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## Coming in from the Margin: Research Practices, Representation and the Ordinary

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### Abstract

This essay explores issues of marginality and representation in research, which emerged during life history interviews with Tammi, an "ordinary" woman living in Appalachia. I examine how my research practices, namely my thirst for drama and marginality, nearly silenced the preferred stories of the woman who shared her life with me. I contrast Tammi's unique yet quotidian accounts with streams of literature reflecting a tendency to neglect the commonplace by representing residents of Appalachia through tragic or heroic extremes. This essay pairs Tammi's stories with a reflection on what may have become of them had I followed my first impulse to sacrifice the ordinary at the altar of the marginal.

### Keywords

Representation, Marginality, Life History, Appalachia

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*This essay explores issues of marginality and representation in research, which emerged during life history interviews with Tammi, an “ordinary” woman living in Appalachia. I examine how my research practices, namely my thirst for drama and marginality, nearly silenced the preferred stories of the woman who shared her life with me. I contrast Tammi’s unique yet quotidian accounts with streams of literature reflecting a tendency to neglect the commonplace by representing residents of Appalachia through tragic or heroic extremes. This essay pairs Tammi’s stories with a reflection on what may have become of them had I followed my first impulse to sacrifice the ordinary at the altar of the marginal. Key Words: Representation, Marginality, Life History, and Appalachia*

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### Introduction

I distinctly remember how my first interview with Tammi<sup>1</sup> had ended. It was late afternoon and beginning to get dark outside. Her front door was open and I was half way through it when I said, in passing, “I really like your house - it’s so warm and welcoming.” In a matter-of-fact tone, she replied: “Well, it’s a lot better than the one I lost in the flood of ‘89. I never liked that house. I lived there with my ex-husband, who used to beat the crap out of me.”<sup>2</sup> Tammi was one of the women I had interviewed as part of a larger study on women in Appalachia. I recall getting angry with myself for having turned off my digital recorder. When Tammi unexpectedly brought up flood and abuse, my immediate thoughts at the time had been: “Now *this* is the stuff interesting studies are made of!”

Not ten minutes earlier I had been winding up a “life map” exercise with Tammi in which I had asked her to draw a horizontal line across a page, with peaks and valleys to represent the highs and lows as they occurred during the 40 years her life. Across her map was a high and proud straight line, with one exception. The dip in the line, she explained, was her recent breast cancer diagnosis. The line came back up quickly and remained steady, Tammi added, because she was in remission and had regained her health. Where were the flood and the abusive husband? I wondered afterwards, as I drove away from Tammi’s house. Now, much later, I am able to recognize that I had been simultaneously impressed and disappointed with the steady line of Tammi’s life map. Tammi’s description of her successful battle with breast cancer was admirable, and yet, I was also selfishly disappointed that she had not talked more about other past struggles. At that time I was still under the impression that an interesting life history was

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<sup>1</sup> I have used pseudonyms for Tammi and her family members.

<sup>2</sup> When I showed Tammi a draft of this essay, she clarified that she had already divorced from her ex-husband at the time of the flood.

one overwhelmingly marked by difficulty, resilience and triumph. In short, I had wished Tammi were more *marginal*.

Tammi was one of seven women I had interviewed as part of an exploratory study on women in Appalachia, a region I had recently moved to but knew nothing about. The study focused on the women's perceptions of challenges they faced and resources available to them to address those challenges. A co-worker introduced me to Tammi and she was the first woman I interviewed. Tammi graciously helped me to contact two other women living in her surrounding area, and each of those women introduced me to further contacts. This method of gaining access to research participants is often called "snowball sampling" (Birenacki & Waldorf, 1981, p. 141; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 124), and Tammi was the beginning of my snowball.

Although I had asked and received permission from my university to interview up to twenty women for my study,<sup>3</sup> I found myself wanting to have deeper, less restricted conversations. Thus I began thinking about the interviews I had already conducted, and looked for an opportunity to return to the field to go both deeper and wider. Several weeks later, I returned to interview Tammi a second time.

This time I replaced my structured interview protocol with very broad, open-ended questions. I asked Tammi to simply talk about her life, in any way she wanted. Tammi and I talked for hours. During this second interview, I was able to listen to Tammi's stories without worrying whether her answers adequately addressed my preconceived questions.

Later, when I began analyzing the transcripts from the two interviews, I realized what a difference the two different interview approaches had made. During the first interview, I had regretted not capturing Tammi's account of flood and abuse because these had corresponded with my line of questioning about life's "challenges." But my desire to hear about struggle and marginality had nearly overshadowed the rest of Tammi's narrative. Flood and abuse might have been interesting to write about, but positioning off-handed comments as if they were central would have been slanting Tammi's story to suit my own needs. What I learned about research from my experience with Tammi was the importance of resisting my initial impulse to exoticize Tammi and the benefits of "allowing" her to be ordinary. I learned to resist the lure of the "sexy," marginal story.

