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## Understanding the Occupational Choices of Rural White Southern Males

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UNDERSTANDING THE OCCUPATIONAL CHOICES OF  
RURAL WHITE SOUTHERN MALES

by

RHONDA MORRISON AMERSON

(Under the Direction of Lorraine S. Gilpin)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate the occupational choices of rural White southern adolescent males. The study was comprised of eight core participants and an additional 30 survey respondents. This ethnography utilized six sources of data: a questionnaire, individual interviews, two focus group interviews, artifacts shared by the participants, an online survey, and the researcher's reflections/notes. The data suggests that rural White southern males' occupational choices are influenced by their geographical context, their parents, and occupations with which they are familiar. The data also suggests that rural White southern males are likely to remain in the area in which they were raised, and they often enjoy the benefits of White privilege and an elevated socio-economic status. This study adds to the extent literature and provides more insight into the culture of rural White southern young men. The study's implications and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Adolescence, Aspirations, Career choices, Culture, Identity, Occupational choices, Rural living, Southern

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2012

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## DEDICATION

To My Sweet Ben – Five years ago you encouraged me to pursue my dream of earning a doctorate, and since that day you have been my ever present support in helping me to achieve this goal. I am so blessed to have you in my life. Thank you for pushing me when I needed to be pushed and comforting me when I became frustrated with my progress. Most importantly, thank you for the sacrifices that you have willingly made along the way. We have finally reached the END of this journey, and I am looking forward to beginning a new chapter in our lives. I love you!

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

*No one lives in the world in general.* Geertz (1996, p. 259)

#### **Background of the Problem**

In the United States rural folk represent approximately 60 million people (U. S. Census Bureau, 2000). Although the lived experiences of youth in rural places are remarkably different than those in suburban and urban areas (Hedlund & Ripple, 1990), in a world of high stakes testing and national standards, educators often neglect the effect that place has on their students. The context of place is a significant force on youths' lives. The physical features of a place complement the social and cultural worlds of its inhabitants (Pozzoboni, 2011). These worlds, which make up the context of place, shape individuals' ways of thinking about the world and being in the world, their identities, and their possibilities for the future (Gruenewald, 2003). Over the past three decades researchers have sought to explore the impact of places/cultural contexts on youth, yet few have turned their attention to the impact of geographic locale on identity development (Pozzoboni, 2011). Understanding the influence of place is essential for educators and curriculum planners, for "adolescents do not come of age in a society as a whole, but rather in a particular community" (Elder, Hagell, Rudkin, & Conger, 1994, p. 261).

Defining the rural area is somewhat problematic for researchers in that the term *rural* is constructed differently by various groups, and there are no clear cut boundaries to differentiate rural areas from urban and suburban areas. Rural residents often define rural areas in regard to their way of life rather than a particular geographic or political area

(Blakely, 2007). For the purpose of this study, *rural* is used to refer to shared experiences in a community which is considered neither urban nor suburban. Youth within rural communities may have remarkably different experiences as a result local conditions and the historical context of the place (Pozzoboni, 2011), but when considered as a whole, rural communities have distinct characteristics that may serve to influence the future plans of youth (Taylor, 2002) and shape their identities. Growing up in these communities, youth are likely to enjoy close ties with family and community members (Hektner, 1995), participate in volunteer activities (Hine & Hedlund, 1994), and have a closer connection to the land (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). The research, however, also suggests there may also be some less than positive aspects of living in a rural community. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: Administration for Children and Families (n.d.), rural inhabitants are more likely to experience poverty and have lower educational attainment than their urban peers. Rural inhabitants may also experience geographic isolation (Hull, 1994). Some researchers believe that navigating life in a rural context shapes individuals' values and beliefs; youth living in rural communities have been found to hold distinct values (Melton, 1983) and to highly regard personal qualities such as dependability, self-discipline, self-determination, and self-sufficiency (D'Amico, Lanehew, Sankar, Merchant, & Zurita, 1996; Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996).

Rural identity and the role that it plays in rural youth's life decisions are like diamond mines waiting to be explored. In Bell's (1992) study of rural inhabitants in a small village in England, Bell found that possessing a rural identity was based on long-term residence in the area, ties to the local economic structure, engagement in country

ways of life, and participation in community activities. In this rural community country folk claimed and granted membership into a distinct social group (Bell, 1992), which gives rise to the idea of developing a rural identity. In a study of how young Canadian women perceived themselves as a result of growing up in a rural context, Shepard (2002) concluded that rurality, with regard to the family and the community, is a powerful influence in the formation of young women's identities. In the United States, researchers have also discovered a connection between rurality and identity development. In studying reputations of rural youth, Pozzoboni (2011) found that characteristics of place were essential to the construction of rural youth's identities in that they shape the individuals' social interactions and provide resources for making sense of behaviors and attitudes. Maltzan's (2006) findings also illustrated the implications of rural culture on the identity development of college students.

Constructivist assumptions may be used to explain the formation of rural identities. The constructivist paradigm posits that realities are "multiple and socially constructed, uncertain and tentative" (Manning, 1997, p. 95), and it underscores the importance of how individuals' actions and experiences are informed by their conceptions of self and their world (Shepard, 2002). Conceptions of self and the world are grounded in a social context of personal lived experiences (Gergen, 1991), and the social interactions located within these experiences act to form the adolescent's identity (Erikson, 1968). In an attempt to better understand how identities are formed, educational researchers have focused their attention on ethnic, racial, socio-economic, and gender identities. Regional identities, however, have largely been ignored (Thompson, 2007). Given the influence of place on individuals' identities and their

future possibilities, it would appear that educators would be more effective as teachers and mentors if they sought to understand how the context in which youth live influences their identity and the role in which their identity plays in decisions about their future. The time has come for educational researchers to focus their attention on rural communities and their youth.

### **Statement of the Problem**

By virtue of their Whiteness, rural White Southerners are more privileged than their minority counterparts and are less in the limelight than their urban White peers; however, young White males living in the rural context have their own struggles. Developing their identities within a rural context, navigating the expectations of rural masculinity, and locating themselves within the world present this subgroup with its own unique challenges and uncertainties as they prepare for the future. These youth may view their occupational choices as being more limited than those who live in large cities; they may be less likely to explore occupations with which they are unfamiliar; they may believe that their occupational choices are not valued within society; and/or they may be misunderstood by teachers from other backgrounds who do not understand the rural culture.

As with youth of all eras, youth of today form their perceptions about the future and their aspirations according to circumstances that are associated with their lived experiences and geographical context. Given our nation's current economic challenges -- businesses being relocated to other countries, an increase in home foreclosures, the prospect of tax increases as a result of the mounting government deficit; and an unemployment rate of 9.1% (United States Department of Labor, 2011) -- the future is

filled with many uncertainties for all of our nation's youth, although perhaps not to the same degree. Based on the tenets of social constructivism and Erikson's theory of identity formation, social scientists believe that the lived experiences of young male adolescents living within a rural Southern context are likely to impact their identities. These experiences, in turn, shape the youth's perceptions about the world around them and who they are to become in the future. However, without the luxury of previous studies to inform them, educators are left to wonder how rural White southern male adolescents perceive their occupational choices and other life decisions and the expectations of their parents and teachers.

### **Significance of the Study**

Until recently, few researchers have sought to investigate the circumstances of rural life (Howley, 1997). While the emphasis of the many research studies has been focused on the urban context, it is hard to ignore that one third of American children attend rural schools, and that, according to a 2004 U. S. Census Bureau report, the dropout rate in rural areas is only 2% below the dropout rate in urban areas (Strange, 2011). Lambert (2010) and Schaefer and Meece, (2009) suggest that rural youth face significant challenges and uncertainties as they prepare for the future. A decline in the economy, limited access to jobs, and misconceptions held within our educational system and society, as a result of cultural biases and a basic lack of information on the part of the practitioners, present challenges that may serve as barriers to the obtainment of their goals (Howley, 1997).

A review of the literature suggests a need to research how identity and the perceptions of expectations of parents and teachers influence the occupational choices of

rural White southern males. Studies of rural adolescent aspirations and achievement report lower aspirations among rural adolescents than non-rural adolescents; however, the source of measurement, which is typically educational aspirations and/or attainment, may lead to a less than accurate picture. For example, Rojewski (1999) reported that rural youth are less likely to pursue postsecondary education than their urban and suburban counterparts. Cobb, McIntire, and Pratt (1986) assert that rural parents, teachers, and counselors do not regard career and educational aspirations as highly as their non-rural counterparts. Before we accept Cobb et al.'s (1986) assumption that the aspirations of rural youth are a "problem for rural America," perhaps it would be wise to examine the cultural factors associated with rurality such as traditional rural values, connection to place, and an attachment to family. Researchers, especially those caught in the societal trap of measuring adolescents' achievement by years of education completed, may need to look further to understand the aspirations of these youth.

Furthermore, a review of the literature reveals no indication that the aspirations of rural White southern males have been explored. This researcher believes that studying young White males living within a rural context is a topic of inquiry for educational research that can no longer be ignored. Understanding how the role of identity and the perceived expectations of parents and teachers influence the occupational choices of young White southern males living in a rural context is necessary for the development of equitable curriculum and the enhancement of culturally responsive educational practices.

### **Roots of the Study**

The roots of this study can be traced to my personal lived experiences of growing up as a White female in a small community in rural Georgia. As Kenny Chesney suggests

in the popular remake of *Back Where I Come From*, I am proud of where I was raised, and after returning to the area after a long absence, I have determined that I likely will remain here for the rest of my life. Were it not for this dissertation, I may have never given in-depth thought to my lived experiences and the socio-cultural context in which I grew up, nor would I have realized the impact they had upon my perceptions of the world and who I was to become.

I grew up in a conservative, working class home in rural middle Georgia in the late 1960s and early 1970s. My father, a high school graduate, worked as a unionized mill worker at one of the local plants, and he also ran a dairy with my grandfather. My mother, a graduate of a secretarial training program and former medical secretary, worked at home as a housewife. Both of my parents were born and raised in this area; my maternal ancestors, who can be traced back to the area prior to the Civil War, were founders of the local Baptist church, which was an integral part of our family's spiritual and social life.

There is a strong sense of regionalism shared by my extended family members. We were proud to be southerners; more specifically, we were proud to be White southerners. However, those two words were never combined in our conversations. To this day, the majority of my relatives continue to live in the community in which they were raised and most reside on the land that was previously owned by their ancestors. Throughout my childhood, this rural community served as my little world; the one in which I formed my beliefs, perceptions for the future and dreams of who I would become.

I believe my socio-cultural context influenced my values, beliefs, and life choices. In junior high I remember aspiring to become a cruise director or an architect, but even at that point, I knew that the possible self that I envisioned was only a dream. Although I had always been very successful in school, maintaining a nearly 4.0 GPA, the option of attending a traditional college was never discussed in our home. It was assumed by my parents that I would go to the local junior college and enroll in a degree program, such as business or accounting. In their opinion, such a program would enable me to secure a “good job.” My occupational choices had been narrowly defined by parents’ vision of who I would become, and I never questioned otherwise, which perhaps explains why at the age of nineteen I found myself married and gainfully employed as a medical secretary.

Over the years many revelations about my past lived experiences of growing up in a rural area of the South have occurred – some positive and some negative. While my parents may not have provided opportunities for me to explore a variety of occupations, they provided me with the best guidance they had to offer, and they instilled within me a sense of right and wrong and the value of hard work. In retrospect I realize that my parents strongly influenced my perceptions of the world and the future with regard to the roles that I would assume as an adult and the decisions that I made in preparing for the future. There is no doubt within my mind that my personal lived experiences within a rural context were instrumental in shaping who I am today.

### **Addressing Subjectivities**

As I undertook this current study, which was near to my heart, I was faced with the reality that it is difficult to produce research that is value neutral due to a researcher’s

subjectivities. Research, for example, is rarely undertaken for neutral reasons (Berg, 1998), and as Nader (1972) reminds us, the choice of a subject is not “value free” (p. 19). Researchers, like all humans, have interests and opinions, and their choices of topics are often influenced by such. While choosing a topic that is of interest to the researcher is likely to maintain the individual’s interest, the obvious drawback to this situation is dealing with one’s subjectivities.

Subjectivities are an inevitable force with which the researcher must continually battle (Berg, 1998), and it would be hypocritical for any researcher to claim to be completely unbiased. Good researchers recognize that culture and personal experiences have the potential to affect one’s objectivity. Rather than attempting to maintain a façade of neutrality, they identify the limitations to their objectivity. Patton (2002) advises that openly acknowledging one’s subjectivities will strengthen one’s ability to become a more objective researcher. A self-study and numerous readings have presented me with the realization of biases and cultural assumptions, which have manifested as a result of my lived experiences. I was unconsciously aware that many of these biases, which I have stored over the years, even existed.

As I endeavored to become a more objective researcher in this journey, I realized that addressing my subjectivities is a continuous process. Even after many hours of introspection, feelings regarding having grown up in a rural southern context have continued to creep back into my thoughts – momentarily blinding my objectivity and causing me to lose my focus. For example, based upon my personal experience of growing up in a rural area of Georgia and the belief that youth’s perceptions of the future and their vocational choices are strongly influenced by their sociocultural context, I

predicted common threads would be identified among these participants. However, I recognized that I must not let my personal experiences cloud my analysis of the data. As I battled doubts regarding my objectivity, I was reminded of what someone once told me - *good* researchers recognize that there is no true escape from subjectivities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

*In order to teach you, I must know you.* (Alaskan educator in Delpit, 2001, p. 211)

During the developmental period of adolescence, youth reach physical maturity, develop a greater understanding of interpersonal relationships, further construct their identity, and develop a sense of purpose; as these processes takes place, they begin to give serious thought to the future roles they will take as adults (Crockett & Crouder, 1995). Around the age of 14, adolescents have formed concrete knowledge about jobs and the social context in which jobs are embedded, and they use this information to make judgments about the world of work (Cook, et al., 1996). However, there is paradoxical duality in youth choosing their paths for the future. Youth are expected to discover their purpose in life based on their interests and beliefs, yet it appears that their discoveries are inevitably shaped by, and perhaps constrained by, the values of those they encounter within the culture around them (Damon, 2008) in conjunction with the other factors associated with context of place. Rural White southern adolescent males, it would seem, are not immune to these influences. The purpose of this proposed research study is to provide educators with a glimpse into the rural White southern adolescent male's world of reality. Through creating a better understanding of how identity and the perceptions of the expectations of teachers and parents influence occupational choices and other life

decisions of rural youth, it is anticipated that the teachers' ability to relate to these youth will be improved.

In *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, Delpit (2006) recognizes that differences between the students' home culture and the school's culture may be problematic as teachers often misinterpret students' abilities and their goals. It is doubtful that Delpit (2006) had rural White southern males in mind as she wrote this book; however, the unique aspects of this group may lend itself to her writings. In order to cross socio-cultural boundaries, culturally responsive practices must be adopted. Culturally responsive teaching practices include teaching about cultural heritage and contributions of various ethnic groups, fostering a positive student-teacher relationship, using cultural frames of reference to make the content more meaningful to diverse students, showing concern for the affective, moral, and cognitive development of students, and cultivating a sense of social and cultural consciousness. Educators, who are sensitive to the needs of ethnically diverse students, agree that the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy should not be underestimated; according to Ladson-Billings (in Banks & Banks, 2005) culturally responsive pedagogy "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically" (p. 234). In Villegas and Lucas's (2002) curriculum proposal for preparing culturally responsive teachers, the initial step is expanding the teachers' sociocultural consciousness, which entails constructing an understanding of how race/ethnicity, social class, and language deeply influence people's ways of thinking, behaving, and being. Phillips and Solitis (2004) write,

Understanding the culturally-shaped assumptions, practices, and values of these students will not only enable educators to be more effective in promoting

learning, but it will also make the educators more sensitive to their own deep-seated cultural assumptions and aware of how their pre-conceived notions may be shaping the attitudes that are being adopted towards students who seem to be 'different' (p. 64).

Educators believe that culturally responsive teaching practices, which use the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively (Gay, 2002), would equally benefit rural White southern males.

The overarching purpose of this study is to gain a clear understanding of the perceptions and future aspirations, particularly those that relate to the occupational choices, of White adolescent males living in a rural community in middle Georgia. This research seeks to provide a rich detailed description of rural southern culture as a means to better understand the influence of rural life on White southern male adolescents. The goal of this proposed study is to enlighten educators of the influence of geographical and sociocultural context and to highlight the perceptions these young men have regarding their aspirations and occupational choices.

### **Research Questions**

This dissertation explores the aspirations and occupational choices of rural White southern male adolescents, focusing especially on ways in which their identities, cultural patterns, and family ties influence their choices. The overarching questions that will guide this study are: **(1) How do rural White southern male adolescents' identities influence their aspirations and occupational choices? (2) How do the perceptions of parents' and teachers' expectations influence the occupational choices of rural**

**White southern male adolescents?** As the study progresses, new questions are anticipated, or are rather expected, to emerge; the beauty of allowing a study to unfold in this manner is that it is not restricted to one particular area of focus (Berg, 2004; Patton, 2002). While there is a sense of apprehension as to where this study may lead, there is also a certain amount of excitement in not knowing what the research will reveal. This proposed study, which will address the uniqueness of the rural southern culture, will contribute to the extant literature by providing a holistic view of the perceptions and aspirations of White adolescents living in rural middle Georgia.

