology while also releasing the dominant class from blame because it becomes part of the structure and not a sole individual (Della Fave 1980; Jackman 1994). These institutions come in the forms of cultural adaptations, political dominance, and organizations such as the West Virginia Coal Association. Furthermore, the threat of sanctions and violence serve to keep subordinates in line, but if dominant groups rely on violence and intense propaganda, then paternalism is not working, because the self-regulating dominant ideology and institutions appear to be powerless (Jackman 1994; Lasswell 1936).

Paternalism is historically grounded, which makes it appear to be somewhat of a permanent, reified structure. As a result, people loyally submit to “natural leaders” based on their traditional power and perceived wisdom (Weber [1922] 1978). Subordinates then begin to identify and look up to their oppressors for guidance, therefore solidifying dependency (Newby et al. 1978). Paternalism has often been used in analyses of farmers and landowners (Ibid.) and mill towns (Schulman and Anderson 1999), but these exploitative relationships also apply to the coalfields.

Coal towns are the basis for paternalism historically, where coal operators also played the roles of landlord, merchant, minister, teacher, and police protection (Burns 2007). After all, control over resources leads to power (Simon and Oakes 2006). Paternalistic relationships
are explicit between coal operators and miners in that the coal operators refer to miners as “family” and expect them to be loyal to the company they work for (Duncan 1999). This dominant/subordinate relationship is historically grounded, but is perpetuated through a specific set of ideals used to maintain the coal industry’s hegemony (Bell and York 2010). This coal rhetoric is often used to maintain the power of the industry, where people in the coalfields “who stick their necks out” are ostracized and sometimes even physically victimized if they threaten the status quo (Shapiro 2010: 4). In this case, victimization highlights a failing system that now relies on violence to maintain its dominance.

Power is a complex set of social relations (Poulantzas 1973). The historical processes of power in Appalachia have left its residents poor and dependent on the very industry that oppresses them. Regardless of the growing number of injustices, people are afraid to speak out against an oppressive industry for fear that things could be worse, or for fear of backlash from the surrounding community, which is happening more frequently. Therefore, the political and economic power of the coal industry makes it difficult for individuals or groups to resist the power of the coal industry (Bell 2009; Bell and York 2010; Goodell 2006; Reece 2006).

Identity

Previous research shows that Appalachians have a strong sense of cultural ideals and values (Jones 1994; Marcum 2008). These shared values, often referred to as Appalachian values, argue that Appalachians share common ideals of familialism, neighborliness, love of place, patriotism, individualism, modesty, traditionalism, and religiosity (Jones 1994; Marcum 2008). Appalachian poets such as Wendell Berry and Frank X Walker, and writers
like Silas House, Denise Giardina, Pamela Duncan, and many others discuss the strong pull of the mountains for Appalachians. In general, Appalachian literature is known for this strong emphasis on place (Miller et al 2006). Yet, sociologists do not widely use the concept of Appalachian values in their examination of the coalfields. By using Appalachian values, I am able to further explore identity in the coalfields and how it affects relations between community members and the coal industry.

Scholars disagree on whether Appalachian identity continues to exist and what the implications of this identity are in reality (Lewis and Billings 1995). Historically, scholars thought of Appalachia as an isolated subculture removed from mainstream America (Billings 2007). Some studies showed that traditional values began to break down once Appalachia became more integrated into mainstream culture, giving way to consumerist ideals (Lewis and Billings 1995). Recent research shows that those who identify with Appalachian identity are typically more highly educated, spend a large portion of their lives in Appalachia, and are generally older (Cooper, Knotts, and Livingston 2010). The stereotypes that plague the Appalachian region could be one reason why individuals choose not to identify as Appalachian (Ibid.). Nonetheless, this research also shows that the more someone identifies with Appalachia, the more they support “green spaces” and limited economic growth (Ibid.), which directly contradicts Lewis and Billings (1995). Thus, I hypothesize that in keeping with traditional Appalachian values such as love of place, Appalachians are likely to disapprove of MTR.