Instead, in this essay, I share the stories Tammi was most eager to tell. I do this despite the fact that the subject matter of these stories may seem somewhat ordinary. I use the word ordinary not in the sense of uninteresting but rather to mean commonly encountered. When Tammi talks about fighting breast cancer, describes a selfish sibling and comments on the joy her children bring her, she could be any woman, living anywhere. Yet Tammi is living in Southeast Ohio, in the middle of Appalachia. This is noteworthy because as a woman living in Appalachia, Tammi's ordinary stories, when written up and published, may indeed be somewhat novel. This novelty stems from the fact that existing scholarly and literary treatments of Appalachia have for the most part neglected and silenced the ordinary. Tammi resists Appalachian stereotypes. She is neither hillbilly nor union organizer. She is married to Larry, a truck driver, with whom she has twins, Brian and Angela. She works as an accountant and lives less than an

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<sup>3</sup> I applied for and received this permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of my university's research compliance division.

hour's drive from her closest relatives. Another way to describe Tammi might be as the kind of person who would open her house to an inquisitive researcher, who was nonetheless a stranger.

In order to put Tammi's stories in context, I begin with a description of the region where she lives and follow with an overview of the existing strains of literature on Appalachia, a body of writing that guided the initial stages of my study. This process of reviewing what had already been written about the region both helped and hindered my research. While the historical perspective I gained from this literature was useful, the influence of what I had read on the design of my initial interview protocol was more problematic, as I hope to illustrate in the conclusion of this essay.

Tammi lives in one of the 29 counties of southeast Ohio that has been included in the 200,000 square mile region of "Appalachia," as defined by the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). In a report produced by the ARC submitted to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Appalachia is referred to as "a region apart" that is "deeply unemployed" and "frequently deprived of the facilities and services of a modern society" (ARC, 1964, p. 16). More than forty years later, Appalachia is still considered a region in need of special attention. A spokesperson for George W. Bush described the 2006 budget proposal for ARC as a reflection of the President's "continued commitment to assist the people of Appalachia in achieving the same kind of social and economic prosperity as the rest of the nation" (ARC, 2006). The idea that Appalachia as under-developed and in need of assistance is a perspective that has been put forth and then firmly contested in literature focusing on the region.

### **The Appalachian Conversation**

Much of the literature on Appalachia can best be characterized as an ongoing "conversation"<sup>4</sup> between those who depict Appalachia as a "strange land and a peculiar people,"<sup>5</sup> (Harney, 1873/1995) and those who labor to refute this portrayal (Drake, 2001). My own interest in the Appalachian "conversation" results from tendencies in Appalachian literature to attribute certain characteristics to the region's 23 million residents, which includes women like Tammi living in Southeast Ohio.

The "Appalachian Conversation" described below has been divided into two parts. Part I discusses works of fiction and non-fiction that contain primarily negative stereotypes of Appalachian life, culture and people. Part II discusses the reactions of various writers to those negative portrayals. To paraphrase the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, these works don't stand "on the shoulders" of those that precede them, but "challenged and challenging," run by their side (Geertz, 1973/2000, p. 25).

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<sup>4</sup> The term "Appalachian Conversation" was coined by Appalachian scholar Gurney Norman and has been taken up and discussed by historian Richard Drake (2001) in his book, *A History of Appalachia*.

<sup>5</sup> This quote comes from the title of an article written by Will Wallace Harney for *Lippincott's Magazine* in 1873. The phrase appears repeatedly (often without attribution) in texts that both agree and vehemently disagree with Harney's (1873/1995) characterization of Appalachia and its people.

## Part I: Local Color & Major “Agenda-Driven” Works

Loyal Jones, former director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College in Kentucky, has described “local color” literature as works that have changed Appalachia “from a place to a condition” (Warren, 1974, p. 10). Mostly written by “outsiders,” or non-residents of Appalachia, local color writing took several forms. Most popular was the travelogue, written by adventurers, journalists and missionaries in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Common themes emerging in these works are the geographic and cultural isolation of the “rugged” mountaineer, violence, particularly in the form of feuds (Johnston, 1899 in McNeil, 1995), and poverty.

Many local color writers employed sweeping generalizations in their descriptions of Appalachia. Harney, in his oft referred to 1873 article “A Strange Land and a Peculiar People,” described the “natives” of the region as “characterized by marked peculiarities of the analytical frame” (In McNeil, 1995, p. 48). Most works of local color literature were descriptive: few writers attempt to uncover the causes of the conditions they described.

Perhaps inspired by the exotic tales of the local color writers, a new generation of writers and scholars seeking to learn more about mountain life conducted a series of community studies in geographically isolated regions throughout Appalachia. Beginning in the 1930s and spanning through the 50s and 60s and up until the 1980s, many of the studies were situated in the “hollows” or “hollers” of Appalachia. A different type of community study focused on religious communities and sects in Appalachia. These studies tended to depict folk and fundamentalist practices that highlighted the “otherness” of Appalachians. Studies on the more uncommon religious practices of the region include *Rattlesnake Religion* and *The Snake Handling Sect of Harlan County, Kentucky* (Kerman, 1942; Stekert, 1963).

