

**MASCULINE IDENTITY WORK AMONG MISSOURI NOODLERS:
COMMUNITY PROVIDERS, PLEASURE SEEKING COMRADES AND
FAMILY MEN, AND TOUGH COURAGEOUS MEN***

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research, based on interviews and participant observation conducted between 2005 and 2008, examines patterned variations in the masculine identity work of Missouri men noodlers between the ages of 18 and 90. Noodling or hand fishing is a folk tradition that involves submerging in lakes or rivers and feeling under the banks for holes where large catfish are spawning. The fingers are used as a lure to catch the catfish by hand. Noodling is contested terrain in which men with differing age cohort-based identity needs emphasize certain aspects from the tool kit of noodling culture over others. Cohort differences are shaped by structural changes affecting different age cohorts in varied ways.

This research examines patterned variations in the aspects of the generalized culture of noodling (Grigsby 2007) emphasized in the rural place-based masculine identity work of Missouri men¹ noodlers between the ages of 18 and 90. Noodling or hand fishing² is a folk tradition that involves submerging in lakes or rivers and feeling under the banks to locate holes where large catfish are spawning. The fingers are used as a lure to catch the catfish by hand. Noodling was outlawed in Missouri in 1919 as one of several practices believed to endanger the catfish population but has continued to be practiced illegally and taught to the younger generation by elders.

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¹According to Morgan (2006) only six percent of Missouri noodlers are women.

²The practice dubbed noodling in Oklahoma, Texas (Bilger 2000; Salazar 2002), South Carolina, Kansas, Ohio, and Virginia, grabbing in South Carolina (Salazar 2002), grabbling in Mississippi (Bilger 2000; Salazar 2002) and North Carolina (Salazar 2002), hand grabbing in Mississippi and Kentucky, grappling in Alabama, snatching in Tennessee and South Carolina, yanking in South Carolina (Salazar 2002), hogging in Arkansas (Bilger 2000) and Illinois (Salazar 2002), stumping in Nebraska, cooning in Georgia (Salazar 2002), dogging in Kentucky (Bilger 2000), logging in Illinois, and tickling, . . . and rock fishing in Kentucky (Salazar 2002), was historically called hand fishing by most in Missouri.

Noodling is primarily practiced by rural identified men employed in blue-collar jobs (Beasley 2001, Bilger 2000, Morgan 2006, Salazar 2002). It is a cultural practice used by different age cohorts of men in different ways while simultaneously the men are constructing a version of masculine rural working-class moral identity that gives them a sense of group solidarity and worthy collective identity as skilled, tough, and knowledgeable common men linked to a historic version of pioneer self-reliant rural masculinity across age cohorts (Grigsby 2007).

In this analysis the lens is shifted from other work (Grisby 2007) that focused on the collective moral identity established by the men against dominant culture constructions of worthy masculinity to the examination of the variations in what men who are situated differently in the interconnecting structures of patriarchy and capitalism emphasize in their identity work using the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) of noodling. Using this lens makes power struggles within the group become more visible and highlights contradictions within the version of masculinity that noodling constructs as it is at work in the lives of the men.

Bringing together consideration of cohort-based gender and class-based identity work of noodlers embedded in the interconnecting structures of patriarchy and capitalism in the rural context where noodling takes place, offers a lens through which to view the social construction of power relations among the men and to observe how changes in the broader economy and culture reshape noodling culture through the changing identity needs of participants.

The locations of the mostly blue-collar men at the intersections of class and status within the local patriarchal “pecking order” which are shaped by changes in the structure of opportunities that impact elder, middle-aged, and younger men differently are found to lead to variations in what the men emphasize in their noodling masculine identity work. Key factors in establishing status within the male noodling pecking order are age, skill and toughness in noodling, self-sufficiency, and being a good comrade who practices reciprocity, is trustworthy, “community minded” and adheres to the norms of the group.

Elders, who lived through the Depression, often emphasize creating community solidarity and providing for the needs of the group through noodling. Some want to create solidarity across age and gender lines, sometimes bringing interested women³ into noodling to reassert the centrality of local community bonds and

³A manuscript titled “Caring Women, Helpmates, Daddy’s Girls, and Tomboys: Feminine Identity Work among Rural-Identified Women Noodlers” based on interviews and participant observation with 10 women noodlers is under review.

norms of trust, respect, and understanding of the pecking order that they associate with noodling as part of a way of life with which they identify. The identity work they do emphasizes “community mindedness,” worthy identities as common men, and the desire to pass the noodling way of life on to the next generation. The pecking order that is an integral part of noodling culture is important to these men as elder patriarchs. They enforce the norms of the group and teach them to the next generation. Those who do not conform are shunned by the noodling group.

Some, mostly elders and middle-aged men, want to use the group solidarity generated through noodling to mobilize noodling groups across the state to lobby for legalization of noodling. The movement to legalize hand fishing in Missouri resulted in a trial legal hand-fishing season in three Missouri rivers, running from June 1 to July 15 in 2005 and 2006. In the spring of 2007 the Missouri Department of Conservation announced the discontinuation of legal hand fishing. The fisheries division chief at the time indicated that the existing high exploitation rates made it undesirable to add another method of harvest. Members of Noodlers Anonymous, an organization formed to lobby for legalization, say that they will continue to press for legalization. Legalization, they say, would make it easier to pass the tradition on to their grandchildren by eliminating the hassle of eluding conservation agents. Symbolically legalization would legitimate the worth and dignity of the way of life and the rural “roots” these men associate with noodling (Grigsby 2007).

Middle-aged men emphasize the enjoyment of the companionship of male friends through noodling as well as spending time with their nuclear family members. They focus on the love of the water and the adrenaline rush of the catch as central.