Appalachian identity goes further than Appalachian values; residents also appear to have adopted coal as an intricate part of their identities (Bell 2009; Bell and Braun 2010; Bell
and York 2010). Today in Appalachia, divisions exist between those who support coal and those who do not (Reece 2006), and the fight between the two has become an intense ideological war. Some view the coalfields as part of a longstanding heritage and part of one’s identity (Scott 2010), while others view the coal industry as inherently exploitative (Eller 1982). The coal industry realizes that widespread coal identity is very beneficial in maintaining their dominant position. Bell and York (2010) describe this discourse as a tool created by coal operators to connect with communities and instill an economic identity attached to coal. This economic identity makes the coal industry appear to be the backbone of West Virginia’s economy, even though employment in the industry is declining drastically (Ibid.). Coal, then becomes a normal part of everyday life, thus making it difficult to acknowledge alternatives to coal (Scott 2010).

Gender also affects how coal identity plays out. It appears that more Appalachian women are willing to speak out against coal than men (Bell and Braun 2010). Other research also reveals a connection between environmental concerns and gender (Davidson and Freudenburg 1996). Scholars argue that women are attached to roles as mothers; therefore, women are more active in environmental justice activism to preserve Appalachian values, land, identity, and a way of life for their children (Bell and Braun 2010). However, men attach to masculine ideals, which coincide with being a coal miner (Ibid.). Thus, men are less likely to speak out against a potential employer, which would threaten their masculinity (Ibid.).
DATA AND METHODS

This project uses qualitative data to examine why West Virginians continue to support the coal industry, despite its negative repercussions. I use Charmaz’s (2006) version of grounded theory to develop themes, and to also construct theory using data from my participants. Thus, I pay close attention to detail and nuances in individuals’ narratives. Reflexivity is an essential part of qualitative research. Being reflexive involves the researcher as the instrument as she is open about her research agenda and self-aware of her biases and preconceived notions. Following Holsteing and Gubrium (2002), I do not assume people are simply open vessels; instead, as a researcher I am aware of the larger structural limitations and constructions that influence the individual. In essence, I am not looking for one “truth,” but rather many truths. Learning from the mistakes of Ellis (1995), I do not portray my observations and encounters as fact, but rather as one viewpoint I derive reflexively from my participation in the field.

Emotions are an integral part of the data and research process (Ellis 1995; Lofland et al. 2006). At various points throughout this study, I became angry. I was angry at participants for what I perceived to be their submission to the coal industry, and angry with the structure of the industry and its influence on the state. It was difficult for me to understand how Appalachians could be attached to place, yet fail to speak out against MTR. However, using a feminist perspective, it is important to not blame participants, but to realize that lived experiences shape subjective realities which power structures often influence (Kleinman 2007). Feminist ethnographic analyses emphasize processes through which individuals come to accept or resist social structure. Through these analyses, researchers reveal power
structures, and we can better uncover the processes of domination (Kleinman 2007). Emotion in fieldwork is revealing of interesting data from both participants’ and our perceptions as researchers (Blee 1998). I assumed I would be considered an “insider” by my participants because I grew up in the Appalachian region. Instead, I was routinely deemed an “outsider” in West Virginia. However, after playing a non-threatening role and presenting myself as willing to learn about the lives of others, referring to “acceptable incompetence,” I was generally accepted in the field (Lofland et al. 2006).

**Research Design**

An early focus of this study was on social capital, which I decided not to include in this particular analysis. My interview questions focus on the ways in which coal impacts participants and their communities, which includes the meaning of coal mining to the community, history of coal mining and the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), historical changes, type of mining, and impacts of the industry on community. Examples of such questions are: “Does the type of mining affect the community in different ways?” and “How have the relationships between the industry and the town changed over time?” I used the interview schedule as a guide in each interview, but I also give participants the freedom to discuss whatever topics were important to them. Major themes emerged from the data, which I present in this research. My interpretation of the data account for the data my participants provided, primarily showing that coal continues to be a contentious issue.