The last participants in the Part I of the “Appalachian Conversation,” are what I have called “agenda-driven” works. Two books in particular have had a major impact on subsequent writers and scholars, ensuring that future representations of Appalachia occur in conversation with (or in reaction to) these works rather than merely continuing a series of propositions about the region and its people. I have employed the term “agenda-driven” to highlight the fact that the books are explanatory in nature and that they make well meaning policy recommendations despite being rife with negative characterizations and stereotypes. Henry Caudill’s *Night comes to the Cumberlands* (1962) is perhaps one of the best known books written on Appalachia<sup>6</sup> to date. President Kennedy’s advisors are said to have read Caudill’s book, which led a Kennedy visit to West Virginia and the subsequent creation of the President’s Appalachian Regional Commission (PARC), which later became part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty (Drake, 2001, p. 176). Caudill’s graphic, unflattering portrayals of “welfare mothers” (p. 287) and “poor wretches” (p. 95) were undoubtedly meant to support his advocacy for the creation of a

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<sup>6</sup> The book makes little mention of the term “Appalachia,” using instead “Appalachians” when referring to the mountain chain of the same name. The book deals mainly with Eastern Kentucky and makes no pretense of generalization. Rather, it is the reaction to the book that has characterized the book to speak for “Appalachia.”

“Southern Mountain Authority,” modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority.<sup>7</sup> Caudill’s rhetorical efforts to make a compelling case for aid and intervention had long-lasting consequences. His book was widely read, both by ordinary citizens and fellow writers eager to take up the “cause” of Appalachia.

One such writer was a Reverend by the name of Jack Weller, who authored a book with the telling title *Yesterday’s People*, in which he writes that “the greatest challenge of Appalachia, is its people” (1965, p. 7). Weller cites Southern Appalachian “personal characteristics” as the cause of poverty, providing a cultural explanation, foreshadowing Oscar Lewis’ “culture of poverty” theory<sup>8</sup> (Lewis, 1966).

Both Caudill and Weller’s books signal a shift from the “local color” literature that predates their work. Both authors offer explanations for the “Appalachia problem” (Weller, 1965, p. 9), and urge policy makers to come to the aid of the region’s residents. These two books are discussed at length here because of the vast and varied reactions they have elicited from several generations of Appalachian writers and scholars.

## Part II: Reactions

Several books were written in reaction to literature by those who tended to portray Appalachia as awash in poverty and backwardness. Loyal Jones, the founding director of the Appalachian Center at Berea College writes:

Those who come to look at Southern Appalachia usually find whatever they are conditioned to find...Appalachian books, articles, television documentaries, films and tapes became abundant, changing Appalachia in the public mind from a place to a condition. (As cited in Warren, 1974, p. 9)

The tendency of authors who attempt to “correct the record” on Appalachia, however, is often on in which negative, stereotypical portrayals are replaced by positive, but equally stereotypical representations of mountain life and people.

The defiantly titled *Hillbilly Women* by Kathy Kahn (1972) “tells what it means to be a woman when you are poor, when you are proud, and when you are a hillbilly” (p. 3). Most of the women featured are portrayed as strong and activist, despite being defined, for the most part, in relation to the men in their lives: they are miner’s wives, daughters and widows. Kahn describes her book as a deliberate response to typical portrayals of Appalachian women as “hopeless, helpless and passive” (p. 17).

Several academics have written and edited books that mention both Caudill and Weller in contrast to their own work (Batteau, 1990; Billings, 1974; McNeil, 1995; Shapiro, 1978; Whisnant, 1983). Shapiro’s *Appalachia on our Mind* (1978) and Batteau’s *The Invention of Appalachia* are entirely dedicated to responding to the images of Appalachia that have been “constructed” by previous writers. Shapiro is credited with

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<sup>7</sup> Despite severely criticizing the TVA’s collusion with the mining industry in earlier chapters Caudill (1962) credits the TVA in his final chapter with cleaning up the Tennessee Valley, making it prosperous; “its once wasted hills” now green. (p. 367)

<sup>8</sup> I made this connection as a result of reading Billings’ “Culture and Poverty in Appalachia: A Theoretical Discussion and Empirical Analysis,” 1974.

being the first to actively engage in an extended “conversation” with the local colorists, community study scholars and “agenda-driven” activists mentioned above. Shapiro does not attempt to replace negative representations with more favorable ones, but rather he argues that as a manufactured “idea,” having no basis in reality, there can be *no* accurate representation of Appalachia. Shapiro makes use of arguments made by social constructionists to describe how explanations for Appalachian’s “otherness” were constructed and then offered up as fact (p. xi). In acknowledging his debt to Shapiro Batteau positions his own work as an extension of Shapiro’s work, with a greater focus on the process through which Appalachia is “invented.” Batteau explains:

I present an account of the invention of Appalachia, recognizing that Appalachia...is just as much a social construction as is the Cowboy or, for that matter, the Indian. This invention was accomplished not in a professor’s study but in the hurly-burly of politics and commerce and industry. And further, it was pursued with some very specific political ends in view. (p. 16)

Batteau’s work echoes arguments forwarded earlier by Whisnant, that characterize many of the traditions promoted as “Appalachian” as the result of a “systematic cultural intervention” (Whisnant, 1983, p. 13) by outsiders seeking economic or political gain.

