Subcultural Masculine Moral Identity Work among Rural Missouri Noodlers: "A Special Breed of Men"

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Abstract: This paper analyzes how male Missouri "noodlers" (hand fishers) account for the persistence of illegal catfish catching across generations. Noodling is central to the way men construct a subculturally worthy identity based on trust, respect, sharing, reciprocity and recognition of interdependence with members of their group, community and the local natural environment. The noodling subculture rejects the definition of noodling as poaching and constructs a group definition of noodling as a worthy masculine community-building tradition.

Keywords: gender, identity, masculinity, fishing, poaching, subcultures

Résumé : Cet article analyse comment se transmet de génération en génération la tradition des « noodlers » mâles du Missouri, qui pratiquent une pêche illégale où ils attrapent des poissons-chats, ou silures, à la main. Cette pêche, le « noodling », est un élément central de la construction, au sein d'une sous-culture, d'une identité reconnue fondée sur le respect, le partage, la réciprocité et la reconnaissance de l'interdépendance avec les membres de leur groupe, la communauté et l'environnement naturel local. La sous-culture locale du noodling n'associe pas cette pratique à du braconnage et construit une définition collective de la pêche comme une tradition masculine de valeur pour la construction de la communauté.

Mots-clés : identité sexuelle, masculinité, pêche, braconnage, sous-cultures

This research examines the ways that Missouri men noodlers account for their persistence in illegal noodling and analyzes the cultural patterns that are consistent in their descriptions to show that the reason illegal noodling persists, and that some noodlers are lobbying for legalization, is because the practice is central in their sense of who they are as worthy men and as a people. The role of noodling in the subcultural masculine moral identity work of rural working-class Missouri men between the ages of 18 and 90 is outlined.

Noodling, or hand fishing,[1] is a practice that involves submerging in the water and feeling under the banks of rivers and lakes to find large catfish. The fingers are used to lure the fish to bite and the fish are caught with the hands. Noodling can be physically challenging and dangerous. It often involves struggling with the fish underwater. Outlawed in Missouri in 1919, noodling has continued to be practiced and taught to the young.

A movement to legalize hand fishing in Missouri resulted in a trial legal season in three Missouri rivers, running from 1 June to 15 July in 2005 and 2006. In the spring of 2007, the Missouri Department of Conservation announced the discontinuation of a legal season. Media accounts reported that studies conducted by the Missouri Department of Conservation showed that the catfish population of the state was under duress and it was decided that adding another form of harvest was not desirable. Members of an organization formed in 2000 to lobby for legalization say that they will continue to press for legalization. Noodling is legal in 17 states.[2] Some Missouri noodlers visit other states to hand fish legally but most active noodlers studied also fish illegally in Missouri.

The Concept of Identity and Subcultural Moral Identity Work

George Herbert Mead (1967) outlined an approach to the study of social life that is ontologically based on the understanding that social reality is always in the process of

being created by human beings through the symbolic meanings they attach to things in interaction with each other within the environment. The approach to identity taken in this research follows in this tradition and holds that identities are constructed through this ongoing process that is done with others, rather than being done by individuals alone, and that takes place within cultural and structural contexts (Grigsby 2004). Here, I focus on the subcultural identity work of noodlers and the cultural and structural contexts shaping the process through careful examination of the meaning-making of the noodlers themselves.

Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock maintain that subcultural identity work is "the work people do together to create the signs, codes, and rites of affirmation that become shared resources for identity-making" (1996:121). Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock maintain that the use of the term *subculture* implies that members of the group are creating or redefining an identity that all claim. This process may involve creating "special social representations—moral identities—that can serve as universal indexes of virtuous selfhood." Group members engage in creating meanings, signs and signifying practices that are distinct while also having a relational connection to the larger culture (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996: 119, 121).

Masculinity

The concepts of "gender regime," (Connell 2000:29), "hegemonic, subordinated, and complicit masculinities" and "marginalization" (Connell 1995:76-81) help to provide understanding of the nature of noodling identity work within the structure of gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men (Connell 1995:78). This theoretical approach views masculinity as socially constituted in different ways in different places and times. The processes of constructing masculinity and femininity within institutional and cultural structures are described by Connell as "gender projects" (2000:28). The patterning of relations within an institution constitutes a gender regime (Connell 2000:29). Subordination refers to "specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men" (Connell 2000:78). Of particular importance for this analysis is Connell's concept of marginalization (1995:80-81) that refers to relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinated classes or ethnic groups. Connell maintains that "marginalization is always relative to the *authorization* of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group" (Connell 1995:81).

Social Class and Gender

The worldviews of working class men showing the ways moral criteria shaped intergroup boundaries, described by Lamont (2000), provide an understanding of the importance of the boundaries established by groups in their identity work as gender, class and place-based. As Bryant and Pini point out, of "the numerous studies of class and rurality, few have theorized gender" and even fewer have examined gender in ethnographic studies of rurality and class: "Rural social science, studies of gender and class have typically operated in parallel rather than in unison" (2009:48, 56). They suggest that class may not be invoked by working-class people because their status is considered lower; middle-class status is normalized as the hegemonic category and does not need to be named. They note that in the rural context the centrality of communitarianism and localism are dominant and require discourses of equality and inclusivity. Also, the hegemony of traditional gender discourses in rural environments forms the local backdrop for the masculine identity work of many rural men, including noodlers. Nonetheless, Bryant and Pini maintain that class is a central structuring element that needs to be considered in unison with gender.