**Sampling Frame**

While planning this project, I first set out to compare an underground coal mining town to a MTR dependent town. Upon further research and after talking to some participants,
I found this nearly impossible to do. Federal records are not always current and are sometimes very difficult to locate. With these difficulties in mind, I focus on three counties: Kanawha, Raleigh, and Fayette. Of particular interest are the Paint Creek and Cabin Creek regions in Kanawha County, because these are the sights of the 1912 Mine Wars and the heart of many union struggles in the 1900s. These sites are also significant because they are neither in the heart of coal country (southern West Virginia), nor completely withdrawn from it. Kanawha County houses the state capital, Charleston, which gave me an opportunity to capture the more political side of the argument. Raleigh County still contributes a relatively large portion of coal mining jobs to West Virginia, while Fayette County has a slightly more diverse economy. I used purposive and snowball sampling methods to ensure I captured various narratives of many groups in West Virginia. By using theoretical sampling methods, I am able to provide a tighter analysis because participants are chosen depending on rising categories within the data (Charmaz 2006). Thus, by focusing my efforts in these three counties, I gained a diverse array of perspectives. Given the variability in locations and their connection to coal, I assumed my participants would be more open with their opinions about coal; however, some were still hesitant to disclose their feelings about coal. Nevertheless, participants expressed conflicting opinions about coal.

Data Collection

Findings for this project are based on the interpretation of 18 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with West Virginian residents and participant observation in the three southern coal-mining counties mentioned earlier. Data collection began in July of 2011 and was completed in August of 2012. I also utilized government statistics and resources as well
as news articles. Results presented from this data aim to create theoretical generalities. In other words, this study serves to build theory pertaining to paternalism, poverty, and identity in the context of an extractive regime in West Virginia.

When I collected data, I usually stayed in the area for several days at a time. Data collection took place during six visits, with each stay ranging from one to five days. Many participants actually offered to let me stay in their homes, one of which, I did. I asked each participant to fill out a demographic form and sign a consent form. Some participants refused to fill out demographic information. This project was designed to be confidential to ensure participants felt comfortable and safe in disclosing information about their daily lives. Each participant, place, and company in the study is assigned a pseudonym (except for county names) for confidentiality reasons. Interviews took place in respondents’ homes or places of work, as well as public spaces such as restaurants and libraries. I interviewed 18 participants, two of which were by phone. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed; I also wrote extensive notes throughout the interviews. While in the field, I took comprehensive notes on my observations of the various towns I visited. Afterwards, I wrote memos on occurrences that seemed interesting, contradictory, or consistent/inconsistent with what others had said. From these memos, notes, and transcriptions, I began to code common themes which occurred in my various interactions with West Virginia residents. I wrote many reflections and memos throughout the process to make sense of the data. Through this process, I acted as both the observer and a participant, as a witness, and instrument of the data (Lofland et al. 2006). I also used the computer software, NVivo, to code my interviews, and memos. From this coding process, I synthesized common themes, which is the data I will
present in the findings section. This coding process ensured that my own biases were kept to a minimum, and that my data analysis is representative of the data collected.

For my sampling frame, I first targeted community centers such as libraries and churches. After contacting 14 local churches and libraries, I received one referral and only two scheduled interviews, all of which were part of the library system. No churches returned my calls. From these three interviews, my journey began. I knew three participants through mutual contacts prior to this study, which I later interviewed. I recruited six from community centers such as libraries, and the other nine were snowball contacts. As time went on, I gathered snowball contacts, as well as met various people along the way whom were interested in my project. I made sure to pay close attention to one’s association with the coal industry, for example, coal worker versus anti-coal activist, so as to make sure my sample was not too heavily persuaded on one side or the other. I also paid attention to socioeconomic status in selecting participants with regards to educational attainment, household income, and employment status in order to gather as many perspectives as possible. At times I chose to utilize snowball contacts, but when I felt I had reached a point of saturation from a particular viewpoint, I targeted other groups.

These individuals included ten men and eight women ranging from ages 28 to 97. Representative of racial demographics in West Virginia, seventeen participants were white, and only one was black. Eleven of the participants attended college but only seven (four females, three males) actually finished a degree. Government statistics showed that 17.1% of West Virginians have a bachelor’s degree or higher (US Census Bureau 2010), thus my sample characterizes a more educated population than would be representative of West
Virginia. The majority of participants were born in West Virginia, while a few of them were born elsewhere and later migrated to West Virginia. Many of the participants grew up in coal mining towns and shared stories about growing up in an “old dirt holler,” and their fathers, covered in coal dust, coming home with only the whites of their eyes showing. They told stories about one-room school houses and delicious home cooked meals. Most, if not all of them, said they would go back to the coal camps tomorrow if they could, representative of a desire for a simpler life. Participants ranged from librarians and school bus drivers to retired UMWA miners, and current coal industry representatives. Some participants were self-proclaimed environmentalists and/or anti-MTR activists. Others were advocates and representatives of the coal industry, while some had no connection to coal at all. I made multiple engagements with some participants. These individuals were very helpful in assisting me find government records, library resources, and other resources. These individuals also expressed interest in my project on many occasions, including emails and phone calls just to see how things were going. One participant even said, “We’ll make sure you have a good paper. You’ll have to work really hard not to!” (Author’s Interviews 2011).

