ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPRESSIONS OF CLASS IDENTITY: A LIFE HISTORY APPROACH

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Utilizing a life history method, a working class male’s perceptions of and responses to notions of discrimination experienced by the working class are documented. The concept of class as an experience unique to each individual is explored through comparison with the author’s experiences with discrimination against the working class and a review of literature.

At first the subject’s actions may appear arbitrary and unexpected, but what is discovered is a coherence or meaning system based on individual rights and self-worth that accounts for his seemingly unrelated activities. Experiences in conflict with this system are detailed and social resistance is revealed as a response to the conflict arising from belief versus experience. Expressions of resistance range from economic and political involvements to sexual expressions all of which are designed to resist middle class expectations.

The individual’s construction of masculinity as a response to perceived class discrimination is investigated. What emerges is a model of masculinity rooted in a desire to express the power denied to him because of class affiliation
PERCEPTIONS AND EXPRESSIONS OF CLASS IDENTITY

by

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts 2005

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Thressa Juanita Coleman, who insured that I believed I could do anything and to Mary J. Stephenson, who made me aware of the possibilities. I am eternally grateful to them both.
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Chapter 1, Introduction

I begin this thesis with three quotes.

I was 20 years old with two kids. I worked two jobs. I was working at the gas station in Westville and I was working at Mains. There was an Esso Station there. I said there was a need for a tow truck around here. Nobody has one. I should do that. Yea, I think that would work. I can make a living off that. What do I have to lose?

They (society) may send it (messages about who is acceptable as a partner and who is not) but I don’t listen to it. It exists, but people should not listen to it. It is what makes you feel good. I don’t worry about what everybody thinks. It is what I think and what I feel. Gets me in a lot of trouble sometimes. I can’t do something, not that I say its right or wrong, but that I don’t think it is about what makes me happy. That whole group of people out there, I am not going to make them happy. No, it is what makes me and my partner happy. Screw them, not screw them, if they can’t handle it; it is their problem not mine. They are not living my life. They are not paying my bills. Date my cousin, live with my sister-in-law.

The political establishment did not take me as a serious candidate. They said he is just an old junk guy, a tow truck guy. What does he know about politics? What does he know? That scared them. There is no way I should beat Porter King according to the political wisdom because it was a Republican year and he was a republican, incumbent councilman and there
was no way this redneck, junkyard, tow truck operator from Summerfield should beat him. But I did.

Three distinct quotes; At first glance, one could hardly expect that they came from the same person. Then again Bill Devlin is not your ordinary person.

Bill’s reputation as a rule breaker is well earned. Self described as “working class”; Bill is never content to go along with what others expect of him. Bill started his own towing and auto parts business at age 20 and built it into a million dollar enterprise. Bored with his junkyard and towing operation after 27 years Bill raised more money than any other Queen Caroline County Council candidate in history and launched his political career, as a democrat, becoming a County councilman in 1994. After a term filled with conflict and after losing his bid for re-election in 1998, Bill parlayed a recent loss in the 2003 primary elections, running as a republican, as a means to support his opponent’s campaign and regain political influence.

Bill’s personal life is also filled with unorthodox choices. First married at 17, twice divorced, working on a third and always rumored the “lady’s man”; Bill has an interesting collection of wives, ex’s, girlfriend’s and mistresses. Acknowledging that his children have their fair share of drug abuse, liberal
attitudes towards sex and the occasional run in with the law, Bill is never-the-
less the proud father of seven (he counts them all, stepchildren, ex-
stepchildren, adopted and by birth). Given my own personal preoccupation
with making sure I follow the rules and live up to what everyone expects of
me, I found Bill’s approach intriguing. Presented with an opportunity to
collect a life history for a seminar at Maryland, Bill was my first choice for a
subject.

A Life History approach can find one set of roots in the work of Jean
Francois Lyotard, who argued against the meta-narratives common to
ethnography insisting that an all encompassing account of culture could not
be produced.\(^1\) Life History as a method seeks to address the concerns that
such postmodern theory has initiated. Focusing on an individual life rather
than a group or society allows the researcher to explore the individual’s
cultural constructions and explain how they are experienced in that person’s
unique cultural context unencumbered by the generalizations and
assumptions about shared cultural experiences required in group analysis.\(^2\)
Initially I began with a set of questions that focused on Bill’s work as that was what seemed most important. All his activity seemed focused on the business and sixteen hour days were his norm. What began as a portrait of a workaholic quickly took on new form as issues of social resistance in response to perceptions of class discrimination and notions of masculinity and power rose to the forefront of both our conversations and my observations. All of these concepts were somehow intertwined with Bill’s construction of his own identity and his presentation of that construction to the world and to me.

Linde in *Life Stories* suggests that coherence systems offer a means to understand the construction of identity and the creation of meaning and coherence. Linde suggests that “a coherence system is a system that claims to provide a means for understanding, evaluating, and constructing accounts of experience... such as a system may also provide, either explicitly or implicitly, a guide for future behavior.” Linde further argues that an individual’s construction of such a system allows them to develop life stories into socially sharable narratives. Linde proposes several coherence systems
ranging from Freudian psychology to astrology noting that they are accessible to anyone who knows about and chooses to apply them.⁵

On the individual level, Linde’s work raises interesting questions. How would such a theory play out in an individual life? Could the coherence system of one individual be detailed through collection of a life history? How does an individual develop a coherence system? What cultural factors and experiences unique to that individual influence the type of coherence system they choose? Does the coherence system change over the course of an individual’s life or remain relatively constant? One might also question how an individual might respond to situations that are in conflict with that individual’s coherence system?

Bill’s early childhood experiences influenced his development of a coherence system based upon individual rights and individual worth. Growing up in a small working class community surrounded by a supportive family, Bill was proud of himself and his community. That pride strongly influenced his response to situations in conflict with his coherence system.
As much of the class literature has suggested, Bill’s first introduction to class was within the educational system. After attending elementary school in his home community, largely comprised of working class families like his own, Bill was sent to a high school in a decidedly middle and upper class neighborhood. His introduction to class differences and prejudices was undisguised. As we shall see, the principal of the high school publicly denounced and demeaned the working class students from Bill’s junior high school.

The realization that others would judge him based on where he came from and the economic position of his family was offensive to Bill. He questioned the authority of an establishment who would make such negative assumptions about the home and community of which he was so proud and determined to live his life in a way that would prove them wrong.

There is a variety of contemporary literature on cultural resistance. Duncombe’s Cultural Resistance Reader offers a generalized and theoretical view of resistance. Most selections examine movements or groups that attempt to resist or change the dominant political, economic and/or social
structure such as Indians resisting British colonial culture or African American slaves using music to create a space free of their master’s domination. Examination of resistance on an individual level through life history allows the investigator to move to a more personal level and to ascertain what the individual sees as the dominant group’s norms and accepted behaviors as well as to investigate which norms are chosen to be violated and to what extent they will be challenged and why those choices were made. When investigating a group attempting cultural resistance the individual motivations of a group’s members are frequently lost in the group’s collective voice about their mission. The scope of such resistance is also frequently limited to some narrow topic imposed by the group while an individual’s choices are much broader with no constraint imposed by the group.

Much of the literature on resistance stresses the importance of community in resistance while Bill’s is a very individual experience. While at first Bill’s behavior would seem to fit well into what scholars like E. J. Hobsbawm call “the primitive rebel”, Bill’s story, as we shall see, also contradicts this model in important ways.
Bill’s interpretation of the situation in high school as a class issue and his further conclusion that the world was divided into “us” and “them” shaped and defined how he saw himself and how he would now chose to live his life. Unwilling to limit himself to one area or topic, social resistance became the focus for living his life. Politics became one avenue for Bill’s resistance and he viewed even his most personal decisions, such as whom he chose as a partner or mate as an opportunity to resist.

Bill’s definition of himself as a man and his individual expression of that masculinity is linked to his perception of class discrimination as well. The kind of experiences bill had with power as a member of a subordinate group are well documented in the literature. *Men, Feminism, and Men’s Contradictory Experiences of Power* documents the disparity in power between groups of men. Again the literature primarily focuses on the group. Most investigations either examine all men collectively or look at groups of men based on some perceived similarity such as race or income level with the assumption of shared experience. Masculinity for Bill is a power relation and his definition of himself as a man is rooted within the exercise of that power.
Bill believes that the dominant group is attempting to deny him the power to which he is entitled. This is an example of a situation in conflict with his coherence system, a system based on a strong belief in reliance on individual power and worth. Bill uses his masculinity as a means to exercise power that he perceives has been denied him in other cultural settings.

Confronted with what he perceived as class oppression and discrimination as an adolescent, socialized in a family where expressions of physical and sexual power were accepted as “being male”, Bill’s construction of masculinity is not unexpected. Bill’s experiences taught him that others were judging him based on his own economic success. Men with real power, Bill came to understand, were not only physically and sexually powerful as were the men he had encountered in his youth; men with real power were able to express that power socially and economically.

Bill’s experiences and his reactions to them are unique and deeply personal. I was raised in a working class family eerily similar to Bill’s, and one might expect our experiences and reactions to be similar. Our approaches to life and our notions of class are, however, vastly different. On the simplest level, I
follow rules and Bill breaks them. Both I would argue are valid responses based on our own individual reaction to class and other cultural experiences encountered during the course of life. Any attempt to investigate us as a group would yield a vast array of common experiences, but offer little in explaining our individual reaction to such experiences. Class, some postmodernists will argue, is a unique experience for each individual.11 Dependent on the time place and the individuality of the person involved; class is understood, experienced and expressed as a distinctly personal encounter. An ethnographic approach involving the collection of a life history is thus one important approach for increasing our understanding of class in an individual’s life. This is also the method I employ to explore various aspects of Bill’s life of resistance.
Chapter 2, Social Resistance as a Response to Perceived Class Discrimination

Stephen Duncombe defines social resistance in *Cultural Resistance Reader* as “Culture (a set of norms, behaviors and ways to make sense of the world) that is used, consciously or unconsciously, effectively or not, to resist and/or change the dominant political, economic and/or social structure.”¹² I will rely on this definition of social resistance in analyzing Bill’s life history. Vital to such analysis is Lynn Weber’s argument offered in *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, in which she asserts “the importance of understanding social location in shaping what we come to see as real, in shaping our understandings of the world…we need complex analyses that attend to multiple social hierarchies as they intersect with one another both in individual lives … and in the society as a whole.”¹³ Here, Weber would suggest that any attempt to explain social resistance both in individuals and society as a whole must include a thorough understanding of the subject’s social location. Charlotte Linde’s notion of coherence systems as described in *Life Stories* also offers a means through which to clarify the subject’s location,
perception and understanding of the culture in which he exists and the choices he makes in an attempt to resist the perceived oppression that culture imposes upon him. Linde suggests that “a coherence system is a system that claims to provide a means for understanding, evaluating, and constructing accounts of experience….such a system may also provide, either explicitly or implicitly, a guide for future behavior.” 14 Linde presents one coherence system, common sense that requires only that beliefs “be plausible when not examined too closely, since common sense is composed precisely of beliefs that are axiomatic and hence, unexamined.” 15 This system relies on “beliefs about the world that are so obvious as to be unnoticeable as beliefs.” 16 My subject over the course of several interviews also describes many of his choices and actions as “common sense”. It is in detailing one common sense coherence system based on individual rights that Linde most accurately describes the subject’s own coherence system. 17 Bill’s system includes the following beliefs.

1. You have the right to judge what is best for you and to be responsible for the consequences.

2. You have the right to act without defending or justifying your actions to others.
3. You have the right not to conform to others’ expectations for you.