The younger cohort of men emphasize noodling as a practice for a “special breed” (Grigsby 2007) of men who are tough, courageous, and self-sufficient. The younger men often want to maintain noodling as a male-dominated activity. Overall they prefer to exclude or keep women’s role in noodling limited to that of occasional companion, help mate, and admiring observer. Younger men are more likely to express a preference that other men, who are not part of their cultural group, not become involved in noodling.

The tensions that emerge between men noodlers within their noodling groups generally take two forms. If a man disrespects the pecking order, for instance, shows an outsider the location of a fish hole shared with them by an elder who has given them entry into the group without getting permission, they will be “talked to.” If such behavior persists, they will be shunned by the group. Another example would be if the norm of secrecy is broken by bragging or telling outsiders about

noodling ventures. This behavior also will result in group pressures to show discretion in with whom information is shared or face being excluded from the activity.

Another source of tension in some groups occurs when women, or men who are viewed as outsiders, are included in noodling and invited to catch good sized fish by the dominant men in the group. Usually elders or middle-aged men invite new people into the practice and this can unwittingly decenter the young male position for ascendancy in the patriarchal male pecking order. The younger men become uncomfortable and express dissatisfaction privately but rarely confront the men who are higher in the pecking order about their displeasure.

These tensions are largely shaped by the different locations of the men within the internal structure of the local patriarchal culture of noodling in intersection with the dominant culture and capitalism. The elders do not experience the inclusion of women as a threat to male dominance in the private sphere of noodling because their positions of dominance are secure, based in historic patriarchy within local community and often in having relative financial security through ownership of land, home ownership, social security payments, and/or having worked in blue-collar jobs with retirement benefits. These men often are no longer dependent on blue-collar jobs for their economic security, spending their time on the land and mostly in the local community.

They are more oriented toward gaining dominant culture recognition of the dignity and worth of the group who identify with the way of life noodling symbolizes than they are in establishing their locations within the local male patriarchal pecking order because they are dominant in that arena. This makes them emphasize noodling culture collective identity and (class left silent and expressed as "roots") solidarity over the exclusion or subordination of women through defining their roles in noodling as strictly those of helpmate or observer. In addition many elders lived through the Depression when whole communities, including women and children, noodled as a necessity with no implications for shifting the male dominated power structure. Some of them are also more likely to invite outsiders to observe or participate in noodling with them because they want to gain acceptance of the practice more widely.

Younger men rely on noodling as a cultural tool for establishing their masculine dignity and worth more heavily than earlier generations of men may have. They are not assured of being able to step into the dominant patriarchal roles that elders have held because their economic security is less assured due to changes in the economic base in rural America linked to globalization, often requiring them to commute or

relocate outside the local area for periods. This means that their embeddedness in the local patriarchal pecking order may be more intermittent than earlier generations and the ties to other men in the local region of a different nature than was the case in previous cohorts who experienced dense networks across many activities engaged in locally. Elders and middle-aged men who are teaching younger men to noodle say that they have to tell them the rules of behavior very directly these days in contrast to when they were coming of age and everyone “just knew” the proper way to act in noodling. The younger cohorts rely more on noodling and other practices linked to the self-sufficient way of life they identify with, than on paid employment or broader community network involvements, for a sense of masculine dignity and worth.

THEORY AND METHODS

The analysis is based on qualitative research conducted between the spring of 2005 and the fall of 2008 that includes in-depth interviews with 18 Missouri men ranging in age from 18 to 90 and participant observation of more than 100 noodlers fishing, at fish fries, in their homes, and with a group of Missouri noodlers at the July 2007 Okie Noodling Tournament, an event held annually since 2000, where noodlers from all over the United States convene.

Snowball sampling was used with multiple people providing entry. I attended the opening day of the 2005 trial legal hand fishing season and met several noodlers while walking in the river with them as they checked fish holes and caught fish. One noodler I met that day helped me gain entry to noodlers he knew. The President of Noodlers Anonymous, who was also at the opening day event, proved a good resource for identifying people to interview because he had a large network throughout the state. Both men greatly facilitated my fieldwork. They told potential informants that I was trustworthy and often introduced me to them. Two students at the university where I work gave me contacts to interview after they learned about my research. A faculty member from another department and a friend who learned of my research connected me with people they knew who noodle. The snowball sample was built from these different entry points. The interview schedule included 22 mostly open-ended questions. Interviews ranged in length from one to three hours. Transcribed interviews and field notes were reviewed and coded for themes and patterns. Themes and patterns emerging from the data were analyzed.

Feminist standpoint theory, which holds that knowledge is shaped by the historical location and position within the social hierarchy of the knower, informs the approach taken in the research that this analysis is based upon (Collins 1990,

1993; Harding 1986, 1987, 1991, 1998; Hartsock 1983; Naples 1998; Naples and Sachs 2000). Throughout the research process I consistently reflected on my social location as a white, middle class, educated woman, with rural working-class kinship roots, in shaping the analysis. The reflexive component is not at the center of this analysis but informs the approach taken.

“Grounded theory” (Glaser and Strauss 1967) that builds theoretical understandings inductively from the data gathered in combination with theory elaboration that involves use of existing concepts and theories that help to clarify the situation under study is employed. The paper explores the role of noodling in doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and class culture-based (Lamont 2000) moral identity work (Schwalbe 1996) among rural identified (Campbell and Bell 2000) mostly working-class Missouri men between the ages of 18 and 90.

SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE

West and Zimmerman (1987) who focused on how doing gender is part of a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” (126) provide the foundation used for examining how men noodlers who are differently situated in the power structure embedded in interconnected systems of capitalism and patriarchy use noodling to enact, and struggle to achieve, and/or maintain their masculine gendered identities and their relative privilege within the group. Connell’s (1987; 1995) concept of “gender regime” informs the understanding of the noodling masculine identity as a time- and place-specific construction of masculinity.

