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# Exploring the Effect of Gender Roles on Female Drug Users in Appalachia

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Exploring the Effect of Gender Roles on Female Drug Users in Appalachia

by

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A Research Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Criminology

Regis University

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### **Abstract**

Drug abuse is an ever-growing problem in the United States and in other parts of the world. The Appalachian region is one of the areas hit hardest by this epidemic. Since 2000, the number of overdose deaths in Appalachia has steadily risen while state and city governments analyze the potential causes for such a widespread issue. Many economic and medical explanations have been suggested, but it is also imperative to examine the cultural belief systems that might play a role in the persistent drug use. This study looks at the influence traditional Appalachian gender roles have on female drug users. Limited research has been done on drug abuse for women in conjunction with gendered societal pressures. The data presented here indicates that many gender expectations are prevalent parts of the female experience in Appalachia. The regional belief systems seem to pressure women in their personal relationships, in the workplace, and in their roles as mothers. Additionally, female drugs users in Appalachia proved to be particularly affected by these gender expectations, and data indicates that many gendered pressures contribute to initial and prolonged drug use.

*Keywords: Appalachia, gender roles, female drug use*

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Drug abuse is an issue in many areas across the United States and around the world, but the Appalachian region seems to be especially affected by addiction. Existing research on drug abuse in Appalachia indicates that the rate of addiction and overdose is far above the national average (Moody et al., 2017, p. 2). Heroin, methamphetamines, and prescription and synthetic opioids are involved in much of the regionally reported drug use. Prescription pain medication and synthetic opioids like fentanyl have been especially damaging in rural Appalachia. High poverty rates, geographic isolation, and injury-prone employment are just some of the factors thought to contribute to the Appalachian burden of addiction (Elder & Robinson, 2018, p. 2). State and local agencies have attempted to address the problem, but they have had limited success reaching out to the various vulnerable populations in the area (Moody et al., 2017).

Research on illegal drug use in Appalachia has focused primarily on law enforcement and healthcare approaches with very few studies on the cultural factors that might affect individual drug users. Female drug users in the region are one group that has been hit particularly hard by addiction. Furthermore, they face unique social factors that contribute to their choices and opportunities (Buer et al., 2016). Though women make up a significant portion of the drug users in Appalachia, there is a limited amount of research on their experiences specifically. Female drug users in the area seem to be particularly vulnerable to traditional gender roles, as many of them indicate that they experience cultural pressures in relation to their drug abuse (Buer et al., 2016).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The Appalachian region of the United States is as an area impacted by unique cultural factors. Rural Appalachia has a “self-contained culture,” which has been influenced by crime, poverty, and inadequate education and healthcare (Moody et al., 2017, p. 125). The culture has historically been patriarchal in nature, specifically concerning the role of gender in the home and in the workplace. The isolation and cultural values of the area have perpetuated gender roles that can be potentially oppressive, especially to women. According to existing studies, the social pressure to fulfill the roles of wife, mother, or homemaker is something that affects many Appalachian women. Those women who choose to challenge the common gender roles or fail to meet them can experience cultural strain (Russ, 2010). While some research has indicated that Appalachian female drug users are especially vulnerable to the pressure of traditional gender roles, further study needs to be done to identify which roles affect this population and in what ways they are influenced.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this project is to identify the cultural pressures that stem from traditional Appalachian gender roles. More specifically, this research will attempt to reveal the gender issues that directly influence female drug users. Additionally, this study seeks to discover how the pressures from these gender expectations affect this population. Qualitative and quantitative methods will be used to examine this issue. Through the analysis of individual experiences and data on cultural factors, this research will seek to provide a better understanding of the lives of female drug users. Ultimately, this study, and others like it, can

shed light on female addiction experiences and contribute to a solution that specifically addresses this population.

### **Definitions**

The geographic mapping of this area follows the Appalachian Mountain range; this would be from southern New York to northern Mississippi. More specifically, this includes all of West Virginia and parts of Ohio, Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Alabama, North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, New York, Mississippi, and Georgia (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2019). This project will examine the populations residing in this region with a primary focus on the rural areas, as those are the hardest hit by the drug epidemic. The rural sections of Appalachia typically have higher rates of substance abuse than more urban areas (Victor et al., 2018, p. 1). Additionally, drug abuse will be defined generally as the misuse of prescription medications and/or the use of illegal drugs. Both instances are prominent in rural Appalachia, though prescription and intravenous drug abuse are most commonly seen.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

This literature review was completed through the use of the Regis University and the West Virginia University Institute of Technology library databases, with the addition of other online materials. The resources analyzed in this review focus on the history of traditional gender roles in rural Appalachia and the severity of the drug problem for women in the region. While research on the Appalachian drug epidemic has been increasing in recent years, there has been limited study on the experience of female drug users or the role of cultural traditions in addiction. The literature discussed in this review examines the historically patriarchal culture in Appalachia and attempts to define how illegal drug use has affected women in rural areas. While

the majority of the articles reviewed here are specifically about Appalachia, there are a few studies concerning gender and drug use that examine other populations. These have been included because the groups and results are comparable to those in Appalachia. Some of the sources used here discuss the evolution of the most prominent gender roles and identify the ones that are still common today. Attention will also be given to studies that record female addiction experiences and the pressures specific to living in the Appalachian region. The trends in gender role research and female drug use will be discussed separately in this review, as there are very few articles that specifically look at this connection.