4. You have the right to be wrong-and to suffer the consequences.

5. You have the right to change your mind.

6. You have the right to your opinions, feelings and desires

7. You have the right to be treated as fairly as others.

Many of Bill’s choices, which seem to fly in the face of what is expected, are best explained in the context of the *Primitive Rebel*. As Duncombe comments in *Cultural Resistance Reader,*

For as long as there has been a mainstream culture there have been those who staked their position outside. There they fashion their own identities and communities, customs and styles... a culture of their own. Through this cultural lens they view the world, dividing it into good and bad, in the process creating a system of values and norms distinct from, and often in opposition to those of greater society. These are; micro-worlds created by those who feel they don’t belong in the world at large: the young, the passed over, the outcast. This cultural space offers great political potential, for subcultures provide a place to test out new identities, ideas and activities that deviate from the status quo. And, because they are self-constructed, subcultures grant their constituents the power of creation and then a sense of ownership over what they have created. These are key ingredients of any political formation... The question is where does this resistance lead?18
What follows is a life history which attempts to identify the subject’s social location within various social hierarchies—including those of race, class, gender and sexuality, and which identifies and explains the subject’s attempts at social resistance based upon his individual “common sense” coherence system whose focus is individual rights.

Bill attributes many of his life choices to the oppression he felt at being identified as working class, the negative connotations that were incorrectly associated with that label, and his attempts to “show up” or prove wrong those whom he perceived as oppressors. Duncombe refers to such individuals citing Hobsbawn’s work as “primitive rebels (who) protest the wrongs of the world by conjuring up and acting out a culture of resistance, removing themselves from society and living according to their own code.”19 Similar to the experiences of many other oppressed groups and individuals Bill’s first encounter with class discrimination was within the education system.20

Growing up in a small town, working class community surrounded by a supportive family, Bill was proud of himself and his community. His first day of high school was a revelation. Sent to a high school in a solidly middle and
upper class neighborhood his introduction to class differences and prejudices came loud and clear from the high school principal.

All the other kids go in the main part. They took all the kids from Samuel Evans and marched us into the auditorium and sat us down. The principal comes in and says, “you people from Samuel Evans, we are a higher class neighborhood, we do things different and we won’t tolerate you. You screw up and you are out of here.” You think about it and they basically tell us we are low lives and they are going to do anything they can, give them a reason and they will throw you out. I was motivated for a long time over that thing in high school, calling Summerfield low lives. It motivated me for almost 40 years. It not only motivated me, but I took it personally. I am not a low life.

Strong words spoken with emotion across Bill’s dining room table. Words that allude to his attempts to resist those who he perceived to be judging him solely on where he came from and the economic position of his family.

An understanding of Bill’s coherence system, the rules he lives by, would partially explain his reaction to this encounter with class discrimination. It was in Bill’s early childhood that his coherence system appears to have found its roots. Bill’s life began April 8, 1947 at his maternal grandmother’s home. “I can remember being real little, they had a rocking chair. I can remember snow
coming down. They had a clock; you know the kind that goes tick tock, tick
tock hanging on the wall right by the rocking chair.” Bill’s detailed memory
of his grandparent’s house revealed the strong bond he shared with his
grandparents. It was in his relationship with his grandparents that Bill
identified both his lifelong commitment to community and helping others,
and his own sense of individual pride and self worth. “My brother Joe was
close to my mother. Sean got close to my father. I was close to my
grandparents, real close to them. Many of Bill’s stories about his
grandparents, who he called Daddy Nick and Gram, reflect his recognition of
their unquestionable devotion to him while reinforcing his worth as an
individual. Bill describes a devotion unique to him rather than the more
expected devotion of any grandparent to a grandchild. “My grandfather had
a workshop and I would go and borrow tools. I was the only one who could
borrow tools. He would not let anyone else of all the grandkids. I was the
only one.” A favorite story of Bill’s was his ability to convince Daddy Nick to
give him the old Chevy, which he could no longer drive because of poor
health.

   He would give me anything I wanted. He had
this old car sitting in this spot and he would go
out and start it everyday for like two years. We
had this demolition derby coming up and I say,
hey Daddy Nick, we need a car for the demolition derby. He gave it to me. I got pictures of Daddy Will and the race. I got pictures of me painting Daddy Nick on the side of the car. We even took him to the race.

Bill’s later ability to recognize how others perceived him as well as his ability to recognize what would be necessary to get others to do things his way is something that appears to be culled from childhood experiences such as these. Such experiences also strengthened his resolve to do things his way.

Bill felt singled out and recognized by his grandparents as superior when compared to others. This appears to have strengthened his notion of individual superiority which he carried forward in life forming a basis for his coherence system.

Daddy Nick and Gram also appear to have provided the foundation for another component of Bill’s coherence system: helping others. “My grandmother was always a very caring, a very loving person. I think it influenced life as far as caring about other people. I know she did.” Bill’s grandparents seemed to serve as a refuge not only for Bill but for many of the neighborhood children as well. “My grandparents used to take the whole neighborhood-the kids- to Camp Bayside Park for the summer down there.
The whole summer they would hang around there at our house.” It is obvious the impact this had on Bill when listening to his descriptions of parenting his own children and interacting with the neighborhood children.

It is something about kids. I don’t know. Young and old I can handle all of them. We would have all the kids in the neighborhood over at the pool. I would fix hamburgers and hotdogs for them or whatever. I would see kids all the time. A whole mess of them and they would all come over. It would be nothing to take 10 or 15 kids to the ball game or circus.

Throughout the years, Bill would sponsor innumerable sports teams in Summerfield and closely surrounding communities as well. Bill felt compelled to assist even if it meant sacrifice on his part. From county government to the local Save Our Streams, Devlin’s (Bill’s Business) provides assistance. Bill did, however, seem to be helping different people for different reasons. Helping those in his community was an obligation. He felt a sense of camaraderie with those he perceived to be “us” and pleasure when “they” needed his help. The definition of “us” and “them” is rooted entirely in class.

Such service activities also provide examples of Bill’s decision not to conform to other’s expectations and the right to act without defending or justifying his actions. Bill became involved in government programs as well as
environmental causes...hardly what was expected of the local, redneck junkyard owner. Many times such involvement was not only costly in terms of finances but required an enormous commitment of time as well. Bill frequently chooses to give away business services and to donate to community causes even when his financial situation is strained. He vehemently opposes any suggestion by friends, family or his girlfriend that such choices are unwise. The time he commits to community service is contested as well. His insistence that he be involved with every aspect of his business and make all pertinent decisions make his absence especially difficult.

Bill’s relationship with his parents and siblings provides additional insight. “I was the oldest. I was expected, you want your parents to be proud of you, try not to disappoint them”. Bill’s father was a police officer and his mother a housewife. Interestingly, he described his childhood as “nothing exciting” and “no thrill”. It made me wonder if he hadn’t spent part of his adult life looking for the thrill he’d somehow perceived as absent from his childhood. His recollections are of a serious mother who provided clean clothes and the same things to eat all the time. Bill’s description of his father and that side of
the family are more colorful and diverse. He acknowledged that “the Devlin
side is a little redneckish,” but he is proud of his family.

The story my father, (who was) the Irish whiskey drinker,
always told about my grandfather, (goes like this), the railroad
came through, and they would put telegraph poles,
they would run telegraph poles between Ellicott
City and Baltimore for the railroad. They put
telegraph poles on my grandfather’s property.
He ran out and grabbed the poles and threw them
down the hill. They went and gave him a bottle of
whiskey and he brought them back up. Then they
gave him a job too. He was on the first train that went
from Baltimore to Ellicott City.

His father, “the cop” was the “neighborhood disciplinarian.” “My father was
very opinionated. My father would give people a fit. He was a hard nose just
like Sean (brother)” While conceding that his father was not around a lot, “he
worked two jobs” Bill acknowledged a strong influence, “he kept me
straight”. It was his father who insisted that finishing high school was
required and the one who made clear that suffering the consequences was
part of making the wrong choices. “You knew better, he would always try to
explain things and give you a reason why you don’t do something. You don’t
do that because of this and if you do it that way I will bust your ass. The
alternative is you have to suffer the consequences.” Bill also credits his father
for being able to recognize when problems at school were not his fault and
acknowledging that they were “assholes”. Bill respected his father’s sense of fairness and his willingness to stand up for what was fair. As an example, Bill told how his father collected a summer’s pay for him and four friends when the carnival tried to cheat the twelve year olds out of their wages. Bill’s relationship with his father is the source of his notions of fairness, of being able to select what is best for you (whether you are right or wrong), and being willing to accept the consequences of one’s actions.

In Bill’s relationship with his mother and brothers one can begin to see hints of the social resistance that would later become a focus in Bill’s life. In several conversations, Bill’s mother she described the importance of obedience and willingness to follow rules to the family. She expected her sons to be honest and law abiding. She also described a strict form of discipline where unwelcome behavior met with immediate consequences. She described a family where the mother was the center. She participated actively in the boy’s daily lives. She had insisted that the boys and especially Bill, because he was the oldest and a large child, assist her in running the household. She described her son Joe as the most obedient as a child, but noted that as an adult he had been a great disappointment. She blamed much of this on his
poor selection of a wife. Her son, Sean, was described as similar to his father, spoiled by a paternal grandfather and as the most difficult. Discipline had done little to tame his wild behavior. As for Bill, he had been the dependable one. Certainly he had done his share of misbehaving, but he had been the one that had always been there. She had been able to count on him. Bill was also referred to as independent and able to look after himself. When the family had attended the local protestant church, Bill had refused to attend and she accepted decision viewing it as consistent with Bill’s independent nature. She did express strong disapproval of his selection of wives, and had only negative comments about all of them. She suggested that his only prerequisites in wife selection seemed to be “if they hung around”. She did hint at Bill’s reputation for liking women and noted “he is just like his…father” She blamed the boys’ father for many of their poor choices noting also that sex in their house was not something that had been discussed.

Bill enjoyed the closeness he felt with his brothers. They were a part of almost everything he did as a child. They also reinforced his growing sense of individuality and perceived superiority. Fighting and getting in trouble with
his brothers was an enjoyable past time. “We played and carried on and fought all the time. I can remember when Joe came after us with a butcher knife. We had to lock ourselves in the bathroom. He was a psycho. The two of them could never get the best of me.” Bill remembers him and Sean getting in the most trouble although he admitted that with the three boys, “we all had our own share”. Sean moved the family car into a neighbor’s yard and pushed his high chair through a picture window, but fires were reserved for Bill.

I was always fascinated by fire. Every night we would burn trash in a barrel. I volunteered for that all the time. I would play with matches. Go down and start this little fire. The next thing I know the whole damn woods are on fire. It was my birthday. I was supposed to get a baseball glove that year and I didn’t get it.

Bill especially enjoyed telling stories about his and brothers mischief.

Breaking the rules and getting away with it was especially pleasurable. He clearly understood the connection between his choices and the consequences they would bear. He also noted a willingness to accept those consequences.

Bill’s elementary and junior high school experiences were for the most part positive and reassuring. Summerfield, where he grew up was a small rural
community generally comprised of working class families similar to the Devlin’s. Bill repeatedly described his family as “poor, really poor”, explaining that they raised chickens and rabbits because they would not have been able to afford meat otherwise. It was with the children of these working class families that Bill attended both elementary and junior high school. It was with a sense of comfort that Bill noted, “you have the same group of people every year. It was a good group of people.” Bill acknowledged that several teachers had a strong influence on him.