The generalized structure of patriarchy in articulation with capitalism, as discussed by Walby (1990), shaped by local culture, norms, and values, constitute the gender regime (Connell 1987; 1995) among noodlers. The form of patriarchy is shown to be constructed through the intersections of structures of culture (Walby 1990) and interactions of noodlers. Patriarchy, according to Walby (1990), is best conceptualized at different levels of abstraction. “At the most abstract level it exists as a system of social relations” (20). Yet “at a less abstract level patriarchy is composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in paid work, patriarchal relations in the state, male violence, patriarchal relations in sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions” (20). Patriarchy today exists in articulation with capitalism.

Culture is understood to be the “tool kit” (Swidler 1986) perceived as available by the noodlers for their use in solving the problems of life, rather than as internalized norms and values acquired through socialization. Lamont’s (2000) study of working men and their view of the world and their place in it, shows how

moral criteria can generate strong intergroup boundaries. Her inductive method and view that identity is constructed within the existing cultural repertoires and structural conditions that are historically contingent and changing, as opposed to primordial, essential, or fixed in time, links with the approach taken in this paper. Consistent with Lamont's (2000) findings about working-class men, the persistence of noodlers in noodling illegally is linked to their efforts to defend their dignity and way of life.

Halperin (1990) documents the intersections of economy and kinship among networks of kinspeople from northeastern Kentucky and describes some similar patterns in "the way of life" to those of Missouri noodlers. She found that Appalachian rural working-class people engage in "family-oriented multiple livelihood strategies" (1990, 3). "The Kentucky way is, quite literally, a way of life based on ties to land and family that confers dignity and self-esteem upon rural working-class people" (2). Highly valued are "homeplace ties, loyalty and generosity to kin, commitment to versatility, self-sufficiency, and self-reliance" (3).

Halperin shows that the "trinity of family, land and community" are of economic and psychological significance for the people following the Kentucky way and that noncapitalist economic patterns remain prominent among them. They value the ability to do many things that enable them, as a group, to be more self-sufficient. "Hunting and fishing are not mere sports in this area; they provide essential protein. Knowledge of the land, its virtues, limitations, and seasonal patterns, are certainly important for all agricultural societies, but the Kentucky way reinforces the importance of agrarian skills in combination with the mechanical skills necessary for keeping machinery, vehicles, and households functioning" (11).

Rural masculine identities constructed through control over technology or the natural environment, the demonstration of strength or toughness, the ability to survive on the land or to endure harsh wilderness environments, and the centrality of a test of manhood (Phillips 1995), have revealed the social construction of different versions of hegemonic heterosexual rural masculinities (Anahita and Mix 2006; Brandth 1995; Brandth and Haugen 2005; Bryant 1999; Bye 2003; Campbell 2000; Fellows 1996; Kimmel and Ferber 2000; Phillips 2000; Sauger 2002; and Woodward 1998; 2000). This literature informs the findings in this analysis.

Campbell's (2000) analysis of drinking performance proved particularly useful in theory elaboration of findings in this research. Campbell (2000) showed how the public performance of a version of masculinity in the rural pub used "conversational cockfighting" and "disciplines of drinking" in reproducing a particular version of

hegemonic masculinity in much the same way that noodling is used to support a particular gender regime in the local context where it is practiced.

LITERATURE ON NOODLING

Scholarly publications about noodling are limited. Bilger (2000) includes a chapter on noodling. Scholarly journal articles dealing with noodling include Salazar (2002) who focuses on describing noodling as a southern folk tradition that she believes is in a rapid state of change and is vulnerable to loss. She describes the history of noodling and includes both those who noodle for catfish and turtles in her analysis, where other scholarly works dealing with noodling have focused exclusively on hand fishing for catfish (Bilger 2000; Morgan 2006).

Morgan (2006) employs quantitative survey methods to compare the levels of “activity involvement” of Missouri hand fishers with that of trout anglers. He found “no significant differences . . . between the groups using a 12-item activity involvement index” (217). However centrality to lifestyle (one dimension of activity involvement) “was more important for hand fishers than trout anglers” (Morgan 2006: 317) hinting at the findings of this study that noodling is central in identity work for many involved in the noodling folk tradition.

Morgan’s (2006) article notes that hand fishing is “a male-dominated sport” (322) with females comprising “only 6 percent of the sample” (322). “Most of the participants began hand fishing during adolescence . . . and have practiced this sport for nearly two-thirds of their lives” and more than “90 percent of participants lived in rural areas . . .” (322). The demographic data provided by Morgan (2006), based on a sample of 103 hand fishers in Missouri, was helpful background for developing the dimensional sampling frame that guided this qualitative research.

Morgan also confirmed what Beasley (2001) had asserted in his documentary, that most hand-fishermen “worked in blue-collar professions (e.g., building and construction, farming, skilled trades)” (322). Beasley (2001) emphasized the linkages made by noodlers between doing work that involved using their hands and bodies and enjoying noodling which they experience as physically challenging and similar in that they use their hands and bodies as the tool with which to catch big fish.

Grigsby (2007) found that being brought into the group is not automatic and is a symbol of male status to insiders and outsiders familiar with the group norms of noodling. The men describe having a special camaraderie with other noodlers based on their shared experiences and the norms and values of a shared way of life that they associate with noodling which some fear is being lost. In exploring the collective identity work of noodlers and the group norms and values, Grigsby

(2007) found that the values of group solidarity based on trust, community-minded reciprocity, respect for each other based on proving oneself through bodily toughness, courage, skill, dependability under duress along with respect for the patriarchal pecking order and for the natural environment and the fish, are taught and reinforced through noodling. Noodlers describe themselves as both common men dedicated to family and community, and as a unique breed of men because they have retained close ties to the natural environment and the ability to be relatively self-sufficient on the land.

Passing on the skill of noodling was found by Grigsby (2007) to represent an effort to reproduce a way of life centered in patriarchal kinship relations in the private sphere and quasi-private sphere of close community. Noodlers link hand fishing to a “way of life” that they say goes back for generations in their rural communities.