Poaching

Several recent sociological and anthropological studies have created typologies of the motivations of poachers (Brymer 1991; Eliason 2004; Forsyth et al. 1998; Muth and Bowe 1998). Muth and Bowe (1998) conducted content analysis of relevant literature to compile a comprehensive typology of motivations for poaching. Their typology includes ten primary motivations: commercial gain, household consumption, recreational satisfactions, trophy poaching, thrill killing, protection of self and property, poaching as rebellion, poaching as a traditional right, disagreement with specific regulations and gamesmanship.

Brymer's (1991) research, based on a case study of hunting poaching, outlined four types of hunting poaching subculture. The types theorized were market hunters, trophy hunters and guides, tourists who are unaware of the game laws, and local rural hunters. He focused on the "local rural hunters" subculture noting that it is

> based in rural families still retaining rural lands which serve as the centre of their hunting territories. Even though they may work in town, the members of such groups commute home, and pursue an essentially rural lifestyle ... Such groups are tightly knit, and outsiders are likely to be distrusted and treated with a friendly but formal distancing. [1991:180-181]

Brymer noted a value for sharing game within networks, especially for reasons of age or physical infirmity (1991: 181). Brymer concluded that the subculture is "based in an extension of values and hunting practices originating ... in the early 1800s in a pre-industrial agrarian era" (1991:192). He maintains that values and practices have remained the same over two centuries but practices have been redefined by the dominant culture as deviant, requiring subculture members to respond in ways that allow their subculture to persist. The need to maintain secrecy from enforcement officials and informers has tightened the boundaries of these groups and he suggests it is possible that the tensions with the legal system may cause the eventual demise of these subcultures. A key point made by Brymer is that this and other subcultures of poaching must be placed in historical context to be fully understood.

Several studies emphasize how people are socialized into poaching by significant others in their lives and thus develop values and attitudes in interaction with others. These studies offer insights into how poaching behaviour is learned (Curcione 1992; Forsyth 1993; Forsyth and Marckese 1993a, 1993b; Grigsby 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Some studies focus on how poachers rationalize and employ "neutralization techniques" in order to temporarily justify or excuse their poaching in the face of "dominant normative standards" that define the activity as illegal and wrong (Eliason 1999:31). This approach seeks to show how poachers justify their illegal behaviour while maintaining a sense of belonging in the dominant culture. Eliason and Dodder (1999) outlined four types of neutralizations most often used by poachers. These included "denial of responsibility," claiming it was an accident; the "metaphor of the ledger," claiming their good qualities made up for the poaching; "defense of necessity," claiming they poached from need; and, "condemnation of the condemners" in which they tried to shift the focus onto the illegal or hypocritical behaviour of game wardens. This literature was used to compare with Missouri noodlers' reasons for their persistence in illegal noodling.

Noodling

Morgan (2006) provided demographic data about Missouri noodlers useful as background for this research. He did a quantitative analysis of a survey of 103 Missouri noodlers. Hand fishing or noodling was determined to be "male-dominated" and primarily practiced by men living in rural areas who worked in blue collar professions. Women made up only 6% of the sample (Morgan 2006:322).

Grigsby (2008, 2009b) explored the tensions and struggles within noodling groups to reproduce or alter the degree to which certain elements of the noodling version of masculinity are highlighted. Differences in the ways the men made meaning of noodling in their identity work were linked to age cohort based identity needs and structural factors. Grigsby (2009a) drew from interviews conducted with women noodlers to examine their relational gender identity work. Though most noodling groups do not include women, a few groups were identified that did and these were the focus of that research. Women constructed feminine gender identities and improved their relative standing in the group through their participation.

This research shifts the focus to an analysis of why illegal noodling in Missouri has persisted and shows it to be a folk tradition that is central as a cultural practice used in maintaining a rural subculture. It provides the men who participate with masculine moral identity through which they define themselves as a worthy kind of men, asserting the value of the local noodling version of masculinity in contrast to that of dominant culture hegemonic masculinity.

The key questions I started with were how noodlers make meaning out of their persistence in noodling and why they have continued to pass this folk tradition from generation to generation despite the potential physical danger and its long term illegality in Missouri. Illegality presents the risk of being fined or jailed. Noodlers also risk being bitten by snakes, turtles, otters and other wildlife while hand fishing. In fact the scars revealed to me during interviews were numerous. And, when a fish is caught, the fisher is always bitten by the catfish which creates "river rash," an abraded and irritated area on the arms or hands. There is also some degree of social stigma attached to hand fishing (Morgan 2006, 2008).

The construction of the generalized culture of noodling and the masculine subcultural moral identity work of noodlers takes place, for the most part, in a space that is defined as male space. This research focuses on how men noodlers construct worthy masculinity in interaction with the men in their group and in comparison to other men.

Missouri noodlers interviewed did not centre their discussion of why they persist in noodling on rationalizing or justifying their participation in an illegal poaching activity, nor did they try to distance themselves from other noodlers as has been documented for some other poachers who distance themselves from the activity defined as deviant by the dominant culture (Eliason 1999, 2004; Filteau 2009; Forsyth et al. 1998; Forsyth and Marckese 1993a, 1993b; Muth and Bowe 1998). Instead noodlers consistently described a set of norms and values present in noodling that exemplified for them a subcultural "way of life" (Halperin 1990) and type of masculine rural identity that they embraced and wanted to pass on to their younger kin.

This research identifies key elements from the "cultural tool kit" (Swidler 1986) used by men in their noodling group identity work. Through analysis of how the men make meaning of their commitment to noodling, the key features of the masculine subculture of noodling, the types of identities men noodlers collaborate in constructing through noodling, the noodling version of masculinity and the role of social class in the culture of noodling are described.