My fifth grade teacher, Mr. David L. Masterson, he loved our class. Here he had been a fifth grade teacher all his life but he wanted to teach us sixth grade too. They let him teach us sixth grade. He wanted to teach us seventh grade and they would not let him do it. I mean he really wanted to teach us.

Bill enjoyed his time at Samuel Evans Junior High as well, especially since his love of fire could be further indulged.

They had split sessions which was great. I had the afternoon shift. We went to school from 12:00 to 4:00 which was good. In the morning I would go to the fire department and hang around out there. Then I could stay up till midnight and hang around the fire department. That was great. I didn’t learn a whole lot. I had fun.
Bill’s experiences in elementary and junior high school further defined his growing sense of self-worth and instilled a sense of pride about his peers and his community.

Thus far, Bill’s experiences at both home and school had been if not “thrilling” generally positive. His value as an individual was not questioned. His peers and friends came from a very similar background and his school and extended community (fire department) encouraged and welcomed him. Because of the homogeneous composition of the community, expectations for behavior were generally agreed upon by community members. Bill felt no sense of need to resist.

High school offered a rude awakening. “We got shipped off to Richmond Hill, 10th grade was miserable. They were down on us because we came from Samuel Evans and they had their thumb right on us.” Bill noted that not being with his peer group was especially difficult.

They were building Southern at that time so half of us went to Richmond Hill. That is when they march us off the bus and gave us the riot act. You are lower life. You are going to be under our thumb. If you screw up, you are going to be out of here. I mean they were right on us.
Confronted with a mandate from home to finish high school and a group of
“others” who made it clear that he was not one of them Bill spent
considerable time describing how he negotiated this situation, mainly
through resistance, and how he applied what he learned to his adult life.

It was a bunch of us that said, screw them, but
then you had a bunch of people that did change
to fit in with the Frats...to be them. To be someone
they weren’t. Over there, they called us Deaners
and we called them Frats. I’ve seen what a bunch
of phonies they were. I can remember going to
their houses in Avondale, big beautiful houses and
not a lick of furniture in their houses, none. A
mattress on the floor. I talked to them and they
would say their parents spent all the money to
buy the house and now we can’t afford no furniture,
just to live here. And we were the low class? That
was their interpretation. I come from a better class
of people. Nicer people, down to earth people.
Summerfield means so much to me. It challenged
me and it still does. They have nothing to
motivate them. Nothing that is sincere. They are
only fooling themselves.

Bill was firm in his decision not to become one of “them”. He was unwilling
to change to conform to someone else’s expectations. To conform would
mean being like one of them, a phony. It would mean a willingness to change
just to be like them. To conform with these people’s desires flew in the face of
all Bill’s past experiences and all he valued. The plan became… just out think
and out last them.

I am going to stick it out and mess with them.
Everybody has a button to push and you take and
sit back and you analyze it. It is all a game. So you
just out think them. Out think them no
matter what it is. Out last them. Know your
weaknesses and strengths and you apply gingerly
to the situation. You leave a lot for people to assume.
I learned that in high school.

Bill set out to analyze each teacher recognizing that he would need to know
what made each one happy if he were going to benefit himself.

This teacher, I would have to be here every day
and sit there and they will pass me. Okay. Another
teacher, just come on Friday and take the test. I
went and said, do I have to be here every day?
You figure out what makes them happy. They are
As unhappy with me as I am with them.

Bill also recognized that while open defiance would not be tolerated, he could
agitate them with little things. Although it was not allowed, Bill frequently
left school to treat his friends to lunch at Carrie’s, the carry-out in Westville 10
miles away, mentioning that the Richmond Hill crowd was content with the
local McDonalds. “Setting the fire alarm off, one night we broke into the
school. We always did things to agitate them.”
The experiences at Richmond Hill were something that Bill carried with him into adulthood. His interpretation of the situation as a class issue and his clear division of the world into “us’ and “them” shaped and defined how he saw both himself and the world and profoundly affected how he would choose to live his life. Bill’s choice to become what Hobsbawm referred to as a “primitive rebel” was made. Bill’s coherence system based on individual rights, which had been shaped in childhood experiences, came to fruition with his high school experience.

This is in me and a part of me now. It is not necessarily fuck them. I am just not going to let them fuck me. At least if you get fucked, it will have to feel good. It becomes a game after a while… They are phonies with me, you see what you get. Money has nothing to do with class. It is how to be real and sincere is class. It’s attitude. I have always been working class. I always will be. What is middle class anyway? It must be them. Anything other than working class is a phony. You are trying to be something you are not. Impressing people I don’t like it. I love where I live. I am going to do whatever I can to promote where I live. If you look at my trucks, the lettering on my trucks has Summerfield as big as Devlin’s on it.

Although Bill acknowledged that by 12th grade the Deaners were well in control of Richmond Hill, life did not get any simpler. Bill’s girlfriend Linda
was pregnant. Bill acknowledged the situation simply. “I got her pregnant. I was still in high school. I was seventeen when I got married. It was a dumb thing for me.” Bill was more than willing to admit a wrong choice, and was willing to suffer the consequences. Getting married and having Linda drop out of high school were the only choices Bill saw available. While his parents were not happy about this turn of events, they were nevertheless supportive and insured that he was able to finish high school. Bill moved his family to the Park Bay subdivision in Summerfield.

There was a change of events. I had another baby (Billy had been born on December 9, 1964). Craig was born in May of 1967. Here I was planning to go into business, building this tow truck. Working towards all that. My mother was going to be all alone. I used to stop and see my mother. She was taking the divorce (Bill’s parents had divorced in 1967) pretty hard. I go into the house and she was trying to hang herself. She put a belt up to the closet and tied it to the thing. I lifted her up and took it off. I said, I guess I am going to have to move back in and I did. At the time I was only twenty. It didn’t really set in, but we moved back in. That was one of those turning points that gives me a different perspective. My mother took it really hard. I don’t want to take things that hard. I would never want to take my life or anything. Look for everyday. Nothing is forever. It is not worth hanging around being miserable if it is going to make you kill yourself over it. Move on. Get over it. I think seeing my mother do that, it is not worth it. At that time is when I became close to my mother. I actually
sort of forgot about it and it came back.

Recalling this experience, Bill illustrates his philosophy of judging what is best for him and having the right to have his own feelings, opinions and desires. If Bill was unhappy, he would be moving on. He was unwilling to be so strongly tied to another individual. Yet he was also willing to move home to take care of his depressed mother even though he had his own young family to care for. It was after moving back to his mother’s house that Bill decided to start Devlin’s Towing in 1967.

I was 20 years old with two kids. I worked two jobs. I was working at the gas station in Glen Burnie and then I was working at Mains. There was an Esso Station there. I said there was a need for a tow truck around here. No body has one. I should do that. Yea, I think that would work. I can make a living off that. What do I have to lose? I’m 20. If I lose everything, I am still a young guy. So I saved my money and bought this used tow truck and then I quit the gas station. When I quit the gas station, I think I had $300.00 in the bank. That is all the money I had in the world.

Bill recalled with amusement that when he quit his job he was told he would be back. Thirty five years later, he is still operating his own business. Having built a small garage Bill spent the time at his mothers’ expanding his business. “It just mushroomed.” The business became what Bill called one of his obsessions. He would work 18 hours a day, many times seven days a
week, but not because of money. “I enjoyed it. I was never motivated by money. I wanted to be the best. I was having a good time showing people up.” Bill’s office has always been above a garage where he conducts the messier side of the parts business. Cluttered, dusty and disorganized the office walls are lined with every award he has ever received proudly framed and displayed. Mixed among the awards are pictures of his children, mementos from his childhood and gifts the children have made at school. Conspicuously absent are any photographs of his wives or in fact photographs of any women. “

“Do it better, bigger and be successful at it” was Bill’s business goal. Having never run a business before, Bill relied on what he called common sense to guide his business expansion. “Figuring where the market is, who to go after? Provide good service, good price, name recognition. Get your name out there. Everybody knew me as “Billy Tow Truck”. Business is basically common sense.”

Bill’s business activities provide another means to explore his coherence system and attempts at social resistance. As hi-lighted by the comments of his
employer, a young man with a family to support was not expected to launch
a business. A man with no business experience at all was certainly not
expected to run much less expand a successful business. Bill admitted that
showing these people that he could be a success was a primary motivation.
Comparing it to his experiences in high school, Bill said he enjoyed “showing
up” those who doubted him. Social resistance was at the root of Bill’s
motivation to start and manage a successful business.

After moving home with his family, Bill availed himself of other
opportunities as well, namely a woman he called Boots.

I saw Boots for seven years. That is a long time.
I was twenty four. She was an older woman.
She was beautiful. She belonged in a centerfold.
There was nothing hidden. My wife
knew about it. My kids would go down her house.
Everybody knew what was going on. It made it easier.
Her husband knew about it. This guy was a real nut.
The sign I used to have on 100. He went and shot it all
up. I didn’t press charges.

It was interesting to me that at first Bill did not acknowledge this
arrangement as somewhat unorthodox. In fact it seemed so well integrated
into the family’s experience that the family’s pet cat was christened Booty.

“Booty, she (Linda) named it after my girlfriend. The girl I was running
around with was named Boots. So they called the cat Booty. She was a neat cat, if she liked you. This cat had 52 kittens. Everybody wanted a kitten. She was moody.” It was only in later discussions that Bill acknowledged that the relationship had caused something of a scandal because of its openness and had also earned him much of his reputation as a “ladies man”. It became clear that both Bill’s decision to have the affair and to conduct it in such an open manner was tied to both a coherence system based on individual rights and rejection of the social rules which required such activities to be conducted discretely.

Sensing that his mother was all right, Bill moved his family to the business’ current location on State Blvd in 1972 having stayed with his mother for five years. Bill had managed to obtain three tow licenses that gave him a monopoly in the Summerfield and surrounding area. At the new location, Bill expanded his towing business to include used auto part sales. A license to sell parts had come with the property along with a pony that Bill had not really wanted. At first, Bill was not interested in used auto parts. He gave away the stock that was on the site when he arrived and continued to
give away the scrap vehicles he towed. Things changed when one of the local yards tried to charge him for a part that was off a vehicle he had given them. Such actions were in direct conflict with Bill’s notion of fairness. He had been more than fair in giving away vehicles he did not want and in turn he expected to be treated as fairly as others. Soon part sales became a large part of Devlin’s business.

Part sales presented another problem. Theft was a problem. As towers, Bill and his brother Sean, who eventually decided to work with his brother, had routinely handled what they referred to as “unhappy customers” in their own fashion.

One time we towed a wedding. The whole wedding procession was drunk and the police came and locked the bride and groom up. The police said, tow these two cars. We towed two cars. One was full of wedding gifts. Rascal, a driver, was towing and he said (on the radio) I am coming up the road 100 miles an hour and they are still on my tail. There is about 20 of them. Rascal pulls in. Sean and I were there with tire irons and guns. Then they just left. If we called the police and told them we needed help, they would send 10 cars. Cause if we call for help, they knew we were in trouble.

Auto part theft was dealt with in a similar manner. “We were shooting at people and the word was out. You don’t go to Devlin’s to steal. Those people
are nuts over there.” Sean and Bill became particularly close. Bill noted that although they continued to fight all the time, many times resorting to brawls on the parking lot, their devotion to one another was understood. “Sean and I would almost kill for each other.” Clearly, Bill was willing and to do what he felt in his best interest and was willing to suffer any consequences associated with his actions. The manner in which he chose to deal with a common problem, theft and unhappy customers, also suggests an obvious resistance to following more socially acceptable and conventional methods.