Qualitative research methods are best suited for this proposed study. Hart (1992) writes, “The study of lives must incorporate instruments that allow the individual’s own view to emerge; a reliance on paper and pencil tests alone cannot do justice to the individual’s life” (p. 7). Psychometric data may be limiting when examining complex social cultural processes, such as the ones which are embedded within this topic. As a researcher, I believe an injustice would be committed in reducing beliefs and values to fragmented/statistical data. It is only through hearing the experiences of the participants that the reader can truly understand the phenomena being studied (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002).

### **Theoretical Framework**

*What is the truth that is bounded by these mountains and is falsehood to the world that lives beyond?* (Michael Eyquem de Montaigne in Crotty, 1998, p. 42)

Committing to a theoretical framework was very difficult task. My search for a theoretical framework has caused me to spend many hours contemplating how I perceive rural adolescent males and the lens which I wanted to use for conducting this study.

Unlike the standardized tests, for which we prepare our students, the answers are not cut and dried. The more I researched for a theoretical framework to support this study, the more I came to realize the intricate layers that exist within theories. I would equate this process with going down in a rabbit's hole; the twists and turns along the way have caused me brief moments of celebrated discovery and hours of confusion. Numerous hours of research and contemplation have led me to believe that the complex process of determining one's occupational choices and aspirations for the future may best be explained by the theory of social constructivism in conjunction with theories of identity development.

### **Social Constructivism**

*It is the theory that decides what we can observe.* Albert Einstein

In working with adolescents over the past eighteen years, I have come to find their aspirations to be particularly intriguing. Each time I hear one of my middle school students speak confidently of their plans for the future, I cannot help wondering how their aspirations were formed. Is it possible that their goals for the future and the occupational pathways they have chosen are primarily a result of nature, or is it more complicated than that? Although innate ability is a definitely a contributing factor, it would seem there is more at play than simple genetic make-up. In view of the fact that aspirations are subject to varying value judgments, I believe that geographical context and socio-cultural differences cannot be ignored when exploring this interesting phenomenon.

This proposed study of understanding how identity and parental expectations influence the occupational choices of rural White southern adolescent males is informed by the theory of social constructivism. According to social constructivists, knowledge,

which is socially constructed through discourse, is a cultural process of meaning making, and it is contextually embedded (Stead, 2004). Constructivists study the inter-subjectivity of two schools of thought. They recognize that individuals do not come into the world with their minds filled with empirical knowledge, nor do they gain all knowledge by direct perception or lived experiences (Phillips, 1995). Noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) points out that individuals are capable of developing in many different ways, and it is the culture into which individuals are born that shapes their beliefs, values, tastes, practices, and intellectual predispositions. It may be argued that one's culture is the very source of one's lived experiences. Constructivists study how lived experiences affect individuals' construction of reality and how those constructions impact the individuals' lives and their interactions with others (Patton, 2002).

Adolescents' lives and the choices they make are heavily influenced by the world in which they live. As the father of constructivism, Vygotsky (1978), whose theory of social development will be discussed in the next section, viewed the relatedness between social contexts within environments and individuals' opportunities. Based on his study of Vygotsky, Veer (2007) writes, "The physical, technological, and intellectual environments and their complex interdependency determine the individual's possibilities" (p. 21). Drawing from Vygotsky's works, Bronfenbrenner's (1994) social ecological systems model posits that human development is supported, and possibly determined by five socially organized subsystems which move from complex interactions with those in one's immediate environment to the far reaching effects of change over time. Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman (2004) also theorize that a combination of both heredity and environment influence the development of youth and the unfolding of their potential.

Educators and researchers alike recognize how the social contexts within a given environment serve to shape the individual. Social contexts that act upon the adolescents include their families, schools, neighborhoods, and communities (Crockett, 1995). Schools and families act in guiding the adolescents' behavior and goals through the transmittal of socially acceptable behaviors and the encouragement of specific roles. Institutions also serve this purpose through hegemony. Researchers have theorized that shared social experiences within a geographic context play a major role in one's construction of reality, and these experiences, which provide either opportunities or obstacles, ultimately influence an adolescent's aspirations (Crockett & Crouder, 1995; Schwandt, 1994).

Lived experiences vary significantly from one socio-cultural context to another. Recognizing the implications that are associated with growing up in a specific geographical or socio-cultural context, this social constructivist lens is particularly valuable in gaining a better understanding of how rural youth construct reality and make sense of their world. It will also serve as an analytical tool in investigating how social interactions shape identities. In considering the differences in lived experiences that occur as a result of geographic and socio-cultural context, hegemonic masculinity must be considered. For example, Howson (2006) notes the dominant group within society produces and enforces many of the expectations and aspirations that are viewed as valuable by members of society. The specific circumstances under which a young person comes of age provides a purpose for that individual; these circumstances also dictate the definition of psychosocial maturity, structure the pathways through which maturity is pursued, and determine, for the most part, the ability of individuals to reach their goals

(Steinberg, 1995). Other factors to be considered are parents and peers. Parents influence the values children adopt, their confidence of growing into adulthood, and their decisions relating to the future (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2003). Social groups and peers are also integral to the establishment and maintenance of social behaviors, perceptions, attitudes, and values, including self-concept. Baldwin (in Cairns, Leung, & Cairns, 1995) acknowledges the importance of social influence by writing, "Each of us is in part someone else, even in his own thought of himself" (p. 35-36).

### **Vygotsky's social development theory.**

Russian social and developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, was one of the first philosophers to bring social order and culture to the forefront of psychology by examining the effects of the social environment on cognition (Bredo, 2000). Vygotsky's research, which was conducted in the early twentieth century, questioned the relationship between individuals' cognitive development and their physical and social environments. As a result of his research, Vygotsky came to theorize an interrelated relationship between social and cognitive development; this theory came to be known as the social development theory or sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky was unlike traditional cognitive theorists, in that he believed the social aspects of cognitive development acted more as a determinant than other factors (John-Steiner & Souberman, 1978).

While Jean Piaget viewed children's knowledge as being constructed primarily from personal experiences, Vygotsky believed children's knowledge was constructed from an intertwining of lived personal and social experiences (Mooney, 2000). Vygotsky recognized social activities as a fundamental key in the development of cognition.

Parents, teachers, and peers influence cognitive development as children acquire attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions within a specific culture by interacting socially with a more knowledgeable person (Mooney, 2000; Pass, 2004). Vygotsky's social learning theory is supported by the idea that the acquisition of a great extent of new knowledge is learned from others (Phillips & Soltis, 2004). According to Vygotsky (1978), "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level" (p. 57). Based on Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development, one may conclude that which children come to know as truth is shaped by their families, communities, schools, socioeconomic status, and culture (Mooney, 2000).

Vygotsky's social learning theory also emphasizes the effects of the environment, economic conditions, and social and cultural factors on individuals' short and long term decisions (Krumboltz, 1979). These factors also serve to influence one's perspective of the world. According to Vygotsky (1994),

The way in which a child becomes aware of, interprets, and emotionally relates to a certain event is the prism which determines the role and influence of the environment on the development of the child's character and his psychological development (p. 341).

Vygotsky's theory "points to the often underappreciated role played by the vast cultural repertoire of artifacts, ideas, assumptions, concepts, and practices which the individual inherits or is 'born into'" (Phillips, 2000, p. 11). With that in mind, one's "position in society" cannot be ignored; as it can act as a primary influencer or constraint in the formation of perceptions and aspirations (Bucher, 1979, p. 116; Hundelide, 1985). Determinants to one's "position in society" include, but are not limited to, age, sex,

education, socio-economic status, social class, ethnicity, location, family structure (Bucher, 1979). These social characteristics shape the individuals' perspectives on the world, which serve as a reflection of individuals' position within society (Bucher, 1979). Social constructivists view knowledge and cultural manifestations as never being absolute – these two constructs are always partial and relative (Hundeide, 1985). Vygotsky's belief that social interaction within a given context leads to ongoing changes in children's thoughts and behavior and that these thoughts and behaviors vary between cultures may explain the occupational choices and life decisions among White southern males living in a rural setting.

### **Beyond Vygotsky.**

*The content of our knowledge must be considered the free creation of our culture* (Von Glaserfeld, 1991 – in Phillips, 1995, p. 399).

Social learning theory has come to be considered as a bridge between behaviorist learning theories and cognitive learning theories, as it appears to reflect an equal blending of these two schools of thought (Ormrod, 1990). Most theorists would agree that some cognitive knowledge is innate, but, perhaps to a greater extent, other knowledge has to be constructed (Phillips, 1995). While social constructionism, which is associated with Gergen (1985) and Crotty (1998), is not synonymous with Vygotsky's social constructivism, the two theories are viewed by the researcher as being similar enough to use interchangeably in developing this theoretical framework. In *Constructivism in Education*, Phillips (2000) parallels the two theories in that they both emphasize the social construction of knowledge and the social construction of reality. According to Howe and Berv (2000), individuals' perceptions of the world are constructed as a result

of a complex network of shared social constructions. Searle (1995) also noted that human behavior can best understood through the examination of perceptions, beliefs, and desires of individuals and interpreted within a consensus of norms that determine that which counts as being important. It is through social activities that individuals “master the typically unarticulated and tacitly conveyed ‘know-hows’ of social life” (Howe & Berv, 2000, p. 29).

Social constructionist inquiry is principally concerned with explaining the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for themselves and the world in which they live (Gergen, 1985). Social constructionists postulate that the individual’s view of truth and reality are socially constructed perspectives which are shaped by historical context, and culture factors (Patton, 2002). They recognize both the role that social relationships play in constructing the world in which we live and the importance of these relationships (Gergen, 2009). Crotty (1998) best captures the essence of social constructionism by writing, “Social constructionism emphasizes the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even in the way in which we feel things) and gives us a quite definite view of the world” (p. 58). Social constructionists believe the geographical context and the culture in which we live form our social reality, and this reality is accepted as the truth (Haas, 1992; Searle, 1995).

Drawing from Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, Crotty (1998) dismisses the assumption that there is a distinct dichotomy between the subjective and the objective in his assertion that the two worlds are actually united. The social constructionist theory is based on the assumption that “the terms by which the world is understood are social

artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people” (Gergen, 1985, p. 267). Inter-subjectively shared lived experiences influence how people shape their knowledge, values, and their perceptions of the world and their future within the world (Crotty, 1998; Schwandt, 1994). While some adolescents believe their aspirations and perceptions were formed entirely of their own accord (Burnell, 2003), the interrelatedness of the minds in which these beliefs were formed and the world of everyday life, which encompasses those who share a particular context through continued interaction and communication, cannot be ignored (Berger & Luckman, 1967).

The power of parents, teachers, and other adults to transform a child’s mind should not be underestimated (Berk, 2004; Carr & Kefelas, 2009). Vygotsky and social psychologist Kenneth Gergen both stress the importance of language in shaping the individual’s construction of knowledge (Phillips, 2000). Language is the medium through which parents, teachers, and peers influence the way an individual comes to understand (Phillips, 2000). The influence of social experience is also evident through imitation. Bandura (1986) puts imitation at the center of his learning theory which he calls modeling. Most human behavior is learned through modeling; ideas for new behaviors are formed and this information serves as a guide for action (Phillips & Solitis, 2004). According to Bandura (1986), many of the behaviors that people exhibit have been acquired through observing and modeling others. When a child imitates the way an adult uses tools and objects, these activities become a “blueprint for possible types of action in the future” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.22). Children imitate their parents by developing similar hobbies and interests and by expressing similar political and religious beliefs. Goals which young people set for themselves are similarly determined as they

depend to some degree on the standards/goals they see influential others adopt (Ormrod, 1990). Adults have a tremendous influential power to shape the futures of youth through the transference of knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes (Berk, 2004). This transference could easily affect one's occupational choices and aspirations. According to Kroger (1996), teachers, parents, and other important figures play a critical role in the development of vocational identity, as these influential adults have the power to foster a sense of industry or inferiority.

Social constructivists believe that the content of one's knowledge is determined significantly by one's culture. Geertz (1973) suggests that each individual's beliefs, values, practices, taste, and intellectual predisposition is determined to a large degree by the culture into which one is born. Vygotsky also believed that human inquiry was "embedded within culture, which is embedded within social history" (Pass, 2004, p. 108). Culture, which may be defined from a constructivist perspective as "a social system of shared symbols, meaning, perspectives, and social actions that are mutually negotiated by people in their relationships with others" (Stead, 2004, p. 392), interacts in a very complex way with learning and the processes of schooling. From a social constructivist viewpoint, culture is an intersubjective reality; "people create and are created by cultures in a complex matrix of interweaving relationships" (Stead, 2004, p. 403). Culture acts as a great force with the power to exclude and include. Cultural factors may constrain individuals' occupational choices and their future development (Fitzgerald & Betz, 1994).

Research reveals there are numerous tenets which will complement the overarching theory of social constructivism and may be useful in guiding the current

study. After careful inquiry, the theory of identity formation was selected to support to the theoretical framework of this study. This theory provides strength to this study's theoretical perspective, as each takes into account the interconnectedness of the individual's innate characteristics and socio-cultural factors. The choice to frame this study with these theories is based on the belief that the relationship between the objective and subjective worlds of the formation of knowledge and identity may never truly be understood. It is believed that these tenets will contribute to the understanding of how lived experiences of these young rural White southern males influence their occupational choices and who they are to become in the future.

### **Identity Formation**

#### **Erikson and identity formation.**

Identity formation is critical to adolescent development (Erikson, 1968; Swanson, Spencer, & Petersen, 1998). The process of identity development both at the personal and social levels are associated with psychosocial resources that provide an individual with a committed sense of purpose and the desire and competence to effectively regulate one's life choices (Erikson, 1968). Erikson (1968) views identity as a process of youth locating themselves within society. According to Marcia (1966), this phase of the life cycle, which usually occurs during late adolescence, is characterized by growing vocational and ideological commitments. Vygotsky (1978) viewed youth identity formation as a social and cultural process. Understanding the identity formation process is essential to understanding how adolescents come to view themselves, and it may provide insight into adolescents' occupational choices and aspirations for the future. In considering theories of identity development, Erik Erikson's (1968) concept of identity

development was used to frame this study because it acknowledges the psychosocial nature of identity and recognizes the important role the community plays in shaping identities of adolescents.

Erikson's (1968) concept of identity development recognizes that the essential crisis of adolescence is discovering one's true identity in an ever expanding social world. Identity formation depends on interrelated processes rather than individual choices and behaviors (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson (1968), identity formation comes into play when childhood identification is no longer useful. During this psychosocial stage of development, youth discard some of their childhood identifications as a result of interests, talents, and values, and a synthesis of earlier identifications creates a new identity configuration (Erikson, 1968). This integration of identities is thought to affect the individual's perceptions of the future (Swanson et al., 1998). In describing the process of identity formation Erickson (1968) writes,

It [identity formation] arises from the selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications and their absorption in a new configuration, which, in turn is dependent on the process by which a society (often through sub-societies) identifies the youth by recognizing him as somebody who had to become the way he is and who, being the way he is, is taken for granted (p.159).

An optimal sense of identity results in feelings of being comfortable in one's body, being confident about one's choices, and having a sense of assuredness of anticipated recognition from those who matter to the individual (Erikson, 1968).

Identity resolution is not reached in isolation; it is dependent on social response. Erikson's (1968) work recognizes the important role the community plays in shaping the adolescent's identity. The idea that identity is influenced by one's environment and social interaction therein supports the social constructivist theory. According to Erikson (1968), identity should not be considered static, for it continues to be reshaped throughout one's life cycle; the same holds true also with knowledge.

### **Identity and aspirations.**

Defining the term, identity, is a difficult task. Identity is like a multifaceted prism that creates a pattern of disparate parts; however, it appears that those drawn from Erikson's theory acknowledge that individual identity development is a product of environment influences in conjunction with the personality of the individual (Maltzan, 2006). Marcia (1980) defines identity as a "self-structure – an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history" (p. 109). In *Finding Herself: Pathways to Identity Development in Women*, Josselson (1987) describes identity as "the stable, consistent, and reliable sense of who one is and what one stands for in the world" (p. 10). Forming one's identity involves the dynamics of fitting together of parts of the personality with the realities of the social world (or at least as one perceives it), such that the person has a sense of "internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the real-world" (Josselson, 1987, p. 13). Adolescents form their identities through identification with others in their lives, especially those who are admired and/or perceived as powerful (Josselson, 1987). According to Mead's works, identity refers to self-understanding to which one is emotionally attached and that informs one's behavior

and interpretations; individuals form a sense of selves in relation to roles, positions, and cultural imaginaries that matter to them (Holland & Lachiocotte, 2007).

The processes of identity development which take place during early adolescence may outwardly affect the processes that occur later in life. Marcia (1980) elaborates on Erikson's theory of identity development by theorizing that an important influence on identity formation in late adolescence was the extent to which a self-reflective approach to oneself and one's future is adopted in early adolescence. During this critical time of development, which Marcia (1966) describes as crisis, adolescents begin to re-evaluate values and beliefs that have been held since childhood, and they begin to question the meaning of life and their purpose in life. Resolving the crisis caused by the challenges of assuming different roles for different audiences is essential to the development of a stable self image (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002).