Theory and Methods

"Grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss 1967), based on building theoretical understandings inductively from the data gathered in the field, was employed. The social constructionist variant of grounded theory advocated by Charmaz (2005, 2006) informs the analysis. This approach emphasizes flexible guidelines in data analysis, the role of the researcher in constructing knowledge and the central importance of understanding networks, situations and relationships as they help to reveal hierarchies of power. Emphasis is also placed on norms, beliefs, values, emotions and worldviews.

Qualitative methods were used in this research. In-depth interviews with 18 men ranging in age from 18 to 90 were conducted between 2005 and 2008 and combined with participant observation of over 100 noodlers fishing together, interacting at fish fries, and at the July 2007 Okie Noodling Tournament (held annually since 2000 in Pauls Valley, OK). Noodlers from all over the United States attended the Okie Noodling Tournament.

I used snowball sampling with multiple points of entry. In 2005, I attended the opening day of the Missouri trial legal season. While walking the river knee-to-waist deep, I met two key informants. One was actively involved in efforts to legalize noodling in Missouri and knew noodlers across the state. He provided me with contacts for interviewees. That same day I met another man who was noodling while we were walking in the river between fishing holes. He also eventually became active in efforts to legalize noodling. He introduced me to noodlers including several family members. A faculty member and two students at the university where I work who heard of my research put me in touch with noodlers they knew. A friend who knew a family of noodlers helped me gain entry into their network. I could have interviewed more men but after the tenth interview, I began to note repetitive themes in the data and by the 18th interview was confident that the sampling and data were adequate for the analysis at hand.

Each person interviewed signed a written consent form and completed a data sheet providing basic demographic data including age, occupation(s), income, educational level, marital status, and place of residence. Twenty-two questions were included on the interview schedule. Most were questions aimed at learning how the noodlers themselves made meaning of the practice. Many noodlers are story tellers and sometimes responses to questions took the interviews in unanticipated directions that were very informative. I made sure I had ample time for each interview so that the men could take as much time as they wanted to expand on themes important to them. Interviews were generally between one and three hours long. Analysis began after the first interview and continued throughout and beyond the interviewing, transcribing and coding processes.

Transcriptions were read multiple times and open-coded into categories. Axial coding of open-coding categories determined to be central for this analysis was used to examine causes, strategies, contextual factors influencing the strategies and consequences of the strategies in the masculine moral identity work of noodlers. As I did observation and analysis, I realized there were key sociological works that helped in understanding and clarifying some of the observations and I began to draw upon them in analysis. Memoing, involving making connections between categories and linkages to literature that helped clarify the phenomenon under study, was also part of the process. Selective coding linking the central phenomenon of masculine moral identity work and the cultural tools (categories) used by noodlers in their subcultural identity work revealed a story of the interrelationship of the categories in constructing masculine moral identities within the specific local and broad societal contexts that shape them. The themes that emerged as the core of the generalized culture were mentioned by virtually all of the men interviewed.

Noodling as a Symbol for a Way of Life

Recent media diffusion of knowledge about noodling through documentaries (Beasley 2001, 2008), numerous newspaper articles, television coverage and YouTube clips have given those who noodle as part of a long-standing rural tradition a view of themselves through the lens of the dominant culture that both idealizes and denigrates them. They are pictured as men who are tough, fearless, skilled at using their bare hands as predators to catch huge catfish, close to nature, respected by other men in their group and looked up to by their wives, daughters and girlfriends. At the same time, they are often depicted as lower class, unsophisticated, uneducated and even crazy by mainstream media. The reasons those who noodle gave for their commitment to the activity reveal the deep gen-

dered, class and rural place-based cultural meanings of the practice that have contributed to it being passed from generation to generation.

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. This way of defining their group identity as a type of men consistently includes claiming toughness, interdependence, and strong bonds of trust and respect among the men; the importance of understanding, belonging, and conforming to the norms of the pecking order; a sense of camaraderie and unity; and, communitarianism, anti-consumerist frugality, and a special elemental relationship with nature. Noodlers maintain that this combination of qualities makes them a "special breed" of men. Each of these elements is described below.

"Born and Bred" to Noodle

Noodlers quickly establish that they and other men who noodle are a unique breed of men, signalling the subcultural identity work they are engaged in and the importance of the boundaries noodling groups maintain in the moral identities they are constructing. Bruce, wearing jeans and no shirt, sits on a concrete block, beer in hand. Bruce is 28 years old and works in construction. He has a couple of friends helping him repair his home in the aftermath of a kitchen fire. They are taking a break, sitting on a porch that looks out over a gentle valley with rolling hills in the distance, green as far as the eye can see in the summer sun. When asked how important noodling is to him he responds:

> Oh, I love it. I mean, it's somethin' I won't quit, you know, no matter, somethin' that I was born and raised to do, and like I say, it just, I won't quit, I'll teach my kids and hopefully they'll teach theirs and just on down the road. [That] way it's never, never lost, like I say, I feel fortunate that I had somebody to teach me 'cause I enjoy it. I mean, have you ever done it? Most people haven't. I just feel fortunate that I've been able to do it. Some people get to go on cruises, and I probably could. I could afford it. I don't want to. I'd rather stick around here and enjoy my family ... I mean it's kind of a dying sport, not everybody does it and knows how to do it. [I'm] just fortunate to know ... You work outside all day, it's hot. Get off, get to go swimming. I don't care to swim, but it gives a little purpose to it and you get to eat a little fish ... it's just companionship and ... it don't cost nothin' to go do it. It's free. It's just a good time, it's something that they all look forward to. It's just something we was born and bred to do.