ANALYSIS

Nearly all of the scholarly research on noodling to date has focused on understanding noodlers as a group rather than on variations across noodlers, so this research will extend knowledge of how noodlers who have strong bonds and a sense of collective identity vary in the symbolic material from the cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986) of noodling that they emphasize in their individual identity work. Tensions that exist among noodlers resulting from the different identity needs of men are explored. These tensions are linked to varied age cohort locations at the intersections of the local patriarchal pecking order in the private sphere and the capitalist job market. They are derived from factors such as location in the pecking order and relative economic security framed by historic processes of change including changes in the structure of opportunities for blue-collar working men in rural America that impact different age cohorts in different ways.

Ongoing negotiated bonds of reciprocity and mutual respect combined with a clear sense of location in the pecking order was found by Grigsby (2007) to contribute to a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding among group members. This does not mean, however, that there are no tensions within the close-knit groups of noodling men, but that the rules of establishing or redefining ones' location in the pecking order are understood and enforced by those who are more dominant, usually elder patriarchs or middle-aged family men who are the “top dog” in the pecking order of their noodling group. As with many tightly knit groups with strong boundaries there are constraints placed on individuals to conform to the

norms of the group. The long term illegality reinforces these tightly bounded social networks.

This analysis will broaden understanding of the role noodling plays in the identity work of the mostly blue-collar (Beasley 2001, Bilger 2000, Morgan 2006, Salazar 2002), rural identified men who engage in the folk tradition by shifting the lens of analysis beyond the important role noodling plays in supporting the collective identity work of men noodlers (Grigsby 2007) to exploring of the ways that the noodling way of life can also be experienced as constraining at times by some in the group. The struggles within the group and the linkages of the tensions and struggles to broader patterns of cultural and economic change are explored.

Elder “Community Minded” Providers—“I Enjoyed Doing Something for the Community”

Older men, mostly those in their mid- to late 60s through 80s focus their identity work through noodling on passing on an understanding of the value of community to those they teach to noodle. This is particularly true for the men who lived through the Depression and have vivid memories of their lives during that time. They tell stories of feeding multiple families and providing fish for community fish fries with fish caught noodling. Elders also emphasize their respect for the men who taught them to noodle. Darrell’s account is similar to those of most of the elder men interviewed.

It was right after the '29 and '30 crash and times were hard for everybody. I'd have been 7, 8 years old when (Roy) came out to my father and (asked to live in) an old house (we had) down below that was deserted. Well he worked for my father, during the summer, putting in the crop, and I knew he was a hand fisherman. He was sharp as a tack, he was canny, I'll put it that way, he was canny like a fox, and called me over there and he said, '(Darrell),' said, 'I wonder if you could talk to your daddy and ask him if we could get off a little early this afternoon,' uh said, 'My family's out of meat and I need to get something for em,' Oh my, that alarmed me, you know, as a little kid. I went over to Dad right quick and I told him, I said, 'Roy and them's family ain't got anything to eat,' and I said, 'He wondered if we could get off and go to the river and see if we could catch some fish.' And, oh Daddy, he figured it out right quick, he grinned and said, 'Oh yeah, tell Roy . . . I'll put the harness away and I'll put the horses away.' . . . Well there wasn't no time at all, we located a pair and uh, he was big enough he could hold anything but he got me in beside him and he showed me that you rub

their heads and showed me, talked to me, said, 'Now Darrell,' said, 'You hold tight,' said, 'They'll knock you out of that hole, and you hold.'

Roy and Darrell's catch fed both their families that night and began Darrell's development as a noodler and provider of food for the community. Darrell like most of the elders constructs a masculine identity that emphasizes community solidarity and well-being as goals.

Serving community and family by providing food is central, being macho is downplayed by the older men, though the challenge of the hunt as a secondary motivation is usually acknowledged.

. . . as it went on and people looked to me to have fish for a fish fry on the fourth. I wasn't no hero, it wasn't that at all, it was everyday, real easy, easy come easy go, and I enjoyed doing something for a community. They'll say, 'Aw, it was macho.' It wasn't macho. It wasn't nothin' macho about it. I didn't care about the girls seeing me chewed up like that. It wasn't that at all. It was this thing of community in them days and they'd fish fry. Then they got to the place where you kind of wanted to see, one a little bigger. I can't deny that. I kept a thinking, 'Well, they's got to be one a little bigger.'

Elders emphasize noodling as a masculine practice that served the survival needs of their family and community and gained them respect as community providers or community-minded men. Passing on an understanding of the way of life and community culture they grew up in and value is important to these men.

Noodling, constructed as a practice that serves the community and preserves and represents the values of the community, assists the elders in maintaining identities as respected and skilled men in the community and in having high status within the male pecking order. Young men often rely on them to teach them to noodle and on a deeper level to give them a "coming of age" (Mead [1928] 2001) experience that brings them into the world of adult males. Gil describes the value placed on noodling skill in his circle and the status it has in the community. He then shifts to the idea that the practice of noodling has meaning for his group beyond just providing fish to eat. Noodlers were found by Morgan (2006) to eat the highest percent of catch of any type of angler in Missouri, but Gil wants to explain that noodling has meaning beyond providing food.

Hand fishing is practiced (pause) by a very small percentage of the people and in some circles good hand fishermen are looked up to in the community. And even if they don't hand fish, people will come up and ask how you been a' doin' and ask for you to tell the story. At this stage in the game, the catch, the process of the catch, the excitement of the catch, is more than the meat to me and my friends.

Gil goes on to explain the norms of noodling he was taught and teaches to others as a way of explaining how noodling is about more than just catching fish to eat. As he describes the norms of not using gloves or hooks but engaging with the fish with bare hands, he is constructing a version of masculine noodling identity that requires an intimate connection with the fish and environment as well as the importance of learning from elders and following the norms of the group. He establishes himself as a knowledgeable and skilled elder who is passing on the norms of his group.