Based on the idea that identity is a key factor in the process of becoming an adult, it would appear that a connection can be made between individuals' identities and their occupational choices. When an optimal sense of identity has been reached, the commitment to work roles and values truly reflect the individual's needs and talents (Kroger, 1996). Marcia (1980) views a sense of industry, which if successfully completed leaves one with secure possession of specific skills, confidence in one's ability, and an generally positive attitude about work, as a forerunner to identity; all of which form the basis for vocational direction. According to Marcia (1980), those with a better developed identity structure are more aware of their uniqueness and similarity to others and their strengths and weaknesses in making their way in the world. Individuals who have a developed identity structure are therefore more confident in who they are

with regard to sexual orientation, ideologies, and vocational direction (Marcia, 1980). Those with a less developed structure are more confused about their distinctiveness from others and they are more likely to rely on external sources to evaluate themselves (Marcia, 1980). A complete reliance on external sources may result in poor choices, especially those related to one's vocational path.

Identity commitments, which were introduced in Erikson's (1968) work, serve as guides and standards for making decisions, adopting values, and solving problems. The perplexing question is how adolescents go about forming identity commitments. In seeking to explain the differences in social-cognitive strategies and processes individuals use to make decisions and form identity commitments, Berzonsky (1989) identifies three identity processing styles: normative, informational, and diffuse-avoidant. Berzonsky, Branje, and Meeus (2007) postulate that the manifestation of these identity processing styles may stem from the adolescents' social relationships with their parents. The theory of social constructivism could be used to frame this idea. Berzonsky (2004) found that parenting practices are associated with identity style of late adolescents. Authoritative parenting was linked with informational style in which adolescents seek out and process information before negotiating identity conflicts and forming commitments; strict authoritarian parenting was linked with normative style in which adolescents deal with identity conflicts and form commitments by internalizing and adopting prescriptions and expectations of significant others in a relatively automatic fashion, and permissive parenting was linked with diffuse-avoidance in which adolescents procrastinate in dealing with identity conflicts and personal problems (Berzonsky, 2004).

While both informational and normative style may contribute to high levels of commitment to a task (Berzonsky et al., 2007), youth who utilize informational style appear to have greater control over their lives. Research suggests that late adolescents who utilize an informational style are characterized as possessing academic and emotional autonomy (Berzonsky et al., 2007). Late adolescents who utilize a normative style, a process which is similar to Marcia's identity foreclosure, are characterized as functioning in a "conforming, socially structured, closed fashion" (Berzonsky et al., 2007, p. 326) by complying with parental standards and expectations. Perhaps the least in control are those who, as a result of permissive parenting, utilize diffuse-avoidance style. These youth are characterized as lacking commitment, autonomy, and self regulation (Berzonsky et al., 2007).

### **Making the Connection - Social Constructivism and Identity Formation**

*Culture is integral to self-formation.* Holland & Lachiocotte (2007, p. 115)

Identity formation among youth is a social and cultural process (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's concept of the individual self being continually produced in individuals, as a result of social interaction with others within a specific culture, contributed to the development of Mead's and Erikson's theories of identity (Holland & Lachiocotte, 2007). Drawing from Vygotsky's theory of social development, it would appear that culture (and place) may empower or constrain identity formation. In reiterating the power of culture, Josselson (1987) writes, "A person is born to a place in society and development consists of learning the roles and molding the self that is appropriate to this prearranged social niche" (p.14). In making the connection between learning and where individuals live, Gruenewald (2003) writes, "Place teaches us about

how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Furthermore, places make us: As occupants of particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped” (p. 621). Given the pervasive barriers that are a result of geographical contexts and socio-cultural factors, some adolescents may come to believe that their identities are more likely to be shaped by outside forces rather than their own individual choices and behaviors. A parallel can be made between identity and aspirations in that they are both acquired through socialization.

Identity is an achievement of an individual’s personal actions as it applies to the contexts and events of social interaction. Individuals develop a sense of self in relation to their social identities and their culture, and as a result their identities act as determinants of which activities are considered meaningful within those worlds. Identities play an important role in mediating personal experience, shaping social life, developing aspirations, and influencing vocational decisions (Holland & Lachiocotte, 2007; Jackson & Meara, 1974). Burnell’s (2003) study of the aspirations of rural youth revealed that aspirations may serve as contributors to individuals’ overall identities.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Drawing from a social constructivist framework, lived experiences and the boundaries, which have been established as a result of these lived experiences, it would seem, are the key to understanding the aspirations, occupational choices, and other life decisions of young White males living within a rural context. While past research on aspirations has included White males, a literature review confirms that the aspirations, occupational choices, and other life decisions of White adolescent males, living within a rural southern context have not been thoroughly explored. If Haas (1992) is correct in his assumption that “aspirations reflect individuals’ ideas of their ‘possible selves,’ what they would like to become, what they might become, and what they do not wish to become” (p. 1), how can we, as educators, come to understand the values and beliefs held by this subgroup of adolescents if we do not seek a thorough understanding of the unique perspectives of these young men?

Individuals begin to form their perceptions of the world around them and make identity commitments with regard to values and future roles during the adolescent years. During this time, aspirations for vocational pathways are also formed, and these aspirations affect the decisions that are made in preparation for adulthood. Since the 1930s, researchers have been researching the construct of aspirations (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996), and while this topic continues a source of research studies today, there is evidence that some subgroups within society have not been given equal attention. A review of the literature revealed there are limited studies on rural youth and their transition to early adulthood (Schaefer & Meece, 2009). Initial research regarding the aspirations of rural

youth brought to light not only the need to do such research but also the complex nature of the two constructs: aspirations and rurality. As with many social constructs, these two terms are difficult to negotiate, which is primarily due to the broad range of definitions associated with each.

### **Defining the Rural Context**

There are many different perspectives on the definition of rural (Blakely, 2007), which may explain why the definition of the term *rural* continues to remain elusive in scholarly work (Maltzan, 2006). The term itself is an ideological construction used to demarcate places (Campbell & Bell, 2000), but the waters become quite murky when one tries to determine exactly what constitutes as rural. From a simplistic view, rural refers to particular spaces that are not urban; but as the population within our country increases and the landscape changes, there is no definite way to determine where the city stops and rural areas begin (Campbell, Bell, & Finney, 2006). Some researchers define the term *rurality* by rural inhabitants' shared experiences or similar ways of life rather than using a precise description of a geographical context (Blakely, 2007; Campbell, Bell, & Finney, 2006). Rural is often defined from an outsider's vantage or urban perspective in much the same way that the dominant culture has traditionally spoken for minority groups (Herzog & Pittman, 1995). Understanding how a researcher defines the term rural is essential to understanding their research findings (Blakely, 2007). Rural life has both positive and negative connotations; it has been associated with a slower pace of life, agrarian practices, friendliness, strong family network, a sense of community steeped in traditions, a connection to nature, backward ways, and prejudice. For the purpose of this

proposed study, the term *rural* is defined as shared experiences within a specific geographical context of middle Georgia.

### **Defining Aspirations**

Aspirations may be defined as simply a desire or ambition to achieve something, but that leaves a vast opening for interpretation. Generally researchers provide a more specific definition of aspirations as it relates to their studies. Drawing from the work of Quaglia and Cobb (1996), Bajema, Miller, and Williams (2002) define aspirations as the “student’s ability to set goals for the future while being inspired in the present to work toward those goals” (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996, p. 130). However, sometimes goals may be more as a result of lip service than the individual’s true expectations to meet those goals. Alix and Lantz (1973) differentiate the two by viewing aspirations as goals and expectations as realizable aspirations. Shamah (2009) also realizes the importance of moving beyond simply stating an aspiration to having the ambition to achieve it. Shamah (2009) writes, “Aspirations must be defined as distinct from dreams, and simultaneously have an ambition or investment component” (p. 6). Aspirations may also include how individuals view their possible selves. Ley et al. (1996) believe that aspirations extend beyond setting goals and provide insight into individuals’ perceptions of themselves and their place within the world. While negotiating the task of defining aspirations may be difficult, it is reasonable to assume that all youth have aspirations for their future.

The aspirations of youth influence their actions and how they go about preparing for the future (Ley et al., 1996). In America, it is not uncommon for aspirations to be measured by various societal standards. Media images of highly recognized professional careers (i.e. doctors, lawyers, entertainers, and athletes) and the luxuries that wealth can

provide send mixed signals to youth. It appears that the general public equates success with fame and large salaries. However, scholars believe the most distinguished of occupations are those professions which are of power and knowledge (Bucher, 1979), which may explain why researchers often equate high aspirations and success with the number of years of schooling completed (Howley, 2006; Shamah, 2009). Researchers, along with the majority of the middle and upper class, have also fallen victim to the societal myth that all youth should aspire to college degrees and professional careers; such ideals may explain why many researchers choose to focus their research of aspirations among youth singularly on those associated with education (Shamah, 2009).

It is not surprising that youth may also believe that years of education are linked to higher aspirations. Shamah's (2009) study revealed that adolescents appear to have generally bought into these middle-class ideas of success, as a majority of these youth voiced aspirations of college educations and professional careers. This trend of conforming to society's standard, however, is not new. Over fifty years ago, Merton (1957) viewed aspirations as meeting societal expectations; he writes "...striving for success it not a matter of individuals hoping to have acquisitive impulses, rooted in human nature, but is a socially-defined expectation" (p. 167). Furthermore, he adds "...this patterned expectation is regarded as appropriate for everyone, irrespective of his initial lot or station in life" (Merton, 1957, p. 167). By societal standards, the worthiness of individuals stem from the social value placed on their labor (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). Societal expectations can be overwhelming to youth, especially those whose interests and skills do not conform to what is considered the norm.

All adolescents do not have the same aspirations for the future, and when their aspirations do not meet societal standards, educators often find it difficult to understand this sense of nonconformity, which is sometimes evident among rural White southern adolescent males. Educators are sometimes caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to helping students realize their potential, explore their options, and determine their aspirations. In acting as social agents for the dominant force, educators have been trained to believe that it is their duty to encourage all students to rise to their fullest potential by achieving a college education; however, it is questionable if their actions are in the best interest of the youth or nation's welfare. Perhaps educators should take note from *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education* in which Noddings (2005) emphasizes that teachers should recognize "all honest occupations are respectable and highly valued" (p. 88).

The complexity of the phenomena of aspirations makes it impossible to determine all of the factors that influence youth's decisions regarding their future lives. To attempt to tease these factors apart may be likened to dismantling a spider's web. Perhaps of greater interest are the youth's occupational choices and other aspirations they hold for the future. In considering rural adolescent males, one must question the role identity plays in determining occupational choices and if these youth believe their choices and aspirations for the future are voluntarily conceived or a result of societal or parental expectations.

Although it is difficult to define aspirations, for the sake of this discussion a working definition is necessary. To reduce aspirations to include only educational goals, a research trend that began in the 1940s (Quaglia & Cobb, 1996), threatens to devalue the

aspirations of youth found within other domains. From a social constructivist's lens, aspirations entail more than educational goals, and therefore it was determined that Burnell's (2003) definition of aspirations best captures the essence of aspirations and encompasses the nature of this study. According to Burnell (2003),

Aspirations are the pool of individually constructed alternative dreams, hopes, and desires of one's future and are continually modified by both internal and external influences. When adjusted to reflect and conform to individual and social realities, aspirations become goals and serve as motivation for behaviors designed to reach those goals (p. 104).

### **Influence of Contextual Factors**

From a social constructivist lens there is an inextricable connection between individuals and their social and cultural contexts. Contexts have a strong influence in shaping adolescents' pathways for the future; they are responsible for shaping their aspirations and their attainment of these aspirations. The decisions that young people make during adolescence and into adulthood depend on the nature of the environment in which they are developing (Crockett & Crouter, 1995), and the possible selves that youth consider are a direct result of their socio-cultural context (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Lived experiences play an important role in shaping an individual's identity. The social experiences of youth play a profound role in establishing and constraining the cognitive manifestation of goals, aspirations, and fears (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Sirin, Diemer, Jackson, Gonsalves, & Howell, 2004). Parents serve to influence their children's identity and occupational choices by way of experiences provided and the transmittal of their beliefs and values (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2001). The close-knit personal

nature of a small rural community operates as a single integrated social structure in providing these experiences for youth (Lambert, 2010) and in providing a safe haven for those of similar beliefs (Lubrano, 2004). However, rural areas tend to provide less exposure to career opportunities than urban areas and the occupations to which the youth are exposed are generally agricultural or service related jobs which require little education (Haller & Virkler, 1993). Socio-cultural contexts have been found to influence the future aspirations of urban youth (Sirin et al., 2004) as well as rural youth (Burnell, 2003). Haller and Virkler's (1993) findings suggest that youth are more likely to aspire to occupations of which they are most familiar.

Centuries ago children entered the world of work by following in the footsteps of a family member; today parents prepare their children for adult lives through the transmittal of their values, motivations, attitudes, and expectations (Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998.) The values and beliefs of significant others may influence a youth's occupational aspirations, for example a youth may compromise previous aspirations for one that is more favorable to peers, parents, or teachers (Gottfredson, 2002). In a longitudinal study of the aspirations of males, Hart and Bauknight (1992) found that "the lack of exploration of other possibilities is attributable, in large measure, to parental expectations" (p. 91). Youth who choose to enter the workforce rather than go to college are often influenced by their parents' demands that they quickly become self-sufficient (Burnell, 2003). In light of the economic hardships that many American families are facing, parents may be faced with the choice of encouraging their youth to further their education or to seek employment to provide additional resources for the family. Some research suggests that the aspirations parents hold for their children influence the social

construction of youths' perceptions of the world along with their aspirations (Shamah, 2009); while other research suggests that parents' and educators' expectations conform to the students' vocational goals (Ley et al., 1996). In the vein of the chicken and the egg mystery, is it possible that these students' aspirations were formed as a result of parents' and teachers' expectations?

The family may serve as only one of the social forces that shape youth shape and their decisions for the future (Hitlin, 2006). Families, schools, and communities are instrumental in providing support of rural youth's aspirations (Shamah, 2009). Local community values and employment opportunities influence the attitudes of youth and their parents about the youth's educational and occupational aspirations (Gandara, Gutierrez, & O'Hara, 2001). Interactions with parents, teachers, and other significant parties may influence the occupational choices of adolescents (Shamah, 2009). Other research indicates that high school students in rural areas often seek advice about their occupational choices from family, friends, teachers, and guidance counselors (Buikstra, Eley, & Hindmarsh, 2007). Although youth are expected to discover their vocational calling in life based on their interests, it appears that they are inevitably shaped by the values of those with whom they have close encounters (Damon, 2008). For example, some research studies indicate that the educational aspirations of students may influence the aspirations that those with whom they have relationships have for them (Burnell, 2003; McDonough, 2005). Rural students' aspirations may even be said to mirror the expectations of their parents as a result of communicated expectations (Cobb et al., 1986). Shamah (2009) found that the occupational aspirations of rural youth may be more directly influenced by primary socialization processes that occur within the nuclear

family than within the educational system or other locations, which is not surprising given that family relationships have been found to play a central role in the growth and development of rural adolescents (D'Amico et al., 1996). Personal involvement with family members is important for rural youth and those who enjoy these positive interactions appear to be insightful and more self directed (Hedlund, 1993). Research suggests that parents may be the most important factor in influencing the career development of youth (Findlay & Rawls, 1984; Korthli & Harrison, 1988; Lee, 1984). Griffin, Hutchins, and Meece's (2011) findings echo the influence of parents as they found that nearly three fourths of the rural high school students in their study looked to their parents as a major source of information about occupations. White students in the study were more likely than Black students to seek information about careers from their parents, and male students were less likely than females to seek advice about careers from various sources of information and to explore a wide range of career opportunities (Griffin et al., 2011). In considering the influence of the nuclear family, there is a question of whether the adolescents' decisions are based on conversations with parents about possible occupations or if the adolescents' occupational choices are made based on that which the youth are most familiar (Peterson, Stivers, & Peters, 1986).

With regard to the nuclear family in a rural context, fathers may play an important role in their youth's aspirations. Although there is a scarcity of studies that address this issue, Jackson and Meara's (1974) study which explored the achievement of economically disadvantaged rural youth and the influence of fathers found that males, whose fathers had higher occupational status and educational attainment, had more positive high school experiences, showed higher achievement, had higher educational

goals and aspirations for long range work plans, and expressed more optimism regarding the future. Although this study is almost forty years old and the economy has changed dramatically since then, there is a possibility that identification with one's father may continue to serve as an indicator for one's aspirations and career choices. Based on Jackson and Meara's (1974) findings, it would appear that the aspirations of those youth with high identification models were formed as a result of their fathers serving as role models; however, there could also be some element of a desire to meet parental expectations. While youth with low identification models may have perceived their options as being more limited, one cannot discount the idea that their vocational choices may have been either direct result of parental expectations or the lack of exposure to other vocational opportunities. One year after their original study, Jackson and Meara (1974) found that the males, who were originally designated as having low identification models, were more likely than those who had been identified as having high identification models to be unemployed, to serve in the military, or to work full time. Is that possible that some rural youth are convinced that higher education is not necessary to obtain a fairly well-paid, although perhaps not prestigious, job (Dunne, Rogers, & Carlsen, 1981)? Is this a reflection of their parents' influence, especially that of their father? It is interesting to note that males with low identification models were more optimistic about the future one year after their graduation, as opposed to when they were high school seniors (Jackson & Meara, 1974). Jackson and Meara (1974) suggest this occurrence may be a result of the fact that these males may believe that "...success is possible when success is not measured in traditional academic terms" (p. 355).