An important work representing a chorus of critique targeting negative interpretations of Appalachian culture is a book entitled *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes* (Billings, Norman & Ledford, 2001). The book contains both a history of Appalachian stereotypes as well as a summary of the most energetic “back talk” and counter representations coming from several generations of Appalachian scholars. However, I am in agreement with Englehardt (2005) who argues:

Looking for a positive spin on a negative stereotype only reinforces the stereotype. In theoretical terms, a concept is never constructed by focusing on its opposite; doing so merely reinforces the binary and the structures of power it supports. (pp. 4-5 )

Speaking specifically about depictions of Appalachian women, Englehardt (2005) continues:

Too often our studies have not gotten out of these positive-negative binaries...we cannot see actual diversity, nuanced life choices, or useful contexts for real women’s lives and are left with impossible standards to try to follow. (p. 5)

This last comment raises an issue that is central to this paper: “real women’s lives” (i.e., *ordinary* women’s lives), with a few exceptions (see Straight, 2005), are largely absent from current literature on Appalachia. In this essay, I attempt to heed Englehardt’s call by providing a brief glimpse into one “real woman’s life,” using the life history method from a narrative perspective.



For the purpose of this paper I use Watson and Watson-Franke's (1985) definition of life history, which is given as "a retrospective account by the individual of his life in whole or in part...that has been elicited by another person" (p. 2). Handel (2003) further describes the production of a life history as a method by which an individual remembers events in their life and tells a listener about them as he/she has "experienced and knows it" (p. 13). Handel describes the act of telling one's life history as:

[A] reflexive activity of the person's self. It is the product of an inner dialogue which arises in response to an interpersonal dialogue between interview and interviewee, and it becomes part of the latter. (p. 13 )

In her article *Women's life histories: method and content* Susan Geiger (1986) points out that telling one's life history necessarily involves selective recall. Thus the benefit of the life history method is its ability to access not only what has occurred in a given life, but to also gain perspective on how the teller sees those occurrences (Geiger). Unlike the life course which seeks to describe trajectories, transitions and turning points (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003) and the biography, which are typically more extensive and comprehensive, a life history can often take a shorter form and cover episodes rather than an entire life period (Handel, 2003, p. 8).

When analyzing the stories Tammi shared with me in our conversations, I used a narrative perspective as a sensitizing lens. I define "narrative perspective" as a starting point for analysis that avoids attempts to treat respondents' accounts as potentially "true" pictures of "reality" (Silverman, 2000, p. 823). From a narrative perspective, the content of interviews is generated by both interviewee and interviewer in the sense that the interviewer interprets *how* a story is told while simultaneously listening to *what* is actually said by the interviewee. A narrative perspective is a means for openly expressing the subjectivity (and fallibility) of the researcher (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). This essay is therefore not just about Tammi's life and how she sees and tells her life: it is also about how I, the researcher, have interpreted both her and her stories.

In sharing Tammi's stories, and my interpretations of them, I make no claims that Tammi is a "representative individual" who can stand for an entire culture (Tedlock, 2000, p. 459). The stories that Tammi has chosen to share render her, to paraphrase Clifford Geertz (1983), one case among cases. These stories also mark her official entry/interruption into the "Appalachian conversation."

## Meeting Tammi

After reading all I could get my hands on in preparation for my study, I began my search for research participants. It was time to shut the books and open my ears. I began by approaching a colleague that I knew was a long-term resident of the area. I told her that I was looking to interview local women and asked if she could recommend anyone she knew. She gave me three names, and then specified: "You should definitely contact Tammi" she -said, "She'll help you - she's a big sweetheart." Any self-righteous visions I may have had of "giving voice" to the women of Appalachia evaporated at the mention of the word "help." The women I had set out to interview already had voice. My role

was not to bestow voice upon them. On the contrary, I needed women to interview and by agreeing to participate in my study they would be helping me, not the inverse.

I called Tammi and arranged for an interview later that week. Before hanging up, she gave me directions to the town where she lived and I felt a tinge of unease: I was unfamiliar with her town and felt uncomfortable with the idea that I would be heading into a backwoods “hollow,” a rural area the likes of which had been represented and misrepresented by many researchers before me.

As I drove into Tammi’s driveway on the appointed day, my discomfort was immediately dispelled. My first glimpse into Tammi’s life came by way of her white Ford Windstar mini-van parked that had “American soccer mom” written all over it. The back hatch of the van door had the requisite soccer ball magnet and several yellow “support our troops” magnetic ribbons. Also in plain view were two pink “breast cancer survivor” ribbons. From the driveway I could see a wide array of “extracurricular” equipment in the back yard: barbecue, trampoline, tent, above ground swimming pool. There were several dogs milling around on leashes at the front of the house.

