

Book Review

Spatig, L., & Amerikaner, L. (2014). *Thinking outside the girl box: Teaming up with resilient youth in Appalachia*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

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Thinking Outside the Girl Box: Teaming up with Resilient Youth in Appalachia describes a youth development program designed to empower young women in Lincoln County, West Virginia, and explains the process of navigating collaborative ethnography as a research method. The Girls Resiliency Program (GRP) on which this book focuses was designed for young women in the hope that they might move beyond the "girl boxes"—constructed by others and the context in which they lived—to write their own stories. Shelley Gaines, the director of the GRP, and other staff and board members emphasized the identification of strengths, the need for young women to become engaged decision makers, and social justice activism as the means by which the young women would understand their constraints and begin to craft their own narratives.

Gaines initially approached co-author Linda Spatig about evaluating the GRP. As a professor in the College of Education and Professional Development and co-director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Gender in Appalachia at Marshall University, Spatig has many years of experience evaluating community and youth development programs. Spatig and her co-author and adult daughter, Layne Amerikaner, set out initially to "understand what the program meant to the girls, how it played out in their lives, what aspects they valued and why, and what they were concerned about" (p. 2), but the research project quickly expanded as they became personally invested in the lives of the people associated with the GRP.

Spatig and Amerikaner describe their evaluation and involvement with the GRP as a love story and include the positive and negative experiences that are part and parcel of such dramas. Their decision to approach and write about

their research in a personal way is justified throughout the book, beginning with a criticism of the privileging of quantitative program evaluation, through to the concluding chapter in which the authors express the conflicts, joys, and labor of love involved in their association with the GRP—a program with good intentions, going up against challenge after challenge. Through more than a decade of collaborative ethnographic research, the authors observed the success of the GRP, as well as its decline and eventual end.

The concept of collaborative ethnography refers to the researchers' long-term investment in individuals and programs under study, through which research is done *with* participants rather than *on* them. Although there may be some concern about the ability of the researchers to remain objective in this scenario, the authors and graduate students who worked with study participants over the years sought to evaluate the program from the participant perspective. In doing so, they were able to work with GRP staff and participants to identify research goals that served the program, not only the researchers. Overall, using collaborative ethnography—including participant observation, interviews, and document analysis—allowed Spatig and Amerikaner to see clearly what was happening with the GRP to "figure out what went right, what went wrong, and how to strengthen and sustain these fragile programs" (p. 170).

This book illuminates ways in which young women in this rural locale are subjugated by family, community, and prevailing U.S. culture. The authors describe the various creative ways in which the GRP confronted this subjugation, and they critique the GRP for not thoroughly addressing the most crucial constraints facing young women in this Appalachian county. For example, Spatig and Amerikaner question why the GRP leadership did not orient the program toward educational goals. In asking this question, they identify education as a flawed—and rare—path by which poor rural youth in the United States can move to a higher socioeconomic class. Indeed, Spatig and Amerikaner cannot help but tackle the education of adolescent females in rural Appalachia because of the integral role that education plays in the lives of the individuals whom their study highlights.

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Each chapter of the book features a key player or players in the GRP whose experiences illustrate the theme of the chapter. The first chapter opens with Ric MacDowell, who relocated to West Virginia as a VISTA volunteer decades ago and has been involved in community development in Lincoln County. The chapter introduces readers to the local context and the intersecting identities of Appalachian women, touching on West Virginia's role as a "national sacrifice area" in the global economy while at the same time avoiding the reification of images of "passive victims or even a broken Appalachia" (p. 23).

Chapter two introduces readers to the founder and director of the GRP, Shelley Gaines. Through Gaines, the mission of the organization as well as an account of its early success is shared. The program was fundamentally about youth empowerment and, consequently, community development. This chapter presents the initial research question of what the program meant to the participants.

Chapters three and four explain the types of activities and projects in which the young women participated through the GRP. The primary goals of expanding experiences and giving participants hands-on learning opportunities are evident in these chapters. Chapter five describes the challenges and benefits of transitioning from involvement in the GRP as a participant to a staff member, as did two young women who were highlighted. Gaines believed strongly that by becoming staff members participants could increase their sense of ownership in the program; Spatig and Amerikaner included in their program evaluation how staffing decisions contributed to the overall success and failure of the GRP.

Chapter six would be of particular interest to readers who are involved in directing and serving youth development programs. It includes a review of what Spatig and Amerikaner learned through their study of the GRP. They included this section because they believe that there is much to be gleaned from the GRP experience, and they hope that this information can be useful to current and future youth development programs. These programs face many obstacles, but the need for after-school supervision and programming continues to grow. Lack of funding and community support can challenge all youth development programs, but Spatig and Amerikaner point out that those programs located in the rural United States may be even more important since the distance from school, friends, and neighbors to home is greater for rural students, financial resources may be limited for these students, and fewer activities are typically available for rural youth than their urban counterparts. Finally, beyond all these issues, youth development programs designed specifically for young women are exceedingly rare at a time when, the authors suggest, there may be an even greater need.