**Connection to Place**

*Place profoundly shapes who we are, and who we believe ourselves to be.* (Griffin, 2006, p. 25)

Connection to place explains youth's significant sense of identity, commitment, and social connection to their environment (Howley, 2006). Thomas Jefferson stressed the importance of a connection to place when he warned that "a successful democracy required people with a sense of place, a closeness to the land" (Sidey, 1989, p. 31). Rural community ties are notoriously strong, especially given the strong intergenerational connections (Hecktner, 1995). Many rural people remain committed to place, resist intrusion of their culture, and make sense of their world in a distinctly rural manner (Howley, 2006). Elder and Conger (2000) found evidence that suggests that attachment to place, intergenerational ties, and rural values benefit rural youth and aid in the development of a strong sense of identity and social connections.

Some people choose to use region as a reference point for self definition, which is often evident among White southerners. Roebuck and Neff (1980) found loyalty for the Southern region and its customs to be frequently professed. Griffin (2006) writes that when southerners identify with the region they "believe the South superior to other places and thus embrace its positive qualities and downplay its negative ones, see its distinctiveness from the hum-drum and the homogenized, reflect on its meaning, and identify and fit in with others in their region" (p. 25-26). Howley (2006) found that rural students' aspirations may be explained by their sense of connection to their local communities, families, and rural ways of life.

Young adults are faced with making many important decisions about their future such as what they will do for a living, if they will marry, and where they will live. Although research indicates that young adults are more likely to migrate than any other age group (Garasky, 2002), choosing whether to stay in the community in which one has grown up or to migrate to other locations often presents challenges for rural youth. Sometimes the educational and occupational aspirations of rural youth cannot be achieved within the local community (Bajema et al., 2002). In these situations, rural youth are often faced with the difficult choice of remaining close to family and friends by accepting educational or occupational opportunities available within the community or relocating to pursue higher education and career opportunities elsewhere (Elder, King, & Conger, 1996; Hektner, 1995; Howley, 2006), and these decisions may cause a great sense of conflict (Schaefer & Meece, 2009). Some rural youth place more value on remaining in their community and forfeit education and enhanced economic options to do so (Hektner, 1995; Howley, 2006). However, another study showed that a lack of local job opportunities may cause rural youth to place less importance on remaining within the community (Johnson, Elder, & Stern, 2005).

In their study rural youth in economically trouble regions of the Midwest, Johnson et al. (2005) found that adolescents who identified with their parents, respected them to a greater extent, and wanted to be like them placed more importance on living near family and less on moving away from the community. Conversely, civic ties were not found to be a major constraint. The more involved the adolescents were in activities, the less importance they placed on living in the same area. Youth who were less optimistic about their occupational opportunities placed less importance on living near

family and in their home community. Likewise, those with higher grades and higher educational ambitions also placed less importance on living near family or in their home community, although they did not express a desire to leave the area. In fact, the desire to leave the area was associated with lower educational attainment. Unexpected events and experiences with regard to job opportunities and relationships with family and community members may cause their preferences to change later in life. However, youths' choice to remain within their local community may reduce their chance of ever moving to another area later in life (Mortimer & Johnson, 1999). Choosing to remain within the local community is not necessarily unwise for young rural males as they have more occupational opportunities than females (Salamon, 1992). In one study, the choice to remain within the area did not appear to limit the youth's attainment of education and earnings during the first few years after high school (Johnson et al., 2005) which may be attributed to the fact that youth may benefit from their social connections in obtaining an occupation and for some, their future with an industry may have begun when they were in high school (Mortimer & Johnson, 1999). Johnson et al. (2005) suggest, however, that choosing to remain in an area may eventually led to individuals struggling to obtain financial security - which may be especially true in light of the uncertain future of many our nation's industries.

In rural communities, religion may also influence attachment to place (Elder et al., 1996). In view of the fact that the family and the church are core institutions and that involvement in the rural church is usually linked with close family ties (Salamon, 1992), it may be difficult to separate the influence of the two. However, it would appear that close family ties influence a youth's attachment to religion. Elder et al. (1996) also found

that adolescents who were strongly bonded to family reported identifying with parents and being committed to a religious faith, and they view this developed faith as a result of family influence and association with peers through religious and social functions. While identifying with parents may cause some rural youth to place a higher importance on living near family (Johnson et al., 2005), D'Amico et al.'s (1996) findings suggest that even in light of strong family relationships, rural youth may anticipate moving away from their conservative rural community. Rural families' attachment to their culture and the geographic context in which they live may cause youth to feel torn between their occupational aspirations and a sense of connection to place, as they realize that these choices have important implications for their future. The attachment that some rural youth have to place may also be associated with lower aspirations and expectations for the future (Howley, 2006).

Given the limited economic opportunities in some rural communities, residential preference may play a large role in the prediction of one's occupational choice (Schaefer & Meece, 2009). In a small town in Iowa, Carr and Kefalas (2009) discovered two distinct groups of teens they identified as the *Stayers* and the *Achievers*; by junior year, most of the *Stayers* believed it was their destiny to remain in their small hometown. A possible explanation for this behavior would be Marcia's (1966) identity foreclosure or Berzonsky's (2004) normative processing style, both of which may have resulted from parental influence to stay in the area. Carr and Kefalas (2009) noted distinct outward differences between the *Stayers* and the *Achievers* with regard to the clothes they wore and the vehicles they drove. Perhaps an even more important reminder of the differences that separated these groups was "their class rank and position in the school's pecking

order” (Carr & Kefalas, 2009, p. 57). Elder et al. (1996) also found that adolescents who were not doing well in school and saw little prospect for college are more inclined to remain in the local community; they further suggest that youth may feel a lack of competence which may prevent them from becoming more independent if their families are under socioeconomic stress. Is it possible that poor academic achievement was a primary factor in why these youth, which were labeled as the *Stayers*, stayed within the community? Did these young men recognize they had the choice to move or did they perceive staying as their only option?

Shamah (2009) noted the long-standing tension between residents’ desire for a strong rural community and the implied belief that the best life for their youth exists in the cities. For others a rural setting offers a sense of contentment that is necessary for enduring rural culture (Sidey, 1989). Is it possible some rural youth fear that moving way will cause alienation from their families, their familiar culture, and their history? In her study of educational aspirations of rural youth, Howley (2006) suggests that aspirations which include remaining in one’s community should be acknowledged and supported by educators and researchers. Aspiring to remain in one’s local community should be the individual’s choice and not those of significant others; however, the difficulty encountered is whether rural youth recognize their options and/or if they are willing to accept responsibility for making the choice of where to live.

Corbett’s (2007) study of the identity of rural youth and their decisions regarding migration revealed three distinct groups of youth. The first group, also referred to as floaters, exhibited signs of mobility capital, which refers to youth accepting the idea that at some point they will leave their home community in order to pursue academic and

career goals, without any expressing feelings of stress or tension (Corbett, 2007). Their conceptions of living outside of the rural community are likely influenced by their resources they have available. Corbett (2007) reports these youth are more likely to have the cultural and economic capital to achieve their aspirations. The second group identified by Corbett (2007) reported significant stress at the possibility of moving away from their rural community. For these youth, the security of being comfortable in their surroundings and having family support is more attractive than moving away to an unknown place in pursuit of aspirations (Corbett, 2007). Success for these youth is gained through the use of “localized capital” such as social networks and economic capital linked to the local area. For the third group identified by Corbett (2007), moving away from their rural area was nothing more than a dream. These youth were unable to imagine their futures beyond high school, and they did not possess mobility or localized capital (Corbett, 2007).

### **Providing an Opportunity to be Heard**

Providing opportunities for rural White southern male adolescents to discuss their occupational choices and other aspirations through a qualitative study not only recognizes the uniqueness of this subgroup, but it also provides an intimate view of the phenomena that quantitative data cannot provide. Through entering into this discussion about rural youth’s occupational choices and other aspirations, the researcher anticipates that rural White southern males may feel a sense of empowerment as they come to realize more about themselves and how their choices were formed. Seaton (2007), Burnell (2003), D’Amico et al. (1996), and Hedlund (1993) provided their participants with voices, and their voices were used to validate the participants’ perspectives and to present a more

holistic picture of the phenomenon being studied. In Seaton's (2007) ethnographic study of rural girls, Seaton found that encouraging rural girls to speak about their experiences and misconceptions of rural youth empowered them to become the authorities of their own lives. Burnell's (2003) qualitative study, which focused primarily on the aspirations and perspectives of work-bound rural high school seniors, also found that the participants were empowered by sharing their stories. Burnell (2003) noted that the participants were surprised that aspects of their lives, their values, and decisions about their future would be valued by others, especially those outside of their culture. These research findings suggest that providing a voice for young White rural Southern males will not only aid educators in planning curriculum, but it may also serve to benefit the young men by validating their vocational choices and life experiences.

### **Self Identity Formation**

*...the internal canvas on which the self-portrait is painted must accommodate a crowd of proliferating persona whose characteristics are not necessarily compatible* (Harter & Monsour, 1992, p. 258)

The concept of self is gradually constructed (Harter, 1988). It is a process that "represents a complex interaction between one's developing cognitive capacities and one's socialization experiences" (Harter, 1988, p. 46). Lived experiences work to influence identity development. The conceptual *Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity* presented by Jones and McEwen (2000) links specific contextual factors to the identity development of college students. These researchers argue that the "[i]nfluences of sociocultural conditions, family background, and current experiences cannot be underestimated in understanding how participants constructed and experienced their

identities” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 410). Other researchers have demonstrated that one’s self-concept, self-worth, and self-attributes vary according to social context (see Markus & Nurius, 1986; Harter & Monsour, 1992). The findings of these studies support the idea of social constructivism and the modern conception of self-concept as being multi-dimensional in nature.

During late adolescence youth begin to shore up the concept of their identities. Hart (1992) posits that “forming a vision of the self in the future is one of the basic tasks of development” (p. 71) during late adolescence and adulthood. However, the process of identity development, although assumed to be natural part of adolescence, is not achieved without some amount of internal conflict. Erikson’s (1968) concept of identity development recognizes that the essential crisis of adolescence is discovering one’s true identity. In their study of the differentiation of self among adolescents, Harter and Monsour’s (1992) results supported the notion of mid-adolescence being characterized by a period of “storm and stress” as a result of social pressure “to differentiate the self into multiple roles while the cognitive apparatus is pressing for integration” (p. 258). During mid-adolescence youth may feel torn between their visions for the future and meeting parental and societal expectations. Harter and Monsour (1992) found that adolescents typically experience conflict between the present self and who they wish to become. The internal conflicts experienced by these participants measured the highest from 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade, with a systemic decrease between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade (Harter & Mansour, 1992). The resolution of identity commitments may be explained by the youth’s ability to resolve conflicting views and contradictory feelings. Drawing from Erickson’s (1968) theory of identity development, Marcia (1980) theorizes that resolution of identity

conflicts are determined by the extent to which a self-reflective approach to oneself and one's future is adopted in early adolescence. If youth are not engaged in a self-reflective approach with regard to themselves and their future, they may exhibit signs of identity foreclosure.

The struggle to locate one's identity during mid to late adolescence may also be located in the concept of possible selves. According to Markus & Nurius (1986), the concept of possible selves is a domain of self knowledge that needs to be explored; this type of self knowledge refers to how individuals think about their potential and about their future. Possible selves are a reflection of the ideal selves that individuals would very much like to become and those who they do not want to become (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Possible selves provide the essential link between self-concept and the individual's motivation to reach specific goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The construction of possible selves is a key factor in occupational aspirations (Marshall, Young, Domene, & Zaidman-Zait, 2008). According to Markus and Nurius (1986), the individual's "repertoire of possible selves can be viewed as the cognitive manifestation of enduring goals, aspirations, motives, fears, and threats" (p. 954).

As youth envision their possible selves, it is highly likely that lived experiences in conjunction with contact with influential adults act as determinants of their future selves; which brings to bear two questions: (1) To what extent are possible selves are formed independently? (2) Could possible selves be a reflection of dreams that significant others have for the individuals. The influence of the family on the construction of possible selves may explain why adolescents and parents often tend to hold similar goals for the future (Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, & Eccles, 2001). Marshall et al.'s (2008) study also

suggests the influence of family, as their findings reveal that concept of possible selves is jointly constructed with parents, or more specifically mothers, through social interaction. A key limitation to the findings in this study is that fathers were not included in the sample. If fathers had been included in the sample, researchers may have a better understanding of how the dynamics of the parent-child relationship affect the construction of possible selves.

Resolving the conflict between self-attributes appears to be the key to youth developing a strong sense of self esteem and self efficacy. Self esteem is an essential component of the ego-identity, which is the cornerstone of successful adolescent psychosocial development (Cantrell & Lupinacci, 2004). Harter and Monsour's (1992) findings show that adolescents who were not successful in adopting a strategy of differentiating self-attributes by placing positive attributes/characteristics at the core of one's personality and dismissing the less desirable attributes/characteristics reported lower global self-esteem. A connection between feelings of self-efficacy and the individual's future orientation has been found to occur in varying contexts (see Ley et al., 1996; Sirin et al., 2004). During individual interviews in Sirin et al.'s (2004) study, urban adolescent minority students consistently mentioned how their personal abilities would affect their successes or failures with regard to future aspirations; feelings of self-efficacy appeared to be a primary factor in determining these participants' future aspirations, with contextual factors (i.e. resources and barriers) appearing to be secondary. In Ley et al.'s (1996) study, rural youth participants also believed their personal abilities would affect their successes or failures, and they, along with their parents and teachers, placed more value on the personal qualities of youth than on the contextual factors associated with

academic achievement. In considering feelings of self esteem, it would appear that lived experiences, at least in the rural context, are responsible for shaping such. In his study of rural youth, Hedlund (1993) found that personal interactions with family members, teachers, and other adults were important to the development of one's identity and feelings of self-worth.

It is interesting to note that Harter and Monsour's (1992) study showed that the female participants, consistently across the grade levels studied, identified more contradictory self-attributes and reported more internal conflict in resolving their identity than their male counterparts. Harter and Monsour (1992) explain this occurrence by drawing from Gilligan's (1982) analysis of gender differences. Gilligan (1982) suggests that the socialization of girls involves more embeddedness within the family and that girls show more involvement and concern with regard to relationships. Boys, on the other hand, seek their path of independence and autonomy by using logic, rather than relying on their emotions, to make moral/social decisions; in this case, logic takes precedence over the bond formed by relationships. Gilligan's (1982) suggestion of males using logic to make decisions may explain why some males are more likely to choose an occupation without as much storm and stress and/or show signs of identity foreclosure.

The projection of self into the future is essential for identity development and serves as a benchmark for youth as they make their way into adulthood. "To be deprived of a sense of self in the future is a loss that makes both social life difficult and day-to-day life meaningless (Hart & Bauknight, 1992, p. 71). A youth's ideal self compasses a multitude of dimensions. It is a representation of personal aspirations and goals, which include those involving relationships, desired personality characteristics, and life

experiences. The ideal self during adolescence and early adulthood consists of career and family-role aspirations (Veroff, Douban, & Kulka, 1981). Self and optimism comes into play as individuals project themselves in the future. In examining the gender differences of self esteem and optimism among rural youth in Australia, Puskar et al. (2010) found that males have slightly higher esteem and optimism than their female counterparts. In understanding the paths that men choose for their lives, Hart and Bauknight (1992) focus on the role the ideal self. Research suggests that the ideal self influences decisions that affect one's life course (Markus & Nurius, 1986). If important decisions are made based on imagining the self under various alternative outcomes (Markus & Nurius, 1986), it may be beneficial to ensure that youth are exposed to a wide variety of options with regard to possible occupations.

### **Conforming to the Expectations of Others**

For some adolescents, conforming to the expectations of others is a viable option. In Corbett's (2007) study of rural Canadian youth from "practical families with rural working class capital and values," the youth perceived their career options as limited and highly stereotypical (p. 783). The youth in Corbett's (2007) study selected high school classes based on their practicality and the ability to give them access to apprenticeships or community college vocational programs; these boys placed little value on required academic classes and viewed minimal grades in these classes as acceptable. Ley et al.'s (1996) findings also suggest that rural adolescents' aspirations may be linked to the expectations held by their parents and other adults with whom they have a relationship. In some cases, rural youth leave their community because they believe that is what is expected of them (Corbett, 2007). If boys, as Gilligan (1982) suggests, are more likely to

make life choices based on logic and basic reasoning, assenting to parental expectations rather than experiencing an internal crisis may appear logical to some young men.

Adolescents in identity foreclosure tend to conform to the future expectations of others without having fully given consideration to the range of options available for their own future (Marcia, 1966). Berzonsky's (1989) normative identity processing style, which is associated with strict authoritarian parenting, may be closely linked to identity foreclosure given that adolescents deal with identity conflicts and form their commitments by adopting the expectations of significant others in a relatively automatic fashion. However, it is questionable if all incidents of identity foreclosure are a result of feeling compelled by one's parents to conform to parental expectations or a matter of identifying with one's parents and wanting to emulate them. Burnell's (2003) and Ley et al.'s (1996) findings suggest evidence of identity foreclosure among some rural youth. While one may conclude that the like-mindedness of those within a rural community may lead to the youth's aspirations mirroring those held by their parents and, in some cases, their teachers as well (see Ley et al., 1996), conventional wisdom gained through experiences with youth indicates that identity foreclosure may cut across all geographic and socio-cultural contexts. Marcia (1966) writes,

A foreclosure subject is distinguished by not having experienced a crisis, yet expressing commitment. It is difficult to tell where his parents' goals for him leave off and where his begin. He is becoming what others have prepared or intended him to become as a child (p. 552).