Note how Bruce shifts from the use of "I" to "we" during his discussion of how important noodling is for him, claiming that it is something "we was born and bred to do." For Bruce, like many of the men, noodling is viewed as a central and distinctive part of his family's way of life that he wants to pass on to his children and to see passed on to their children. Many of the men brought up the idea that they are unique in comparison to the average man because they noodle and most people do not. Bruce engages in group identity work that constructs those who carry the knowledge of how to noodle and pass it on as among a fortunate few who are "born and bred" or "born and raised to noodle." Bruce contrasts noodlers with "most people" who might like going on cruises. He makes clear that he prefers noodling to cruises, reinforcing the assertion that those who noodle are different from those in the dominant culture by upbringing and by choice.

In describing why he likes noodling, Bruce expresses a value for purposeful leisure activity that links cooling off in the water after a day of physical labour outside, social companionship, frugality and getting some fish to eat together. Bruce's comment that he does not like swimming is consistent with the noodlers' value for leisure activity with a purposeful goal beyond just relaxing.

Toughness, Interdependence and Kinship Ties

When asked about the catfish tattoo on his arm, Bruce describes the experience that led him to get it. As he does so, he touches on several key themes used in defining values among noodlers, acknowledging indirectly some of the rules (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996:123) linked to signifying the moral identity of noodlers. He establishes his toughness, courage, skill and knowledge gained from experience as a noodler. He makes clear that he recognizes his interdependence with others in the group and values teamwork. He reinforces the norm of noodling with a group of trusted "kin" rather than alone and he establishes that he is devoted to his kinship group and takes his roles as brother, cousin, husband and father seriously:

> I drowned in 2000. My little brother gave me CPR and mouth-to-mouth and brought me back. Six months later I got the fish on my arm that I'll never catch, never know if I did catch ... Me and my brother and my cousins [were] workin' on a house, somewhat by the river. [We knew] of a good fish hole and we went and anyway there's fish in it. And the fish hole was probably twelve foot back. And I went in, and my cousin Ronny and my brother [were] there and a couple other co-workers that worked for me at the time. I went in. The fish came out and bit me on the hands and I missed

him. [pause] There's a air pocket in there ... I breathed the air in that air pocket and told 'em, they could hear me, I said, "I'm alright." So they went out. And anyway, I knew the air wasn't right. I took a deep breath and it knocked me out. It was carbon monoxide. I laid back in there and the fish bit me two or three times while I was layin' in the hole. And they got nervous about me so my cousin come in and he done the same thing, he felt my head [and said] "oh, what the hell's he doin'?" My cousin Ronny felt my head down in the mud. And my cousin come in and got the same air and fortunately he floated out of the hole, and was face down and my brother seen him ... And my brother brought him to the bank and resuscitated him and then come in ... So anyway, my brother said I was probably under three to four minutes before he got me out and back to the bank and brought me back. I have no recollection of it, but anyway went to the hospital and had pneumonia and carbon monoxide poisoning. I was in for three or four days. And Ronny, he was in for a couple, which was a eye opener ... If my little brother wouldn't have been there we wouldn't be here. So it's kind of a common rule you go with three guys ... I know the date because my oldest daughter was three days old [pause] and my wife won't let me forget about it. It's [the tattoo] a sign of the fish I will never catch or know if I did catch him. And just to remind me, you know, I got kids, when I go [noodling] just a little reminder of what can happen ... They're more important than anything.

Most often hand fishing is done in a group with assistants blocking the hole to keep the catfish from escaping, monitoring the noodlers' situation to make sure they do not get trapped or injured while under water, and assisting in dragging the fish from the water once the catch is made. Most noodlers maintain that to noodle safely it must be done with others, not alone. This reinforces the idea that group belonging and support is necessary to the activity and in life. Note that Bruce does not claim mastery over nature in his account. Instead he acknowledges his lack of complete knowledge, and the agency of the fish.

Trust and Respect

Bruce, like most noodlers, describes having a relationship of trust and respect with the men with whom he noodles. His discussion shows the focus on interdependence with other men to succeed in the catch and with nature to provide the fish. These themes play a role in defining noodling masculine moral identity and enacting them through noodling affirms that identity:

> When I go in and catch a fish, I'll get the fish, and then I'll wrap my legs around his tail. Now what am I gonna do? There ain't anything I can do, I've got the fish and I'm floatin' underwater downstream. Now would you rather have somebody there that don't know what's goin' on ... or would you rather have my little brother, my cousin, or [Gil] somebody that's been with me a hundred times, knew exactly what I was doin', had their foot on my back the whole time, knowin' and, can tell when they put their foot on my back when my muscles tighten up in my back there, I've got a fish. I mean they know, it's experience, it's camaraderie, they know, they know when I come up they've got to get me and the fish to the bank. Now, I wouldn't go with just everybody. That's just, like I say, it's trust. I'm trustin' my life with their hands.

Most noodlers discussed trusting the people they noodled with in terms of safety and judgment in a potentially dangerous situation. Noodling encourages the men to develop sensitive systems of nonverbal physical, as well as verbal, communication with each other. The use of these communication techniques reinforces the sense of connection and trust between noodlers as it enables them to successfully catch large catfish. Trust that the people you noodle with will not share the information with others, who cannot be trusted not to talk about it, is also important to noodlers because of the illegality of the practice.