### **Cultural Structure**

It is first important to discuss the existing opinions on the role that gender has played in rural Appalachia. Some of the early literature on the social roles of women point out the traditional expectations in the home. The culture of the region has historically been patriarchal in nature with specific jobs, home tasks, and expectations related to gender. Men were traditionally considered the “breadwinners”; women were usually in motherhood/caregiving roles and, in many cases, did not work outside the home. This dynamic typically placed men in the dominant social role (Russ, 2010). Though according to some scholars, Appalachian women have played an interesting cultural role because they have represented some conflicting values in the region. For example, Robertson (1979) indicates that women were often responsible for a great deal of work and decision-making when the area was predominantly engaged in agricultural operations, but many of these same women would suggest that only men should be in positions of power and should be the head of the household. Robertson (1979) suggested that the mentions of gender roles in religion have influenced these opinions a great deal. Her interview provided examples of

how women could feel confident in their assigned social role, but still be apprehensive to move beyond that due to social and religious factors (Robertson, 1979).

Other prominent studies have been concerned with the expectations of the individual in addition to those imposed by society. Fiene (1988) noted that Appalachian women value the idea of the nuclear family, though one prominent family structure in the region includes extended family members living in the home as well. Interestingly, Fiene (1988) asserted that the valuing of this ideal nuclear family image is something that begins in childhood and is carried with them into adulthood (p. 130). Women can sometimes feel strain when they do not meet these expectations, but in contrast to other studies, Fiene (1988) does not feel that this is due to inward feelings of inadequacy. Instead, she stated that “they [the women] attribute their inability to achieve this ideal to the failure of the men in their lives either to find the means to economically support a family, or to avoid anti-social behaviors, specifically alcoholism and violent behavior” (Fiene, 1988, p. 130). Domestic violence and substance abuse are also common themes in the research on Appalachian gender roles. Russ (2010) provided a more contemporary outlook on this strain in suggesting that the pressures of typical patriarchal culture in Appalachia can lead to resentment between partners and feelings of inadequacy when expectations are challenged or unmet (p. 3-4). Such feelings are often connected to domestic violence and drug use as well, which is often cited in studies on the region.

There seems to be a theme throughout much of the existing gender research that suggests women are negatively affected by unmet or unsatisfying social expectations regardless of whom they blame for the situation. In a 1989 study, Crissman found that the hard life experiences common to Appalachian women often led to disillusionment about the roles of wife, mother, and caretaker (p. 37). When compared to the men in Crissman’s study, women exhibited

less familism, which the author suggested is likely due to their strenuous roles in the culture. Buer et al. (2016) discussed the burden of caretaking and female responsibilities as well. They concluded that nearly all of the female drug addicts in their study admitted to feeling trapped in their social role, which typically included caretaking tasks. Substance abuse tended to be related to these feelings (Buer et al., 2016).

While much of the United States has had similar male-dominated gender expectations throughout history, many scholars have noted that Appalachia has held onto these cultural expectations a little more than most. In her article on counseling practices for Appalachian populations, Russ (2010) indicates that the culture is still predominantly patriarchal, which often includes the expectation that men are to support their families through work, and women are to be subservient wives and mothers (p. 2). These gender roles can be noted outside of Appalachia, but they are particularly recognizable in this region. Zahnow et al. (2018) noted, “While cross-cultural differences exist, most traditional gender roles endorse female passivity while encouraging male privilege and dominance” (82).

Though contemporary social roles have evolved to encompass broader definitions of femininity and masculinity, the original expectations are thought to still have an influence on behavior, especially in rural Appalachian areas. Zahnow et al. (2018) echoed Russ’s sentiments in stating, “Globally, gender-power structures consistently endorse dominance of the male gender” (p. 82). Russ (2010) also suggests that male “unemployment and under-employment” has caused more women to enter the workforce and move away from traditional concepts of womanhood, which is often a point of contention between genders (p. 3).

Overall, the timeline of gender research in Appalachia reveals that the region has historically been patriarchal and religious in nature, which has likely contributed to the

development of modern gender expectations. For some women, it seems that the traditional gender roles are still creating strain and potentially influencing goals and decisions.

### **Trends in Drug Abuse Research**

In terms of drug use, researchers have given limited attention to the women of Appalachia. Shannon et al. (2009) notes that drug abuse has historically been considered a male issue, particularly in the Appalachian region; however, research is beginning to indicate that addiction is becoming an increasing problem for females (p. 59). More recent studies appear to confirm this sentiment, as current researchers are interested in the causes, effects, and recovery of women specifically. Many of the studies discussed in this research seek to define female drug users as their own unique population within the Appalachian community; factors that contribute to initial drug use and individual treatment needs are often noted.

The primary research method used to analyze female drug abuse has been qualitative, with one-on-one interviews being a common means of data collection. This means of study only allows for certain kinds of relationships to be explored. While this provides the benefit of a firsthand experience, the results are individualized and are not necessarily applicable to all women living in the region. It is difficult to control for variables when using semi-structured interviews. There is also the issue of honest answers among the respondents; some researchers have expressed concern that the interviews represent a narrative they feel comfortable sharing rather than the drug experiences as they truly occurred.