It is possible that identity foreclosure may be explained by Erikson's (1968) idea of adolescence acting as a moratorium for youth, as this period which may best be described

as a time of freedom from the responsibilities that require thinking about choices and experimenting with options (Csikszentmihalyi & Schmidt, 1998). While identity foreclosure shows evidence of a loss of autonomy, some adolescents may find that it may be much less troublesome and more convenient to commit to a lifelong career if, in fact, difficult choices, such as those related to career choices, are made by someone else.

For others, their occupational choices are a matter of resigned orientation. According to Alix and Lantz (1973), resignation, which may result from economic failure, is sub-cultural in nature and can be learned through socialization. Also, resignation may be the product of forces other than low socio-economic status. Alix and Lantz's (1973) findings suggest that resignation had a greater independent effect on those with low occupational aspirations. The resigned poor may continue to feel limited in their choices of occupations without the support of significant others and educators who will provide these youth with opportunities to explore a variety of occupations and support in the obtainment of their goals.

### **Making Sense of the Literature**

Contextual factors, feelings of self identity, identity foreclosure, and a connection to place may all serve as influencers of adolescents' aspirations. In this proposed study, the individual and contextual factors that contribute to the formation of aspirations of rural White southern adolescent males will be examined. Members of this unique subgroup will be encouraged to share their stories of growing up in a rural context and to discuss their occupational choices and aspirations for the future. The goal of this proposed study is to provide educators with a multifaceted view of rural White southern males' occupational choices and their perceptions of parents' and teachers' expectations.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Research Design

*Culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described (Geertz, 1973, p. 14 in Merriam, 2009, p. 28).*

For the purpose of better understanding how identity and the expectations of parents have influenced rural adolescent males' vocational choices, this current research study utilized mixed methods. While quantitative research methods alone have the potential to identify the influencers that affect adolescents' occupational choices, the reliance on fixed answer categories may act as a hindrance to the researcher, as it may not provide enough evidence to make an accurate analysis. Taking into consideration that the use of in-depth interviews with open-ended questions increases the likelihood of obtaining self-generated responses (Shuy, 2003), which in turn adds to the depth and detail of the data collected, it was determined that qualitative inquiry would best be suited for this study. The documentation of the self-generated responses of these young adolescent males provided a description of these adolescents' thoughts about rural life, their occupations, and their aspirations for the future that could not have been achieved with statistical analyses. The experiences of these young men were captured truly "in their own words." Patton (2002) recognized the importance of the spoken words of the participants, in conjunction with researcher's description of the events observed, and he considered both to be "the essence of qualitative inquiry" (p. 457).

To study the occupational choices of young males within the rural culture, ethnography was used. Ethnography, which was originally developed by anthropologists, “involves an intensive study of the features of a culture” and patterns found therein (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 500). Patton (2002) places the importance of understanding culture as the cornerstone of ethnography. Ethnography may best be described as a traditional form of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2002) that interprets findings from a cultural perspective (Wolcott, 1980). Ethnographers believe the most important difference among groups of people is their culture (Gall et al., 2007). They use ethnography as a vehicle to identify themes or cultural patterns that explain how people think, believe, and behave. These identified cultural patterns may then be used to explain the behavior of others members of a culture (Gall et al., 2007). The traditional goal of ethnography is to make the familiar strange – this goal involves looking at a cultural phenomenon from the perspective of an outsider and then seeking to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of an insider (Spindler & Spindler, 1982). Results of an ethnographic study should generate concepts that were not present before the study was conducted (Stewart, 1998).

This ethnography illuminated cultural processes that shape the identities of young rural White southern males and provided a better understanding of how their identities and the expectations of their parents and teachers have influenced their occupational choices and other life decisions. Merriam (2009) locates “thick descriptions” at the heart of ethnography (p. 28). “Wherever it has been adopted, a key assumption has been that by entering into close and relatively prolonged interaction with people...in their everyday lives, ethnographers can better understand the beliefs, motivations, and behaviors of their

subjects than they can by using any other approach” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 456). In conveying the meanings participants make of their lives, this ethnographic study captured the essence of young rural males, allowed for the exploration of deeper meaning structures, and brought to light epistemological concerns of this unique subgroup. It is the researcher’s desire that readers of this study will be able to understand the culture of these rural White southern males even though they may never experienced it.

### **Data Sources**

The use of a wide range of qualitative data collection techniques is warranted for conducting ethnography (Gall et al., 2007). To gain a clear understanding of the rural White southern males occupational choices, their perceptions of parents’ and teachers’ experiences, and the influence of the rural context on their identity, six sources of data was used: (1) a questionnaire, (2) individual interviews with participants, (3) selected artifacts which characterize the participants’ identity such as photographs, news clippings, lyrics from songs and other mementos, (4) a focus group interview, (5) an online survey, and (6) the researcher’s reflections/field notes. Triangulation of multiple data and multiple methods were used to secure an in-depth understanding of the research topic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), and to identify specific themes and increase the credibility of the findings in this study (Berg, 1998; Glesne, 2006). A recursive process of analysis was used to give meaning to questionnaires, transcripts of interviews, field notes, and reflective thoughts regarding codes, to identify themes, and to guide the direction of the current study. (Justification for each of the data sources is given in following table. See Appendix A for the questionnaire, Appendix B for the online participant survey, and Appendix C for interview guide for the participants.)

Table 1

*Justification of Data Sources*

Data Source	Justification
Questionnaire – completed prior to individual interview	Completing a questionnaire in advance of the individual interview gave the participants a preview of the topics to be discussed and allowed them time to reflect as they established their thoughts; having these responses in advance also provided the researcher with insight into their perspectives and allowed for more effective planning of the interview
Individual Semi-structured Interviews	The interviews included some specific prepared questions which provided an element of continuity and aided in identifying themes that emerged. The participants' responses also guided further questioning, as the elaborated responses provided evidence of the affective and cognitive underpinnings of the participants' perceptions (Glesne, 2006; Seaton, 2007; Burnell, 2003; Hedlund, 1993).
Focus Group Interviews	Focus group interviews allowed the researcher to observe interactions of the group members and to gain their multiple and/or shared perspectives about various topics (Berg, 1998; Glesne, 2006; Sirin, 2004).
Field Notes	Field notes were used by the researcher to make personal observations and reflections regarding the research (Glesne, 2006).
Self-Selected Artifacts which Characterize the Participants' Identity	The use of self-selected artifacts allowed the researcher to gain more insight into the participant's identity. In some cases, the artifacts revealed more about the participant's identity than the participant was willing to express verbally in an interview.
Online Survey	Conducting surveys online via the Internet has become increasingly popular with researchers (Gall et al., 2007). The use of an online survey provided the researcher with access to a larger sample of participants in the surrounding areas and a convenient and effective method for collecting data. Responses from the online survey were compared to the data collected in interviews to identify similarities and differences.

### **Context of the Study**

*Heartland County* is located in central Georgia. This rural area, which is filled with a combination of tall Georgia pines and hardwood trees, is a quaint area that provides its residents with opportunities to engage in a variety of outdoor activities. Each of the seasons has distinct characteristics and brings about favorite pastimes. In the spring, the landscape is highlighted by the blooms of azaleas, daffodils, and dogwoods; the smell of new freshly tilled gardens and new grass permeates the air, and residents enjoy youth baseball games, gardening, and fishing. In the summer the days are long and the temperatures are often scorching; the summer crops reach their peak and the smell of fresh cut hay permeates the air; the residents enjoy church league softball, fishing, swimming, or tubing in a nearby lake or river. In the fall, the leaves begin to change colors, fishing continues, and the football and hunting seasons begin. In the winter, most of the vegetation goes dormant, firewood is cut, and the hunting continues. Throughout the year church activities, county sports events, and school functions occupy the time of many of the community's residents.

*Heartland County*, with a population of approximately 16,000, is a close knit community with a small town feel. There are historic homes and Protestant churches sprinkled throughout the area. This area has a rich history that reaches back to the founding of its county seat in the mid 1800's, and it has been home to many families for multiple generations. For years the majority of the long time residents of this community knew all of the other long time residents by name. However, in the last ten years, the area has begun to change with increased land development, as a result of families escaping the negative aspects of city life and/or taking advantage of lower property taxes.

### **Participants and Participant Selection**

Participants for this study were selected with the help of the school guidance counselor and suggestions from other participants. Eight participants met the following criteria for selection: White male, ages 18 to 25 years, and having family ties to this rural central Georgia area for at least two generations. All of the participants were high school graduates. The researcher anticipated having at least three demographic groups represented: those who lived in trailer parks, those who lived in houses on less than 10 acres, and those whose families owned 10 or more acres of land. It was discovered, however, that none of the young males who were suggested for this study lived in a trailer park. Therefore only two demographic groups were represented; those who lived in the subdivisions on less than two acres of land and those who lived on the outskirts of town on more than ten acres of land.

The use of a purposeful sample allowed for the selection of “information rich cases,” which provided depth to the study (Patton, 2002, p. 46). A homogenous sampling strategy was utilized to gain access to rural adolescent males in *Heartland County*. This purposeful sample allowed for the documentation of the commonalities that exist within a much larger sample and to present a more comprehensive description of the perceptions and aspirations of this cultural group (Patton, 2002). The careful selection of participants provided information which encompassed the aspirations of rural White southern males to the point that it may allow the researcher to, as Berg (1998) suggests, theorize about those who share similar lived experiences. While there is no prescribed number of participants for a qualitative study (Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2002), the researcher believes a diverse sample is essential for providing a clear and accurate representation of

rural White southern males' perspectives. Patton (2002), notes the importance of the participants selected as opposed to the number of participants when he writes, "The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (p. 245). Therefore, the researcher chose eight participants for the purpose of data collection. The rationale behind this decision was to include at least three males from each of the two demographic groups.

Based on suggestions from the high school guidance counselor and recent graduates, potential participants for this study were contacted by way of telephone, and they were invited to participate in the current study. The researcher identified herself as a teacher from a nearby school system and expressed her interest in rural culture. She explained that as a part of graduate coursework she was investigating the lived experiences of southern White males growing up in a rural area and their occupational choices and future goals. The researcher also explained to the potential participants that should they agree to participate in the study they would be asked to initially complete a brief questionnaire via e-mail and to participate in a personal interview which would last approximately one hour. The researcher emphasized to the potential participants that their confidentiality would be maintained and their real names would not be revealed at any point in the study.

As anticipated, the researcher found that she was able to easily gain an insider status with these participants because she was a White female from a rural community in middle Georgia. The researcher credits the ability to establish rapport and credibility with her ability to "fit in" with the participants by way of her Southern dialect, casual attire

which included of cowboy boots and jeans, and driving her husband's bright red Dodge Ram 1500 pickup with hemi. The image that she created, in addition to her knowledge of rural life experiences, put the participants at ease to the point that they were comfortable in frankly sharing their perspectives of growing up in a rural context and discussing their perceived identities, aspirations for the future, and how their aspirations were formed.

### **Data Collection**

Given that the researcher is familiar of this rural Georgia area through having grown up in a nearby rural community and teaching for the past four years in a neighboring rural county, a background study phase was not be completed. Prior to conducting individual interviews, each participant completed a questionnaire (see Appendix A). This questionnaire, which was created by the researcher, presented the participants with a preview of the topics to be discussed and allowed them time for reflection as they established their thoughts; it also provided the researcher with insight into their perspectives, which aided in effectively planning for the individual interview.

Face to face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each of the selected participants were conducted at the public library. During each interview, detailed interpretive notes were taken to identify the context of the event; these notes included reflections on biases that existed prior to the interview or problems encountered with the prepared questions (Richards, 2009). The interviews were audio recorded for later analysis. The use of face to face interviews allowed the interviewer to develop a sense of trust between the interviewer and the participant; the establishment of this relationship was useful when exploring complex issues (Shuy, 2003). The use of similar questions in the semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to make comparisons among the

participants (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Taking into consideration factors that may have prevented the participants from providing an accurate picture of their cultural world, the researcher disclosed her upbringing in a nearby rural area as she explained the purpose of the study to each participant. The researcher believes that disclosing her rural background provided a means of gaining the participants' trust and showing genuine interest in what they had to say in the interview. Exposing a common bond may have also alleviated any hesitation on the part of the participants to freely share their perceptions and to openly discuss their aspirations and the influences that shaped their decisions, as they may have felt that the researcher could relate more easily to their lived experiences.

Open ended questions were used to initiate the conversation, and probing questions were asked to further pursue topics and to thus gain a clear understanding of the participants' complex world. Assuming the role of an efficient interviewer, the researcher took responsibility for providing direction to the conversation. The researcher strove to make the interview as relaxed as possible, while at the same time maintaining a level of professionalism (Crang & Cook, 2007). Care was taken to ask questions that had been identified as significant to the study and to redirect participants whose responses strayed from the focus of the interview. Researchers are faced with the challenge of collecting data that is necessary to answer the research questions (Richards, 2009) which essentially constrains qualitative inquiry (at least to some degree) to the goals of the study (Weiss, 1994). While some element of wandering from the topic may have provided new insight, allowing the participants to stray from the topic may have caused confusion for both the researcher and participant. In order to keep the flow of the conversation going

and to gain more in-depth responses, a variety of questioning techniques (see Crang & Cook, 2007) were used.

During the individual semi-structured interviews, the researcher explored topics such as responsibilities within the family, family/parental influences, personal attributes, extracurricular activities, work experiences, religious beliefs, academic life, perceived expectations of parents and teachers, perceptions of growing up in a rural area, personal educational goals and expectations, occupational choices, and aspirations for the future with regard to work and family. The interview questions were constructed to assess a wide variety of topics which may have influenced the adolescent's identity, occupational choices, and other important life decisions, and relevancy of each question was supported through the literature (see Appendices B & C). While there was some concern that the participants may have falsely reported in the interview, which may also happen with a survey, Weiss (1994) makes the argument that it is difficult for participants to maintain a lie throughout an interview; therefore, he suggests that to ensure that the participants are being truthful, interviewers should use probes to gain detailed answers and develop a better understanding of the study's topic. Most of the interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. However, as Weiss (1994) suggests, the interview time was extended if the interview was productive and the participant did not show signs of fatigue.

The interview questions were based on Spradley's (1979) basic format for meaning-seeking inquiry and included descriptive questions, structural questions, and contrast questions. The use of descriptive questions encouraged the participant to talk extensively about his background. The use of specifically prepared, organizational questions allowed for exploration of thoughts and beliefs while maintaining an element of

continuity, which was helpful in identifying themes that emerged. Based on the participants' responses, contrast questions were used to gain more elaborate responses which provided evidence of the affective and cognitive underpinnings of the participants' perceptions (Glesne, 2006; McGough, 1997; Spradley, 1979). During the interview process the researcher strove to ensure that the participants felt a sense of self worth and validation in their responses and to remain self reflexive, so as not to allow personal biases or suppositions interfere with the data collection process (Sirin et al., 2004).

In contrast to the individual interviews with the eight participants, two focus group interviews with four participants were conducted after the initial analysis of the data. Berg (1998) differentiates between the data collected from individual and focus group interviews. Responses given during focus group interviews "reflect the collective notions shared and negotiated by the group" whereas the responses given during individual interviews "reflect only the views and opinions of the individual, shaped by the social process of living in a culture" (Berg, 1998, p.112). The researcher believes that the use of both interview methods proved useful in this study.

During the focus group interview, which was audio taped and later transcribed, the researcher shared her initial findings with the group and asked for the group's reactions to these findings. This interview provided the researcher with a rare glimpse into the relevant interaction of participants as they shared their perspectives regarding the researcher's conclusions. While focus group interviews are not truly natural conversations, the interaction between the participants may allow for a more natural flow of conversation compared to that associated with traditional individual interviews which may yield information that may not be obtained otherwise. Research has shown that

participants' responses during focus group interviews are more extreme than those provided in survey questionnaires (Berg, 1998), perhaps as a result of the power found within a group. Recognizing the limitations placed on this process of data collection as a result of group dynamics, the researcher viewed the data collected during the two focus group interviews as useful. The comments made during this interview allowed the researcher to gain insight into these rural males' socially constructed responses.

To gain a holistic picture of growing up as a rural youth and to allow for triangulation of the data, other sources of data were utilized (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002) in addition to individual and focus group interviews. Selected artifacts, which the participants chose to characterize their identities, such as photos and song lyrics, were examined. Other sources of data include the researcher's field notes and reflective memos, which were presented in a narrative format, and an online survey. During the period of time that the researcher was conducting interviews with participants who were suggested by the school counselor or other participants, the researcher also issued invitations to participate in this study via an online social network and through personal contacts in surrounding counties who may have knowledge of adolescents who would qualify for this study. Those interested in participating in this study were directed to an occupational choices survey at [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com). The survey, with questions similar to the questionnaire, was a combination of 16 multiple choice and short answer questions (see Appendix D). The participants completed the survey anonymously, but participants had the option to put their contact information if they were willing to participate in an individual interview or focus group. (None of the participants who completed the online survey agreed to be interviewed.) The online participants'

responses were used to determine similarities and differences among those participants who were interviewed. The online survey was available for a consecutive 60-day period. The researcher had initially hoped to have a minimum of 50 participants for this part of the study; however, only 30 participants completed the online survey.