I was taught how to hand fish without using gloves. And there's some people use gloves, some people use hooks that they attach to their hand, and there's drawbacks to all that. I've seen people that used hooks that attach to their hands and they got em in their body and also the turtles, muskrats, something else that might hurt you in there. If you're wearing gloves, well you can't feel what is moving down in there. Getting to the technique part of it again, if you run your hand down the river bank and you feel a depression or a hole back in there, with years of training and hit and miss, and this an that, 90, 95 percent of the time just by feeling the very outside and the bottom of that hole, you can tell if that's a fish hole or a beaver hole or a muskrat hole. There's just little things there, like green leaves, if there's any green leaves in that hole, fish don't eat trees. If there's, and muskrat and beaver, if they got a hole and it feels similar on the outside, but if you feel real close, you can feel the claw marks in the bottom of that hole where they have dug.

The norm of hand fishing with bare hands is supported by Gil by linking it to safety. Among younger noodlers who advocate using bare hands the reasoning is often linked to the idea of going one-on-one with the fish and being willing to take the pain of being bitten and having "river rash," abrasions caused by being bitten by the catfish, for a few days.

Elders also emphasize the importance of experiential knowledge of the natural environment and the skill gained over years of hand fishing. They integrate the knowledge and skill gained with the deepening of the bonds of trust and respect noodling creates among the men. And they point to the importance of respect for the local noodling-based male pecking order and the value of wisdom and skill gained through experience that those who have been noodling longer have and can share with younger men. This reinforces their position in the pecking order currently and signals to the younger men what worthy masculinity is based upon. As Gil described a range of factors that make noodling appealing he established himself as a knowledgeable and skilled noodler who had progressed up the ladder of knowledge over the years.

When you're young you gotta have something to do. The main thing is, you gotta love the water, you gotta, just love [it]. There's a certain rush and a thrill there, and then its out psychin' the fish. And then it's the, the habitat, the nature, the whole learning about the fish. When will they move up? What year will they move up? I've been at it long enough, but those questions and answers aren't clear . . . it's just studying, it's just a lifetime of knowledge and being able to pass that on down. . . . You just keep progressing up this ladder of knowledge.

Gil notes that when young, noodling is something to do if you love the water and for the thrill, but that for him it has now become more about studying the habitat and behaviors of the fish and consolidating the knowledge passed down from others and gained in a lifetime of noodling. Noodling masculinity is constructed as a practice that requires active engagement with nature, the thrill of the catch, and over time a deepening and consolidation of knowledge gained from other men in the group and from experience.

Its just been in the last few years, a lot of old timers has told me about the blue cats and I've been along when they've caught 'em but I've learnt enough on my own that I know that when that blue cat lays into you, just let him chew, and let him get that second bite or that third bite and then he won't turn and slash and roll like a flat head, and you try and get a hand in his mouth or his gill or something and control that fish just a little bit, and you don't squeeze down hard and if you can get one hand in his mouth, and then bring the other hand back out and get a hold of that fish and then if

he's really a big fish you don't really muscle down on him, and especially in deep water and hopefully the team-work factor comes in and your buddies that you was depending on when you was little kids, now that you're battling what I consider the most thrill of anything that you can go after, big blues . . .

Gil, a man in his 60s, notes he has recently learned more about how to hand fish for blue cats from "old timers" whose experiential knowledge he clearly values. Woven into Gil's description is the repeated thread of the intergenerational quality of the tradition and the status it provides for the men who noodle. The themes of learning from elders combined with experiential knowledge gained through hand fishing and the importance of passing that knowledge on to worthy younger men is common in the accounts of elders and some middle-aged men. For some of these men generating group solidarity trumps maintaining noodling as a male dominated or insider only activity. In addition many older men remember the Depression when women and men often noodled together to put food on the table. Some recall being able to get special permits to noodle in groups for church fish fries.

Middle-aged Men - "I Think Touchin' the Fish Has a Lot to Do With It. I Love to Touch 'Em."

Men in their 40s, 50s, and early 60s often focus their descriptions for their reasons for noodling on the sensual pleasure they get from being in the water and from the physical challenge and the adrenaline rush that noodling gives them. They describe enjoying the male companionship that they have in noodling and/or the enjoyment of sharing the activity with their family. Middle-aged men are less overt in describing a desire to pass on values or norms linked to being community minded. More of these men focus on noodling with their nuclear families or male friends than on noodling in an extended kinship/community network.

Little Leap gives a rich description of his feelings about enjoying the river and noodling. Like most noodlers he describes enjoying being in the water, the process of hunting for the fish, and the adrenaline rush of finding and catching one, and he gives a particularly good description of the feelings about this aspect of noodling when he describes the pleasure he derives from "touching the fish."

I love the water, any water sports I always enjoy [them]. Me and my wife waded down the river the other night for two hours and a half, it was just so enjoyable, you know picking up rocks, picking up clams. We had such a

good time and never even caught a fish. . . . My daughter and my son (pause) we used to go on a Sunday afternoon. My daughter, my son, my wife, me and there were several places on (the) river where there would be (a string of) rocks, for miles and just go down there and lay down in the water and float along and stick your hand back under 'em and catch channel cat and little blue cats and just make an afternoon of it, bring home eight or ten fish and just enjoy the heck out of it. . . . I just love to feel my hands on that fish. The most fun for me hand fishin' is to go underwater and go back in that hole head first. I would rather do that than sit out in the hole up to my neck and have the fish swim up in my lap. . . . I wanna go under the water. . . . You can go back in there and if he doesn't bite you immediately you can actually put your hand on that fish. I've went back in the hole before and felt the fish to see which one was the biggest, to see which one I wanted to catch first. Oh, I love to touch the fish. I love it. I want 'em to bite me. Yeah. I think touchin', I think touchin' the fish has a lot to do with it. I love to touch 'em. It's a feeling of excitement for sure when you touch him. Um (pause) I wanna use the word tingly feeling. I don't know that you get a tingly feeling when you touch the fish but you get excited. . . . You don't know you have it, but you know you've accomplished what you set out that day to do, was touch a fish.