The new location bought other changes as well. Bill and Linda divorced and Bill married Katie.

I was into the business and I don’t know what she was into, but we sort of had different goals I guess. I don’t think she had any goals other than parting (separating). Cause she was the one who fixed me up with my second. We went on vacation, the three of us. That was rather unique. They were bowling together. My first wife wanted to go out and party and decided to fix me up with her(friend) Katie. One’s birthday was July 19th and the other’s was July 20th so I took them both out to dinner for their birthday. Then we went on vacation and the rest is history. I thought it was a step up. The second wife had a little more class, more intelligence.
Again Bill at first failed to acknowledge that his experience was somewhat unorthodox. One generally does not take a wife and girl friend on vacation or consolidate birthday celebrations. Nor does a husband allow his wife to set him up on dates. Bill’s body language including the smirk on his face did, however, belie his own amusement in telling the story and recognizing the reaction it would generate. In subsequent conversations, Bill also acknowledged pleasure in breaking rules including what he perceived as society’s attempts to limit his choices. He also acknowledged pleasure in watching people’s reactions to his rule breaking.

With Katie came her two sons, Michael and Jamie. Bill says that Jamie’s relationship with him became closer than that with his birth father.

Jamie did not have self confidence or self esteem and I sort of pumped him up and made him feel good about himself. We are real close. I could call Jamie right now and say I need help and he would come right over. He is funny. He is a story teller, who puts sound effects in every story he tells. He was going into elementary school when Katie and I married. If I had left it up to Jamie’s mom, she would have made a sissy out of him. I would say, “come on Jamie we are going to ride mini bikes.” His mom would say, “no, you’re going to kill yourself.” “He might get a little bruised up. Don’t worry about it.” I made them tough. She wanted to make a sissy out of them.
Bill does not seem to distinguish between his biological children and his step children. His willingness to love and protect his step sons was as strong as his devotion to his own sons. In fact, he noted with discouragement the effect his first wife had on Billy and Craig. “They were very much influenced by their mother, unfortunately. Bad thing. She would encourage them to quit school rather than finish. She didn’t finish high school.” Bill’s relationship with his children is an interesting one. Although most of his children are grown, he appears to feel a bond and responsibility to them that one might expect only in younger children. The Devlin children have their own reputation of being rebellious. Admitting that drugs, liberal attitudes about sex and the occasional criminal act have all been problems, Bill is nevertheless unquestionably the proud parent. In fact, Bill recounts with pride Little Billy’s ability to steal his mother’s new car and out-run the police on the highway when he was a young teenager without a driver’s license. Meeting all the children and getting to know most of them, one cannot help but see hints of Bill’s strong personality and self confidence in each one. When asked what he had tried to instill in each child Bill responded, “If you put your mind to it you can be and do anything you want to do.” Bill judges his children by standards different from those of the mainstream. Bill appears proud of their
willingness to question authority even when it is his. Bill is proud of their
willingness to speak up for themselves and admits that none of his children
could be called shy. Undoubtedly, such confrontations with authority have
not been without consequences and he is quick to point them out.

After his marriage to Katie, Bill became committed to running a used parts
business, and to making it bigger and better than anyone else’s. The junkyard
business was a close knit group and not open to a young outsider filled with
new ideas and a desire to be better than the next guy. To run a successful
business, you needed to be on the line (basically an open, telephone party line
where the junkyards could call one another as a parts exchange) and Isaac
Stein, both the owner of the line and an enormously successful local junkyard
owner, would not let Bill on the line.

Them not letting me on the line, when you don’t
let me do something and give me a challenge and
I say “alright, another opportunity to beat the
establishment, to prove that you are better”. A group
of people started the Advance line, which was in
competition with Isaac. Isaac would not let Roger
Wilson on the line either. So Roger came to me and
there was a bunch of them down there, Rocky
Mason and all of them formed the Advance line. When
we got that going, we put Isaac’s first line out of
business. He was gone. When I joined VRA,
the Vehicle Truck Recyclers Association,
the association sort of opened your mind to a lot of
different things. A trade association, you see what
everyone is doing, gives you ideas. When I became
president of VRA, the first year I put Isaac’s
second line out of business. That is why Isaac
doesn’t like me. He is a piece of shit. Isaac was
greedy. He is a cut throat.

Once again, Bill was confronted with a situation that conflicted with his
coherece system, which required that he be treated fairly. When he
perceived he was treated unfairly, he refused to accept the situation and
reacted strongly by starting his own line. Additionally, Bill saw it as a
personal attack and was not satisfied until he had driven his competitor out
of business.

As a member and president of VRA, Bill had the opportunity to travel all
over the state as well as to become involved in the political side of the
organization lobbying for and crafting legislation that would benefit the
recycling industry.

I had only been there three or four months and
they said that they needed me on the legislative
committee. “We have problems in Queen Caroline
County,” and I said “OK.” So they take me to The State Capitol
and there is this hearing going on. That is your man
sitting up there. His name is Delegate Tony Thomas.
We have a little bit of a problem with him. I said OK.
We (VRA) were trying to redefine the legal
definition of a recycler and a couple of other things. Well Isaac Stein goes over and whispers something in Mr. Thomas’ ear. The next thing I know, Thomas stands up reading everyone from the association the riot act and telling us what low lives we were and how there was no way these bills were going to pass. He was crucifying us. I said, “man, this is my guy and I am supposed to do something with him? Shoo.” Then the hearing was over and they said “you gotta go and straighten this guy (Thomas) out”. “What do you mean I gotta go straighten this guy out?” I said, “there ain’t no way” So I go up and bang on Thomas’s door and say I am Bill Devlin. I am in your district. I am a recycler and I really need your support on these bills. And he put his arm around my shoulder and said, “I am sorry sonny. I am already committed to the other side. There is nothing I can do. See you later”. So I walked out, walked down the hall and said, “Damn that didn’t go very well did it? Let me try a different approach”. I was thinking this man told me to get the hell out. It was like stuff it up yours. It’s like the redneck came out when I thought wait, let me try the redneck approach. It was like yea, let’s try a different approach. So I turned around and went back and said, “Mr. Thomas I need to say one more thing to you”. I said, “you know I am in your district and you know if you don’t support these bills I am going to tell everyone I know. I have a lot of family and I am going to tell everybody in the next election to support anybody but you. I will work pretty hard to make sure you don’t get elected if you can’t support me”. Then he puts his arm around me and said, “wait a minute sonny, we need to talk about this”. Then he took me up to the Main Street Tavern and introduced me to the committee. I never met this man before in my life and he went right down the row and said, “this is Bill Devlin. He is a friend and we have to support this bill”. Then that afternoon
they voted on the bill and the bill won. I said, Damn. This is fun.”

Bill had managed to beat “them” again and managed to get himself hooked on politics as well. Here, again, we can catch a glimpse of the world through Bill’s cultural lens, which divides the world into “us” and “them”. Bill was willing to call on “us” in order to convince “them” to do something he wanted. In the same fashion, he reminded “them” of the power “us’ yielded.

While at first glance politics might seem an unlikely arena for such a “rebel.” Duncombe suggests that politics is the mature fruition of the seeds of resistance. While resistance alone can protest the wrongs of the world, it is politics where the action or correction can take place. Perceiving himself as someone on the outside, someone who was shut out, it is easy to understand the appeal that such success had on Bill. “That is another gift I think I have. I have this ability to go in and convince people.” It was rewarding to be able to effect change.

Under Bill’s leadership, his business flourished as did the VRA. Membership was way up and they were making over $30,000 a year profit off the line.

What had been a shaky organization whose existence was doubtful was now solid. But success was not without cost.
It cost me a marriage. I sort of had become obsessed but I learned a lot, visited a lot of yards. I had seen their mistakes and I thought I would do it different. I gained a lot of information and I used it to build. I would take at least one day a week and travel all over the state and sometimes I would go to Western Maryland and Katie thought I was doing something else and she left me.

As part of the divorce settlement, Katie got the store that Bill’s Dad had operated. Mentioning that she had already gotten a house from her first husband, Bill noted that it was the only thing they had without a mortgage. Reflecting back, Bill refers to Katie as a gold digger. “One night in the middle of making whoopee she said, Do you really own all that? I didn’t think too much of it till later. Somebody wants to talk dirty. She wanted to talk assets.” I thought it interesting that Bill chose to reflect on his marriage this way. While he was willing to admit he had made a mistake in that he had misjudged Katie, he was not willing to place the blame on himself in considering how his actions may have been at the center of the marriage’s failure. Rather he constructed the divorce much as one would expect from a person whose coherence system is based on individual rights.

Bill acknowledged his divorce from Katie as a turning point.
I stayed in Seaside (an ocean resort) for a year. I think that was my midlife crisis. I was about 40. I did absolutely nothing. I would come up on Friday and sign paychecks. I had everything paid for.

I didn’t owe no money. I said this is boring. I need a challenge. I was going to build the best yard in the state and that was what I decided to do.

Bill had managed to find other diversions noting Joyce, a girlfriend of an employee, as a partner. I found Bill’s choice of a girlfriend a bit odd. Stealing an employee’s girlfriend certainly would not foster good employee relations and I had trouble believing that his choices were so limited that only Joyce had been willing. When I questioned him he responded, “It didn’t go over well. That was one of my dumb moves. Lust is all that was.” Bill’s body language and tone of voice however, again belied his amusement. Once again, I could not help but wonder if there was not more purpose to his choice. Bill enjoyed breaking the rules. The act of stealing the girlfriend as well as the attention it would have obviously attracted may have provided more reward than the girl herself.

In 1986, he met his third wife Debbie. Debbie would, “laugh, joke and cut up, she can be a real good person.” It was with an obvious sense of disappointment that Bill also noted, “she can be a real mean person. She
changed. She was alright until she started doing drugs.” With Debbie came Andrew, his stepson, Whitney, a daughter, whom he adopted, and Nicholas, his youngest son. As usual, the children brought Bill enormous pleasure.

Andrew, however, was a challenge.

I always tried to be there for Andrew as much as I could. It is kinda hard to get close to him. He had a rough life. Andrew was with his real Dad for the first couple of years. I did not have the influence over him that I had over Michael and Jamie. Whitney doesn’t know whether I am her father or not. I adopted her. But she is a lot like me. She is a lot like her mom.

Bill noted a special bond with Nicholas and Whitney. He had an opportunity to develop a closeness he had not had with his other children.

Nicholas being born was the most rewarding. I was there in the delivery room and got to cut the umbilical cord and all that. Nicholas is only 14. He is probably most like me. In his school work, he gets by with only what he can get by with. His personality is a lot like mine, smart, a little conniving. He looks like me and is built like me.

Bill noted special pleasure in his relationship with Whitney, his only daughter. She offered a different experience from the boys.

As Bill continued to be involved with his children, his business evolved into the success he had envisioned. His business was nationally recognized for
excellence within the industry in 1993. “It was 1986 to 1990, we were rolling. We were on top.” Bill also diversified the business adding a roll-off disposal, component as well as rental properties to his list of business ventures. Reaching his goal meant a return to boredom and the need to find something new to master.

Bill had long been associated with the local county councilman, Bobby Duncan, and had reaped the benefits of that relationship. In 1994, Bobby lost the election to Porter King and Bill had himself an enemy.