### **Data Representation and Analysis**

Intrigued by “the open, emergent nature of qualitative inquiry,” the intention of the researcher was to let the data guide the direction of this study, with the objective being to identify salient themes as they arose (Glesne, 2006, p. 19). As each interview was completed, the researcher, who has previous experience as a medical transcriptionist, transcribed the data within a two-week time frame. This data was stored securely on the researcher’s computer; to insure against the loss of data, all data files were also stored using Carbonite Online Backup. Completing the task of independently transcribing the interviews allowed the researcher the opportunity to become immersed in the data and to ensure accuracy of the transcripts (Patton, 2002; Richards, 2009). Richards (2009) estimates that each transcription should take four to six times the length of the interview. Since qualitative inquiry does not require waiting for all data to be collected before embarking on early analytical processes, the transcripts of the recorded interviews were reviewed as they are completed. The researcher recorded initial thoughts and reflections about the data record and sought to identify central themes; frequency counts were used to identify patterns within the data, and data displays were constructed to gain a clearer conception of overall patterns. Since computer analysis of data can sometimes interfere with the initial analytic process (Bernard & Ryan, 2010; Patton, 2002), the researcher decided that the data would be hand-coded. The researcher believed that experiencing the

data in a hands-on manner through transcription and coding would allow her the opportunity to become familiar with the data and to discover of patterns that computer analysis may not identify.

During the initial text analysis, the researcher's objective was "to see across the data" to themes and ideas (Richards, 2009, p. 94) while at the same time checking against the data to ensure that the understandings generated were merited by the participants' responses (Lincoln, 1995). The researcher sought to identify recurring themes and to uncover patterns in the data. Themes were generated from both an inductive approach, which allowed the researcher to draw ideas from the data presented and an a priori or deductive approach, which allowed the research to draw from her prior theoretical understanding of the topic being explored (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Themes were mostly derived from the data. Charmaz (2000) warns against the dangers of relying on prior theorizing when identifying themes, as researchers may be tempted to find only what they are looking for. Ignoring theory, however, may prevent the researcher from making the connection between the data collected and the research questions (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

At this point in the analysis, the researcher created codes for any themes that appeared within the data; Richards (2009) suggests researchers should initially be generous with codes, as analysis software may be used later to revise and remove categories that are delineated as extraneous. Engaging in timely data analysis allowed the researcher to make important decisions regarding the direction of the study. Ongoing initial data analysis allowed for questions to be added or refined as new themes came to light (Peshkin, 1993) and for gaps or ambiguities to be identified. When gaps were found

within the data, additional interviews with participants were requested to probe topics that were not initially addressed as a means of gaining a greater perspective of the study (Patton, 2002). During this analysis process the researcher drew from theory to reflect on the findings, this technique allowed her to step back from her rural upbringing and focus on her role as a researcher (Gall et al., 2007). Given that the researcher has “no privileged voice” in the interpretations that are written the researcher relied on theory to make sense of the data collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

After all interviews were transcribed, the researcher engaged in a cross case analysis of the participants’ responses to the questionnaire and the interview questions. The uniformity of these questions allowed for greater ease in this process. Major categories, which were originally discovered during the initial analysis, were explored and subcategories were added as they manifested within the data. To remain fully immersed in the data, the researcher decided not to use a computer program for the analysis process. After many hours of carefully reviewing the data, the researcher began to narrow down the codes and categories and focus on the codes that were theoretically relevant in the analysis.

Qualitative inquiry requires researchers to become an artist of words by utilizing a variety of writing skills. In working to transform the data into findings, writers of qualitative studies seek to blend the technical aspects of their studies with a flair for creativity (Glesne, 2006). While the writing processes may vary with the method used, the goal of ethnography is to paint of vivid picture of how the participants think, behave, and believe. “If an ethnography has been done well, readers of the final report should be able to understand the culture even though they may not have directly experienced it”

(Gall et al., 2007, p. 500). The researcher used the theories in which this study is framed to analyze the data.

### **Measures to Support Qualitative Inquiry**

*One cannot expect positivist criteria to apply in any sense to constructivist studies...* Guba & Lincoln (1989, p. 236)

Validity in qualitative research has often been questioned by positivists who engage in quantitative inquiry. Unlike quantitative inquiry, qualitative research offers no straightforward tests which can be applied to test for reliability and validity (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) views the human factor of qualitative inquiry and analysis as a “scientific two-edged sword” (p. 433); it may provide strength to the study, yet it also may act a hindrance. According to the constructivist paradigm, which recognizes the concept of multiple realities and the shared efforts of the researcher and the respondent in co-creating understanding, those engaging in qualitative inquiry make sense of the data in terms of patterns (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) rather than statistical tests. In view of the skepticism associated with qualitative inquiry, ensuring that a qualitative study is perceived as credible and trustworthy is imperative. Strategies to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used. Guba and Lincoln (2005) parallel these measures to the positivist validity measures - internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity.

*Credibility* – The credibility criterion for this study was met in several ways. The primary contributor to the credibility of this study was the researcher’s background experiences. The researcher was raised in a rural culture and has taught in and interacted within a nearby rural area for the past four years. Credibility was also established through

peer debriefing. The researcher enlisted two peers in the Georgia Southern University's Curriculum Doctoral Program; these peers, who are also in the process of writing their dissertations, agreed to serve as accountability partners by providing feedback regarding the findings and analysis which provided clarity and gave new direction to study. The researcher chose these peers because of their academic integrity and their ability to challenge the researcher's way of thinking. The process of using these peers as sounding boards and accountability partners has been in place since the development of the pre-prospectus for this current study.

The researcher also monitored her subjectivity as a researcher and maintained a log to ensure credibility. Initially personal and professional information that may have affected data collection, analysis, and interpretation was revealed in a disclosure statement. Recognizing that "analysis of qualitative data involves creativity, intellectual discipline, analytical rigor, and a great deal of hard work" (Patton, 2002, p. 442), Patton (2002) notes "analysts have an obligation to monitor and report their own analytical procedures and processes as fully and truthfully as possible" (p. 434). In maintaining a sense of truthfulness, a log was kept to justify each step of the study, note the limitations of each step of the study, and examine alternatives considered (Richards, 2009).

As modeled in Maltzan's (2006) study, the researcher addressed her expectations of the findings as a precautionary method to prevent her from imposing her expectations onto the analysis. The researcher's expectations of the findings were recorded as reflective notes prior to collecting data. The researcher referred back to these early reflections throughout the study and over the course of the study, cross-checks of anticipated findings with the findings were conducted with accountability peers. The

researcher believed that the accountability peers challenged her findings and prevented her from interpreting the data to conveniently find that which she expected to find. Guba and Lincoln (1989) write, “If the inquirer ‘finds’ only what he or she expected to find, initially, or seems to become ‘stuck’ or ‘frozen’ on some intermediate construction, credibility suffers” (p. 238). The credibility of this study was also established through member checks. Guba and Lincoln (1989) identify member checks as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (p. 239). Each participant was given the opportunity to review the transcript of his interview to verify the accuracy of his responses.

Finally, through a variety of data and the use of triangulation, credibility was further established. As outlined earlier in the chapter, several disparate sources of data were used for this purpose. According to Fine (2008), objectivity is achieved when researchers gather ample evidence from many vantage points. Triangulation of the data provided an in-depth understanding of the topic and allowed for the acceptance or rejection of themes.

*Transferability.* To establish transferability, Guba and Lincoln (1989) recommended providing an “extensive and careful description of the time, the place, the context, and the culture in which those hypotheses were found salient” (p. 241-242). The researcher took extensive notes as a reference in creating descriptions for the reader. The researcher believed that providing a thick description of time, place, context, and culture throughout this current study would allow for the transferability of the findings of this study to other similar studies.

*Dependability and Confirmability.* The dependability and confirmability audits may be likened to a financial audit as they verify the qualitative inquiry process and the data (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Each of these audits has a specific task in testing the validity of the study. The dependability audit examines the research process for appropriateness, and the confirmability audit ensures that the data used can be traced through the analysis to the original sources. As a means of meeting these two criteria, a peer in the doctoral program, who is not familiar with this study, was enlisted to read the completed study to examine the report for dependable research practices and to confirm the data.

### **Limitations**

- (1) The first limitation was that the research participants were volunteers from one county who have been solicited by the school counselor or a friend. The research participants were limited to those who were willing to participate in a face to face interview to discuss growing up in a rural context and their occupational choices and other important life decisions. It was also later discovered that all of the participants represented the middle class. The absence of variation actually was a strength within this limitation. In order to generalize results, future research would need to be done on a larger geographic area and include a wider variation in socio-economic status.
- (2) The second limitation was that the participants may have felt a need to please the researcher by providing answers which they believed the researcher would find most favorable. The researcher attempted to curtail this limitation by assuring the participants that their frank responses would give merit to the

current study and that strict confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study.

## CHAPTER 4

### RREPORT OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

“If you wish to understand persons - their development and their relations with significant others, you must be prepared to view them as embedded in historical context” (Strauss, 1959, p. 164).

The purpose of this study was to explore the aspirations and occupational choices of rural White southern adolescent males. This research was driven by an interest in identifying the impact of rural culture (i.e. rural histories and lived experiences) on identity development, aspirations, and occupational choices of youth. The following questions guided the research:

- R<sub>1</sub>: How do rural White southern male adolescents’ identities influence their aspirations and occupational choices?**
- R<sub>2</sub>: How do the perceptions of parents’ and teachers’ expectations influence the occupational choices of rural White southern male adolescents?**

The first section below provides an overview of each of the participants and describes their backgrounds as revealed through questionnaires and individual interviews. The second section presents data that were derived from those sources framed within the context of the study’s theoretical framework and review of the literature. They are organized around central ideas derived from the questions and/or responses to them. The final section presents a summary of data from the 30 online survey respondents.

### Overview of the Participants' Backgrounds

This section uses shared biographical information to introduce each of the eight core participants. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants' identities and to maintain their privacy.

On the afternoon of the individual interviews, the researcher met the participants at the public library. With the exception of one participant who was dressed in khakis and loafers as a result of just having come from work, all of the young men were similarly attired in what appeared to be the standard "uniform": jeans; button-down shirt with sleeves rolled past their elbows; camouflage jacket; ball cap; and pull-on work boots commonly referred to as Georgia boots. The researcher also noted that each of the participants, with the exception of one, drove pickup trucks. What follows is a brief introduction of the young men who were present. (See also Appendix E for a brief summary of this information.)

**Chip.** Chip is 20 years old and the youngest of three siblings. He grew up with his parents and two older siblings just outside of town on 112 acres of mostly wooded land. Chip, like his siblings, has moved out of the family home but continues to live within close proximity to his parents.

Chip's parents were high school sweethearts who both graduated from the local high school. They own a variety of businesses within the community – a laundromat, a tire and automotive repair shop, a convenience store, a car wash, and a deer processing cooler; and they also raise chickens for a poultry producer. Chip's father works at the tire and automotive repair shop, and he also oversees the deer processing cooler. Chip is

responsible for the chicken houses, and his mother assumes responsibility for the other businesses. Chip estimates his family's average income to be over \$100,000 a year.

Chip's father is a skilled mechanic, and as a youth he raced cars. His father's affinity for racing has apparently been passed on to Chip and his older brother. Most Saturday nights, Chip's family goes to the races to watch him and his brother drag race.

At the age of 15, Chip began working for his father at the tire store and at the chicken houses. After graduating from high school in 2009 with a vocational seal, he attended a vocational school in a nearby town where he trained to become a machinist. Within the last year he began working part time at a local machine shop, and he has recently begun working full time as a machinist in a nearby town. Chip continues to work for his father at the family's chicken houses. He currently lives with his girlfriend and their 6-month-old baby in a detached duplex garage apartment located behind his parents' home. Chip's brother lives in the other half of the apartment. Neither Chip nor his brother pay rent to live in their apartments. Chip's grandmother lives just on the other side of the family pond.

Chip's immediate family is a close knit group. They spend most weekends together. While they enjoy going to the races and the local high school football games, much of their time is spent at home watching football, eating meals together, and relaxing with friends by the pool in warm months or a bonfire when it is cooler. Chip and his male relatives, both young and old, have a reputation within the community for enjoying a good brawl whenever the opportunity arises.

*Chip – We just don't take anything off of anyone.*

When asked to identify an artifact that best characterizes his identity, Chip chose a picture of his young son, who favors him greatly. At a young age, Chip has assumed the responsibilities of being a provider for his girlfriend and their baby, and he appears to take these responsibilities seriously. Chip is the only participant who spoke of paying bills.

*Chip – Betsy [my girlfriend] is still in college, so I pay \$150 a week for my little boy to go to daycare. I tell Betsy not to pick him up until 5:00 p.m. I want to make sure I get my money's worth.*

Although Chip professes to be cost conscious and wants to get the most for his dollar, he doesn't mind spending some of his earnings on beer and sometimes gambling in card games which may cost up to \$100 per person. During the weekend, Chip continues to unwind during the weekend by spending time with his buddies, who appear to look to him as a leader, drinking and hanging out. Since he does not pay rent to his parents, he is able to save money each week.

*Chip - When I get some of my bills paid and some more money saved, I plan to buy a brand new decked out truck.*

At this point, Chip has no plans to make a marriage commitment to his girlfriend. Ten to fifteen years from now he sees himself working the same job, living in the same area, married, and with more kids. Eventually Chip hopes to inherit the family's chicken houses. Chip wants his children to grow up in the same environment in which he grew up and to have the same experiences which he enjoyed.

**Brantley.** Brantley is 18 years old and has a younger teenage sister, whom he won't let any of his friends date,

*Brantley – Hell no, I wouldn't [let them date her]. I would shoot all of them. I try to be a protective brother.*

Brantley is also Chip's cousin. (The fact that the two were cousins was not discovered until later in the study). Brantley's father and Chip's father are brothers, and they have maintained a very close relationship over the years. It is not unusual for the two to hang out on the weekends watching football or helping one another with tasks that need to be done on their automobiles or properties; however, Brantley's mother rarely accompanies her husband to her brother-in-law's house. Brantley and Chip appear to have a similarly close relationship. Family appears to be very important to Brantley. When asked to identify an artifact that best characterizes his identity, Brantley chose his family name.

Brantley lives in "town" in a subdivision with both parents; however, he spent much of his youth at Chip's house in the "country." His mother graduated from college and is employed as a teacher at the local high school. His father, who is employed as a foreman by a local power plant, did not complete high school; however, it is interesting to note that even with the vast difference in education levels, Brantley's father earns a higher income than his mother. He estimates his family's average income to be over \$100,000 a year.

Brantley is quick-witted, and his comments are often to the point but right on target. He does not hesitate to comment on his friends' actions if he believes they are wrong. He also shows a sign of better judgment, at least when it comes to drinking and driving.

The only participant who admitted to contemplating dropping out of school, Brantley graduated from the local high school in 2011 with a vocational seal. Brantley's immediate plans after graduation were to get a job and go to vocational school. Upon graduation he secured a full time job working 40 to 60 hours per work as a construction worker at the same local power plant where his father is employed. He indicated that he plans to eventually attend vocational school to study welding; however, he does not know when that will be. Ten to fifteen years from now Brantley hopes to be a welder and to live in this area. He also plans to get married and have one or two children.

**Jake.** Jake is 19 years old and he has one older brother. Jake attended a private school in the nearby town thru the 11<sup>th</sup> grade, at which time it closed; he then transferred to the local high school. Because he had already earned more credits than he needed to graduate from public high school, Jake attended the local college during his senior year. He graduated in May, 2011 with a college preparatory seal. He is now a sophomore at the local college.

Jake's mother and father both graduated from high school. His mother is an office manager for her brother-in-law's dental practice, and his father is a land surveyor. The family owns 75 acres and a local trailer park. Jake estimates his family's average income to be \$80,000. Although he is a full time student, he stays busy with several part time jobs. He works part time at the chicken houses with Chip and with his father making repairs at their trailer park, and he also has his own lawn care business.

Jake loves to listen to country music, so it was not surprising that he chose two songs to capture his personality. The first is Luke Bryan's *We Rode in Trucks* (written by Luke Bryan, Jim McCormick, & Roger Murrah, 2007) which focuses on the positive, and

the not-so-positive, aspects of growing up in the country with lines like “You either lived on a farm or you wish you did” and “We thought tobacco and beer in a can, was all it would take to be like our old man.” The other song is Toby Keith’s recent hit, *Red Solo Cup* (written by Jim Beavers, Brett Beavers, Brett Warren, & Brad Warren, 2011) that pays tribute to the red Solo cup, which aside from a beer can, is a widely popular choice of containers to hold alcohol among rural males. Jake sang a few of the lines - “Red Solo cup, you are not just a cup, you’re my friend, yea, thank you for being my friend. Red Solo cup, I fill you up. Let’s have a party!” Jake believes that both songs characterize his country roots and his enjoyment of getting drunk.

After he finishes his core classes at the local college, Jake plans to transfer to Georgia Tech and major in engineering. For the six months, Jake has been dating a girl from the community who graduated from the local high school in 2011 and attends the local college; however, they recently broke up because he felt that she was smothering him. Ten to fifteen years from now, Jake plans to be an electrical engineer for Georgia Power, and although he anticipates having to commute to work, he plans to live in this area. He hopes to get married and have no more than two children.

**Bud.** Bud is 19 years old and has one younger brother. Bud lives with his family on 180 acres. Bud is the only participant who has a nickname; when asked how he got this nickname, which did not appear to relate to his legal name, his response was vague.

*Bud – That’s just what they called me since I was little, and so I go by that instead of my real name.*

An obvious leader among his peers, Bud loves to make jokes and to be the center of attention. He drives a “jacked-up” pick-up truck that has been modified with large tires

to sit higher off the ground. The lower half of his truck is spattered with mud as a result of his outdoor adventures, and according to Bud the windows are tinted beyond the legal limit. Bud, who is the shortest of the participants, believes that his “jacked-up” pick-up truck best characterizes his identity. In response to his friends joking that he needed a ladder just to get inside:

*Bud – (laughs) I do have to jump up to get inside.*

He does not seem to be the least bit bothered by his friends teasing.