Many of the studies that have focused on Appalachian female drug users, or those outside of this area, have indicated that women experience cultural strain differently than men. Furthermore, some studies have also noted that this cultural strain is often because of the men in

their lives, especially in relation to drug use. Zahnow et al. (2018) indicated that many women are introduced to drug use by an intimate male partner; this relationship is often underscored by the existing gender roles (p. 82). The women then come to rely on this person to supply drugs and to insure some level of safety within drug communities. Other studies have expressed similar opinions, with an emphasis on the intimate partner acting as the social pressure to use drugs (Buer et al., 2016).

Some of the most recent articles on female drug use in Appalachia have dealt with even smaller groups, such as incarcerated women. Rural women are reportedly increasing among jailed populations and are at risk for many health disparities (Staton et al., 2017). From a sample of rural jails in Central Appalachia, Staton et al. (2017) indicated that women often find themselves in vulnerable situations due to drug use with an intimate partner; this was found to be particularly common in the Appalachian region.

Much of the research that focuses on female drug abuse has been interested in how women become addicted. For example, Young et al. (2013) reported on the nature of female sexual experiences and drug abuse habits. Their study found that these areas tended to intertwine in the lives of rural female drug users more so than for male drug users, especially for the means of obtaining drugs (Young et al., 2013, p. 401). Such findings contribute to existing ideas that female drug users are often controlled, both physically and emotionally, by intimate partners who use their drug addiction against them.

The five articles selected for a further critique are representative of some of the most prominent and relevant ideas concerning Appalachian gender issues and female drug use. The studies are primarily qualitative, with fewer quantitative examples being undertaken for a closer reading. This is reflective of the prevalence of qualitative studies in this field of research. These

articles will be used to show the existence of traditional gender roles in Appalachia and the nature of female drug abuse in the area. In some of the studies both themes are discussed. The first article by Rezek (2009) provided insight on rural Appalachian gender roles through studying young mothers and their support systems. Zahnnow et al. (2018) published the most closely related study to the current research because it reported on the gendered economies of intravenous drug use. The studies from Buer et al. (2016) and Lee and Boeri (2017) both used an interview approach to record the experiences of female drug users; the questioning specifically asked them about their social roles and peer groups. Lastly, Staton et al. (2017) provides a quantitative perspective on the intersection between the home life, incarceration history, mental health, and future drug use. These articles were specifically chosen for their research methods and the relevance of their findings. Some of the information overlaps between studies; these instances are mentioned when relevant.

### **Critique of Selected Articles**

#### **Rezek (2010)**

In a 2010 study, Rezek analyzed a similarly vulnerable population in rural Appalachia— young, unmarried pregnant women. Her research focuses on the gender roles present in female support systems. Though the study does not directly examine drug users, it does address cultural strains that could affect similar populations. This study provides some information about the gender expectations that might influence certain populations in the region. Furthermore, many Appalachian female drug users are, or have been, young mothers (Jumah, 2016). It is important to the current research to understand the prevalent Appalachian gender roles, especially those that can cause strain to at-risk or vulnerable groups.

This study only recruited participants from West Virginia who had had a child before the age of eighteen and were not living on their own or with a spouse (Rezek, 2010, p. 133). These parameters were chosen to produce participants who relied on people in their family for social or economic support. Though the eight participants were only recruited from one Appalachian state (West Virginia), the results are generalizable to many rural counties in the region. Ultimately, this research indicated that the young women felt especially fearful when announcing the pregnancy, especially to their fathers, due to regional feelings toward purity and the female role. This finding reveals that gender strains are not always based on romantic relationships; strain from cultural expectations can be perpetuated by family members as well. Rezek's (2010) study provided a useful connection between similarly vulnerable female groups, which makes the research on Appalachian gender roles more applicable to both drug users and non-drug users. However, the sample for this study was small and chosen through a self-selection process; this perhaps calls into question the applicability of the results to the entire region. With only 8 participants from West Virginia, it would be quite difficult to make broad generalizations about all the rural areas in Appalachia.

In addition, it was suggested that patriarchal traits were often passed down through generations (Rezek, 2010). These findings support the notion that Appalachian culture has historically been conducive to the existence of rigid gender expectations. Furthermore, according to Rezek (2010), the emphasis on tradition in the region has made the perpetuation of these gender roles commonly accepted in society. A particularly important aspect of this research was that the author was able to do side-by-side comparisons of participant responses, which demonstrated that many of the women in this population had the same experiences concerning gender roles and their kinship support systems (Rezek, 2010, p. 134). These conclusions are

significant for the current research, as the female drug users interviewed in similar studies also noted difficulties receiving positive support from those around them.

Zahnow et al. (2018)

This study is perhaps the most closely related to the current project, as it examined intravenous drug use in terms of gender and social factors. However, in contrast to the proposed study, this research is interested in the drug use practices and the risk behaviors associated with gendered drug economies rather than the influence of gender as a cause of rural drug addiction. Though the article utilizes data from several different countries, many of the ideas relating to traditional gender expectations are applicable to Appalachia simply because female drug users tend to share some traits regardless of geographical location. The authors used quantitative research in the form of data from the 2015 Global Drug Survey, which reported on drug use statistics in six global regions (Zahnow et al., 2018, p. 81). The questions provided for the participants were specifically used to gather information on “injecting practices and experiences” (Zahnow et al., 2018, p. 83).