Porter King got in office and started messing with us. He sent every agency, every inspector. It was like that for anyone who had supported Duncan, messing with everybody. He had everybody out looking for something. The only problem was the zoning. Geesh. Which was a bunch of crap. They singled people out. But OK. We will play this out (and wait them out, like always). I stuck with it and when we got to court, I would know I got them. We got to court just in time, when I got elected. What timing.

It struck me how similarly Bill described this circumstance with his experience at Richmond Hill. He felt singled out and unfairly treated. He described the manner in which he dealt with this situation in almost the exact words that he had used to describe his high school experiences. I also found it
striking that he once again chose to resist rather than to simply try and get along.

Already bitten by the political bug, what Porter King had not counted on was Bill Devlin’s decision to beat him in the next election. Once again the rebel’s seeds of resistance were coming to fruition through politics.

It was me, Hulk, a lot of people from Bobby’s organization, Mason Williams. We started talking and everybody said, “why don’t you run?” We were going to run Lillian Smithson, but we did the numbers and she couldn’t. She had pissed a lot of people off. I said, “I don’t want to run. I have always been behind the scenes”. Lillian got a little mad, but I could not get any support for her. Then I said, “why don’t I run?” And that was it.

Bill’s family’s reactions to his decision to run were mixed. Debbie had not been consulted. His mother was very critical. Although she was supportive, she had seen how politics played into Bill’s father’s job and was not thrilled to have her son in the midst of it. Bill acknowledged, however, “She was there every time I needed her. She was right there.”

In my own conversations with Bill’s mother I noted with interest just how opposed she is to his political activity. She blamed his current financial
There was no way I should have beaten Porter King because it was a Republican year. He was an incumbent.
Councilman and there was no way this redneck, junkyard, tow truck operator from Summerfield should beat him. But I did. I ran the whole campaign. I wrote every article. I laid them all out. I did it all myself. I said, this is what we are going to do. The T.V. commercials, I wrote them. I edited them and did it all myself. For a council campaign, I raised a quarter of a million dollars. That was unheard of.

It was only later that I came to realize how this statement was untrue.

Bill had made the campaign his alone failing to acknowledge the contribution or expertise of those who surrounded him. Devoted campaign workers had assisted with much of the literature and a local sign contractor had actually designed the campaign signs for Bill’s approval.

Bill’s political signs distinctively red with green grass advertising “the home grown candidate” were especially effective. Part of Bill’s recognition was that of the hometown boy made good and the signs capitalized on that perception. The signs were designed by Bill who joked that everyone thought he was making a reference to drugs. Posted all over the district and beyond, the signs were even recognized by the local newspaper for their attractive appeal. His political success and favorable portrayal in the press further confirmed his sense of self-worth and success.
Bill enjoyed his term as a councilman. “I enjoyed politics. It was like a drug. I was obsessed with it. It was like a drug, politics. I stayed high on it all the time, couldn’t get enough of it. You know I was good at it.” If a review of Bill’s legislative and capital projects records were the sole judge, Bill was unquestionably a success. Citing numerous examples of common sense zoning bills, amusing, given his long past of being at odds with that agency, and a long list of capital projects that were secured for the district, Bill accomplished much during his four year term. Not surprisingly, Bill used this opportunity to get back at those whom he perceived as treating him unfairly and those he thought saw Summerfield as beneath them.

There was this big rift. I was trying to do the indoor soccer and the team (from Richmond Hill), I still have the newspaper article, they wanted to know why Summerfield was getting the indoor soccer instead of them. “We are better and we should get it”. I said, “yea right”. When I did stuff like that, I would say “yea, Summerfield is better”. That’s how I would get my digs in at them.

It is not surprising that Bill enjoyed his political activity. While previously only able to resist their rules, Bill clearly availed himself of the opportunity to correct what he believed to be slights against himself and his hometown. He enjoyed being the one making the rules, rules that could benefit “us”.

Hobsbawn in *Primitive Rebels* argues that the primitive rebel’s responses are
usually futile. Bill’s successful political activities offer a contrast to that argument.

What Bill failed to anticipate or manage was the attack launched by his political opponents. Particularly bothersome was his inability to deal with continued attacks in the press that covered a variety of topics from his financial problems to a related dispute with his ex-wife Katie. Bill refused to acknowledge what many considered his political downfall. Bill strongly supported locating a NASCAR track in Summerfield. Public sentiment as reported in the press was strongly against the project. Bill maintains that the project had support and was portrayed incorrectly in the newspaper. Bill was able to pass the legislation allowing the location of the track within the district. Bill felt strongly that the track would provide a revenue base for the county and could be managed so as to not interfere with the community’s quality of life. The local press reported his actions as contrary to the wishes of the district. Again, Bill rejects this view insisting the project had support but was halted by a very vocal minority. This example provides interesting insight into a politician who has a coherence system strongly based on individual rights. While unquestionably wanting the best for Summerfield,
Bill has difficulty seeing and addressing perspectives different from his own. Others frequently view this behavior as unyielding or self centered, not something becoming to a politician. One wonders how much of Bill’s behavior was based on some attempt to model his behavior after the benevolent, good old boy politician of the old South. Bill lost the primary in the next election. Bill insists he could have won if he had tried. He noted that it was the only thing he had ever done where he had not tried his best. His financial problems having grown too great, he simply could not afford to be away from the business any longer.

Bill acknowledged the consequences of his political obsession. “I paid dearly during that time. Like a million dollars.” The business, left to his wife, Debbie’s care, had not fared well in Bill’s absence. Things were not going well between Bill and Debbie either, “I would go in her office and say well what do you think?” Immediately she would say, “I don’t have the time right now”. People change and they go in opposite directions. So you do what you gotta do. Madelyn seemed to be what Bill had to do.

I had known her a long time. She is really my third cousin. She was very outspoken and outgoing and always laughing and carrying on and joking. It
was at that point all the crap was going on and Debbie was spending all her time away. Just to be around someone who was laughing and carrying on. It was company. She wasn’t happy in her marriage and I was not in mine. When you are not happy in your marriage and you are with someone else, everybody thinks sex and not thinking the real thing is just a companion. Someone filling in the empty space in your personal life. Something is lacking and you find that in another person. Even though it is not totally the right situation.

Once again, when confronted with a problem Bill chooses to respond based upon what he felt was best for him. He recognized that his choice to engage in extramarital affairs was not socially acceptable, “everybody else thinks sex… it is not the totally right situation”, but chose to justify his actions based on his own needs “It was company…someone filling the empty space in your personal life.” Bill continued to defy social convention and pursue life choices based upon his coherence system.

Bill was happy to put politics aside, for the time, and return to private life.

Bill’s return to private life was for a time well documented by a continuing, very public rendering in the local paper of his dispute with Katie and continuing financial problems. He sold the parts division of his business and continues to struggle to reorganize and restructure his towing business.

“Financially I am struggling. Even if we are poor as church mice, we will be
all right. You do want to feel a little more secure. You can make more choices with money.” Bill mentioned that he would like to start a new business, a restaurant and bar. Well recognized as an excellent cook among family and friends and enjoying the companionship of many people Bill thought a restaurant would be fun. Bill seemed to be making plans for the future and a life without politics. Margie is also a part of Bill’s life now.

She is a good partner. We never have words. We compliment each other at work. We work together all day and we can leave here and go have a drink and laugh and carry on...I think we both have the outlook lets be happy today and hope for the best. Hopefully, we will be together forever.

It is interesting to note that shortly after this interview Bill began an affair with another women citing his fondness for multiple partners.

What Bill fails to mention is that Margie’s very presence has served as a source of conflict. Margie is his wife Debbie’s sister, and Margie’s relationship with Bill has not been warmly received by his and Debbie’s children. Interestingly, this is another instance where Bill seems to have escaped the consequences of his choices. The children seem disproportionately upset with Margie in comparison with Bill.
In his personal relationships, Bill’s coherence system is evident. Bill’s choices are based on his own needs, and feelings and he is not willing to follow anyone else’s rules if he feels they limit his choices. Mistresses, distant relatives, and employee’s girlfriends are not generally considered acceptable partners, but Bill made those choices anyway.

They (society) may send it (messages about who is acceptable as a partner and who is not) but I don’t listen to it. It exists, but people should not listen to it. It is what makes you feel good. I don’t worry about what everybody thinks. It is what I think and what I feel. Gets me in a lot of trouble sometimes. I can’t do something, not that I say its right or wrong, but that I don’t think about it is what makes me happy. That whole group of people out there, I am not going to make them happy. No, it is what makes me and my partner happy. Screw them, not screw them, if they can’t handle it, it is their problem not mine. They are not living my life. They are not paying my bills. Date my cousin, live with my sister-in-law.

Not entirely surprising was Bill’s announcement in the summer of 2002 that he had decided to return to politics. What was a surprise was the manner he chose to do so. After announcing to friends rather unceremoniously at a concert that he needed to tan because he was going to be a candidate, he entered the race for his old council seat only a few months before the primary. During a last minute shuffle at the Board of Elections on the night of
the deadline to file, I became his treasurer. Although Bill seemed to enjoy the race, the immersion that he had described with his previous campaign was absent. Bill made only a few public appearances and helped author only one pamphlet. Bill did put enormous effort into his signs insuring that they blanketed the district in the best locations. When my involvement with the campaign cost me my job, Bill was supportive but reminded me that he had warned me that the decision would not be viewed favorably and I was stuck living the consequences. He frequently reminded me that I needed to only wait and that the situation would eventually improve. I could outlast them. I recognized these words from his own past experiences. It was only evident after his loss in the primary just how complex Bill’s political plans were. Immediate support was given to the Republican opponent, Tim Aiken, the opponent Bill had refused to attack in the primary where his age and total lack of experience could have been issues. All Bill’s sign locations were given to Tim and Bill now actively wrote letters to his own supporters and business contacts supporting Tim’s campaign. Later, Bill gave to Tim much of the research he had amassed against the Democratic opponent, which had not been used at Bill’s insistence. When Tim won the General Election in November, Bill had truly won. The Republican Party, whom he had
alienated when he ran as a Democrat, now respected and admired his hard work on Tim’s behalf. His ability to connect with the citizenry was reaffirmed by his ability to fundraise, secure sign locations and his ability to target an opponent’s weak spot was recognized. Bill had laid the ground work for future campaigns, which would need the full support of the party in order to win.

Much of Bill’s current activity focuses on his return to the political arena. Elected president of the local business association, he enjoys the platform and opportunity the organization provides. The organization, of which he had previously been president, had suffered from declining membership and morale. Bill’s nomination for the presidency, essentially a no confidence vote in the current president, was enthusiastically received by the membership who unanimously voted him into office. Bill immediately began a membership drive and demolished an old building on the site of the organization’s new headquarters. He announced a spring groundbreaking for the new building. What was not common knowledge was that the demolition permit had expired and he refused to have it renewed. Also, the new structures building permits are not yet approved. Bill enjoyed holding a party and inviting the
press to cover the event knowing that he was violating county code. The
membership, even those who are aware of his unorthodox methods, at first
loudly praised his actions and take-charge attitude. It soon became obvious to
many, however, that he was alienating much of the membership and failing
to accomplish much of what he promised. Much of the recent press he has
received has been favorable…something he relishes. Bill also attempted and
ultimately failed to reorganize a group of NASCAR fans hoping to further
solidify a political base. In addition, Bill notes that he needs to organize a
class reunion mentioning off-handedly that his class-mates will have children
who vote. Much of Bill’s attention has returned to the political action he so
enjoys.