Mutual respect is another norm that noodlers associate with the practice. In describing the type of relationship he shares with his cousin Ronny, who is his peer in the "clan," Bruce touches on the type of mutual respect that noodlers often discuss as important for them:

> Ok, Ronny's my cousin, me and him been thousands of places and we've caught a lot of fish. And I'll tell him, I'll say, "Don't let this guy in, I don't trust him. I don't want him (around)." And that's it ... He'll go along with that ... And he's the same way with me, it's like, you know "I really don't want him around." And it's like well I'd rather you go than bring this guy, so that's just the way it is, I mean usually everybody pretty well trusts everybody else's decision and say, "Ok, you know, if he don't want him around we don't wanna cause no (problem), we'd rather have him go, that's already in, than take this guy."

The Pecking Order: "Everybody's Got Their Number"

Respect for elders who are skilled noodlers and teach others is mentioned frequently. A pecking order is clearly understood to exist and plays a significant role in affirming or validating identity claims and in policing (Schwalbe

and Mason-Schrock 1996:123) the behaviours that signify the noodling moral identity. Bruce describes his place in the pecking order of noodling:

> [Everybody] knows me because of it [noodling] ... I mean everybody's got their number, [Gil] being number one in ours. I mean you know, everybody's got their number. Oh there's some old timers that used to go with [Gil] a lot, they're still good fisherman and I ain't passed them, probably won't ever. So, you know, you gotta die to lose your number.

Ongoing, negotiated bonds of respect combined with a clear sense of location in the pecking order creates a sense of solidarity and mutual understanding among group members (Whyte 1955). This does not mean that there are no tensions, but that the rules of redefining one's location in the pecking order are linked to patriarchal relations understood and enforced within the collective kinship or community group. Men gain entry to the group only if they are judged to understand and respect the pecking order and are trustworthy. Being brought into the group is not automatic and signals status to insiders and local outsiders familiar with the group norms of noodling.

Gil, who is 62 years old, describes the pecking order and his changing location in it more directly, touching on the importance of respecting skilled elders. He uses the example of the importance of teaching the younger men the norm of not going to a "fish hole" that someone showed you without them being along or being told. Only trusted people are shown where a good fishing hole is. Gil quoted Jessie, a noodling friend, to make this point. "This is really Jessie's quote but I've used it many times. 'I go fishing in the water right beside my favourite mushroom patch.'" Gil is referring to the location where the much coveted morel mushrooms hunted in the spring are known to grow. These locations are kept secret by those who have discovered a good patch:

> Used to be when we'd go to the river for [pause] 40 years, I was always the lead. Me and my brother was always in the lead. Now then, I gotta admit, I'm getting a little older. A lot of young men that I still go [with], if they don't stop and pick me up, or if they catch a fish and they don't come tell me the fish story, they know they are gonna have to answer to somebody [laughter] if I don't get to hear about that catch. And then, there's kind of a progression there. We had some young men that went [and] fished our fish holes while we was busy farming, and [Jessie] went and had a visit with them about the pecking order. You don't go check somebody else's hole unless you tell 'em you're goin'. It's just an unwritten law that you don't do things like that.

Friendship and kinship ties were reported to have been broken because of a breach of the norm described by Gil. As with many tightly knit groups with fairly strong boundaries, there are constraints placed on individuals to conform to the norms of the group. Longterm illegality reinforces these tightly bounded social networks. Gil continues:

> I was talking about the pecking order. We try and make sure that everybody gets a chance at at least one fish in the year. If we know where a hole is or if we're going down the river, somebody that hasn't got a fish, whoever finds a fish has got the option of, he can either try and catch it, or pass it on to somebody else. And then different holes are made different ways, some holes are made for a big ol' boy like me because I can block the hole and I can stand the cold a lot better, than some skinny guy, he can't stay in the water so long because his metabolism is different, but yet whenever you find a hole that's little and skinny, he's the perfect person to send into that particular hole.

In Gil's group, the rule is that the person who finds the fish has the first right of catch but can pass it on to somebody else. Gil notes their group tries to let everyone in the group catch at least one fish a year.

A Special Camaraderie

The bonds established through noodling are highly valued. Being taught to noodle by elders like Gil is prized by young men in the community. Learning to noodle is a "coming of age" (Mead 2001) experience for the men, giving tangible evidence of their courage, skill and place in the heterosexual male "pecking order." Each time the men noodle, have a fish fry, talk about their noodling exploits with each other, remain silent and secretive with outsiders about the practice, roll down their sleeves to cover river rash in public, hang a fish head on a fencepost for passersby to see, take fish to an older couple in the community, or think of spring and the first noodling expedition, they affirm their masculine subcultural moral identity. Gil, who taught Bruce, along with a number of others, to noodle, describes the unique sense of camaraderie that he believes characterizes noodlers:

> The main thing is there is a camaraderie there and there is a trust, a bond amongst the fishermen ... No matter where you come from, when you get together they have been through that experience, they've been through fish bitin' 'em, that thrill when you talk about what's happening, they can relate to you and the person that hasn't been there, it's hard for them to do that.

Gil's description highlights the sense of collective identity constructed and shared by noodlers.

Relating to the Natural Environment: "You Ain't Fishin' 'Til You're Bleedin'!"

All of the men interviewed emphasized the significance and satisfaction of going into the element of the fish without protective gear, engaging physically with the fish and taking the punishment the struggle entails. Most also described having respect for the fish and a love of nature, particularly the water. Noodlers eat a large proportion of their catch (Morgan 2006) and many said that they never take more than they need. Little Leap, a man of 60, who wears jeans, tennis shoes and a t-shirt, leans back in his chair and reflects before he speaks. He too sports a catfish tattoo on his arm.