Walking into Tammi’s house, I couldn’t help but notice the great amount of pink. There were pink Christmas lights ringing the ceiling in the kitchen, pink ribbons tied onto several surfaces, and Tammi herself, dressed in pink hospital scrubs. Making small talk, I commented that I liked her outfit. Before I could ask any of my prepared questions or even introduce myself formally, Tammi began her first story.

It’s a smock. I bought it...I had breast cancer, okay. And I thought: I’ve got to at least get dressed for the interview so I just threw this on. I had breast cancer. It has the breast cancer ribbon on it.

Tammi motioned for me to sit down at her kitchen table and offered me coffee, which I accepted. Her two children were drawing quietly on the couch, in front of the television I then said, somewhat awkwardly, “Well you look great, so I’m assuming...”

She knew where I was heading. She explained:

I’m still healing. I had it a year ago, in October, and it came back and I went through two months of radiation, and then I found another lump on the same breast, and it came back benign, thank heavens.

I perceived that Tammi, despite not knowing me well, didn’t deem her cancer to be an “off-limits” topic of conversation. I wondered if this was a result of the unfortunate ubiquity of breast cancer in our society, or rather a measure of Tammi’s forthrightness. Her story continued.

But now I’m fighting an infection in my incision – it just opened up. My body doesn’t fight off stuff very well. I was sittin’ there folding clothes, and I kept feeling this drip, and I look down and my whole nightgown was covered with this fluid, coming out, and I said “Larry honey, I think we have a problem.” That was five and a half weeks ago.

“Well you look so good” I said, interrupting. Then, as if to demonstrate empathy, I added: “My mom, when she was sick, she lost all of her hair, so...”

“She had chemo. I didn’t have chemo, but I have to take Tamoxifen, because mine was...”

“Mastectomy?” her son Brian asks from across the room.

“Those are some big words for a young guy,” I said, surprised both by her son’s advanced vocabulary and his comfort level in asking questions about his mother’s illness. “No, I didn’t have to have a mastectomy,” she said, directing her words to Brian. Then, to me she added:

They’re twins. They’re nine. They’re good helpers. [Then, recalling what she had sought to say earlier]: Hormone receptive - that’s what it was. It could go to my ovaries and my other breast, so they put me on Tamoxifen, for five years. So I have another four to go. I just keep on plugging.

These last words I interpreted as a mixture of resignation and resolve. I was acutely aware of the fact that Tammi was telling her story in front of her children. I assume she was conscious of this fact as well. When I read these last words in the transcript of our first interview, I began reflecting on the variety of functions served by storytelling, beyond merely providing information - how the stories we tell help us make sense of the past and present. In *Making Stories*, Jerome Bruner (2002) notes that our own memories can “fall victim” to what he calls our “narrative creation of self” (p. 64). In choosing what aspects of our stories that we choose to tell and retell, we are, in essence, recreating our past. He writes:

We constantly construct and reconstruct our selves to meet the needs of the situations we encounter, and we do so with the guidance of our memories of the past and our hopes and fears for the future. (p. 64)

Tammi was very forthcoming about many of the challenges she encountered after being diagnosed. She did not appear to be trying to erase painful memories in her narrative. Acknowledging the challenges she had faced, and continued to face, Tammi also stressed her resolve to overcome them. While I can’t be sure as to her motivations for telling her story the way she did, I found myself admiring her positive attitude and her strength. At the same time, I was also concerned my admiration of Tammi would result in my telling her story in too stereotypical fashion: i.e., as the “illness survival” story or the “heroic struggle” story.

Tammi went on to describe the adjustments she had to make when she was getting radiation. She said she felt lucky to have such helpful children and also a supportive boss at the accounting firm where she works. Talk then turned to the stress she felt during tax season. I told Tammi that I could relate, having a father who also works in accounting. It was becoming increasingly clear to me as the interview went on that Tammi’s story,

with a few minor changes, could have been the story of several people I know: my mother, my cousins, several family friends. Her words, at times, hit so “close to home,” that they affected me in ways she may not have imagined: my own memories of illness and loss kept creeping into my head. While Tammi and I were engaged in dialogue, a second (inner) memory monologue was silently interrupting.