FINDINGS

My analysis is driven by the examination of West Virginians’ loyalty towards a destructive industry. In general, participants appeared to be torn between their support for coal and their disapproval of MTR. The majority of participants (13 out of 18) were characterized as “pro-coal” because they expressed support for the coal industry; however, the majority (12 out of 18) were also “anti-MTR” because they openly expressed their disapproval of MTR. Hence, most participants were both pro-coal and anti-MTR. This
relationship is bound by a strong ideology based on paternalism, identity, and poverty. Using poverty, paternalism, and identity to explore the dominance of the coal industry in West Virginia, I argue that the paternalistic power of the industry has reached a breaking point. This breaking point is largely due to the practice of MTR, which destroys place and employment opportunities, in turn making residents question the legitimacy and stability the industry once provided. I divide my findings into three sections: poverty, paternalism and power, and identity.

Poverty

Due to the lack of economic opportunities, poverty was a reoccurring theme in my interviews. Participants discussed the shift to MTR and how it had amplified poverty in the region. Many participants suggested that the declining coal employment in the region was largely caused by the shift to MTR, which had displaced a large portion of the labor force and replaced them with heavy machinery. For example, Ginnie, who grew up in a coal town suggested:

The coal industry doesn’t hire that many people anymore because it is almost all mountaintop removal which requires a lot less people. When I was younger there were a couple of hollers that had like 10,000 people each living in them, now there’s maybe less than 1,000 (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Ginnie, as well as many other participants, expressed that “back in the day” there were tens of thousands of workers employed for underground coal mining, but due to a competitive economy, the coal industry had shifted to more extreme mining practices to increase production and decrease labor costs, which resulted in a large body of unemployed miners. Katie, who worked for a non-profit environmental organization, suggested that mechanization is the primary cause of poverty in the region:
Look at a production graph versus jobs graph anything they can mechanize they will and so you’ve got production skyrocketing and jobs going in the opposite direction. (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Statements like these showed that participants were beginning to reconsider the role of the industry today. Although coal production remains high, coal employment has declined drastically since the 1940s and even more so since the 1970s (see Figures 1 and 2). In this context, participants expressed concerns about alternative employment opportunities. Sally, also grew up in a coal town and noted that coal mining had changed:

We need jobs up here, because our coal mines are dying out up this way. We need a lot of jobs for people. That’s why I’m a little mixed with the Wal-Mart because I know the Wal-Mart is gonna cut out jobs for the little places, but there might be other people who need the jobs. No win (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Sally acknowledged that coal employment is changing, and she expressed uncertainty that retail can provide the same high-paying jobs that coal mining did. There was also a sense of desperation in her tone as she talked about the lack of economic opportunities in general. Most if not all participants claimed that there was a dire need for economic growth in West Virginia, but that they were left with few options.

Despite participants’ support for coal in general, most also noted the contradiction between the vast amounts of coal mined in the region, yet the persistence of poverty that remained. One participant, Tabitha, who also grew up in a coal camp pointed out, “My father was a coal miner so he was always working, but you know how can someone always be working and still be poor?” (Author’s Interviews 2011). This quote acknowledged the lack of reciprocity the industry provided, which left people questioning their support for the industry. Dan, a former UMWA coal miner suggested a similar contradiction:

If coal is so fantastic, why is it that in southern West Virginia where there’s so much coal being mined that’s where you have the highest poverty?” (Author’s Interviews 2011).
A former West Virginia Congressman, Carl, also alluded to similar conclusions:

All you have to do is look at the statistics to find out that if coal mining was so good for the economy, why is it that those areas have the highest unemployment, the lowest per capita income, the worst roads, the poorest health clinics? (Author’s Interviews 2011).

These sentiments showed that residents were becoming aware of the outward flow of profit, and the poverty that remained. Thus, participants were beginning to question the legitimacy of the coal industry in today’s society.