> Well, I guess it's the thrill of the unknown [pause] because you're in the water, and you're feeling along a dirt bank or a root wad or [pause] whatever, tractor tire, old water heater and you're feeling mud all the way every time you're workin' the bank you're just feeling mud and then all of the sudden you feel sand and you know it's a fish hole. But you don't know what's in there. What kind of fish. You don't know how big a fish. You don't know how many fish and you don't know whether you're gonna be able to catch him or not and you don't know how bad you're gonna get hurt when you do catch him. But you know you are gonna get hurt, because you can't catch one without getting hurt but I guess that's the thrill of it is the unknown, because once you touch that pile of sand your heart starts pumpin' ... Oh, it's a rush, it's a big rush. As soon as I find a hole my breathing doubles, my heart starts pounding [pause] knowing that you're about to interact with a big catfish. Probably the biggest part of it is the challenge that you're facing as soon as you feel that pile of sand. Well I have the utmost respect for flatheads. We've put the fish back in the hole hundreds of times. Once in a while we're gonna have a fish fry next Saturday and we need fish. But most hand fishermen don't just stockpile fish.

The underlying theme is one of recognition of the reliance of human beings on the natural environment for their survival and the need to take only what one needs. Little Leap's rich description of his feelings about enjoying noodling gives insight into a profound sense of connection with the natural environment through noodling. Some even maintain, as does Little Leap, that "you ain't fishin' 'til you're bleedin'!" The willingness to bleed and the act of bleeding affirm the masculine moral identities of the men in the group. They emphasize the centrality of the willingness to endure physical challenge to accomplish a goal but they also emphasize interdependence and an elemental relationship with nature more than they do mastery or control.

Communitarianism, Sharing and Reciprocity

Darrell, who is 83 years old and came of age during the Great Depression, describes his early hand fishing days, revealing the delight he takes in being out in nature, the importance he places on sharing part of his catch as a contribution to the community, and his early upbringing regarding not taking more fish than one can use. On his first noodling expedition with Roy, the man who taught Darrell to noodle, he recalls being cautioned about not taking more fish than was needed. Darrell was catching a fish and there was another in the same hole.

> Oh man I was grittin' my teeth. I had a hold of the roots and then, imagine that about nine or ten years old you know, and I was all excited. And I said "[Roy], what about the other one? What about the other one?" "No," he said, "[Darrell]," he said, "Leave 'em alone, leave 'em alone," he said, "We ain't got no 'frigeration," and said, "that's enough for your daddy and your momma and you and me and my family," and said, "we'll come back next Saturday and get him," and we did that, we did that. That was the beginning of my fishing.

The themes of taking only what you need so that there are fish for the future, sustainability and local self-sufficiency are intertwined in the accounts of noodlers. Darrell, who became recognized in his community as an expert noodler, recalled being relied upon by the community to provide fish for fish fries and also remembered giving extra fish to the older people in the community who needed them:

> That was a time when it was almost a phase of sustainability. People look to me to get the fish for a neighbourhood fish fry, they looked to me. On top of that, I always took any extra fish to the older people in the community ... They needed 'em, they needed.

The themes of sharing with others in the community and group ties based on reciprocity are central among noodlers. Darrell goes on to describe how his sharing of fish, fowl, rabbits and squirrels with people in his community during the depression resulted in his being "paid off" later in life:

> As I look back now, it paid off, way late in life it paid off. One day a young fellow came ... and stepped up here

> and talked [at] length, and finally said, "I wanna sell you a welder." I said, "My god boy, I can't buy a welder, 'cause I got a family and everything, I can't buy one." He said, "You can buy this one because you ain't gonna have to pay for it." I said, "[Jared], I don't know what you're talkin' about." He said, "Do you remember when you used to bring us fish? And then rabbits and then squirrels and stuff like that way back?" "Well yes, I do [Jared] but." He said, "You don't know what that meant." ... And he said, "it just was, it was like a banquet. That kind of stuff that you brought to us." And said, "I'm gonna try to pay you." ... Well, [at the time] I didn't think too much [about it], but I look back now, they were a poor family, boy I remember it yet. I didn't realize it meant that much to them.

Darrell reinforces the centrality of the norm of reciprocity in which the sharing of fish is common and longterm reciprocal sharing of things that are useful is practiced. While obtaining the fish to eat may not be as central as it once was, it is still a part of the activity and symbolizes the ability of the men to provide for others through noodling in local waters.

Anti-consumerist Frugality: "The River Is Our Mall"

Bruce, like several of the noodlers interviewed, contrasts himself and other noodlers to the "suit and tie" white collar men and people who go to the "mall" for entertainment, pointing to the frugality and simple pleasures enjoyed by noodlers in comparison to the consumerist values of the dominant culture. He also alludes to the stigma he believes "suit and tie" men place on noodlers. "Yeah, them guys in suits and ties tell us it [noodling] ain't sporting, they just ain't done it. 'Cause it'd be sporting if I stuck their asses in there. That'd be one good sport" (laughter from everyone). One of his friends comments: "Good reality show." And Bruce responds "Wouldn't [that] make a sport out of it?" Of the mall Bruce notes:

> Out here it's like what do you do? Let's got to the mall? [laughter] I mean, there ain't no mall. You know, let's go to the movie theater, it just, uh ain't. I wouldn't go anyway, I'd go hand fishin'. [laughter from everyone] I'd go buy some new boxer shorts and go hand fishin'. [everyone is still laughing] My attire might be a little better when I go.