Sociologist Arthur Frank argues that personal stories are not to be understood as strictly individual. Any person’s story, he writes, “is the site of struggles permeated by multiple voices” (2005, p. 972). For Frank, the research process should be dialogical rather than monological. By this he means that rather than trying to utter the “last word” about research participants and viewing their words as mere monological “raw material” for analysis, the conduct of research should be seen as entering into relationship with the research participant: a dialogical sharing of space and conversation (p. 971). Dialogical research, according to Frank, involves a recognition that “the meaning of any present story depends on the stories it will generate. One story calls forth another, both from the storyteller and from the listener/recipient of the story” (p. 967). A dialogical research report, he stresses, is one which “offers an account of how researcher and participant came together in some shared time and space and had diverse effects *on each other* (p. 968, emphasis in the original). To pretend that Tammi’s stories had no effect on me would be to deny the dialogical nature of research. This is not to say that I did not grow a bit alarmed at the effect Tammi’s stories had on me. I recall trying to reign in my straying thoughts with silent admonitions and reminders to myself, saying, in essence: ‘this is not about you!’” But Tammi’s story was provoking an unavoidable connection: I recalled loved ones, my mother in particular, who had battled cancer, who had tried to carry on “normal” lives while undergoing radiation, who had, to use Tammi’s words, “kept on plugging.” As Tammi spoke she gave me hope, for whereas few of those I have known that battled cancer have survived, Tammi was living proof that it can be done.

Yet Tammi cannot be reduced and summarized with the words “cancer survivor.” While I have no doubt that surviving her illness has to some extent defined who she is, I would not like to monologically “finalize” (Frank, 2005) Tammi by sharing only this aspect of her life. In my second conversation with Tammi, I asked her to tell me about her life, beginning wherever she liked. Given free reign in her response, she shared earlier memories.

### **On Childhood and Independence**

“I had a good childhood,” she began. Her son Brian who was sitting next to us seemed excited to hear his mom’s words. “I want to know more about your childhood,” he said. “You know all about *my* childhood,” he added, with a mischievous grin. Tammi continued:

I had a good childhood. I always loved to dress up. I had this one red skirt. It was like a 50s skirt – it had had paisley designs on it – I would put button it, and then unzip it. But I would wear it like it a dress and put the button up here and put my arms through where the zipper was and I would wear that and I always stylin’. I don’t know what ever happened to that skirt – I wish we still had it.

Terri went over to a cabinet near the front door and pulled out some framed pictures. “Oh my gosh!” Brian gushed. “I’ve seen those pictures!” Terri pointed to pictures and gave brief descriptions. “That’s my senior picture,” she said, pointing to what could have been the high school picture of anyone who grew up in the 70s; big glasses, feathered hair, polyester. “And you had braces,” I said. “Yes,” she replied. And we all sat there for awhile, without speaking, looking at the pictures. Eventually Tammi said: “I think that one that Brian has in his left hand, is my favorite.”

Tammi’s husband Larry was noisily doing the dishes in the kitchen. “Sweetie, do we have sponges?” he called out. “I have Brillo pads,” she responded. I was enjoying the group aspect of my conversation with Tammi. Her family added flavor to our conversation with their own comments and recollections. The next question I asked is barely audible on my recording due to Larry’s vigorous pot scraping in the background. I had asked Tammi if she had any siblings.

I have a sister and a brother. My sister is six years older and my brother is nine months younger. My sister...she’s more...into herself. You know - you could call me and say: “Tammi, I really need your help, could you meet me in Coolville?” and I would be there. My sister –she would say: “Well, that’s really not going to fit into my plans...I’ve got this going on, or I have to check with Bob, (her husband). Larry doesn’t like him. My brother-in-law is an asshole.

“It’s interesting how siblings can be so different,” I said, reflecting inwardly upon my own family and how different I am from my own older sibling. I also reflected on the fact that one rarely hears banal stories about irritating brothers-in-law in research studies. I made a note to myself to be sure to include these comments in my essay.

“Did you go to the same high school as your sister?” I asked. Tammi explained that her sister had gone to school in West Virginia, where they had lived before her father got transferred back to Southeast Ohio for his job as head butcher for a large supermarket chain. Her father had wanted to let Tammi’s sister finish high school before uprooting the family to return to Ohio. Tammi’s story then turned to her own education: “I went to the vocational school, and then April, of my junior year, they put me into the Co-op program.”

“What’s the co-op program?” I asked.

She explained:

It’s where you work for part of the day and then you get credit, for classes, to graduate. Then I worked for the Core of Engineers, in Marietta. Then I got married...ten days after I graduated from high school. That was a BIG mistake. But, yes I probably would have changed it, but no, I wouldn’t...because I learned a lot. And if I hadn’t gone through all that experience, I wouldn’t know what I do now. That’s how I look at it.

The next part of our conversation took place amid a chorus of animals barking and continued pot scraping and banging. I admired Tammi's ability to concentrate during the commotion. "I grew very independent," she said, and then paused.

I misunderstood the direction she was heading, and so I said: "Well I can imagine, considering you began working when you were a junior in high school..." But Tammi wasn't referring to work; she was attempting to explain her perspective on how her first terrible marriage shaped who she is today.

Well, yeah, but I mean, if the washer got plugged up, he would beat me. He would beat me, because it was my fault, but it was an old washer. So I finally had my dad and Ted show me - Ted is my mom and dad's next door neighbor - they showed me how to take the washer apart. The commode would plug up, and he would beat me over that, because "I dropped something in the commode." So I tore that commode apart, and there wasn't one thing in there. I grew very independent, I will say that. You know, me and Larry have been together 12 years and it's taken me a lot to say: "Larry will you help me." Hasn't it?