As previously indicated, this study revealed that females were more likely to be initiated into drug use by a male intimate partner. The authors describe this as a result of a male-dominated social structure that encourages women to fulfill a more submissive role (Zahnow et al., 2018, p. 82). Several studies have noted that most female drug experiences begin with a connection to a male partner who is also using drugs. The negative effects of unequal gender roles have been cited in previous articles as well, some of which have been listed in this review. With this in mind, this study reaffirmed the known outcomes of these cultural influences, but it also tied in the consequences for the drug community. These consequences include limited

access to treatment and decreased likelihood of using safe sex or safe injection practices (Zahnow et al., 2018). The connection between sex and drug addiction has been highlighted in previous studies, as was noted in the Young et al. (2017) article on intravenous drug experiences. Zahnow et al. (2018) builds on the notion that female drug users typically rely on males for their first injection experience. This study sought a more in-depth conclusion by demonstrating that many women continue to depend on their intimate partners while using drugs even after that first injection. The authors used this result to prove that women were more likely to share intravenous drug equipment, and therefore, more likely to have related health issues. However, it is also valuable for the current study as it shows that some of the traditional gender roles are still observed and influence women in these communities.

#### Buer et al. (2016)

Buer et al. (2016) conducted a study that examined the experience of female drug users in Central Appalachia. The authors used a qualitative research design and interviewed self-identified illegal drug users who functioned in well-connected drug networks. In semi-structured interviews, 16 women were asked to describe their drug networks and the extent of their substance abuse. Though the study was intended to define the difficulties that keep Appalachian women from seeking treatment, it also offers important information about the cultural pressures this population faces. The responses all contained a similar message; they noted that their roles as mothers, romantic partners, and family members were often stressors that negatively contributed to their addiction (Buer et al., 2016).

Buer et al. (2016) found that women are influenced by the cultural pressure to be caretakers, to remain in unhealthy relationships, and to privilege family above all else.

Additionally, the complicated relationship between these female addicts and government agencies only worsens the problem of drug use. Buer et al. (2016) found that women see Child Protective Services and social programs as oppressive forces that will only make things more difficult, instead of helping them with addiction or domestic violence (p. 70-71).

The findings from this study are useful as firsthand accounts of involvement in Appalachian drug communities, though some of the struggles noted here are felt by non-drug users as well. Because this research was conducted solely using semi-structured interview responses, it is difficult to determine which strains are present for those outside of the drug networks. Buer et al. (2016) reported that women drug users are often burdened by negative kinship influences, domestic abuse, and oppressive expectations in their caretaking roles. These factors were marked as potential causes for continued drug use and an unwillingness or inability to seek treatment (Buer et al., 2016). The women interviewed for this research expressed such social difficulties, many of which were connected to issues of gender in rural Appalachian society.

Because the research was qualitative in nature, the authors could only make a general connection between the social experiences of Appalachian women and their drug use. The relationship could not be labeled one of cause and effect due to this study design. Studies like this one add to the conversation about the importance of gender expectations when considering factors of prolonged addiction. More research could be done to determine how such factors influence the experience of drug users. This study indicates that there is a connection between the burdens of existing female cultural roles, but future quantitative research could determine if a cause and effect relationship exists.

## Lee &amp; Boeri (2017)

Lee and Boeri's (2017) findings were quite significant, as they authored one of very few studies on the initial causes of female drug use and the damage caused by stigmatization. The foundation of the research was based on the ideas that stigmas negatively affect women interested in seeking treatment and are viewed as means of social control. This study noted that many women begin using drugs as a means of self-care or as a way of coping with social stressors; these are conclusions that were also found in the Buer et al. (2016) article. By gathering the life histories of 20 female participants, Lee and Boeri (2017) found that women reported stigmatization before and during their drug use, so it functioned as both a catalyst to begin using the substance and a deterrent to receive treatment for addiction. Additionally, the article asserted that the recovery period comes with a stigma as well, in which the women feel unsupported by family and peers (Lee & Boeri, 2017). Ultimately, this adds to the body of knowledge concerning how women begin to use drugs and the social difficulties they experience while attempting to recover.

Perhaps one of the most important findings from this study was that current and former drug users both indicated that they felt stigmatized by society as well as formal government agencies. The outward expressions of these stigmatizations resulted in some of their roles being "formally controlled," such as motherhood (Lee & Boeri, 2017, p. 21). According to this research, mothers who are recovering drug addicts are seen as eternally deviant and unfit even after they have reached a point of long-term sobriety (Lee & Boeri, 2017). There are some notable similarities between this study and that of Buer et al. (2016). The women in the latter study also admitted that they felt controlled in their social roles by their kinship circles and governmental agencies who used their stigmatization against them (Buer et al., 2016).

Though this research has included the experiences of women from other parts of the United States, the results are relevant for women in Appalachia as well due to the nature of the drug abuse experiences. The entire body of research suggests that female drug users face similar barriers, but that these difficulties are increased in rural regions like Appalachia. Most of the women from Lee and Boeri's (2017) study were mothers from low-income communities, which is one major factor that makes its participants comparable to women in Appalachia.

Staton et al. (2018)

Staton et al. (2018) conducted a study to fill the gaps in the literature concerning vulnerable female populations. In this case, the authors focused on the "distinct health disparities" experienced by rural women in Appalachia. These disparities include both physical and mental health issues. Ultimately, the study examined the convergence of the female health issues, substance abuse, and experiences with incarceration. It is important to note that access to health services prominently features in multiple studies on both female drug use and gender roles. This study used quantitative research to gather data from 400 female drug users who were incarcerated in three rural jails. The researchers used very specific questions that pinpointed participant experience with incarceration, home life, mental health, and drug use (Staton et al., 2018). The findings of this study suggested that while there is a relationship between drug use and incarceration history, environmental factors likely play a larger role in drug abuse for the sample population.