Little Leap emphasizes the physical and psychological pleasure of noodling. The pleasure in being in the water, taking in the natural environment, looking for good fish holes, the anticipated interaction with the fish, the closeness to the fish before engagement, the adrenaline rush, and then the struggle with the fish are all highlighted in his description.

Also mentioned is the enjoyment derived from sharing the activity with others, usually family members or close and trusted friends. Relational gender identity work with women is often part of the practice where women are engaged in "helping" a man to block the fish in the hole and/or assist in pulling the fish out of the water in this cohort. Occasionally daughters or wives of middle-aged men, who show an interest, are taught to noodle alongside the men. Yet as with all women engaged in the folk tradition form of noodling, they are taught and given entry into the practice by men.

Secrecy is viewed as important because of the illegality of the activity in Missouri but also because showing the wrong person your fish holes can result in

their showing them to other people. Matt, a slim man of 50, leans back in his chair and recounts a case where he brought the wrong sort of person into the group.

There's been a time or two that I've taken the wrong person [noodling]. And it came back to bite me. [He came back] again and again. He's a big ol' boy. (laughter). I just pretty well shunned him out and I was done hunting and fishin' with him. . . . He swore to me that he would not go back and fish these holes. He took four or five (people) . . . yeah. I actually caught him at it. . . . they'd been hitting holes every night. . . . I watch real close on who I take and I don't take 'em to my areas. . . . That's been years ago and I still catch comments from people I fish with about it. (laughter) I should of never taken him. . . . I should have known better. . . . The gentleman I took, you know, stepped on my trust and just pretty well ruined our friendship.

A friend of Matt's notes "character, it's all about character." Matt shakes his head slowly with a pensive look in his eyes and says "he's a shady character." Matt and his friend made clear that being taken noodling signals trust, inclusion and the expectation that newcomers will conform to the pecking order norms of the group.

More recently Matt has taught Aaron, a younger man, to noodle and Aaron has become adept and says he's addicted to hand fishing. Still, Matt and Aaron do not want noodling to become widespread beyond the circles where it has been a folk tradition. Matt explains.

For the most part people that have never done it or have never been around people that have done it think it's dangerous. People think you're crazy and they compare you to fightin' bears with a switch. Well, you don't tell them otherwise. Let their mind work. Kind of leaves the field open that way. Not as many people will go, [if] they think you're crazy, or it's a crazy thing to do. Cause, as [much as] I do want it to carry on, I don't want everybody doin' it.

Views similar to Matt's about not wanting just everyone to take up noodling are common among younger middle-aged men and young men as well as for several of the elders.

Young Men – “I Ain’t Scared of Nothing.”

For the younger men noodling is a tool used in their “coming of age” (Mead [1928] 2001) masculine identity work and entry into the world of adult males in their community and to establish worthy masculinity relative to a version of dominant culture masculinity they construct in contrast (Grigsby 2007). Because of its illegality in Missouri the practice has been secretive and based on in-group ties and lends itself to providing a clear line of insider/outsider status.

It’s something I hold, you know, I’ve got guys that’s begged me for years to go, and I won’t take ‘em, I mean it’s just, for one thing they’ve probably got loose lips (laughter) they, they like to talk, you know, it’s just somethin’, you can brag about it, but you don’t brag to everybody about it. I mean you know, I’ve had people, “What happened to your hands.” “Nothin’.” You know, it’s none of their business, so, like I say, just it’s a bond between who we let in, who we wanna take.

The younger men want the boundaries to be tight once they are insiders and some express doubt regarding the wisdom in legalization, maintaining that if noodling is legalized it will be invaded by outsiders.

Another indication of the centrality of noodling in masculine identity work for the younger men is the fact that several men mentioned having taken their future wives noodling as a date during their courtship. Gil noted that the practice used to be common among the young men of his “clan.” Bruce clearly enjoyed recalling his first date with his wife Gina. He picked her up for their first date without telling her ahead of time that he planned to take her noodling.

I told her, I said ‘There’s a fish hole ain’t been checked, I gotta go check a fish.’ She had no idea about hand fishing at all. So I stripped down to my underwear and she’s like, “Who is this guy?” (laughter) you know, strippin’ down to his underwear on our first date. . . . I went in and caught probably a thirty-five pound flathead and I said, ‘You’re gonna have to come help.’ So she’s like, ‘Yeah, whatever.’ So I brought the fish out of the water with his head bent that way, and she was like, ‘Yeah you’re gonna need some help.’ So I got the fish rope by myself and I said ‘You’re gonna have to hold this fish there’s another one in here.’ So I caught a forty-five and this fish she thinks (is) chasin’ her, which they’re bumpin’ against you when you got ‘em on a rope anyway and she’s just flippin’ out on our first date.

Noodling provided a cultural tool for Bruce to use in performing a tough, courageous, skilled masculine identity for Gina on their first date. That he chose to take her noodling on their first date suggests the centrality of the activity to his sense of worthy identity and manliness. The description he gives of taking off his clothes down to his underwear, and going in the water and catching two good sized fish, suggests the usefulness of noodling in the physical bodily performance of this version of working class rural identified masculinity. Bruce pointed out the scars on his knuckles proudly noting "I've got scars, them scars . . . on my knuckles never go away. That's hand fishin'."

The noodling date also allowed Bruce to establish himself as dominant, in control, and skilled, with Gina playing the role of admiring audience and helpmate following his directions. Descriptions of Gina by Bruce and other family members revealed that her upbringing, though rural, was culturally distinct from that of Bruce's extended family. Of particular note was the fact that her cultural background did not include hand fishing. One female family member confided that Gina had adjusted well to the lifestyle in the family, noting with pride that Gina had even embraced learning to noodle herself.