Reflecting on Bill Devlin’s life, one might consider upon what insight it
provides in better understanding those who chose to live outside the
mainstream culture and appear to reject many of society’s norms and values.
Bill’s life seems to be guided by a specific set of rules which place the
individual and his rights, wants and needs at the center while also mixing in
a strong level of concern for his own family and community. Bill’s behavior
be it a business undertaking, a personal relationship or a political campaign,

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focuses on validating his own feelings, refusing to conform to other’s expectations and demanding what he perceives as fair treatment for himself and his people. Bill’s childhood provided the basis for a strong sense of individual worth and care for others. The oldest son, he was required by his mother early in his childhood to be responsible for helping care for his siblings and assisting her in household chores. Doting grandparents obviously showered attention on him and increased his sense of self worth. Many of Bill’s activities focus on attempts to correct what he perceives as past unfair treatment. His political activities provide an excellent example. It was only when an encounter in high school challenged this sense of self worth that he chose to resist. Bill openly chose to resist the rules of those he considered his oppressor. He views the world through a cultural lens which clearly divides the world into “us” and “them”. Bill’s definition of “them” seems to follow along class lines. Anyone perceived as other than working class is labeled “them” and it is his choice to live in opposition to the norms set by “them”. Bill’s choice of partners in personal relationships would most clearly indicate a recognition and rejection of society’s values and norms. Bill’s interest in politics appears to be an outgrowth of his resistance. He views politics as a manner in which to affect change and punish “them” for
past wrongs. Bill continues to be guided by his coherence system as he pursues his own agenda. Driven by a sense of self worth and an obligation to support those he considers to be “one of us”, Bill lives his life resisting the norms and values of people of the mainstream culture he labels “them”.

Chapter 3, Expressions of Masculinity & Perceived Class Discrimination
“It’s because you are a boy,” I explained. “I think I qualify as a man,” was
Bill’s quick reply. “In my world you are either a girl or a boy, and you are
definitely a boy,” I answered. So went one of our many exchanges.
Although typical of our exchanges, there was something about his comment
that made a bell go off in my head. It had been two years since I began my
research with Bill and while I felt that I had collected most of his life story
something was lacking in my interpretation and understanding. I had
understood that his perceptions of class oppression had served as the source
of much of his adult behavior, but I knew that something else was happening.
Something was missing and I knew that it involved how he saw himself as a
man and how he chose to publicly express that construction. I wasn’t the only
one who noticed it either. Other people knew that he was doing something
different. At the hospital, a friend of his who had come to visit asked that I
“make sure he’s decent. I know all of Summerfield has seen it, but I don’t
want to.” His son in noticing that Bill’s office door was locked confided to me
“he must be doing something”. Even a clerk in a store who knew Bill
cautioned me that “he’s led by his dick” not typical comment from friends
and family. I watched as people referred to him as “cowboy” and the “boss” terms that would offend some but which Bill embraced.

Bill himself had mentioned the role of gender in his life. When I mentioned that being a man had afforded him privileges I had not received, he said he had carefully used the fact that he was male and if he had been a woman he would have used that to his advantage as well. In fact, he believed it may have been better to be a woman as he could have used that position to his advantage.

Conversely Bill saw race as having little impact on his life. He said that he saw no privilege in his whiteness. Contrary to any stereotypical construction of redneck, Bill never expressed any racist sentiments. His employees were racially diversified and he expressed pride in the diversity of his customers noting proudly, “they come here because I treat everybody the same.”

It was his “I am a man” comment that made me consider: how he sees himself as a man. How would that construction play out and be visible to others and where did his notions of masculinity come from? It would be the answers to these questions I believed that would offer additional insight into many of his
choices. This is not to suggest that defining his masculinity or linking it to his choices will conflict with the class oppression explanations, rather his notions of masculinity will be entwined with his notions of class oppression and possibly another reaction to it.

Power. That is where most texts start when addressing masculinity. The male preoccupation with power is addressed in many ways depending on the text. Be it a biological propensity towards power, a socially constructed tendency because of socialization or the influence of Capitalism and the break down of social order, power is always a factor. Oppression also factors in as well. Men oppress women it is suggested. That is what it means to be a man.

Power argues Hearn and Collison in *Theorizing Unities and Differences Between Men and Between Masculinities* is not simply limited to domination over women. Nor, they argue is there one masculinity that defines all men. Masculinity, they argue, is a power relation. Michael Kaufman in *Men Feminism, and Men’s Contradictory Experiences of Power* continues that argument and suggests that there is “no single masculinity although there are hegemonic and subordinate forms of masculinity. These forms are based on
men’s social power...”

His argument rests upon the supposition that gender is socially constructed and distinct from biological sex, a position that is adopted for this research as well. Kaufman goes on to recognize the disparity in power between groups of men and suggests “Patriarchy exists as a system not simply of men’s power over women but also of hierarchies of power among different groups of men and between different masculinities.” The images that each of these different groups conjures up is related to the possibilities and the tools that those particular men will have to exercise power.”

If one is to accept that masculinity is a power relation and that the definition of being a man is found in the exercise of that power, one must accept the notion that gender is distinct and separate from biologically determined sex. Being a male is not wholly and exhaustively determined by the possession of a penis. Judith Butler in Gender Trouble expands the notion of gender arguing that gender goes beyond a social construct and is rather a type of performance or a series of signs that reveals who we are. This theory of gender argues that it is not a fixed attribute but rather a fluid one subject to change and personal interpretation. The hegemonic expressions of gender are
so ingrained, claims Butler that they have taken on the appearance of the
natural i.e. biological. Butler’s work also grants agency to the “performer”
regarding gender. The performer chooses what form the performance will
take and allows for subversive action as a protest of the status quo.27

Considering the above theories of masculinity and gender one might expect
that Bill’s view of himself as a man and his expression of that notion of
masculinity will rest on his experiences with power and his proclivity to act
subversively. Bill’s most significant encounter with power has been is
confrontation with class oppression. Considering the intersection of gender
and class one must return to Charlotte Linde’s notion of coherence systems, a
means for understanding, evaluating and constructing experiences, a guide to
predict future behavior.28 Bill’s own coherence system as previously detailed
contains a strong reliance on individual power: one is entitled to make
choices based on one’s own desires, fairness in relation to equality of
treatment is important and since the individuals’ own needs and desires are
placed first you do not have to conform to other’s expectations for you.
Bill’s definition of himself as a man and his own expression of masculinity are, I believe, related directly to his experiences with power as a member of a subordinate group (working class). Such subordination is in direct conflict with his own coherence system and as such, much as Kauffman described, he uses the tools available to him, in this case his masculinity, to express the power that was denied to him in other cultural settings. Much as Butler describes Bill’s propensity towards social resistance is an expression of his desire to change or resist the dominant social structure.

Why wouldn’t Bill simply reject any dominant notion of masculinity as an exercise of power? Bill’s rejection of some of the hegemonic constructions and expressions of gender but not others is best explained by Tony Whitehead’s model of masculinity. In The Big Man/Little Man Complex: An American Construct of Masculinity in Cross Cultural Context, Whitehead suggest that bigness, achieved through expressions of strength and goodness, is a masculine goal. For my purposes, I interpret Whitehead’s notion of Bigness to be an expression of power. One expresses strength through a combination of respectability and reputation. Expressions of respectability may be considered as agreeing with the social order such as a man acting as the
economic provider. Expressions of reputation act in contrast to the social order and may include expressions of cultural resistance such as illicit sexual behavior. Goodness addresses high moral and ethical principles and a focus on the social good. Goodness could be expressed through loyalty to one's family, and obeying the law. Interestingly, some of the expressions of goodness may be in conflict with expressions of reputation. It is however balance which is key to this model. One must maintain balance between respectability and reputation as well as strength and goodness in order to be viewed as Big (powerful). If one veers too far in one direction, for instance failing to provide for one's family because of time spent in illicit sexual behavior, and if this becomes public knowledge, an individual risks being classified as weak. Such behavior would also reflect on others' interpretation of his goodness considering his lack of loyalty to his wife. Conversely, a man who spent all his time with his family, obeyed all laws and functioned at the highest level of ethical behavior would be lacking reputation and could also be classified as weak and thus Small. Balance is central in this theory. If an individual wants to express Bigness or power, he must maintain a balance between strength (balanced respectability and reputation) and goodness.
Returning to the specifics of Bill’s life, the rules that he lives by insist on equality including equal access to power. These rules also stress the importance of pleasing one’s self rather than conforming to other’s expectations and they include a responsibility to help others. I suggest that Bill’s construction of himself as a man and his expression of that masculinity are directly related to the discrimination he faced as a working-class male. Power was denied to him by other men because of the subordinate position of the working class of which he was a member. Using the tools available to him, chiefly his ability to construct his own identity and express himself as a man, he wields and expresses power in the cultural setting most readily available to him, his own gender. Bill considers the exercise of power subversive in that others have sought to prevent its expression. I would further suggest that any adaptation to the dominant expression of masculinity rests primarily upon his understanding of the social requirement demanded for balance as suggested in the Whitehead model. It is his goal to be viewed as Big (Powerful) and thus he must maintain both a balance between respectability/reputation which forms the basis of strength and he must balance strength with goodness. It is this recognition of a need for balance which tempers his expressions of reputation and wickedness, which
are primarily self serving. This is not to suggest that I believe his choices are
totally informed because of his recognition for a need to express goodness
and respectability if he wants to be viewed as Big. Rather, I suggest that that
he is aware of the broader benefits of such choices.

Bill’s view of himself as a man and his expressions of that masculinity include
four components all of which allow him both expressions of power and an
opportunity for cultural resistance. Bill sees himself as economically, sexually,
physically and socially powerful.

Bill views himself as an economic provider. It is a role well grounded in his
upbringing. His primary recollections of his own father were “he was a work-
aholic” and “My father wasn’t really around, he worked two jobs... he
worked a lot.” The necessity of work was also understood, “We were poor.
That was it. If you wanted something, you had to work for it.” Bill’s mother
described the family’s difficult economic situation, “Things were tough
paying for a house and having to work for just a little bit of money. We were
trying to keep three boys in shoes and clothes, Oh my. I never seen shoes go
so fast in my life.”
Bill’s experiences also taught him that others were judging him depending on his own economic success. It is no wonder that he determined to become a successful economic provider and that this became central to his identity.

Bill described his economic success during his first marriage to Linda. He recollected that although he had to work two jobs to do it, he and Linda did well by the standards of that day. “...we were able to get a color television in the 60’s. That was cool. First time I ever had pizza was after I got married.” He was able to save enough money to start his own business. Linda he recollected was not happy about his starting the business and “ran up” all the credit cards in an attempt to require that he return to his previous job. It may not have been a smart choice economically, but it did indicate a couple well off enough to have their own charge cards.

Describing his life with second wife, Katie, he again recalled with pride the extent of his economic prosperity. The business expanded and he acquired more property. Katie, he admitted, was attracted to his prosperity and liked to talk assets even during “whoopee”. Descriptions of life with Katie included
pool parties with the neighborhood children as well as trips with groups of
the children’s friends to ball games and the circus. Bill paid for everything.
The children were able to have the extras that he had not been afforded.

Times were even better by the time Debbie and he were married.

All hell broke loose... we were doing almost two
million dollars a year Bought a Harley, a new
Corvette. My credit limit was unbelievable. I could
go down anytime, it was almost scary to borrow a
half million dollars on your signature.

His and Debbie’s children went to exclusive private schools and took family
vacations. While it might at first appear odd that Bill would not want his
children in the local schools that that he had enjoyed, Bill saw private schools
as another way to flaunt his economic success. He and Debbie traveled
extensively and enjoyed the fruits of Bill’s labor.