The noodling identity is often constructed in contrast to white collar "guys in suits and ties" and "doctors and lawyers" who prefer "golfing" and "keeping their hands clean." A contrast is being made by noodlers between the noodling version of masculinity and the noodling "gender regime" and the "gender regimes" of corporate employees, and the medical and legal professions associated with the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant culture (Connell 1995:77). The mention of new boxer shorts has mildly ribald connotations since some noodlers are known to noodle in the buff at times. On a more serious note, his comments make clear that any shopping he might do would be aimed at supporting the noodling lifestyle, not in conforming to consumerist values. Working-class buying power and the frugality often necessitated by it is constructed as a choice based in the moral identity of noodlers who enjoy the rural lifestyle and closeness to nature rather than city life, fancy clothes and the mall. Male noodlers identify with frugality and anti-consumerist ways of living, and contrast themselves to city folk who love to go to the mall and buy things, do not enjoy the simple pleasures of life, and cannot survive on the land. One man even said "The river is our mall." These men are constructing masculine subcultural moral identities as providers from the natural environment in a way that is distinct from the breadwinner role associated with the capitalist labour market. They make clear that they value meeting needs locally and outside of the formal economy when possible.

Bruce sums up why he noodles by saying:

> [We've had] hundreds of great noodling experiences and some of 'em I've never come home with a fish. Oh yeah, I'd like to catch the hundred pounder but hundreds of times, [we've] fished, had a good time, and come home not caught nothing. You know, you catch a fish and that's just a bonus ... Basically the easiest way to put it for me, it's a way to get through life, it's somethin' to look forward too. I mean you know, come spring it's like, alright, we, we know hand fishin's comin' up, let's get some work done, you know, get caught up so we'll be able to go.

Bruce's friend George interjects, "to me it's a challenge." Bruce affirms his comment:

> yeah, [anybody] can go out and catch one with a rod and reel, anybody can, you know, but who is gonna go do it the other way? I mean it takes a special breed you know. It, it's a lot harder. Yeah, it is.

Bruce and his friends make clear that noodling is linked to a way of life that is one chosen by a "special breed" of men, it is a "way to get through life," something to look forward to and enjoy, but it is not the easy path or the path chosen by most men.

Conclusion

This analysis gives insight into the ways the men in noodling groups establish a sense of masculine dignity and worth as a group and how this process reproduces, to some extent, a distinctive noodling version of masculinity and a local gender regime (Connell 1987, 1995; Connell 2000). Noodling persists because it is a cultural practice that is used in constructing a subcultural masculine rural working-class moral identity that supports the men in maintaining group solidarity and a sense of worth. The subculture they are part of and are constructing through noodling participates in the dominant culture in that there is an understanding that noodling is illegal, but the noodling subculture groups reject the negative definition of noodling as poaching and construct it as a worthy activity. It is linked to a historic version of a communitarian rural gender regime in which worthy men are providers from nature rather than from the capitalist market. The breadwinner role, linked to the capitalist labour and consumer market, has not supplanted the provider role, linked to the local natural resources and community-based provision of necessities, as the ideal of noodling masculinity.

Noodlers see themselves as "a special breed" of men who are carrying and passing on a unique rural way of life that is based in close community ties of reciprocity, trust, respect, an understood patriarchal pecking order, and a relationship of interdependence and struggle with nature. The way of life they want to pass to the next generation is, at heart, embedded in private sphere patriarchal kinship relations. Noodlers do not embrace the dominant culture that privileges high occupational status, educational attainment or a consumerist suburban or urban cosmopolitan lifestyle as gauges of worthy masculinity. Frequently the men say that their paid work is just a way to make money for the noodling lifestyle they enjoy.

Noodling moral identity and the noodling gender regime are linked to a form of masculine moral identity that was historically hegemonic but that has been supplanted by the contemporary version of hegemonic masculinity. Noodlers do embrace some features consistent with hegemonic masculinity, for instance, a taken-for-granted heterosexual norm and essentialist view of gender, and so in some ways are complicit with the hegemonic pattern (Connell 1995:79). Noodling masculinity is also constructed in relation to women who are excluded from many groups and, in those where they are included, are located outside the noodling pecking order and status system of the men noodlers except through their connection as kin or friend-kin to one of the men in the group.

The practice of noodling itself, the relatively tight boundaries for belonging, and the cultural norms of the group are centred within the local kin and friendship network similar to the local rural hunter poacher subculture described by Brymer (1991). The centrality of family ties, land and community found by Halperin (1990) among the Appalachian kinship networks she studied, emerged as similarly central during interviews with rural Missouri noodlers, in particular the high value placed on homeplace ties, loyalty and generosity to kin, group self-sufficiency and self-reliance.

The relationship of noodling masculinity with dominant culture hegemonic masculinity is consistent with what Connell (1995) describes as the relationship between masculinities in dominant and subordinate classes and the marginalization experienced by the subordinate group(s). Noodlers are aware of their marginalization and use the strategy of tight cultural boundaries at the local level in an effort to protect the local pecking order status system from the incursion of the dominant culture hegemonic form of masculinity. At the same time, some noodlers lobbying for legalization are, in one way, not just seeking to legalize the practice but are contesting the marginalization of the noodling version of masculine moral identity and the noodling way of life.

The tight boundaries of noodling groups in which young men join only if senior men in the pecking order invite them to do so creates an ingroup in which socialization into a way of life takes place. The illegality of noodling in Missouri promotes group solidarity and shared identity which might be weakened if noodling were legalized (Douglas 1970; Goffman 1963). Noodling is defined as a worthy masculine activity for those in the subculture and is not defined by the group as poaching. The repetitive discursive themes that construct noodlers as tough, skilled men who are following a distinct, communitarian rural way of life are constructed in contrast to the lifestyle of the white-collar "suit and tie" men. The "suit and tie" men are symbols of hegemonic masculinity, they are not physically tough or courageous enough to noodle, are not rural-identified or closely connected to the local environment, are not communitarian, and are instead consumerists who rely on the market for their survival.