Overall, I argue that West Virginia residents are increasingly aware of contradictions between the continued extraction of coal and the persistence of poverty. Poverty had deepened because MTR employs a fraction of the people required for underground mining (Bell 2009). Concerns posed by participants regarding employment in the coal industry showed how they questioned the industry’s ability to provide for the region, which is expected in a paternalistic relationship. The impoverishment of the region also highlighted structures of power and dependency. Most participants expressed a feeling of dependence on coal because of the lack of other economic alternatives, which indicates support for Freudenburg (1992) and Duncan (1999). Freudenberg (1992) showed that once extractive economies are established, additional economic ventures are limited, thus creating structures of poverty and unequal power relations. However, once these economies die out, it leaves the population more desperate than before. This relationship keeps the population vulnerable and dependent on coal (Duncan 1999), which is where the importance of paternalism comes into play.

*Paternalism and Power*

Paternalism is a system of controlling subordinate groups through ideology and an appearance of benevolence (Jackman 1994). Bell and York (2010) described the coal
industry’s ideology as an “economic identity,” because it suggests that coal is the only economically vital industry in West Virginia. I show that the industry continues to recreate this ideology by using ideals of national security. However, I also show that the industry has begun scapegoating those opposed to the industry as the reason for declining employment opportunities. I argue that despite the attempts of the industry to perpetuate a paternalistic ideology, participants questioned the motives of the industry.

Paternalistic ideology of the industry includes rhetoric pertaining to national security in order to legitimate the industry’s role in society. For example, Tyler, a key spokesperson for the entire coal industry in West Virginia talked about the continued importance of coal and how it contributed to the energy security of the United States:

> The good lord put the minerals in the mountains for a reason. The fact that America has the most coal of any other country but imports the most oil - we have got to learn to understand the need for security and not depending on the volatile places in the world for our livelihood and lifestyles (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Tyler framed his dialogue around national security and how the United States should rely on coal instead of importing foreign fossil fuels. As a spokesperson for the industry, he played a key role in creating and propagating a paternalistic ideology. These sentiments were used to legitimate the coal industry, but also ignored declining employment and environmental degradation. Today, billboards, bumper stickers, and license plates in West Virginia read, “Coal Keeps the Lights On” or “Friend of Coal” representing the crux of modern day paternalistic ideology in the coalfields. These messages showed the attempts of the industry to maintain legitimacy, but it also showed their use of propaganda. Ideology remains powerful because it creates structures of dominance without one even realizing it.
Participants had internalized this paternalistic ideology and echoed the ideas that coal was the pinnacle of energy production in the United States. Dan, the former coal miner, claimed:

West Virginia is ranked as an energy state, facts are facts, you know, West Virginia played an important part in WWII, metallurgical coal; it’s fueled the country with electricity (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Dan suggested the importance of West Virginia’s status as an energy state, thus showing how ideology is interpreted and reproduced by others. Sally, also considered coal to be a necessary part of the historical development of the United States; “If it wasn’t for the coal miners I don’t think our country would be where we are today” (Author’s Interviews 2011). These sentiments showed that ideology continued to play a major role in maintaining the industry’s legitimacy.

In addition to promoting coal production as the peak of energy creation and national security, the coal industry also targeted anyone who was opposed to the industry as key enemies of the state. In particular, environmentalists were targeted most frequently. Aside from messages targeted toward those who oppose the coal industry, some participants noted similar ideas. Wes, who worked for a mine servicing company, claimed:

Fifty-one percent of the nation’s electricity comes from West Virginia, so there’s nothing negative about coal; unless you’re a bra-burning, tree-hugging femi-nazi…Yeah there’s coal in these mountains. You can drive down the road and see coal coming out of the ground. It’s there so we might as well use it. There’s nothing else as plentiful and nothing else around here that creates as much jobs, there’s