Bud graduated in May 2011 with a dual seal taking four years of welding for his technical classes and Spanish as part of his college preparatory classes. Bud’s mother and father both graduated from college. His mother was previously a teacher and is now a media specialist for the local school system, and his father, who has a degree in agriculture, owns a logging business. Bud’s family’s average yearly income is approximately \$100,000.

Currently, Bud attends the local college and works part time for the department of recreation cutting the grass, taking care of the fields, and opening and closing the gym for games. His immediate plans after high school were to attend college; however, he is undecided about his occupational choice. Bud seemed a bit reluctant about being interviewed for this study, as was indicated in a conversation that was overheard by the researcher in between interviews with the participants.

*Bud - What kind of questions is she [the researcher] going to ask me?*

*Lane – (very seriously) You know, things like have you ever had sex with a farm animal.*

*Bud* – (nervously) *I don't have to tell the truth, do I?* (Other participants are overhead laughing.)

While it may appear to him and his buddies that he has no idea what occupation he will choose, he appears to be the most open to his options, which may possibly be a result of his relationship with his mom. Both parents have encouraged him to get a good education as a means of finding a job. Bud appears to feel no pressure in choosing a career, nor does he seem to be in a hurry to do so. Ten to fifteen years from now, Bud plans to have a house in this area, a wife, children, and a good paying job.

***Ben.*** Ben is 19 years old and has one younger brother. He lives with his family on 300 acres of land. His mother earned a high school diploma, and she has been a homemaker since he was born. His father graduated from college and owns a land surveying business. Ben estimates his family's average yearly income at \$100,000.

Ben attended a nearby small private school, the same school that Jake attended, through 11<sup>th</sup> grade at which time the school closed. He finished his last year at a private school in a city approximately 30 minutes away, and he graduated in 2010. Ben is a sophomore at the local college. Upon completing his core classes, he plans to transfer to a technical school in a nearby city to study land surveying. Ben has an interest in wildlife biology; however, it appears that the opportunity to work in the family business outweighs choosing an occupation that matches his interests.

Ben, who is the least talkative of the group, was very reserved when answering questions about his life; however, he was eager to share pictures of his golden retriever, Muzzy, and the carcasses of his recent "kills" which included wild hogs, deer, turkey, and

ducks. Ben is very proud of his dog, and he and his girlfriend, who is a senior at the local high school, refer to her as their baby.

*Ben - Muzzy is a true hunting dog. She is our baby, and we both love her very much.*

Although Ben could not identify a particular artifact that best captured his identity, it would appear that it is his “kills” made on the family land. Ten to fifteen years from now Ben plans to be in the surveying business with his father and married with children. He eventually plans to take over the family’s land surveying business.

**Lane.** Lane is 25 years old and the oldest of three siblings. His shaved head makes him appear to be much older. Lane graduated from high school in 2005. He took welding, law enforcement, and electrical classes in high school. He played football in high school, and he has maintained his muscular physique. His mother graduated from high school and is currently unemployed. His father graduated from high school and earned some college credits; he previously worked in law enforcement, and he currently works for the state. Lane grew up with his mother and father on 75 acres of land, but his parents have recently divorced within the last year. Lane now lives with his father, and he reports that his relationship with his mother is strained.

As the oldest of the participants, Lane appears to possess great maturity. He joked during the interviews, but there was a serious side of him that shone through in his responses. Lane’s initial occupational choice was to work in law enforcement. Upon graduation, he worked in the jail for several years and he eventually earned the rank as a sergeant; however, after realizing that his passion was being outdoors he changed occupations. He now works as a lineman for a local power company. Lane spoke

passionately about his job, one of the higher paying jobs within the community that does not require a college degree. He earns approximately \$40,000 a year with additional pay for overtime.

When he is not working, Lane enjoys drinking and hanging out with the boys, fishing, and hunting. While he values spending time with family, especially his pre-school age nephew, Lane particularly enjoys the companionship of his chocolate lab, who occupies him when hunting wild hogs, dove, or ducks. His accomplishments at work best characterize his identity. He currently has no serious girlfriend. Ten to fifteen years from now, Lane plans to live in the same area, be married, perhaps have kids, and to be a foreman with the same company. His attitude about the future may best summarize his personality:

*Lane - I plan on staying where I am at, settling down, and just making a good life for myself.*

**Johnny.** Johnny is 18 years old. Due to the high cost of gas, Johnny's pick-up truck has been replaced by a small compact car as he currently attends a university three hours away. Johnny is the middle child of three siblings. His mother graduated from high school and works as an office manager. His father earned some college credits and is employed as a welder. Johnny's parents divorced when he was about 3 years old; both parents have since remarried. Johnny lives in "town" with his mom and step dad whose estimated income is \$80,000, and he spends much of his time enjoying the outdoors at his father's property outside of town. His family refers to this 100-plus-acre piece of property as "The Reservation."

Of the students that I interviewed from this high school, the high school counselor identified Johnny as being the brightest. Some of the guys interviewed also agreed that Johnny was the smartest guy in their social circle. He made all A's throughout school, and he graduated in 2011 with a vocational seal. At the large state university where he is a freshman, Johnny is a member of a small fraternity; he feels that membership in the fraternity helps him to feel less isolated in this new environment and best captures his identity. Although Johnny has held a variety of part-time jobs since he was 12, he currently is not working, as his parents believe that he should focus all of his efforts on school. He acknowledges not being able to earn spending money for himself.

*Johnny– I am completely dependent on my parents for money.*

In ten to fifteen years Johnny plans to work in the field as a civil engineer. He expressed that he had no desire be an engineer who spent all of his time at a desk. He also plans to get married and to have children before he turns 30.

**Stephen.** Eighteen-year-old Stephen has a younger brother. Stephen grew up in “town,” but his family owns 100 acres of farmland/wooded property. His mother and father both graduated from college and are employed as school teachers for the local school system, and the family's average income is \$80,000. According to his friends who live outside of town, Stephen spent a lot of time with them during their youth; however, they believe he did not have the same experiences they did because he never owned a four wheeler and his mom was very protective. Stephen has been hunting a few times, but he has never shot a deer, turkey, duck, or wild hog.

Stephen graduated in 2011 with a dual seal. He took business classes and college preparatory classes. As a result of family connections, Stephen began working as a teller

at a bank in a nearby town as part of a youth apprenticeship program at his high school when he was a senior in high school. He has worked there for the past 18 months.

Stephen is the only participant who works in an indoor setting.

Stephen currently attends the local college and works at the bank in the afternoons. He plans to transfer to a large state university which is three hours from home where his friend Johnny is already a student. Of all the young men interviewed, Stephen was by far the most polite. He answered every question with “ma’am,” most likely a direct result of his working at the bank. Stephen believes that he demonstrates compassion toward others:

*Stephen – I am kind and always willing to help.*

However, his actions are not viewed as positive by some of the participants who have known him for years. These friends view his eagerness to please others as a sign of weakness, and they refer to him as a “kiss ass.” Ten to fifteen years from now, Stephen hopes to continue employment with the same financial institution as a loan officer; however, unlike many of his counterparts, he has not limited his options to this area. He hopes to also get married and to have children.

### **Conceptualized Presentation of the Qualitative Data**

#### **The Ties that Bind**

Erikson’s (1968) theory of psychosocial development maintains the common thread of individual identity development depends, at least to some degree, on the interaction of the individual with environmental factors, as well as the influences of the personality of the individual. Every effort was made to find diversity among the participants; however, the commonalities among these young men, who were raised in

this area and have long-standing family ties to the area, were remarkable. Based on each participant's estimate of his family's annual income, which, as the researcher recognizes, may not be completely accurate, it appears that all of the participants are middle class. Interestingly, the oldest participant of the group used his level of social class to describe himself. The members of this social class appear to share the same economically shaped life chances (Gilbert, 2008). All of the participants grew up in homes that were owned, not rented, and all of the participants with the exception of one grew up with both of their biological parents. Each of the parents holds at minimum a high school diploma, and in most of the situations both of the participants' parents work. The majority of the participants' families own an average of 100 or more acres, and much of their land is still in its natural state. Of these land owners, one family raises poultry; however, this business venture is not the family's primary income. The similar backgrounds and shared lived experiences within this small rural community, coupled with the fact that these young men share a group identity, may explain the similarity among participants' answers.

Forming a common bond with others gives validity to a one's social identity (Tajfel, 1978). Research shows that social identity has a powerful impact on one's perceptions and actions (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). According to Panelli (2002), social relationships should be taken consideration when studying rural youth. Social relationships appear play an important role in the identity of these guys. Based on their responses and the interaction that I witnessed between the participants, it appears that they place great importance on social interaction with family and friends. For many of these participants, their group of friends has become an extension of their families.

*Bud - I always enjoy hanging out with my friends.*

*Chip – We enjoy hanging out with each other and having a good time. I plan to still be hanging out with these friends every weekend even when I am old.*

*Brantley – We look out for each other. They know we have their backs.*

### **Self Perceptions**

The variety of self descriptions provided by the participants during the initial interviews gives insight into their identities and how they perceive themselves. One participant described himself by the activities that he enjoyed:

*Chip – I like the outdoors. I like to race. I like to work on things. I am hands-on.*

However, the majority of the participants used personal qualities to describe themselves. All of the qualities listed were positive reflections upon themselves. No one spoke of any negative qualities that he may possess.

*Ben – I am quiet unless I know you. I am usually pretty nice and caring. That's about it.*

*Johnny– I am a pretty outgoing guy. Smart for the most part I would say. I am used to small town life I guess. I don't know what the word would be to describe that.*

*Lane – I am very hard working.*

*Brantley – I am hard working, and I guess I am smart because I made it through high school, and I got a job.*

Two of the participants downplay their unique identity in their descriptions:

*Jake - I'm just plain. Normal.*

*Lane- I guess I would describe myself as just a middle class person.*

In all but two of the interviews, the participants felt that others would view them in the same way that they perceived themselves. When asked how they thought others would describe them, two of the participants who had previously described themselves as being smart expressed doubt in whether others would consider them as smart. The fact that these young men downplay their intelligence by not always acting smart in front of their peers may be a result of seeking to maintain the rural masculine image.

*Brantley – They would probably describe me as hardworking, but I don't know about smart. I am like the rest of them. I just make bad decisions. None of us act real smart.*

*Johnny– [My friends would describe me] pretty much the same. Maybe not the smart part, but I don't act that way sometimes.*

During a focus group interview, the members of the group were asked to elaborate on why these participants may not have felt that their peers would consider them as smart. A conversation between the participants brought to light their perceptions of smartness and evidenced a common, false dichotomy.

*Chip – Johnny is book smart, but he doesn't have any common sense.*

*Bud – Yeah, I changed his brakes the other day, and when I told him to give me the other brake shoe he said, “There was only one of this side. I only took one off.” And I said, “There are two. You have four brake pads.” He hadn't popped the back side off yet because he couldn't see it. (laughs)*

*Brantley – God. (His comment suggests slight disgust at the fact that not everyone would know there were two brake pads on each side.)*

*Bud – He is not a good driver either - him or Stephen. Stephen will wreck something in a heartbeat - especially a four wheeler.*

*Researcher – Why are they different?*

*Chip – They grew up in town.*

In small rural areas, there is a distinct difference between growing up in the country and growing up “in town.” To live “in town” means having access to certain conveniences that others in the area do not have, but it often prevents one from engaging in activities which are associated with rural life. In this situation, the young men from the country view the town folk as lacking the skills and/or knowledge to be self sufficient. There is an obvious reversal of thought exhibited given that those in an urban setting usually look down those who live in the country, viewing these inhabitants as lacking social skills and/or higher knowledge.

The participant who attended a large university three hours away felt as though the image that he projected caused others to view him in a different light.

*Researcher - Now that you are in contact with a more diverse group at the university, do you think they see you in the same way that your friends here see you?*

*Johnny - Not really. They see my boots, and the way I talk, and the way I am, and it's not that they write me off, because I am in college, and I was able to do some level of good to get here; however, I think they look at me differently.*

When asked how others would describe him, the oldest of the participants provided a multi-faceted list of qualities. His initial comment mirrored that of the young participants, but then he added a list of qualities that sounded almost as if he were applying for a job.

*Lane – I think they would describe me as outgoing, fun to be around, and like I said hard working. I'm always on time, trustworthy, and very reliable. I am always there for other people.*

Maturity may be a key factor in the difference between this participant's self description and the other participants' self descriptions. Other possible explanations may include the following: the participant believed that these multiple descriptors revealed more about his true character; the participant places a high value on qualities such as being hard working, trustworthy, and punctual which may possibly be a direct result of his rural upbringing; or the participant may have wanted to impress the researcher by creating a more desirable image of himself.

### **Rural Life and Its Influence on Identity**

Rural youth's lives are influenced by many overlapping variables. The cultural, economic, socio-political, and spatial contexts are believed to shape the practices, experiences, and values of rural youth – all of which impact their identities (Panelli, 2002). In considering rural life and how one defines oneself, we must examine the term rural. *Rural*, like the term *country*, may be used in reference to one's self and/or a place. Establishing if participants considered themselves to be rural and the logic behind their answers was considered to provide insight into the identity of each of these young men and the perceptions they hold about rural life. Some of the participants thought of themselves as rural because of the area in which they were raised. For these participants, the answer seemed obvious; if one lives in a rural area, then one must be rural.

*Lane – Yes, I consider myself to be rural. Living here in Pleasant Grove that's all there is - farmland and woods. I definitely think I am rural.*

*Bud – I do [consider myself as rural]. I live on a dirt road. I drive a jacked up truck. I ride four wheelers, and I have horses.*

*Jake - Yes [I consider myself to be rural] because I like mud bogging and hunting and all that.*

*Stephen – Yes [I consider myself to be rural] because I grew up in a small town. I don't really like to be in crowded places. I just like to hang out.*

When asked if he considered himself to be rural, one participant needed clarification.

*Chip – Do you mean do I consider myself as country?*

*Researcher - Yes, do you consider yourself as country?*

*Chip – Compared to some people, no, but then compared to some people, yeah. It depends on who you are comparing yourself to.*

*Researcher – So, who would be more country than you?*

*Chip – Probably some people in Alabama or Louisiana. Swamp people or something.*

*Researcher – When you talk about people around here, do you see yourself as country?*

*Chip – Yeah, we're country (with emphasis placed on the word country).*

One participant had a change of perception regarding where he lived after he went away to a university in a large city.

*Johnny - Before I went to college, I wouldn't think so much [that I was rural] just because this area seems big while you are here, but after going to college and getting to know some people who went to Alpharetta, which is one of the bigger schools, you see*

*things differently. There are 40-50 kids from their high school at my college and yet there are only three people from my high school here.*

*Researcher - So now do you consider yourself rural?*

*Johnny- Mm-huh, I graduated in a class of 160 students.*

Another participant had an interesting take on the term rural:

*Brantley – It's not as much to do with where you live as how you were raised.*

This line of reasoning highlights the importance of lived experiences within a particular cultural context, for it is the lived experiences that serve to shape one's identity rather than simply being an inhabitant in a particular environment (Vygotsky, 1978).

One of the younger participants appeared very insightful in his explanation of why he considered himself to be rural. Unlike the other participants, he felt that he was rural because of a combination of factors. His response about whether he considered himself to be rural fits with the theoretical framework of this study.

*Researcher – What do you think makes you rural?*

*Ben – It's the things that I do, the way I act, and where I live.*

Most of the participants felt that their identity had been shaped to some extent by their rural environment. However, when asked if he believed that rural living had influenced his identity, such as the way he was or what he did, one participant responded:

*Brantley - No, I think I would be the same way whether I lived here or not.*

*Researcher - If you lived in the city, do you think you would be the same way?*

*Brantley - Yes, I think I would be the same.*

All of the participants expressed satisfaction with living in a rural community. Knowing everyone in the community and having family nearby was commonly cited as a

benefit to living in this area. The sense of personal connection and belonging has had an obvious positive effect on these young men. Secluded to some extent from the hustle and bustle of city life, these young men find a sense of safety in their rural environment. To the outsider, such a life may be viewed as being sheltered; however, a sense of isolation, which was found by Hedlund (1990), was not perceived by these young men. The difference in perceptions among the two groups of participants may be partly related to the fact that these participants, unlike those in Hedlund's (1990) study, have the freedom to travel outside of the community as they please because they are over the age of 18. These participants also spoke of having their own forms of social activities to entertain them and enjoying the freedom of being away from crowds and the city life.

The participants perceived that the advantages to living in a rural area far outweighed the disadvantages. In their opinion, rural living offers a sense of one's own space.

*Ben – You don't have everybody up your butt all the time. They're not right up under you.*

*Bud – What's good is that I don't have any neighbors to bother me. We have 180 acres, and the closest neighbor is 200 yards down the road from us. It's an old lady, and she doesn't bother us at all. I can just go out the back door and go hunting. I like it; (pause) I love it.*

Rural living also offers a peaceful environment where one can relax and think about one's life choices:

*Stephen - In the city I wouldn't be just going and hanging out with my friends 24/7 just chilling out around a fire. It [living in a rural area] helps my decisions a lot because it's made me think about my choices.*

*Lane – The good points are definitely no traffic or loud noises.*

Rural living offers a sense of connectedness with family:

*Brantley - It's quiet. I know everybody. All my family lives here. (When asked if all of his relatives lived here, he replied: No, some live out of state, but these are the only ones that matter to me.)*

Rural living also offers a sense of familiarity among the community members.