This research makes many important contributions to what is known about incarcerated female drug users and the environmental factors that have contributed to their addiction. There are some notable limitations, however. Because the study used participants from three purposefully chosen jails in Central Appalachia, the authors suggested that the results may not be

generalizable to other areas of the region (Staton et al., 2018). The authors also noted that “social desirability bias” could have influenced the responses in the study because the information given was about drug use and other criminal activities (Staton et al., 2018, p. 940). This is an issue that likely appears in many similar studies due to the nature of the information and respondent fear of being perceived negatively.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This study examined the significance of traditional gender roles in relation to drug abuse among Appalachian females. The research sought to determine the nature of the connection between women who feel pressure from regional gender roles and their experiences with drug abuse. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this project; these are presented in the form of a content analysis and a systematic review. The study specifically placed emphasis on establishing which gender roles are present for female drug users in the region and how those gender roles affect their initial and prolonged drug use.

#### **Methods: Content Analysis**

With qualitative goals in mind, the first part of this study explored the gender roles present in rural Appalachia, specifically for women who abuse drugs. This information lays important groundwork for the entirety of this study, which attempts to make connections between the gender roles and the use of illegal drugs. It was imperative to identify which gender roles, if any, contribute to the social pressures felt by this particular population. It was necessary to specifically seek out the gender roles that are present for female Appalachian drug users, because these individuals often experience different pressures than other women.

While cultural expectations can influence both drug users and non-users, this study was particularly interested in the gender-related strain reported by women who abuse drugs.

### **Data collection**

The qualitative content analysis highlighted patterns and themes in the interviews conducted with female drug users in the region. The data collection consisted of reading/watching interviews conducted with the women where they were asked to discuss their addiction and their social environment. The latter was especially important for this design. Instances where the women brought up pressures related to gender or family were noted in the analysis. These would include concerns about motherhood, job opportunities, romantic/kinship relationships, and physical expectations. The content analysis was performed using interviews from published studies and other media sources that released the stories of female drug users. Different mediums were used in this section of the study to represent the experiences of a larger number of women in the region. Sources where the stories of female drug users were simply summarized by other researchers were purposefully avoided for this analysis. Additionally, only voluntary interviews were analyzed in this research; scenarios where the women felt criminally questioned were left out as well. The following pieces of media were used for the content analysis:

- (1) Buer, Leukefeld, and Havens' (2016) interview-based study "'I'm Stuck:' Women's Navigations of Social Networks and Prescription Drug Use in Central Appalachia"
- (2) Four firsthand accounts from the collection *Not Far From Me: Stories of Opioids and Ohio* (compiled by Skinner and Franz)
- (3) *Oxyana*, a 2013 documentary by Sean Dunne
- (4) *Heroin[e]*, a 2017 documentary by Elaine McMillion Sheldon.

Each of these selected materials provided information on the social lives and addictions of women living in rural Appalachia. This study interpreted these accounts to record negative or stressful experiences with gender expectations. Table 1 shows the number designation given to the sources for the purpose of data reporting. To be included in the content analysis, the interviewees had to be female, 18 or older, residents of Appalachia, and current or former drug users. Some of the sources interviewed men and women, but only the

Table 1	
Source Title	Charting Designation
Oxyana (2013)	1
Herion[e] (2017)	2
“I’m Stuck” (2016)	3
“Evelyn Mendivel” (2019)	4
“Mary Morales-Torres” (2019)	5
“Estella: Making a Family” (2019)	6
“Marty Helms: Deluded” (2019)	7

female responses were indicated in this analysis. The sources were reviewed for mentions of pressures related to regional

gender roles.

The sources were viewed multiple times to construct a general idea of the most important themes in the conversations. Then, the responses were sorted into five categories: motherhood, family/inner circle, partner, workplace/other opportunities, and physical expectations. Appendix B provides definitions of these categories. Only instances where respondents expressed strain or pressure related to one or more of the categories were included in this study. For example, a woman who states she feels obligated to do something by her partner would be counted in the “pressure from partner” category. Example response coding is listed in Appendix A. As there were many possible responses, the sources were coded for frequency of themes rather than specific words.

**Methods: Systematic Review**

After the prominent gender roles were analyzed and recorded, the latter part of the project examined the impact of these gender expectations on female drug use. This task was undertaken using recent published studies, specifically through a systematic review. Because this is a topic that has not been given a great deal of attention, there was a limited number of sources that were relevant enough to be included. While there are very few studies that focus solely on female drug use and traditional Appalachian gender roles, there has been some research on the significant social and environmental factors that are applicable to the pressures felt by women in the region. Many of the factors in these studies are directly related to issues of gender.

Seven quantitative studies were synthesized in the systematic review to determine how pressure from traditional gender roles could potentially affect female drug users in Appalachia. The majority of the studies analyzed here approached the issue of drug use by indicating common social factors that accompany addiction. For the current study, these factors were compared with the traditional gender roles present for women in the Appalachian region to draw conclusions about the impact of those factors on initial and prolonged drug abuse. With the exception of two studies, this project only used research that dealt with adult females in Appalachia that were current or former illegal drug users. Two studies focused on relevant rural females outside of Appalachia. In addition, some of the studies published results about both male and female drug users, but the latter was the focus of the systematic review. The GRADE method was used to assess the quality of the studies.