Noodlers invited to describe why they persist in noodling despite its illegality did not generally focus on rationalization or neutralization of it as a poaching activity. None indicated it was an accident. A few mentioned that it had been done out of necessity historically, particularly during the Great Depression but most indicated that although the fish was used for fish fries and shared with elderly in the community who no longer fished, it

was not a practice motivated by need since they could use legal means during the same season to catch fish. None approached noodling as something that needed to be rationalized, justified or distanced. Far from claiming that their other good qualities made up for noodling, they defined themselves as worthy through their participation in the practice. One noodler interviewed did engage in what might be considered a version of the "condemnation of the condemners" in which, when pressed regarding the issue of noodling being defined as poaching in Missouri, he shifted the focus to the unfair behaviours of an informant, a conservation agent and a judge in a case where he was caught noodling and fined. Noodlers advocating legalization, however, when pressed on the issue of noodling being illegal, deflected the label of poacher by arguing that the law was no longer reasonable and should be changed. This seemed less a technique of neutralization than a form of collective resistance to change the laws that define noodling as deviant and to redefine it as legal and as a valuable cultural tradition and skill.

Noodlers mentioned being motivated by many things such as having a fish fry, recreational enjoyment and the thrill of the catch. A few indicated they enjoy outwitting conservation agents and integrating gamesmanship as a form of rebellion against authority. But in their accounts, no single motivation prevailed. All motivations discussed were subordinated to and integrated into a construction of noodling as a practice that is part of a "way of life" and that helps to maintain and reproduce it.

Gamesmanship in catching the fish was also described as an important aspect because it linked with deeply held values and norms of the subculture. The deeper motivation was that it helped to socialize the young to subculture values and to reinforce them for group members as outlined above. Commercial gain and protection of self and property were not mentioned as motivations. One man pointed out a trophy mount on the wall and several mentioned an interest in getting larger and larger fish. Traditional rights of use, in the sense of historic precedence in the local region, were sometimes mentioned. Preserving and passing on the folk tradition were key and these other motivations were integrated into discussion of how they supported these goals. Overall, the motivations identified in Muth and Bowe (1998) in their compilation cannot be isolated as primary motivations for noodlers. Some are mentioned but they are part of an integrated deeper cultural meaning that noodling holds for these men. The men are ultimately motivated to noodle because it represents and helps them reproduce a way of life that they value. In addition, the typologies do not specifically address issues of gender identity or social class which are important underlying factors in the persistence of this subculture.

To understand the persistence of illegal noodling in Missouri, it is not only important to understand the historical context of noodling in the state, it is also necessary to consider the deeper cultural meanings and integration of a constellation of motivations that are used by the men in identity work to define themselves collectively as worthy rural men. Noodling is considered a worthy activity rather than one the men want to distance themselves from. This is largely because of the role noodling serves in their subculture. This also may, in part, stem from the fact that noodling, unlike some other poaching activities that have been studied, is not illegal consistently across states or regions and media coverage has made Missouri noodlers aware of this. Media and members of the public have demonstrated interest in noodling and Missouri noodlers have garnered media attention in their efforts to lobby for legalization.

Noodlers construct identities that are based on carrying forward a way of life that values frugality, taking what is needed from nature but not exploiting it, integration of recreation, entertainment, and practical aims that are tied to place, family and community. They do not describe not being able to afford the dominant culture lifestyle, but say that they do not like going to the mall, do not want to spend a lot of time away from home and prefer going noodling to just about any other activity that they can think of. Bryant and Pini (2009) point out that many working class people avoid claiming a class identity that they may see as undervalued. Still, they do describe identities inscribed with class and class tension in interacting with the dominant culture. The moral identity work of noodlers is linked to their efforts to defend their dignity and gain respect (Lamont 2000) as working class rural people whose identities are marginalized by the dominant culture. The noodling way of life defines the self as a part of a web of relationships that entail interdependence, responsibility, belonging and privilege within the hierarchal patriarchal "pecking order" and the natural environment. The two are experienced as intertwined as a foundational pattern for understanding the natural order of the world. Thus, the experience of noodling for these men reinforces a sense of power, worth and their central place in the web of life.

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Notes

1 The terms used to describe noodling vary from region to region. The list below includes the terms, thus far identified, by state:
Alabama: grappling (Salazar 2002)
Arkansas: hogging (Bilger 2000)
Georgia: cooning (Salazar 2002)
Illinois: hogging, logging (Salazar 2002)
Kansas: noodling (Salazar 2002)
Kentucky: dogging (Bilger 2000), handgrabbing, rock fishing, tickling (Salazar 2002)
Mississippi: grabbling (Bilger 2000; Salazar 2002), handgrabbing (Salazar 2002)
Missouri: hand fishing, noodling (Morgan 2006), rock fishing (Grigsby 2007)
Nebraska: stumping (Salazar 2002)
North Carolina: grabbling (Salazar 2002)
Ohio: noodling (Salazar 2002)
Oklahoma: noodling (Bilger 2000; Salazar 2002)
South Carolina: grabbing, noodling, snatching, yanking (Salazar 2002)
Tennessee: snatching (Salazar 2002)
Texas: noodling (Bilger 2000; Salazar 2002)
Virginia: noodling (Salazar 2002).

2 An e-mail and telephone survey of conservation departments in the United States found that noodling is legal in the following 17 states: Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee and Virginia. In two other states, there is no law against hand-fishing for catfish but laws against entering the waters of the state make it illegal.

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