There was a problem however with how Bill interpreted his economic power
within his family. None of the wives appeared to have been included in the
decision making process within the family.
Starting a business. Did you ask your wife what she thought about it? I asked.
“No”, Bill replied.
“Wasn’t that a little odd”, I countered.
“Well she saw the tow truck out in front of the house, I do a lot of assuming...people can figure it out. Sometimes I lack communication skills, Bill answered.
(You told Debbie)”I am running for County Council and there is nothing you can do about it?” I reminded him.
“Well that is probably why I am not married to Debbie anymore, cause I didn’t discuss it. Linda that...None of my wives worked”, he offered.
“Forget work, I argued, you come home and say “I am running for Council and I don’t care what you think...”
“I really never discussed it. I am going to quit my job at the gas station and go into a towing business. Katie, I am going to be VRA President.” No I didn’t discuss it. I guess it is my fault.

Bill believed that his success at providing economically for his family placed him in a position of power at home. The only explanation he offered for his behavior was that his wives did not work and that it is “different now a days.” It seems clear that his family traded economic security for any real say in the family’s decisions. Bill would make all the decisions.
Bill also provided for others in his family. When he started the business, Bill recollects, “I went to both my brothers and asked if they wanted to go into business with me. “No,” they said. “We are not going to get into that” But that did not stop both brothers from being involved with the business almost from the beginning. Brother Sean drove a truck for Bill for most of his adult life and recently purchased a half interest in Bill’s roll-off trash business and manages that company. Brother, Joe, although estranged from the family currently, worked for Bill after returning from military service.

Bill’s father was also a beneficiary of Bill’s economic success. After Bill had purchased and was operating a small convenience store of sorts he remembers:

My father said, “if I move back down can I run that store for you?” I said, “yeah.” I wasn’t making any money with it. I had just started making a little money. I let my father come down and run it just to have something to do. Wasn’t worrying about making any money. Which he really didn’t make any money. By the time I paid everything, we didn’t make any money, but he was happy doing it. I got pictures of him down there.
Helping his father benefited Bill two-fold. First, he was helping his father, a man who had supported him and now he had the opportunity to be the provider. Secondly, it became public knowledge that he was helping out his father, “He socialized with everybody, talk politics, whatever… I said don’t worry about it. It is only my father.” The public perception that he was economically successful enough to help his family was attractive to Bill.

Bill was viewed as an economic provider in other ways as well. Bill has always been a benefactor in the community. Donating to just about any cause including sponsoring a myriad of children’s sports teams, there is a public perception of Bill as both benevolent and successful.

If we would go to the County Fair I would take a bunch of kids down to the fair … whatever they (the neighborhood kids) wanted I would give to them…tickets, season tickets to ball games, I would give them tickets to go. Literacy. We did that Bill Clancy book. We sold raffle tickets…Clean-up days. We did Muddy Creek with Save Our Streams. Pulled cars out of the creek for them…We did the billboard, the thing, the scoreboard (at the local high school). Peter Jacobson called and said, “I can’t find another sponsor”. I forget how much it was, maybe $6,000. I said, “ok, we will.”
Although he will deny it if asked directly, Bill is proud of his reputation as economically successful. I would suggest this is primarily for two reasons. Bill remembers exactly who and what he has donated or otherwise contributed to and is not shy about telling others. Also, Bill’s recent economic choices say much about how he views the importance of at least a perception of economic power by others. It has been unquestionably hard economically for Bill recently. But if you are on the outside looking in one would never know it. Bill’s generosity has continued unaltered.

Bill continues to contribute to charitable causes even when it is obvious that he could use the money elsewhere. He organized the local business association’s Christmas party, covering all the expenses that exceeded ticket sale revenues. He purchased whole tables of tickets for local functions and gave away the tickets. He has provided generous donations for charitable auctions and raffles. His continued generosity to his children exceeds what would be expected. He provides rent supplements to grown sons, cars and repairs to a grown daughter, a son, and an estranged wife. His public image is not one of a man with any economic concerns. Bill understands that the
world will to an extent judge him based on his economic success or failure.

Such success connotes power both within his family and in the broader public arena. Bill’s image of himself as a man is central to the notion that he is economically successful, able to provide for his family and continue his generosity to others. As such, he is determined that the image he conveys is one of economic prosperity.

Bill also understands his economic success to be subversive and contrary to the mainstream notion of a working class man. He enjoys that defiance. He mentions one pleasure associated with the success of his business to be simply “showing up” his critics and doubters. The very survival of his business annoys some of his critics and he mentioned designing a recent newspaper ad mentioning that he had been in business for over 35 years for just such an effect.

Bill views himself as sexually powerful. Bill’s life is filled with recollections of wives, girlfriends and mistresses. Those partners have included an interesting mix of women from an employee’s girlfriend, to a cousin to his sister-in-law. They have ranged in age from much younger than him to older. He admits to
a long term affair with a married woman, but denies any intimacy noting it was only about sex. Bill enjoys both the power he wields over the women with whom he is involved and the reputation that such activities have afforded him. His ability to obtain numerous partners as well as his ability to get them to go along with his requests reinforces his personal sense of power.

Bill’s reputation as “lady’s man” is well established. As previously mentioned, his indiscretions are widely known and accepted in the public arena. While he does not exactly call his relationships conquests, he makes it clear that he is proud. In describing a long term affair that occurred during his first marriage, he indicates that it was that relationship that made his reputation because “everyone knew what was going on. There was nothing hidden, my wife knew about it, my kids would go down her house.”

Tall and dark with piercing blue eyes, Bill is aware that he is considered attractive by some standards and will remind me of his “baby blues” lest I forget. Charming and manipulative, he is more than willing to admit that he will go to almost any length to get who he wants, “It’s a challenge.”
It is a challenge, I suggest, that Bill learned at home. Although Bill only hinted at his father’s indiscretions, Bill’s mother was much more direct.

Well my husband left me. I was still married to him and he was living with this other woman. And how I found it out. I went out there one day, I said you know, there I opened the truck and there was a pillow and a blanket in the back. Laugh...See he (Bill) gets it from his father. He has his father in him...

While Bill understands the subversive nature of his sexual activities, he also understands that it is a delicate line he walks. He enjoys the reputation he has earned but also understands that going too far could cause others to look down on him. Accordingly, and I suppose not unexpectedly, much of the information I garnered on this topic came not from any structured interview but more from snippets of conversation almost confessional in nature that occurred often randomly and unexpectedly over the course of the project (now in year three). While at first, he mentioned only four or five partners later that was changed to “more like twenty”. His claims of fidelity to wife Katie were also abandoned. He admitted to not wanting sex the way “they”
said preferring both unorthodox times and places. Getting his partners to go along with some wild requests was a source of pride. He mentioned enjoying being in charge and being the leader in sexual encounters. Earlier claims to not participating in one night stands were also abandoned when he asked if he had to count oral sex partners.

Bill was not only concerned about what I might think but he is concerned about a broader audience as well. When I remarked that he would have made a great Mormon, he became upset and said people would not understand. He admits to an inability to remain monogamous in any relationship although it has at times caused him to feel guilt. When I asked why he simply did not share his propensity towards infidelity with his partners and find someone accepting of such behavior, he seemed shocked. I am not sure why. Would that take all of the fun out of cheating? Likewise, he is concerned that someone will find out about his stranger sexual desires and activities and made clear that he was unwillingly to have them made public for that reason.

Sex is important to Bill. Recently, he was diagnosed with advanced stage cancer. During his illness, he mentioned that he was not interested in living if
he was unable to participate in sexual activities. He went on to reflect that he had not refrained from sex during his illness even when such activity had been painful because sex had been reassuring to him. Sex reinforces his desirability to women and his ability to exert power over them. He is able to attract a variety of partners and is still able to keep his wife. His sexual activities also generate a positive “reputation” among members of his community and he values that as well. It is not surprising that he feels so positively about sex.

Currently in remission, Bill’s experience was not the turning point that some might expect. Upon reflection, Bill decided he was happy with the choices he had made and felt he had a good life. He had no desire to change. Considering Bill’s coherence system this attitude could be predicted. One might wonder if this attitude is not typical of other working class individuals.

Bill’s desire to have a positive reputation in his community is also linked to his desire to maintain and possess social power. Bill wants others to look positively towards him and he wants to be part of any community decision making process. The possession of social power is an important part of Bill’s
masculinity. He desires this so strongly because he feels that he has been denied such power previously solely because of his working class status.

Perhaps the greatest example of his quest for social power and affirmation was to be elected to the County Council. Bill realized he was an outsider. “I didn’t come up through the political ranks…I wasn’t one of them…The political establishment did not take me as a serious candidate. They said he is just an old junk guy, a tow truck guy, what does he know about politics. What does he know…? But I won.”

Bill recognized that a working class junk yard owner would not ordinarily be expected to be politically powerful or to choose to exercise his social power in that way. He enjoyed subverting the normative.

Bill enjoyed the social power political activity afforded him. He experienced some sense such power as a lobbyist when he was influential in passing several bills, but it was nothing like the power he experienced as a politician. I can distinctly remember one phone call after Bill had been elected. We were only casual acquaintances at the time, but I had assisted with his campaign to
some small degree. Bill offered assistance if I should need any and commented on, “the power, the power”. Ht seemed mesmerized as he realized the power his position was affording him.

How Bill used that power is a source of debate. Unquestionably, his district benefited in the number of projects for which he was able to secure funding. Critics suggested he had his own agenda and was unwilling to listen to the desires of his constituency. Ultimately, his insistence on trying to legislate and construct a NASCAR track within the district was his political downfall and he was not elected to a second term. Bill explained his defeat away, saying that he had to return to his business concerns.

Another example of Bill’s desire for social power is his involvement with the Summerfield Business Association. Bill has been reelected as President of the group, which generally represents business concern in the eastern part of the County. The group, under Bill’s urging, formed a legislative committee to have a greater voice in the political process.
Observing Bill in this setting has afforded me an opportunity to see him exercise his style of social power. Much like the control he attempted to wield at home and politically, he desires the same type of power within this group. Identified as trying to play “cowboy” when he assumed control of and made most of the decisions regarding the group’s building project, he agreed to the label, but noted that he had gotten the job done. Unwilling to develop consensus, he forges ahead determined that ultimately he will be vindicated when the project is completed successfully. One officer of the organization confided to me that, “you may have a problem with the way he gets things done, but he does get them done.” Others are more concerned that a building will appear on the lot, but everyone will feel bad about it. Bill cares little about the feelings preferring to focus on the product, something over which he feels he has control.

Bill has also acted as the emcee of the group’s annual Thanksgiving parade. This gives him enormous exposure and discretion (he decides what and how much is said about each business) as he describes the floats from local businesses, schools and civic groups as they pass the review stand. Perhaps
Bill’s favorite, however, is that all the politicians, especially in an election year, vie for his attention.

Bill’s methods were similar to the building project when he decided to tape the groups’ annual Thanksgiving parade and run it on the local cable channel. Without consulting anyone, he forged ahead waiting to submit the bill for video taping until after he had been elected the group’s president. Later, he decided to dedicate the next year’s parade to a local veteran killed in Iraq, who happened to be a relative of Bill’s. The association found out when he announced the parade’s theme in an article in the group’s newsletter. Consensus building is not a strength of Bill’s and has often dogged his attempts at an effective exercise of social power.