The studies for this systematic review were only considered if they had been written in the last ten years, though the majority were quite recent (published in the last 3 years). To

make the results applicable to a larger portion of the female drug users in Appalachia, the review attempted to consider articles covering a wide array of situational factors, such as incarceration, poverty, and motherhood. The gender categories that were established in the content analysis were looked at very closely. Ultimately, this part of the study specifically reported on variables that are directly related to the experiences with social strain, job opportunities, and home life, only as they relate to the circumstances surrounding drug abuse. Overall, the two-part study sought to confirm the gender expectations present for women in Appalachia and connected the existence of these social factors to female drug use.

### **Hypothesis**

Considering the proposed research and the existing literature on gender roles, it was hypothesized that some women in Appalachia experience stress from attempting, challenging, or failing to fulfill social expectations. Additionally, it was hypothesized that the pressure from traditional gender expectations in rural Appalachia increases the likelihood of drug addiction among these women. These hypotheses were tested using both qualitative and quantitative data, which provided a more complete examination of the effect of gender roles on female drug users in the region.

### **Results**

#### **Content Analysis**

Responses from 21 women were reviewed for the study. Of these, 17 women mentioned feeling pressure related to gender. Table 2 lists the number of respondents involved in the analysis and the number of those women who were counted in the gender role categories. The women who indicated that they felt strain from regional gender expectations

mentioned these issues multiple times throughout the sources. Each instance was tallied, as the frequency of the subject matter was intended to denote the importance of the topic to the women. Table 3 reports these results, which are the responses coded into the five previously

Source	# of women interviewed/ recorded	# of women referencing gender issues
1	6	5
2	9	4
3	4	4
4	1	1
5	1	1
6	1	1
7	1	1

mentioned categories. It is clear from the frequency of these themes in the content that the women most often mentioned stresses from their family/inner circle, partners, and their roles as mothers. Women discussed issues with their workplace, opportunities,

and regional physical expectations the least. These results are reported below in Table 3.

<b>Table 3</b>					
Source	Motherhood	Partner	Family/Inner Circle	Workplace/ Opportunities	Physical Expectation
1	5	5	6	3	6
2	1	0	2	4	4
3	8	6	9	3	1
4	2	2	1	0	0
5	1	1	1	0	0
6	2	1	2	1	0
7	1	2	1	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>11</b>

Stressors related to motherhood, family and friends, and romantic partners were clearly the most discussed gender-based topics in the chosen sources. The availability of opportunities and physical expectations were also mentioned several times throughout the interviews, but they were certainly not the most prominent topics. Sources 1 through 3 focused more on individuals who were current drug users, and sources 4 through 7 were

representative of experiences in the recovery stage. It appears that the mentions of gender strain lessened in the recovery stories, but they were quite prevalent in the experiences of current female drug users. Many of the women in the sources indicated that these social pressures were contributing factors in both their initial and their continued drug use.

### **Systematic Review**

The articles reviewed for this section of the study all adopted a quantitative research methodology and addressed social factors related to rural female drug use. All the studies directly researched Appalachian populations except for two. Bowen et al. (2012) focused on rural Wyoming, and Zahnnow (2018) examined global rural populations, but the target groups had many similarities to rural Appalachia. Four of the seven studies solely examined female drug users; the remaining three reported data on male and female users, though information on the latter was primarily discussed in this review. To assess the quality of the studies, the GRADE system was used. Because there were no relevant randomized trials, the studies examined for the systematic review were assessed as moderate or low quality data. Sample population, risk of bias, and effect size played the biggest roles in this part of the assessment. Ultimately, three studies were rated moderate (Victor et al., 2018; Bowen et al., 2012; Albright et al., 2017) and the other four were rated low (Staton et al., 2017; Staton et al., 2018, Young et al., 2013; & Zahnnow et al., 2018). Below is the analysis of the systematic review findings.

#### **1. Drug abuse and romantic/sexual relationships**

Five out of seven studies discussed a connection between female drug abuse and a partner. Zahnnow et al. (2017) found that women were significantly more likely to be injected with a substance by an intimate partner than men were (25.2% compared to 9.8%). Similarly, Staton et al. (2018) reported that 79.5% of the women used in their study indicated that their

drug use was connected to a sexual relationship, and 60.22% had a partner that used drugs. Young et al. (2013), Staton et al. (2017), and Victor et al. (2018) all suggested that drug-using partners, especially in intimate relationships, were strong influences in the lives and drug practices of Appalachian female drug users. Furthermore, some researchers found that the females in their studies felt like receiving drugs from a partner, especially a man, allowed that partner to have the power in the relationship. Several studies focused on intravenous drug use, so a great deal of the information included was related to needle-sharing practices and the economy of trading drugs for sexual interactions. Ultimately, the studies reviewed here reveal that intimate partners play an important role in the drug practices of rural female drug users. While this is not defined as a problem solely affecting women, the findings do suggest that men are less influenced by this.