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5 Along the main interstate during my drives to West Virginia, there was one billboard that stood out which read: “Obama’s No Job Zone: The President talks about creating jobs, but his EPA is destroying jobs.” The organization connected to this billboard is the West Virginia Coal Association, which serves as a major institution that reproduces the paternalistic ideology of the industry. These messages showed the efforts of the industry to place blame on others for the industry’s decline, ultimately claiming that governmental regulations and environmentalists are the two biggest enemies of the industry.
nothing else around here that would keep West Virginia people going like coal. If you don’t like it then go sit in the dark, because that’s basically what would happen (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Here, it is clear that a very specific ideology has circulated that those who oppose the coal industry are threats and must be shut down. Furthermore, his comments showed the creation and reproduction of a paternalistic ideology that attempts to portray the coal industry as benevolent and those opposed as enemies. Those perceived as threats to the industry typically included the EPA, other regulatory agencies, and environmentalists in general. By scapegoating these other institutions as enemies of coal, powerful figures attempted to gain legitimacy by insisting that the industry continued to be a powerful protector of an Appalachian and American way of life. However, his comment, “bra-burning, tree-hugging femi-nazi,” made it apparent that this ideology is breaking down because it must rely on intense propaganda and scapegoating to get its message across. A few, however, were aware that this intentional ideology existed and that it used propaganda to disperse its messages:

I think we have this hard pushback from the industry with the propaganda, and I think part of that is a tip of the hat to our types of [environmental] groups because it’s like a dying beast that’s backed into a corner and is lashing out. I think it’s like a beast and its desperate and all this propaganda and the inciting the EPA and all this stuff is rising up really strong because people are trying hard not to, but they’re seeing the writing on the wall (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Here, it became apparent that residents had started to notice the tactics used by the industry to maintain its power and control over the region. These individuals presented the industry as a “dying beast” as powerful figures attempted to legitimate the industry. Residents had begun to question this reality, which is also largely based on participants’ cultural love of place.

Identity
As participants began to question the legitimacy of the industry, they began to question their own identities and place in the social world. Thus, I argue that a tension exists between participants’ Appalachian identities and their attachment to coal. As mentioned previously, Appalachian values are considered culturally significant norms and values of the Appalachian region (Jones 1994). Even though many participants remained supportive of coal, participants were most critical of MTR because of the destruction it caused. MTR represented a breaking point for what most participants were willing to bear for the industry. Thus, I argue that participants’ love of place acts as the breaking point for the industry’s paternalistic power.

Environmental degradation was one of the most talked about issues among my participants. Primarily, when residents talked about environmental degradation, they were talking about the aftermath of MTR. Many participants were torn between their love of place and their support for the industry, as expressed by Lisa, a local librarian, (one of the few who supported MTR):

I love my mountains, I love my trees, but I believe that coal was put here for us to use and I can’t imagine why we would not mine it and pay for another source when we have such an abundance (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Lisa suggested that mountaintop removal “may not be pretty,” but that she was willing to sacrifice “her” mountains in exchange for coal. This sense of loyalty and sacrifice was shared by some participants, while others were more critical of the environmental impacts of MTR.

Love of place was one Appalachian value expressed by many participants. As many of them discussed their love for West Virginia, many noted the devastation caused by MTR, which directly contradicted their love of place. Participants described the widespread
degradation caused by MTR. Ginnie said, “The environmental situation has gotten much worse. There are actually huge areas in the southern part of the state that are becoming unlivable” (Author’s Interviews 2011). Most participants were concerned about the consequences of MTR on local communities, while others, such as Lindsey, were concerned about the aesthetic impacts of MTR, again demonstrating the importance of place:

I think it’s beautiful in West Virginia. It just breaks my heart when I see mountaintop removal. It’s just so unnatural looking when you’re driving on the turnpike and you see this. In the fall when the leaves are off the trees and in the winter when the leaves are off the trees, the scars show so vividly (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Lindsey personified the mountains, saying that when the leaves were off the trees, “the scars show.” Many participants talked about their love of the mountains and the importance of the biodiversity of the mountains to provide natural habitats for wildlife, filter water, and deter flooding, but MTR caused water quality to worsen and flooding to drastically increase; Carl and many others said, “In many rural areas in West Virginia, people who have their own water wells discover that suddenly they’ve gone dry or polluted as a result of all that mountaintop removal” (Author’s Interviews 2011).