Bill sees himself as physically powerful. He is tall and imposing. A recent weight gain has made his presence even more imposing. His decision to let his hair grow long contributes even more to his commanding presence. Bill has great pride in his physical strength. Bill’s descriptions of his relationship with his brothers include descriptions of his ability to physically control them
We would always fight. The two of them could never get the best of me, even when I was twenty. I would get them both by the neck under my arms and choke them and their tongues would hang out. They knew not to get near me... Yea, we used to have some fights.

Bill’s reputation for physical strength reached into his work environment and the community as well and he was proud. It was a big part of how he believes a man behaves.

One day there was a car load of people and Sean got in a fist fight with them. Man those people ain’t going to get the best of me. So I got my sawed off shotgun and say let’s go. Sean drives the tow truck and I got in the passenger (seat). They seen us coming and take off. I chased them all the way to Long Branch Rd. and Headly Highway. There was a car beside them. He (Sean) pushes the car up I take my shotgun and stick it in the car and the one guy steps down on the gas and goes through the intersection and hits about twenty cars... we had a reputation. Don’t mess with the Devlin’s. You will get hurt.

Bill’s children too, are proud of their father’s no-nonsense reputation gained from such manly displays. Andrew, Bill’s step-son, who rarely has anything positive to say about his step-father, had to admit after one incident when Bill
confronted some unhappy customers “he had his hair down, Lucifer, (the rottweiler) was behind him and he had the shot gun propped in the window. He was bad. They just left.”

Again Bill’s recent illness offered insight into how he views himself. He had great difficulty with the notion of himself as sick. Not being able to work was unthinkable and he threatened to come to the office wearing a robe when clothing became too painful because of radiation treatments. He never did stop working. He admitted to ignoring indications that something was wrong because he was just too busy to go to the doctor. Illness, he had always said, was a state of mind, for the weak. Not for Bill. The endless array of doctor’s appointments, test, treatments and surgery was almost more than he could bear. This from a man I had never known to see a doctor. His illness required that he admit that something had beaten him, at least in the short term. He is determined that it will not win in the long run, however.

Power is central to how Bill views himself as a man. Strong examples for such a construction of masculinity are deeply rooted in Bill’s childhood and family life. While Bill’s notion of masculinity might at first glance seem quite
stereotypical and one cannot deny the conservative male construct that he
was socialized into, it does contain attempts at subverting more normative
roles namely in his social and sexual expressions of power.

In Andrew Kimball’s *The Masculine Mystique*, he discusses some notions that
are I believe a part of Bill’s personal construction of his own masculinity.
Regarding economic power and men Kimball suggests, “They are the envy of
most men, the epitome of the American way of life: the successful
businessman.”33 In America, he suggests success has always meant making
money. Bill fits neatly into this model. The kid from the poor family looked
down on by the larger middle class community because of his social class
certainly wants to be viewed as successful.

Regarding men’s health and sexuality, Kimball notes that men are less likely
than women to notice or seek treatment for symptoms of disease. Men
generally feel shame when admitting illness. This is even more pronounced if
sexual issues are involved. “...men must be able to perform their sexual roles
in a machine like fashion...impotence stigmatizes a man as a failure.”34
Viewed through this lenses it is no wonder Bill viewed illness as a sign of
weakness and something to be avoided and denied. Likewise sexual prowess in sharp contrast to impotence connotes the strength and power, that Bill certainly wants.

Similarly, the author suggests, men are constructed as bullies and manipulative dominators. While one might suggest that Bill falls into these stereotypes as well. It is less clear in these circumstances. Unquestionably it is Bill’s style to dominate, but rather than as a response to some male construct into which he has been socialized I would suggest that it is more likely that displays of social domination are an attempt to exert power in a cultural setting where he has been denied power. The political arena serves as one example. The manner in which he expresses that power, his unwillingness and inability to build consensus within groups, however, must be noted as a possible expression of such a male construct.

Manhood for Bill is about righting wrongs. His construction of masculinity is strongly influenced by his perceptions of class discrimination. Bill felt power was denied him in many cultural settings. Economically and socially his family lacked power. His construction of manhood allows him an ability to
express power in many cultural settings including those from which he was previously excluded.
Chapter 4, Conclusion

As I reflect back over the past four years and the work it yielded, I must stifle an insatiable desire to rush in, explain, and interpret and have the reader understand Bill’s life. That is because it would not necessarily be Bill’s life that one came to understand rather it would be my understanding, however well intentioned, of Bill.

Reflexivity is what the literature calls it. An understanding as described by Emerson in Contemporary Field Research: Perspectives and Formulations that ethnographers are “…influenced by value and theoretical commitments and by cultural categories used to observe order, and describe events … it also ranges from the basic ways the describer engages with the world.”35 Any explanation offered, any theory employed, in fact the most basic tenants of the project, my choice of subjects and method are not only about the subject rather they are also about the writer. Recognition of that fact is therefore crucial to any analysis. Any scene produced is the combination of both researcher and subject and the viewpoint of both must be understood.
My relationship with Bill has always been a challenge. If opposites attract, Bill and I must be cemented. I approach our interactions on all levels with amusements and a genuine fondness for him. I had been the County Zoning Inspector who cited him for code violations and now I am a partner of sorts, remembering his stories, recording both triumphs and failures, poking I am sure in places he had not wanted to go, ending up more a part of his life than either one of had expected. I am interrupted as I write by a phone call from his brother wanting to discuss family pickle recipes for I have also become, somehow, the one chosen to carry on the family recipes as their mother’s health continues to decline. Part of me wonders though if it was not the call of a peace maker. Bill and I have not spoken for weeks, another of our frequent periods of silence, in an always tumultuous relationship. Although we are alike in many ways our approaches to life are also very different and a continuing source of conflict.

Eerily similar I call us, certainly not at first glance. Seventeen years my senior Bill is a junk man with a pony tail and I am a graduate student with a job in code enforcement. Our upbringings were decidedly alike, even down to the detail that each of our grandparents had lived next door. Like Bill I come
from a working class family and like Bill I first noticed that my family had
less than others at school. My introduction came in elementary school,
however, with a memory that still stings of being teased for having a jump
rope that was homemade and not fancy like the store-bought ones of the
other girls. It was easy for me to both understand and believe his dramatic
response to the situation at school as my own memory is still so sharp more
than 30 years later.

The difference then lies in what each of us did with our experience. The truth
is, I could see that the fancy jump rope with beads worked better than mine
and I wanted it. My parents, who had had little opportunity, often spoke of
education as the key to money and I wanted it so I could have everything
“they” did. I became the rule follower. Rule followers fit in better in school
and met with more success.

Bill on the other hand went in an opposite direction. He did not necessarily
want things. He was not envious. He objected to the suggestion that their life
or things were better than what he already had. He wanted to prove their
assumptions wrong. Unlike me, he was unwilling to change himself. He
decided to change all of them. I think his mission was harder.

There is a rebellious part of me, however, that enjoys sticking it to them just
like Bill. Doing the unexpected reminds me that I am not really that good girl
who is one of them. Rather it is what I must be to succeed in their middle
class world. Beneath the dark tights that I wear to business meetings is the
bright green, large Peter Pan and Tinker Bell tattoo that insists, “I will not
grow up & lose myself in your world.” Bill, I believe is another expression of
that rebellion. While at first, I assumed no one would notice my interest in
him, I relished the reaction it drew. One of Bill’s business enemies decided
that informing the current councilman that Bill and I were frequent lunch
companions would not only be a great way to get back at Bill but was a great
way to score brownie points with the Councilman as well. When Bill placed a
large political sign from a previous campaign on the highway, even the local
paper questioned his antics wondering if he thought he was the current
councilman or was announcing a run in an upcoming election. What no one
knew was that I had actually egged Bill on, calling him several times asking
where the sign was when I actually knew he had only been half heartedly
joking when he mentioned posting it. When Bill decided to enter the race, I went along with him to the Board of Elections naively assuming no one would notice. I heard myself agree to be his Treasurer “just until you get someone else”. Only later did I discover that a close aide to the County Executive and an ally of the councilman had indeed noted my presence at the Board of Elections and spent the better part of a day reporting it to anyone who would listen. It did not do a whole lot for my reputation at work to fraternize with the enemy, but I came not to care and to better understand what Bill was doing.

So it is with my point of view laid out that I offer my understanding of Bill. What his life history reveals is not so much a generalized portrait of a working class man, but rather an exploration of his unique reactions and responses to notions of class discrimination.

What the literature dealing with social resistance would lead us to expect is such activity taking place within a group and community where the actions of the members could be fostered and supported by the group. John Clarke in “The Skinheads and the Magical Recovery of Community” offers just such a
portrait. The deviant behavior of the members is supported by the group launching a united affront to the dominant culture. Bill has sought out groups only when he individually could be the focus. He does not function well as a member of a group as demonstrated by participation in the local business association finding his personal desires limited by the will and considerations of the group. Bill does partially fit into one resistance model, the primitive rebel. However, as we have seen his ability to take action and bring about social change as evidenced by his political activity contradicts Hobsbawm’s model. Here again life history complicates theoretical generalization.

Bill’s behavior, at first, would appear to fit well into many models of masculinity almost serving as an exaggerated caricature of machismo. He is concerned with power no doubt, but this has little to do with dominating women. Rather it is to what he calls to “show up” men: if you have a wife, I’ve had three. You play around? I have three at once. He relished taking his second wife from a podiatrist laughing that “she went from one toe to another tow”. Economically he flaunts his success to make sure others notice that the junkman has more than the professional. Even when times are not good, his behavior does not change substantially. No one would ever know it.
Physically, he enjoys intimidating others and makes frequent reference to his size. He believes he is attractive to women and enjoys flaunting that as well although he did note that given the right circumstance he would take what he wanted (sex) and assume that if he was not “fussed at” all was well. Sex seemed the only circumstance where he believed physically dominating a woman was acceptable even mentioning an argument with his brother after he had refused to let Sean hit Debbie. Bill negotiated social power as well. He seems to have a clear understanding of just how far he can go in his antics before he became a social pariah consistent with the Whitehead model.

Again, I return to Bill and my own relationship for I think it also offers a wealth of information. Something drew us to each other and allowed us to work and share intimate conversations with each other for more than four years. As many questions as I asked Bill, he asked me the same. For each criticism I offered him, he hurled several at me. I believe we used each other as mirrors to more clearly see ourselves and our choices. It was the similarities and shared experiences that allowed us to connect, but it was the differences that provided the information and challenges both personally and academically.
Class may be less obvious than race or gender generally, but nevertheless it can be a huge part of who we are and what we will become as people. Bill views his experiences with class as central to his life. I agree with him and I also realize the central role of class in my own choices. Guiding me to a rather ordinary middle class existence it has for Bill been the basis for a quest for power and control that consumes every area of his life. Seeking to resist what he perceives as other people’s rules, he regularly tries to do the opposite of what is expected of him. While he recognizes that much of his behavior is self-destructive, he is unwilling to risk resuming the powerless role of his youth.
Notes

4 Linde, p. 163.
5 Linde, p., 222.
8 Duncombe, p. 9.
12 Duncombe, p.5.
13 Weber, p. 72.
14 Linde, p. 164.
15 Weber, p. 72.
16 Linde, p.207.
18 Duncombe, p. 135.
19 Duncombe, p. 136.
20 Weber, p. 35-36.
21 Duncombe, p. 135
24 Brod and Kaufman, p.145.
26 Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (New York: Routledge, 1999), 25.
27 Butler, p.xi.
28 Linde, p. 164.
29 Brod and Kaufman, p. 145.
31 Whitehead, p .6.
32 Whitehead, p. 4.
34 Kimball, p. 213.
Bibliography