## **2. Drug abuse and family/peer relationships**

Four of the seven studies noted that family and peer influences were contributors to female drug use. Staton et al. (2018) reported that 77.4% of women in their study said they had family members who used drugs in their presence. Bowen et al. (2012) published similar results, with 35.6% of women stating that they felt pressured by family members to use drugs. The results for reported peer pressure were even more impactful; 75.6% of women indicated they began using drugs due to influence from friends. Young et al. (2013) and Victor et al. (2018) also highlighted the connection between women and family/peer pressure to use drugs. Many of the respondents recalled their first injection experience being at the urging of a friend or family member.

## **3. Other findings**

Though the studies reported the most significant evidence about partner and family/friend influences, there were other notable results that indicated a connection between social environment and addiction. There were a limited number of respondents that suggested the drug presence in their surrounding culture caused them to become drug users. A small portion of respondents (2.2%) in the Bowen et al. (2012) study stated that they used drugs because it was a common cultural behavior in their area. It could be argued that some of these participants were considering their close relationships as part of that cultural pressure. Additionally, though it was often noted throughout the studies when participants had children, it was not typically considered a big influence on drug use.

**Table 4: Article Review**

Article	Populations	Research Focus	Findings	Limitations
Zahnow et al. (2018)	Male and female recent drug injectors (n=619)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gender related factors in drug use practices and associated risk behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Women were much more likely to be injected by an intimate partner during first use than men (25.2% compared to 9.8%).</li> <li>Women were more likely to be injected by their male partners throughout their time using drugs.</li> <li>They also relied on these partners to provide them with drugs.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited in scope</li> <li>Deals only with intravenous drug use</li> <li>Only reports behavior at first use and in the last 12 months</li> </ul>
Staton et al. (2018)	Female drug users from 3 rural Appalachian jails (N=400)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To assess drug use and incarceration history for rural Appalachian women.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>79.5% used drugs in conjunction with a sexual relationship</li> <li>60.22% had a partner who used drugs</li> <li>77.4% had relatives that used drugs</li> <li>87.2% had children</li> <li>22.8% were working prior to their incarceration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Limited scope, as the women were purposefully chosen from particular rural jails. This limits the overall generalizability.</li> <li>Lack of focus on comorbidities with substance abuse</li> </ul>

Young, Larian, & Havens (2013)	Male and female drug users enrolled in the SNAP study (n=503)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Differences in the initial drug injection experiences of rural men and women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 30% of women reported their first drug injection was from a partner</li> <li>▪ Women were significantly more likely to report trying drugs due to social pressure and to have received their drugs from another person.</li> <li>▪ Women were also more likely to have engaged in sex around the time of the first injection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The study only addresses intravenous drug use</li> <li>▪ Only reports first injection experience</li> <li>▪ Relies on long term memory of the participant through questionnaires</li> </ul>
Bowen et al. (2012)	Male and female methamphetamine users in rural Wyoming (n=83)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Bioecological influences related to initial methamphetamine use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ 35.6% of women reported using drugs due to the influence of a family member.</li> <li>▪ 75.6% of women said they used due to peer influences.</li> <li>▪ 2.2% of women attributed their use to the culture in their area.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ This study was not done in Appalachia, though it represented a similar demographic.</li> <li>▪ Only reports on methamphetamine use.</li> <li>▪ Small sample size in comparison to the other studies</li> </ul>

Victor et al. (2018)	Rural female drug users from vulnerable populations in Appalachia (a jail sample) (n=400)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Using a behavioral approach to assess female use of substance abuse treatment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most women reported that they were lacking in support systems to help them stop using drugs.</li> <li>There were 739 mentions of abuse (emotional, physical, or with a weapon)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focuses a great deal on treatment</li> <li>Participants are all part of the jail population</li> <li>While the results are likely generalizable to female drug users in many rural areas, the study was conducted using a jailed population from a single state.</li> </ul>
Staton et al. (2017)	Female intravenous drug users in Appalachia (n=199)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine partner relationships and their influence on intravenous drug use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>76% of women said they had a recent male partner who used drugs</li> <li>Many women reported that their male partners held the power in the drug use relationship, and therefore in the romantic relationship.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus is on intravenous drug use</li> <li>Exclusively used participants from the jail population</li> <li>Largely interested in the repercussions of sharing equipment</li> </ul>
Albright et al. (2019)	Female opioid users living in Appalachian vs non-Appalachian counties (n=1,098)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Estimate the prevalence of opioid misuse with comorbid psychological distress in the target population.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Females living in Appalachian counties have a higher level of opioid misuse than those in non-Appalachian counties.</li> <li>These individuals were found to have fewer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Primarily addresses psychological issues with some focus on social causes</li> <li>Responses were grouped into rather large age groups that might potentially be unrelated</li> </ul>

opportunities  
and more  
reports of  
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health  
issues.

### **Discussion**

This study focused specifically on the experience of female drug users in Appalachia, as this is a population that is often overlooked in criminological and sociological research. Through pre-existing cultural studies, it has been proposed that some areas in the Appalachian region place importance on traditional patriarchal beliefs, particularly emphasizing family and gender roles. For some women, these gender expectations can cause them to feel pressured if they fail to meet the standards or subvert the roles altogether. The content analysis conducted for this research indicated that female drug users are aware of such gender expectations in their lives and that they sometimes feel strain from those roles.