This last comment was directed to her husband. Larry confirmed Tammi's comments. "She rarely ever does ask for help," he agreed. "It's got to be absolutely something that she cannot do. Here's the thing - [he paused for effect] she does probably more than I can at times." For both Larry and Tammi, it seemed to me, Tammi's relationship with her abusive ex-husband was mentioned mostly to provide context for how independent this experience made her. To lay bare my own cultural assumptions and prejudices I'll admit here that I was surprised to hear Tammi speak of her abusive ex-husband in front of her husband and children. I wasn't sure if the ability to discuss it so freely was a result of her family being already familiar with the story or whether it served as an indication that for Tammi and her family, witnessing and/or talking about abuse were not out of the ordinary or demonstrated that the challenge had been overcome and was definitively in the past. I struggled with the way my thoughts kept centering on the abuse in a narrow way. It seemed that for Tammi, the mention of abuse had a functional rather than informational purpose. I interpreted her revelation as an illustration of her sense of independence, rather than a re-visitation of a painful past. Writing on marital violence Catherine Kohler Riessman (1992) has argued that narratives about abuse are often told in effort to render the "sorrows of life heroic and meaningful" (p. 247). Yet I didn't get the sense that Tammi was trying to present herself in a heroic light: I perceived her account as one of an ordinary woman who had grown independent due to extraordinary circumstances.

As I recall my disappointment in not getting Tammi's mention of abuse on tape during our first interview, I am compelled to reflect on how I had been tempted to suppress Tammi's more "ordinary" stories in order to focus on that one. My determination that "flood and abuse" made for good research topics had (temporarily, at least) silenced the way Tammi saw her own experience. Rather than silencing the marginalized (Clair, 1998) my research practices risked privileging the marginalized at the expense of the ordinary. In his essay entitled *From ethnographic occupations to ethnographic stances*, communication scholar William Rawlins challenges researchers to

write about others in a way that would be recognizable to them (1998, p. 360). He further argues that research should seek to uncover the “wealth of ways in which people make sense of being alive” (p. 362). One of the last stories Tammi told me seemed to speak directly to this notion of making sense of being alive. As she told it, I remember thinking that of everything we had talked about, this story seemed to best epitomize what I had learned about Tammi’s attitude and character thus far.

### **Of Hassles and Tassels**

Tammi was cajoled into telling this next story by her son Brian. “You *have* to tell her about naming the machine,” he said, as I was getting ready to leave after my second visit. My curiosity was piqued since we had not been talking about anything machine-related when he said this. His request seemed to come out of nowhere. It turned out that the story was about Tammi’s tricks for getting through radiation.

I named the machine Wilson, okay? Cause you have to lay still – and you can’t move – and it has two bolts – and it has eyes. And I say: “you guys, we need to make that a smiley face, because if that’s what everyone is staring at, they need to have something nice to look at.” So I went in with a sticky thing – a smiley face – and the nurses lifted the table up, so I could put it on the machine. And I named it Wilson – because of that movie, *Castaway*.

Well, then – (laughs) this is awful...

I have a friend who works at an adult book store, okay, so I got this wild idea – and I’d been thinking - I’ve *got* to play some kind of joke on these people on my last day. So my friend got me these little nipple tassels...

“One stayed on but the other one fell off,” Brian interjected. I was amused at how much Brian seemed to enjoy hearing and adding to the story. Tammi continued:

They have a light in them – and they flash, red, green and yellow, red, green and yellow – and my mom knew I was doing this – and my mom even went with me that day, just to see their reaction. So I go in and I’m getting ready, and one of the ladies said, “Tammi, what are you doing?” I said: “nothing – tell me when you’re ready for me to get on the table.” She said: “Alright” So I go in, and I open up my gown, and I had the lights going, and she just totally lost it – and she said: “Oh my god, I *have* to call all the girls in!” Here comes every one of those girls that I had dealt with through the two months of radiation – every one of them came in and started cracking up.

Tammi paused for effect. Her voice grew quieter. Brian and I can be heard on my tape giggling in the back ground.

And then they called my doctor in – they called him and said: “Doctor, you need to come quickly, there’s something the matter with Tammi’s left breast again.” Here he comes, in two seconds flat – I mean, he just hauls in, and he says: “what’s the matter?” And I lifted up my top and said: “I really don’t know but there’s something wrong.” And he just laughed – he cracked up. And now whenever I go in they say: “we were just talking about you.” They said they’ve never had anyone do anything like that before.

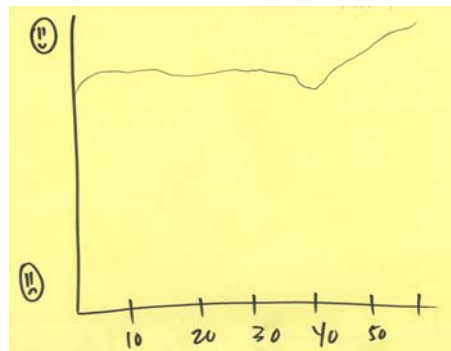
Brian then recounted, with evident pride, that clinic staff has seen people bring in stickers for the machine before, but *never* had anyone gone as far as his mom with the tassels.