Many participants were concerned that there was little effort made by coal companies to go back and reclaim the land they destroyed during extraction, such as Lawrence, who devoted his life to educating people about MTR:

We’ve gotten millions of acres destroyed and it is probably a conservative estimate that 1,200-1,500 miles of stream [have been destroyed due to MTR] but it’s more likely 3-4 times that much. So you know it’s what they’re doing here. It’s gotten to the point it’s almost irreversible and all the land they’ve destroyed not less than 2% but not more than 5% have they ever done anything with [reclamation]. So you’re looking at a great mass of land that’s been destroyed that would stretch from New York to California a quarter mile wide and start over coming back. How do you justify that? (Author’s Interviews 2011).
As indicated here, participants often became angry when they talked about MTR, ultimately because they perceived it as an attack on their way of life. Many were torn between their support for coal, but the lack of reclamation as Sally noted, “I don’t agree with the way they’re tearing the mountains up. If they would go back in and replenish or replant trees and stuff like that, that might be different, but…” (Author’s Interviews 2011). Others including Carl, noted similar issues with reclamation, “Mountaintop removal is what we call strip mining on steroids. And the claims by the coal industry that reclamation always works are false claims. I have described reclamation is like putting lipstick on a corpse” (Author’s Interviews 2011). These quotes highlighted the tension expressed by participants between their support for coal, and their concern for the environment and future generations. In general, people were upset about MTR, because of its implications on “land that will never bear again in generations” (Author’s Interview 2011). It was apparent from these dialogues that the destruction caused by MTR contradicted the West Virginian way of life and their love of place.

Damage are becoming more common as MTR sweeps through the region as is shown by my participants’ remarks. It is known that MTR pushes many people out of their beloved homes because of constant blasting, contaminated well water, and flooding (Scott 2010), but my participants showed that not everyone can leave and they are left to suffer the consequences. Consequently, MTR not only disrupts the natural ecology, but it interrupts communities as well (Bell 2009). MTR contradicted my participants’ love of place, which many of them noted. Thus, it appeared that the environmental degradation caused by MTR

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6 Essentially, these damages are known as externalities of coal and are offloaded onto surrounding communities by coal companies (see Epstein et al. 2011).
was the breaking point for participants’ support for the industry, and the industry’s power would suffer accordingly.

CONCLUSION

By using poverty, paternalism, and identity, I am able to examine the dominance of the coal industry in West Virginia, showing that the paternalistic power of the industry has reached a breaking point. The decline of the industry’s paternalistic power is shown through participants questioning the legitimacy and the ideology disseminated by the industry. In particular, participants questioned the role of mechanization and the contradiction between coal extraction and the persistence of poverty. These contradictions indicated that the coal industry did not have participants’ best interests in mind, but instead, were only concerned about increasing their profits. It was also apparent that the coal industry played an active role in creating an ideology to promote the legitimacy of the industry as is shown in this work, as well as Bell and York (2010). Furthermore, for identity, I argue that the Appalachian value, love of place, holds true and serves as the main breaking point for my participants’ support for the industry. In particular, the destruction caused by MTR and the coal companies’ lack of reclamation made participants realize that the industry no longer served as the protector and provider of the region, but instead exploited them with little reciprocity.

Ultimately, I suggest that there are limits to paternalism and place is important. In this case, place-bound identities are strong; particularly those attached to nature (Cooper, Knotts, and Livingston 2010; Harvey 1993; Jones 1994). Space can be anywhere, but place is attached to a larger set of social relations (Lobao, Hooks, and Tickamyer 2007). Place is attached to particular social ideals, cultures, and communities; essentially, “places have
meaning” (Lobao, Hooks, and Tickamyer 2007: 12). I show that place matters because it is tied to a multitude of larger social meanings such as class, exploitation, culture, and structures of power. In the end, it was the destruction of place that served as the breaking point and made participants realize the power differential between them and the coal operators. Thus, I argue, these awakenings will mark the decline of the coal industry’s power.

**Strength, Weaknesses, and Suggestions for Future Research**

This study offers a qualitative analysis of West Virginians’ support for the coal industry, providing rich, nuanced detail that would otherwise be lost. One weakness of this study is that I was unable to gain access to current coal miners. This is an important piece of data in itself; in that I was told multiple times that I would not be able to interview miners because of the ruthless work environment that ostracizes anyone who speaks out against the coal industry. This proved to be true. If given the opportunity, I would like to go back and interview more people currently employed by a coal company.