For the younger cohort of men, masculine coming of age identity work that engages them in proving themselves courageous and competent to the elder males in their group is central. Several also described using noodling in establishing worthy masculine identities in relating to women they were dating. They focus less on the sensual pleasure of noodling and camaraderie emphasized by middle-aged men and more on how difficult it is. Bruce, like many younger cohorts of noodlers, wants to make clear that he is tough and courageous as well as a skilled noodler. He asserts:

I ain't scared of nothin'. I'll catch, if they throw a fish at me, I'll catch it. And I think anybody'll agree. I like the hard road, anything that's harder, I'd rather do it 'cause you accomplish more in the end, than takin' the easy route, I mean it, to me, . . . anybody can go set lines and catch fish, you know, all they need's a boat and but, (pause) (only one) outta ten people's gonna wanna get in the river and catch a fish with their hands.

The younger men are not always happy with the willingness of elder men to teach young women to noodle and work to establish themselves as superior noodlers and true insiders relative to the women. When asked how he feels about women noodling Bruce responds "I ain't all for it. My wife done it. It's babysittin'

to me.” Younger men often suggest that women are taught and brought along to noodle when it is a family time activity rather than serious, but that when it is serious noodling it is the men who noodle and the women are either absent or act as help mates.

We'll go once a year and take the family and that's enough, the other times, for one thing I ain't gonna go find a big blue cat and let somebody else catch it. I ain't gonna get my foot chewed apart and say, “Alright, come catch it.” If you want the fish you come find a fish and catch the fish and most women won't. I mean, they ain't gonna fish along like we do. And that's somethin' I disagree with my uncle about is he'll (say), “Wait, wait, wait, so and so ain't caught a fish.” Tell the son of a bitch to come down here and find one and he'll catch one. You know, I ain't gonna let him chew my foot off and then come in and catch him. That just to me don't seem right, but, like I say, I think, it's fun. I mean, I love (that) my wife caught one. She knows what it's like, I think, there's a time and a place for it, but, that's about it, it ain't, every time I wanna go I don't wanna take my wife or I don't wanna take somebody else's wife and you know come and say, “Well yeah, there's a fish in here, get in the water.” It just, I think if you're, you're a fisherman, you're gonna find your fish and catch it.

Bruce conflates outsider men and insider women invited into the noodling group as catchers of fish and maintains that in both cases the newcomers are not engaging in real noodling because they are not knowledgeable about the habitat, fish behaviors, or skilled at locating fish.

My wife, she's caught some thirty pounders, and that's fine, you know, that's, that's great, I don't mind, and, and I want her too, but there's some fish that I ain't gonna stand there and let somebody else catch 'cause I done all the work. There's a time like right now, the blue cats are layin' eggs, there's no time for a little kid to be there, there's no time for women to be there 'cause honestly I don't think, my wife can't take a thirty pound blue cat, I mean they're just too mean, they hurt. . . . I'm gonna tell ya, once he got a hold of you, you'd be like, “Son of a bitch, that hurt.” I'll go in and foot it and if he's real aggressive I don't want somebody goin' in and catchin' him because they could probably get hurt

Bruce also emphasizes that real noodling involves taking on blue cats, a more aggressive fish that he believes can't be handled by women or outsiders. He notes that blue cats can hurt a person and engaging with one is not something he thinks is safe for women, or his wife, to do because they could get hurt. Bruce shifts here between constructing a tough masculine noodling identity and identity as a protective man concerned for the safety of his wife and other women. Then he shifts back to the theme of resentment he feels about the prospect of finding a good fish to catch and then having to let someone who he does not view as a real noodler catch it.

(I) ain't worried about my fish, but they can find their own damn fish. To me there's a difference, you know. I think anybody can catch (a?) fish. I could stick anybody, I could go pick anybody off the street and you'd get him to catch a fish, there's a difference between noodlin' and fishin'. I mean, noodlin's an art. I mean, noodlin' is goin' and fishin' the banks, findin' the holes, determinin' whether it's a fish or a beaver and there ain't very many women that do.

Bruce's friend David chimes in picking up on the thread of the outsider in Bruce's comments and expanding the outsider group to those who do not noodle at all but prefer to use a fishing pole. David says "Yeah. That's, that's a little more sporting chance than puttin' a bait on a hook I think." Bruce responds, "Oh yeah." David continues "When he comes up and bites you and then you get the courage to (stay) there and catch him." Bruce continues.

I think there oughta be you can't wear no shoes, no gloves, I mean, you gotta take what the fish gives ya. I mean there's some, there's some rules in our club, you can't have shoes, you can't wear gloves and basically we'll all either wear boxers or swimmin' trunks or what we got and that's it. So, like I say, there's, there's a wrong and a right way, and I know everybody does everything different so, but, like I say, you know in our club that's the way it works.

Bruce emphasizes the norm in his group of noodlers of going into the element of the fish without protective gear and of having the willingness to engage physically with the fish and take the punishment the struggle entails with courage and toughness where Gil emphasized using bare hands because it is safer than

wearing gloves because bare hands allow the hand fisher to feel the edges and bottom of the hole and tell if it is a smooth sandy fish hole or a muddy, leafy hole that is likely inhabited by another creature that might inflict a serious bite.

Bruce maintains that though some women can catch a fish by hand they are not noodlers because they do not embrace the whole experience and all of the risks and discomfort involved in finding the fish, and they are not tough enough to take the punishment of catching a really big catfish. The younger men also emphasize that they are tougher than other men who use fishing poles instead of noodling, men who may noodle a fish but do not really know how to noodle, and than some noodlers who use gloves and hooks.