The women in the sampled interviews frequently discussed the pressure they feel from motherhood, family, partners, the workplace, and physical expectations. Only determining the frequency of these topics does not allow for inferences about the relationship between female drug use and regional gender roles; however, it does establish that these cultural pressures are present in the lives of this population. In fact, many of the women interviewed suggested that the cultural expectations from those around them encouraged them to do drugs either as a coping mechanism or to adhere to a certain image. It often seems that loyalty to family,

friends, and partners pressures women to conform to drug use. The repeated emphasis on pressures from family members and partners indicates that these might be potential problem areas for female drug users. The individual responses from Appalachian women are beneficial in determining how drug recovery initiatives can cater to the experiences of this population. Many of the women reported poor relationships with loved ones and lack of opportunities as contributing social pressures. This information perhaps demonstrates a need for domestic violence services and relationship and workplace counseling.

The systematic review section of this project was used to expand on the gender roles identified in the content analysis and see how stressors might affect the likelihood of drug abuse. Other researchers have examined the connection between female drug use and social and environmental factors, but it is not a topic that has been extensively explored. The systematic review undertaken here compiled multiple sources that focused on female drug users in Appalachia. The aims of the studies were not identical, so some of the pressures were discussed in relation to treatment while others reported the influence on initial and continued drug use. Pressure from partners, family, and social circles were reported numerous times throughout the studies. This is consistent with the responses from women studied in the content analysis section of this project. The majority of women in each of the seven studies noted that their drug use was in some way related to their intimate partners and family members.

One interesting conclusion that has been generated by combining this data is that women seem to experience social pressure in a unique way, particularly if they are from vulnerable populations. Though failure to meet cultural expectations and the desire to avoid them both cause a certain level of strain, it seems that some of the most influential pressures

come from the need to please others or to fit in. In the interviews, some of the women reported using drugs for self-care or to cope with feeling gender role strain, but it appeared that more respondents were concerned with the approval of family members and intimate partners. This is not to say that other gender role pressures do not have an effect on rural female drug users, but these certainly seem to have the greatest impact on drug behaviors.

### **Limitations**

While this project begins to fill the gap in the literature on Appalachian female drug users, there is more research to be done to truly understand the experiences of the population. The results reported here were compiled using existing information, but future qualitative studies that conduct interviews with drug users would be valuable to this topic. Much of this subject matter depends on individual experience and is rather subjective. Because the content analysis was conducted on the interpretations of the researcher, there are likely other conclusions that could be drawn from the information which were left out of this report. The results of the GRADE assessment used in the systematic review indicated that future research should address potential biases and perhaps include other types of non-observational studies. This would increase the quality of the evidence and make stronger claims about the connection between Appalachian female drug users and gender roles. Overall, this research could be considered exploratory in nature, as the data collected just begins to uncover a potential connection between traditional gender roles and substance abuse. There are limited studies that explore this relationship, so much of the analysis requires researcher interpretation. Despite these limitations, this research forms important conclusions about the experience of women in rural drug communities.

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## Appendix A

### Sample Coding Chart

Source	Interviewee Statement	Thematic Category
1	"I saw Kayla, my cousin...I used to be like really big...she started doing pills and lost like 80lbs like really quick. I lost almost 100 lbs in 4 months. I was happy then" (Greener & Dunne, 2013).	Physical Expectations
2	"I've been sleeping on the streets...I lost my job and I can't help it. This is the only place I can turn to [prostitution]" (Sheldon, 2017).	Workplace/Opportunities
3	"My momma, she didn't believe in divorce, no matter what you stick it out...and I did as long as I could...I just told her, I said, mom, I can't do this. If I don't walk away now, I'm not ever going to walk away because they'll be carrying me away" (Buer et al., 2016, p. 76).	Pressures from Family/Inner Circle
4	"I carried two of my children under the influence of heroin and cocaine When my second youngest was born, two women from Imperial Valley Ministries came to visit the hospital. The doctors wanted to take my baby" (Skinner & Franz, 2019, p. 12).	Motherhood
5	"My kid's dad sold cocaine, so we would do speedballs, a mixture of cocaine and heroin" (Skinner & Franz, 2019, p. 13).	Partner
6	"I was a bad parent. There, I said it. Anyone who sits in a meeting and says, 'I took care of my kids,' is most likely a liar. Your house may have been cleaner, your kids dressed nicer—but we all know. We are self-centered and selfish both in addiction and in recovery. It's always our children who are the last to recover" (Skinner & Franz, 2019, p. 89).	Motherhood
7	"My mom had me on drugs my whole life because I had ADHD and I had a real unstable life, so I was always sick to my stomach. She gave me this stuff called Paregoric. I don't even know what that is, really, some kind of narcotic, and then when I was fifteen, I was overweight, so she took me to a doctor that gave me amphetamines. I've literally been taking pills my whole life" (Skinner & Franz, 2019, p. 160).	Pressures from Family/Inner Circle

**Appendix B**

<b>Thematic Category</b>	<b>Description</b>
Motherhood	Pressures related to the concept of being a good mother or fear of losing/having children based on common cultural expectations.
Family/Inner Circle	Any stressors related to family or peer expectations (excluding interactions with a romance partner).
Partner	Pressure felt from the partner to behave in a certain way or to live up to their standard.
Work/Other Opportunities	Feelings of inadequacy and hopelessness due to lack of opportunities in the region. Additionally, it would include pressures to fulfill a certain role in the workplace.
Physical Expectations	Instances where the women indicate they are expected to look a certain way due to social pressure. Additionally, this category contains mentions of stereotypes about the value of female bodies.