Although participants identified a number of environmental, social, and economic contradictions of the coal industry, globalization and the finite capacity of coal were not concerns. Most participants failed to identify West Virginia’s role as a major exporter of coal. This implied that most West Virginians were largely removed from the decisions of the coal industry, and the fact that West Virginia coal plays a smaller and smaller role in the United States’ energy production. It also showed that West Virginians are left to experience the externalities of the extraction of coal in the forms of environmental and health degradation, while importers only reap the benefits without the negative consequences of extraction (see Epstein et al. 2011). The one interviewee most aware of the broader context
of coal was a spokesperson for the coal industry, and he talked very proudly about exporting West Virginia coal to other countries. However, given the patriotism most participants expressed regarding mining coal for the needs of their country, I imagine this discovery would drastically change their perceptions of the industry if more people knew the coal they risked their lives to mine was increasingly shipped to other countries. Second, even the most critical participants were unconcerned that coal was a finite resource. Only one participant acknowledged that “the easy coal [was] gone” and that extraction was only going to become more complex as time went on (Author’s Interviews 2011). Instead, most participants did not acknowledge that coal would eventually run out, as expressed by Lisa, who said, “We don’t even take all the coal. Our coal reserves are amazing” (Author’s Interviews 2011).

This study offers a small contribution to the vast amount of work that needs to be done in Appalachia. Contributing to work by Bell (2009), Bell and Braun (2010), and Bell and York (2010), there is a vast need to continue work in Appalachia, spatially, quantitatively, and qualitatively. In addition to Freudenburg’s (1992; 2006) work on extractive industries, there need to be more studies regarding the transformation of the dependence on mono-economies in rural regions to diversified ones. Another important avenue for study comes in the form of applied work. In the event the coal industry collapses, there will be a great need for policy recommendations and development strategies in order to diversify West Virginia’s economy. I encourage researchers to use a place-based approach to accomplish these goals.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

Obama’s No Job Zone Billboard.

APPENDIX B

Interview Schedule*

I. General questions
   a. So how long have you lived in this area?
   b. What do you like and dislike about living here?
   c. What is it like to live here?
      i. Safe, close to neighbors?

II. Workplace Connections (networks, union, professional organization)⁷
   a. How do you make a living?
   b. Does your workplace have anything like a workplace organization or union?
   c. What do you think about this organization?
      i. Are you involved? How so?

III. Community investedness (social trust, networks, social norms)
   a. Describe a memory you have about this community.
   b. How have things changed since then?
      i. Socially? Environmentally?
   c. What keeps you here?
   d. If you didn’t have any family here and you had the financial means to move, would you? Why or why not?
   e. Do you feel safe being outside at night in your neighborhood?
   f. When you leave the house, do you lock your doors?

IV. Impact of Coal (social trust, social norms, networks)⁸
   a. So what do most people do around here for work?
      i. What about coal mining? (if respondent says anything other than coal mining)
   b. What does coal mining mean for the community?
   c. Do you know anything about the history of the United Mine Workers of American in this area? What about presently?
      i. What are your feelings towards this?
   d. How has this changed over time? (The impacts, the relationship between industry and the town, etc)
   e. What do you think the future will be like in regards to coal mining and this community?
   f. What kind of mining do miners do around here?
      i. Does the type of mining affect the community in different ways?
   g. Does coal mining determine whether you stay here or not?

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⁷ Adapted from Putnam 2000.
⁸ Created for the purpose of this study.
h. I’ve heard in the news recently about a march to Blair Mountain, what are your feelings towards this?

V. Engagement with neighbors (social norms, informal networks, social trust)
   a. Are you close with your neighbors here?
   b. Has anyone ever helped you during a time of need?
   c. Do you do any favors for your neighbors?
   d. Tell me about a time recently when members of the community came together to help someone in need?

VI. Social Trust (social trust)
   a. Do you feel like most people trust each other here in your neighborhood?
   b. Are there people or organizations in this town that you don’t really trust?

VII. Volunteering (social norms, formal networks)
   a. Do you volunteer anywhere?
   b. About how often would you say you volunteer?

VIII. Church/religious group (formal networks)
   a. Are you involved in a church anywhere?
   b. Are you involved in any church or religious organizations?
      i. How often would you say you attend church?

IX. Nonreligious group membership/involvement (formal networks)
   a. Do you do anything outside of work or church with any groups, clubs or organizations?
   b. What do you do with these groups?

X. Political Participation (networks)*
   a. Are you involved in politics?
   b. Do you vote?
   c. What party do you typically vote for?

*All sections except the ones marked are adapted from Bell 2009.

9 Adapted from Putnam 2000.