CONCLUSIONS

Elders teach the young to noodle, providing a coming-of-age experience that brings them into the male-dominated group. It instills close ties of trust, respect, reciprocity, and provides recognition of manhood for the initiates (Grigsby 2007) engaging them in constructing and reproducing the noodling gender regime. As with Campbell's (2000) findings about pub drinking there is an element of exclusiveness in noodling. Men are invited to join the group selectively and not all young men are invited to participate. Most groups do not include women. In groups that do include women high status men in the group invite them to participate.

Noodling is constructed as a practice that symbolizes and passes on the values and norms of the groups way of life. The similarities between the accounts of noodlers and the descriptions of the values and practices of those following the Kentucky way (Halperin 1990) are noteworthy. The centrality of family ties, land, and community found by Halperin (1990) among the Appalachian kinship networks she studied emerged as similarly central during the interviews with rural Missouri noodlers, particularly among the elders and older middle-aged men.

The older men are often retired from blue-collar employment where they had benefits, or are landowners. They can remain embedded in "the way of life" that noodling symbolizes, in part, because they can live with relative economic stability without leaving the local area to earn money. The elders' positions in the pecking order are well established. They seek to reproduce and maintain the status system in place and to encourage younger men to understand and become part of the male "pecking order" of the group.

Some middle aged and younger men work locally but many work "in town" or even travel to urban centers to do construction and other blue-collar jobs while retaining a home in the rural area and a sense of identity as rural men. The

structure of opportunities in rural America has changed. The younger men noodlers often have less opportunity to make a good living locally either in farming or in other blue-collar employment and some are therefore relatively less embedded in the local setting than previous cohorts.

Some men, mostly elders and older middle-aged men, now want to have noodling legitimated as a worthy practice by the dominant culture through legalization in part because they think legalization will make it easier to pass the tradition on to the next generation. Simultaneously these elders often seek group solidarity relative to external pressures that bring change to the existing structure of the culture. Those who want legalization are, in a way also, pressing for recognition of the worth of the culture in the face of cultural change that draws the younger generations away from what they believe is a way of life worth preserving and passing down.

Those in favor of legalization are more likely to downplay the exclusion of women in the family or kinship group from full participation, and to invite women to participate in noodling to unite women and men in the community in support of reproducing the way of life and norms and values that noodling as a practice constructs and symbolizes. These men sometimes invite outsiders to observe or participate. They are more likely to frame the activity as a community building or family activity.

Middle-aged men most often emphasize their enjoyment in the camaraderie of noodling with a circle of trusted men friends and/or family members. Skill development, the sensual pleasure of being out in nature, being in the water, and having the adrenaline rush that comes with the catch are also important. For these men noodling provides the experience of mastery and accomplishment recognized and shared by fellow noodlers.

Younger men often emphasize their distinct form of tough courageous manliness through noodling to establish worthy identities as men. For most of the men, experiencing physical pain and a willingness to bleed to "take the fish" is a core part of their identities but this is most emphasized by the younger men. They are more concerned with establishing themselves as worthy men through noodling than with establishing the dignity and worth of the way of life that noodling symbolizes.

Young men motivated by identity needs aimed at establishing their adult male status and worthiness relative to other men prefer noodling to remain tightly bounded once they have become insiders. It is not surprising that some younger men with less established power in the male pecking order generally prefer women

to fulfill the roles of admiring audience, helpmate, or nonparticipant. Retaining noodling as a male-dominated activity is more important for the younger men who are using it as a central tool in their masculine identity work. Young noodlers emphasize the status derived from being skilled and tough noodlers instead of focusing their identity work in ways the dominant culture does by privileging high occupational status under capitalism with an emphasis on patriarchy in the public sphere (Walby 1990), educational attainment, and a consumerist suburban or urban cosmopolitan lifestyle. The secrecy and exclusivity of the folk tradition is key in the usefulness of the noodling version of masculinity in their rural identified identity work. If legalization occurs, it remains to be seen what impact it will have on the pecking order relations within noodling groups and whether it will promote the folk tradition being passed on to the next generation or will lead to a decline in interest among the young men.

Campbell (2000) noted “successful performance and defense of hegemony are premised on a style of residence and male embeddedness in locality that is characteristic of small town society” (579). For noodlers the less embedded younger men are on the one hand highly invested in reproducing noodling as a masculine practice that supports them in identity work aimed at establishing them as worthy men by emphasizing the courage, toughness and skill noodling requires. On the other hand they do not generally emphasize noodling as a “community minded” activity, perhaps in part, because they are less embedded in the local rural setting, and community does not hold the same meaning for them that it does for the elders.

Courage, toughness, and self-sufficiency, characteristics emphasized by the younger men the most, are important elements of masculine noodling identity. Still, their power in supporting and perpetuating the local noodling gender regime and culture rests, in large part, on the men who have these qualities using them to serve the community. For instance when noodling groups provide fish for community fish fries and for family and community members more generally, their performance gives tangible and symbolic evidence of reciprocity and community self-sufficiency. The noodling way of life historically has placed a high value on meeting the needs of the group as a whole, and this has been central in legitimating the noodling gender regime in the local setting.

Noodling is appealing as a cultural tool for establishing worthy masculinity for the younger men precisely because it is embedded in the historically constructed local patriarchal mode of production and has remained connected to cultural traditions linked to a way of life in rural Missouri that assigns status based on self-sufficiency, home ties of reciprocity, and assumes male dominance as the accepted

norm. Yet there is a shift underway toward a more individualistic construction of worthy noodling masculinity among some in the younger cohort, shaped by their locations at the intersections of the local patriarchal pecking order and capitalism, as they are at work in the local setting, that may decenter the local noodling gender regime(s).

Campbell (2000) found pub drinking to be a “site of male power and legitimacy in rural community life” (563). This is also true of noodling. Noodling persists, in part, because it serves as a site where a version of masculinity is constructed, legitimated, and to some extent, successfully reproduced. Simultaneously this research reveals that the elements from the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) of noodling used to establish power, legitimacy and worthy masculine identity (Lamont 2000) through noodling is not simply reproduced, but is contested and changing terrain.

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