Spatig and Amerikaner apply Roth and Brooks-Gunn's (2003) "five Cs" framework for effective positive youth development programs (competence, confidence, connections, character, and compassion) to the GRP and in general find the program to be a success. However, the authors point out the lost opportunity that the GRP had to challenge and support its participants academically. While the GRP staff consistently provided participants with new experiences and opportunities to expand their cultural capital accumulation, the program was not specifically oriented toward academic advancement. Consequently, these forms of cultural capital were not specific, and participants were not able to apply them in future educational settings. For instance, preparing young women for life on a college campus by touring colleges and universities may have served participants who were prospective first-generation college students to acclimate to their surroundings more easily than they did.

The constraining and enabling nature of the pursuit of postsecondary education is achingly present in *Thinking Outside the Girl Box*. Educational aspirations represent a potential disruption of cyclical poverty, but high school and college are also institutions that perpetuate inequality in the United States. Chapter seven illustrates this process, and reveals the negative outcomes that may have come from the GRP leadership's decision not to make academic success one of the primary goals of the program, through the example of GRP participants who moved on from high school and to postsecondary education. These women attended the same high school, but not all were first-generation college students. Starting in high school it was apparent that the young women experienced a lack of college preparatory advising in their rural school, including a lack of awareness of the need to take college preparatory courses and little information about the availability of scholarships for which they would have been eligible. Not taking the necessary high school courses led to having to take remedial courses in college, prolonging what was already an expensive endeavor. The importance of college preparatory advising was also apparent as the young women waded through the unfamiliar waters of admissions and financial aid paperwork. Furthermore, a study participant specifically stated that she took computer-aided drafting (CAD) classes taught by an inexperienced teacher, illustrating the difficulty that rural high schools have in attracting the best teachers and enough teachers so that courses are not taught out of discipline (Hannum & Irvin, 2009).

As a book related to rural education, *Thinking Outside the Girl Box* puts names and faces on some of the challenges for young women aspiring to postsecondary education. For example, two former GRP participants experienced

Burton Clark's (1960) concept of "cooling out." This can occur when universities have policies that include pretests, remedial courses, and evaluations of incoming student records in an effort to guide students toward a less difficult educational path such as easier majors, less selective universities, or community college (Childress, 2001). Former GRP participants were required to take remedial math courses upon getting to college, and they struggled to pass these classes. Awareness of a lack of preparation for science fields and extending time spent pursuing a degree were among the factors that caused the young women to consider lowering their career aspirations.

Overall, Spatig and Amerikaner are ambivalent as to whether or not the GRP was "effective." On one hand, they remark that girls became more able to control themselves, but on the other, they ask whether this skill is a positive development or a form of oppression that encourages young women to behave as others would like them to behave. Clearly, the work of evaluating any human project is inexact and full of contradictions. The authors fearlessly share their own doubts about the fuzzy nature of their work, but they also identify the potential positive outcomes of close examination and thoughtful reflection of a positive youth development program.

This book contributes to rural education research by shedding light on how rural youth are marginalized and ways in which they can be empowered. Spatig and Amerikaner could have used the section of this book dedicated to program evaluation to build on the discussion of how future efforts to guide young rural women could be made as they challenge the shape of the boxes in which they have been placed by others—not to prescribe of the "right answers," but to provide inspiration for new projects that challenge and support young women as they navigate life, including postsecondary education. Focusing on academics for young women in rural schools might have extended the life of the GRP because a shift away from social activism could have led to greater community buy-in and opened new channels for funding, as youth development sources funding activism shifted focus, closed, or concentrated on urban areas. Additionally, throughout the book it is clear that GRP participants needed help with academics, specifically math.

Education policymakers, researchers, educators, and community development organizers in rural settings can be complicit in marginalizing young women by ignoring unheard voices, or they can advocate for them in significant ways that alter their individual trajectories and reshape communities. Not only is this overall research project a "girl-driven" program, but the feminist approach to the writing and methodology allow to be heard many voices beyond a dominating few. This refreshing approach to social science research includes co-authorship by a

seasoned scholar and her adult daughter. Inviting additional voices into the project, including the young women in the program and adult staff members, means that the book risks being convoluted. However, Spatig and Amerikaner do well in maintaining a united voice, writing clearly and with humbleness, suggestive of all the complexity involved in attempting to study human activity empirically.

On the whole, *Thinking Outside the Girl Box* attempts to explain how one particular group of young women in Appalachia experienced the intersectionality of identities that enabled and constrained them in making future choices. Spatig and Amerikaner break up the monolithic concept of adolescents situated in rural Appalachia to show how these young women were involved in a daily challenge to use their own agency to make decisions about college, career, and family plans. This book would be an excellent reading for a graduate course in Appalachian studies, sociology of education, rural sociology, or rural education because of its accessibility to scholars and laypeople alike. It adds flesh, bones, and names to the anonymous figures observed in quantitative studies of rural education. Researchers might take inspiration from this book to pursue further research into the educational challenges specifically related to rural women and girls.

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