I shared with Tammi my interest in the use of humor in health communication. I commented that her story seemed like an inspiring example of how humor can heal. At the time, I had only been thinking about how her playful attitude must have been beneficial to Tammi herself. Only later did I begin pondering the effect Tammi’s stories may have had on her son Brian. I can’t say for sure if he felt reassured, inspired, or amused by his mother’s stories, but he clearly enjoyed hearing and participating in them.

To conclude this paper I would like to return to Tammi’s life map, which I referred to in the beginning of this essay. I was introduced to the life mapping activity through a casual conversation with Monique Sternin, a researcher and social activist at Tufts University. The life map exercise invites interview participants to chart the course of their life, marking “peaks and valleys” that then serve as the starting point for follow up questions that probe for narratives on the experiences that signaled a “peak” or “valley.” In retrospect I see my introduction of this activity at the end of our first interview as my attempt to “dig for valleys” in Tammi’s life. When I revisited the tape of this part of our conversation I heard a definite lack of enthusiasm in Tammi’s voice. Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately) I was oblivious to this at the time, and we proceeded with the activity. I explained, clumsily:

It’s called a life map...here’s an example...and it’s not very professional looking with my happy face drawings...it’s like - if *this* represents the good times up here (pointing to a happy face) and *this* is the represents the bad times...you sort of chart the highs and lows across the years, which run along this axis down here (pointing to the line marked with decades along the bottom of the page).

Figure 1. Tammi’s Life Map.





The drawing of her “life map” line lasted no more than 30 seconds. She talked as she drew, giving this description: “I would say that up until here (age 40) I had just a little down, and then I’m up. I’m always up. Am I not?” This last comment was directed to her son, who was sitting nearby.

“And what does this represent?” I say, pointing to the dip.

“When I had cancer...when I found out,” she responded.

“I could have guessed...I just wanted to...”

“Wanted to verify it?” She said, completing my sentence.

“It’s not a very big dip,” I remarked.

“Because I never let it take me down. Did I? (to Brian). I never let it take me down.”

After listening several times to the recordings of our conversations, something became embarrassingly clear to me. In my first conversation with Tammi I could hear myself relentlessly seeking signs of struggle in her life. I had the notion lurking in my head that to be interesting, her story needed to be more painful, more radically peculiar (Said, 1979/1994).

I now recognize that this “notion lurking in my head” did not spring from nowhere. Revisiting the journals and research books on my library shelf, including the literature I reviewed in preparation for my study on women in Appalachia, I find very few articles that deal with “ordinary” lives. Scholarship on “marginalized” populations, in contrast, is abundant and varied, Sociologist Mitch Duneier, for example, has written an excellent book on homeless men living and working in New York City (Duneier, 2000). Other academics have written about “stigmatized women” living with HIV (Berger, 2004), “fragile” group home residents dying of AIDS (Adelman & Frey, 1997) victims of domestic violence (Hedge, 1996), and gang members (Conquergood, 1994). These works are sensitive and thoroughly researched portrayals of people and social issues that undoubtedly warrant attention. The danger, however, of multiple and repeated depictions of marginalized populations is the defining emphasis on marginality. The mere act of selecting the extra-ordinary as an object of study can unwittingly turn marginalized groups into a spectacle. People living with HIV/AIDS are defined by disease just as battered women and gang members, once researched and reported upon, become defined by violence. In the same sense, there has been a tendency to represent the extremes of Appalachia, the heroic union organizers and the impoverished holler dwellers, while neglecting the less glamorous stories of ordinary citizens.

In this essay I do not argue that researchers should cease to write about marginalized (and presumed marginalized) groups altogether. Rather I suggest that instead of attempting to “give voice” to others, we might benefit from simply engaging with them in conversation. We should then honor the results of these conversations, whether ordinary or extraordinary. In lieu of voyeuristically seeking “research worthy” extremes (Tierney, 2000, p. 547), researchers should remain open to the mundane in the lives of those we perceive as marginalized. In essence, it is important to avoid applying the “marginal” label to those who may not welcome or accept this designation. Had I limited the focus of my study to the “hollows” of Appalachia, and edited my participants’ stories until only struggle and resilience remained, I would have sacrificed the ordinary at

the altar of the “sexy.” But my research participants have taught me that “ordinary” people - the moms, accountants, and cancer survivors<sup>9</sup> like Tammi also have much to contribute to our understanding of human experience. In listening to Tammi, I learned that under the cloak of the ordinary woman was a generous interlocutor, an extraordinary storyteller and a hilarious and inspiring set of flashing nipple tassels.

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<sup>9</sup> There are currently two million other women in America who like Tammi, have been diagnosed (past or present) with breast cancer (American Cancer Society breast cancer facts & figures, 2005-2006).

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