*Stephen - You know just about everybody in the town that you live in. You know what is going to happen and your daily routine.*

*Jake – In a small area everybody knows you..*

Rural living creates a sense of looking out for one another.

*Johnny– I had good experiences in my childhood around here. You know everyone. You catch a lot more breaks because everyone knows everyone.*

*Researcher – So that helped you get out of trouble sometimes?*

*Johnny– Not only that, but you get the help you need just because everybody knows everyone. I feel like everyone is tighter knit because you don't have as many people to choose from.*

Living in a rural community offers connections and provides opportunities that others may not have.

*Researcher - Is that unusual for a high school senior to work as a teller at a bank or was it because you had family friends in the industry?*

*Stephen - Not in our county. We have a youth apprenticeship program in school where you can get out and go work a job. I had a connection with the bank, and so they got me in.*

Rural living also offers a safe haven for underage drinking and other youthful activities:

*Chip – You can party out here and you don't get into trouble. (Reference to fact that underage drinking is often ignored by parents and law enforcement officers.)*

Some of the participants spoke of city life it is as if it were an undesirable location where no one would electively choose to live. One participant spoke of living in rural area if he would not want to consider any other option.

*Bud – I like it [referring to living in the country]. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else.*

*Stephen – It [living in a rural area] is what I want to do.*

*Ben – I think it [living in a rural area] is a lot better than living in an urban area or in the city.*

*Brantley – I would rather live here than in the city.*

*Jake - I think it is the best way to live. There's not anything any better.*

Rural residents are sometimes resistant to urban ways of life (Williams, 1973). Given that none of the participants have ever lived outside of this community, the negative perceptions of city life held by these participants have obviously been formed by hearsay from family and friends and from the media. Family members may have spoken negatively about city life to prevent their children from considering moving away, or

perhaps these feelings stem from the deep pride that inhabitants often have for their homeland.

*Stephen - In a city you don't really know everybody; you only know a few people.*

*Lane - You have tons of traffic in the city, and you can't go nowhere.*

Hedlund (1990) found that his participants felt that living in a big city would cause them to get into trouble, and most of the participants in his study shared a positive view of the rural area in which they lived and saw it as a good place to raise their own children.

One participant perceived only positive aspects of living in a rural area.

*Stephen - I don't really see any disadvantages [to living in a rural area].*

However, it was noted that some of the advantages of living in a rural community, such as familiarity and less populated areas, may also be perceived as disadvantages.

*Jake - Everybody knows your business.*

*Ben - If something happens you wouldn't have anyone right there. So in some cases it could be good to have someone right there.*

The majority of these young men were apparently accustomed to not living close to stores and shopping centers. Their families either consider the increased travel time as a small price to pay in order to avoid city life, or they are merely accustomed to traveling further for some services and goods.

*Lane - The bad part of living in a rural area is that you may have to drive a couple of miles to get to a gas station or to get to a grocery store, and if you want to go shopping you may have to drive 10 to 15 miles. To go to a large mall you have to drive 30 miles away.*

The people within a rural community are often more homogeneous, and it the commonalities shared, rather than unique differences, that garner popularity among rural peers. One participant noted that how being different from the group negatively affects one's social life.

*Johnny – Some kids that never really were that popular, can't get popular in a rural area. There aren't a lot of different groups here like there are at large colleges. Sometimes kids who aren't popular just can't find other people like them.*

Finding one's niche may be more difficult when living in a rural area, and apparent differences may create social barriers among rural youth. In a later focus group interview, the researcher found several of the participants did not want to be associated with someone who was considered to be different from them.

### **Maintaining the Image of Rural Masculinity**

Masculinity has been "socially constructed" throughout history and in various spaces (Campbell & Bell, 2000, p. 534). For these participants, maintaining a certain masculine image among peers and to those outside their social circle is imperative. They work hard and play hard, and they act as though they truly don't give a damn about what others think about them. Collectively these God-fearing, beer drinking young men exude what may be considered the stereotypical picture of what may be considered as *rural masculinity*. Their blue jeans, work boots, t-shirts, baseball caps with images of tractors, wildlife, or logos of manufacturers of hunting equipment, and camouflage or Carhart work jackets present the visual image that often comes to mind when one thinks of rural males. Likewise, many of their stories remind those, who are old enough to remember, of scenes from the late 1970s television program "Dukes of Hazard." These young men are

proud of their identities, and they understand that the way they dress, talk, and act and the activities they engage in set them apart from others.

In the focus group interview the participants were asked how it felt to be characterized as a country boy. Their responses capture their attitudes.

*Ben - I like being a country boy. I wouldn't have it any other way.*

*Bud - I know there is a big difference between me and someone living in the city.*

*Jake - Everybody is entitled to their own opinion. If they don't like the way I dress or the way I am, that is their problem, not mine.*

*Chip - I know I'm a country boy. I don't give a damn what anybody thinks about that.*

Drawing from her knowledge of rural life, the researcher had anticipated most of the behaviors these young men exhibited; however, she was concerned about their attitude toward drinking and driving. Thus far these participants have escaped harm to themselves or others and the negative consequences associated with drinking and driving, but they continue to tempt fate every weekend.

### **Drinking, Dipping Snuff, and Engaging in Reckless Behavior**

Drinking among these rural young White males appears to be connected with all of the social activities in which they participate. The topic of drinking frequently came up during the individual interviews, the focus group interviews, and again in casual conversations with the participants. The participants spoke of drinking while engaging in a variety of physical activities such shooting skeet, fishing, hunting, and driving. They also talked about drinking at their friend's house while "shooting the breeze" in the pool

or around a bonfire. Sometimes these social gatherings involve females and casual sex. Chip's baby was conceived in a tent with a girl he "hooked up with" at a bonfire party.

Although only one participant was of legal drinking age, they all spoke openly about drinking beer since they were 12-15 years old. Their reasons for beginning to drinking include:

*Bud – I like being drunk.*

*Jake – The women push us to it.*

*Brantley – There ain't nothing else to do.*

*Chip – It feels good.*

During the focus group interview the participants were drinking beer when the researcher first arrived. The participants and their parents for the most part see no danger in consuming alcohol as long as they drink on their property. For these young men, drinking beer is an integral part of their social lives; from their stories, it would appear that they believe alcohol is a necessary element for an enjoyable weekend.

Based on conversation with the participants about their drinking, it was discovered that their parents either approve of the behavior or they choose to ignore it. All of the participants agreed that their parents knew that their sons drank alcohol, but it was unclear as to when each of participants' parents made this discovery.

*Chip – Our parents probably knew we were drinking by age 15 or 16. We tried to hide it, but all summer long we would drink beer in the pool and get drunk. By the end of the day we would have a pile of cans. Daddy only got really mad if he thought I was drinking and driving. I was probably about 18 when I began drinking in front of my parents.*

*Bud - I remember one time when Jake was about 16, and he went home drunk one night. He was throwing up, and he told his mom that he had drank too many energy drinks. That's when his mama and daddy cared about him drinking. They used to bitch at him all the time.*

Brantley and Chip spoke openly during a focus group interview about their fathers' drinking. It is unclear if the other participants' parents drink alcohol; however, the fact that his parents were teetotalers was enough for one participant not to drink in front of them.

*Jake – I don't drink in front of my parents because they don't drink.*

The researcher visited Chip's house on two occasions for focus group interviews. During the researcher's first visit home to Chip's home for a focus group interview, all of the participants were standing in the backyard drinking beer with Chip and Brantley's fathers and another male relative. The participants appeared to be at ease in drinking with these older males. However, later during the interview when Chip's father came into the kitchen to make a drink with cola and Jack Daniels, and Chip asked for me, his father responded, "You don't need one." Given that Chip's father allows the participants to drink on his property, although he does express concerns about them being under the influence of alcohol when they drive home, the researcher believes that this statement was possibly made for her benefit.

It was not until the second visit that the researcher has an opportunity to socially interact with Chip and Brantley's fathers and at least one of their male relatives. The researcher felt privileged to be allowed access to this social time, as there were no other women present. As they beer from cans, each of men present tried to one-up the other

with a story about being drunk. As with the responses in the focus group interviews, the researcher anticipates that some of these stories were embellished for the sake of the researcher. The men's stories were as comical as those told by the youth. The participants appeared to enjoy the male bonding that took place during these conversations, and researcher could sense the respect that these younger participants had for the older males; however, whether the older males viewed their sons/relatives truly as their drinking counterparts, it is not clear. Based on the researcher's interactions with Chip and Brantley's male relatives, the researcher believes these young men believe that drinking alcohol makes them a part of this "brotherhood of men."

With the exception of one participant who lives away at college, all of the participants drive pickup trucks. Their trucks provide a means of transportation, an extension of their identity, and a source of recreation.

*Jake - We just like riding around in our trucks and hanging out.*

Many of the participants also enjoy access to a variety of other motor vehicles aside from their primary source of transportation. They told stories of reckless driving and daring stunts with four wheelers and old vehicles that are destined for the junk yard after they are finished "playing with it." Many of their adventures involve destruction of property of some sort.

*Jake - We have "fun trucks" that we don't care anything about. We came up here one night drunk as hell and we missed the turn and wiped out the whole storage building where they store the Christmas trees that go down by the pond. Then on the way home we took out every road sign between here and there.*

*Jake - We also have a little junk SUV that we like to jump in the fields and run over trees.*

*Chip- We carry a chainsaw with us in the jump box just in case we need it when we are out there.*

At least one parent was displeased with his son's apparent lack of respect for property.

*Chip – Sometimes we like to get old cars that are parked around here and go to the back field and tear them up. Dad gets mad.*

*Researcher – Who fixes the cars?*

*Chip – We scrap them.*

Sometimes the participants cross the line and destroy property that does not belong to their families.

*Jake – One time we did donuts in the richest man in Hopeville's yard. (Hopeville is a neighboring town)*

*Brantley – He's the richest man in the whole county.*

*Jake – He may be the richest man in Georgia. I don't know. (laughs)*

*Jake – We told him that it wasn't us who did it, and then he showed us the video tape. We were busted. (Focus group members laugh.)*

*Researcher – What happened after that?*

*Jake –Nothing much; we didn't really get in trouble, we just had to calm him down a bit.*

As stories about their daring adventures were being told, one of the participants showed me some pictures they had posted on Facebook. In one photo the junk SUV was

flipped upside. In another an old truck pickup truck with both doors removed was in an almost upright position as a result of not being able to successfully climb a clay embankment.

Many of the stories shared by the participants involved drinking and driving;

*Bud – One time we were so drunk that we drove home with our sunglasses on at 12:00 a.m. We were in rare form. We had to keep it between the mayonnaise and the mustard.*

One participant admitted that he did not drive while drinking, not because he had a strong conviction about drinking and driving, but rather to avoid getting in trouble with the law for driving under the influence of alcohol.

*Brantley – When we have all been drinking, I make Chip drive. That way I won't get a DUI [being charged with driving under the influence of alcohol].*

Although the stories of driving drunk were numerous, none of the participants had ever been seriously injured as a result of driving under the influence. During a focus group interview the participants shared a sobering encounter in which one of their peers could have been seriously injured.

*Jake – One time we were out in the back field messing around in our trucks, and Ben drove over his brother.*

*Researcher – Drove over him? Was he seriously injured?*

*Bud – No. You see his brother was drunk and had laid down in the field but we didn't see him. Ben just drove right over him with the tires straddling him.*

*Jake – I don't think Ben meant to drive over him, but if his truck had not been "jacked-up" he could have killed his brother.*

*Chip – That really scared me. Ben was shook up too.*

None of the participants admitted to ever receiving a ticket for DUI, and although these youth found their drunkenness to be a laughing matter, they became quiet and appeared to become much more serious when this topic was brought up. Based on the researcher's conversation with the focus group, the participants are aware of the consequences of driving and driving; however, they choose to ignore them, perhaps believing that they will not get caught. One superstitious participant offered an explanation for why one should never brag about not being caught for driving under the influence.

*Chip - (as he knocks on the table) Not saying; I mean I haven't had one [a DUI], but when you say you haven't had one, you are going to get one.*

As we discussed the use of tobacco, it was found that smoking tobacco is not a popular habit among these participants. Many of the participants said that they had never tried cigarettes. Two of the participants admitted to currently being smokers although their use of cigarettes varied.

*Brantley – I smoke sometimes when I drink.*

*Bud – I smoke every day.*

The use of smokeless tobacco, however, was another story. During our conversations, it was discovered that the smokeless tobacco and alcohol are a likely combination. Many of the participants began dipping around the age of 13; for some it was even younger, in this case as a result of the influence of an older brother.

*Chip - Almost all of my buddies dip (smokeless tobacco). I was probably around 8 or 9 when my brother who is ten years older than me let me try it.*

During a focus group interview, one of the participants felt comfortable enough to take a dip of smokeless tobacco during the interview.

*Jake – Yeah, we all dip. I might need to get one now.* (He reaches into his back pocket, pulls out a can of Copenhagen winter green smokeless tobacco, and begins packing the dark, pungent substance inside of his lower lip. As the interview continues, the red Solo cup, which he had earlier identified as his friend, serves as a makeshift spittoon.)

At one point while watching Jake spit in his cup, I inquired if his mother, who works at a dentist, had ever warned him of the dangers of dipping. (His mother would have to know that he uses smokeless tobacco because the worn white circle made by the rim of the can on the back pocket of his jeans is a dead giveaway that someone dips.) His answer came as quite a surprise.

*Jake – I have a good dentist. He says I have beautiful teeth and gums.* (He proudly flashes a large smile which exposes his pearly white teeth.)

*Researcher – He doesn't notice that you dip?*

*Jake – He's my uncle.* (The focus group members all laugh.)

Illegal drugs were not a consideration for most of these participants. All but one denied ever using illegal drugs.

*Bud – I smoke a little weed everyone now and then. One time I changed a girl's oil and I smoked some pot with her. That was a couple of weeks ago. At my job they don't drug test me unless I wreck one of the county vehicles, so I try not to drive any of the county's trucks. It's not really bad for you.*

As the participant spoke about smoking pot, the researcher noted that the mood of the other participants in the focus group changed. While they laughed about getting drunk and dipping snuff, they did not find the use of marijuana to be funny. Sensing the disapproval of its use among his peers, it appeared to the researcher as if the participant was trying to convince his friends and himself that smoking marijuana was harmless.

### **Avoiding Trouble with the Law**

Earlier in individual interviews, several of the participants alluded to the idea that when they got into trouble the punishment was minor.

*Jake – You don't hardly get in trouble around here. Maybe a little slap on the wrist now and then, but in the big city you can't get away with anything in public like that.*

Based on conversations with the participants, it is perceived that law enforcement officers are not feared within the community. In a focus group interview, the participants explained more about their inside connections and how they avoid law enforcement officers.

*Bud – The way we look at it is there are only two city police and four sheriffs that work this area, so they can't be all over the county at one time.*

*Jake - We know how to avoid them.*

*Brantley – We usually outrun them though.*

*Bud – We also have friends like Sam, and he is a deputy sheriff. He will let us know if there are roadblocks set up. He helps us out.*

Sometimes it appears that the law enforcement officers, like the parents, turn a blind eye to the behavior of these youth.

*Jake – When I was driving home from Hopeville last night and struggling to stay out of the ditches, I never got pulled over. We passed a sheriff on the way home, but he didn't bother us. I may have been on the road then, but I doubt it.*

For the most part, encounters with the law are a joke for these youth.

*Brantley - We have been kicked in at parties several times, but we just run! You know, don't stop. I ran eight miles one night just to get away from the cops.*

While blue lights may strike fear in some drivers, for at least one participant, the threat of being charged with traffic violations does not seem to cause concern.

*Bud - I have gotten pulled over many a times. Jake was with me one day when I got pulled over. I got a window tint warning, taillight warning, speeding warning, & faulty equipment warning. He [the sheriff] let me off because he just wanted to be nice.*

*Bud –One time I got pulled over for going 56 in a 25 by Otis. (Imitating the officer using a southern drawl) – “Where you going, Bud?” He can't talk. I told him that I was late to go eat. He said, “Alright.”*

*Bud - Another time Cletus pulled me over because of my taillights. He didn't even really pull me over. He just flipped his blue lights on and I pulled over. He pulled up beside me and stopped. He didn't even get out of his car. He just told me to get them fixed.*

When this same participant had a more serious encounter with the law, he found that the consequences were more severe; however, in his opinion the situation did not warrant such action.

*Bud – I have gotten three tickets all on the same day and had to go to court. I shot a deer from my truck a 22 caliber rifle. It was during the day. (He was indicating that he was not breaking the law by “shining” for deer.)*

*Chip – He pulled over in someone’s drive-way.*

*Bud – When I got over to Chip’s daddy’s deer cooler with the deer, the sheriff was waiting for me. Someone had called it in. I had to go down to jail, and then I had to go to court. I wasn’t really scared; I didn’t think it was that big of a deal. I was put on probation for 3 months. I didn’t have a driver’s license for 30 days. I had to be home by 7 p.m. on weekdays and 9 p.m. on weekends for 90 days. That sucked. When I finally got off I got drunk. (Emphasis on drunk.)*

Sometimes family connections within the community prevent these youth from being punished to the fullest extent of the law.

*Ben – My brother’s truck was searched at the high school and they [the resource officer and principal] found his hunting rifle. I know there’s a law against having a gun on school property, but it’s not like we would ever hurt anyone. I am sure most of us have gone to school with our rifles behind the set. My dad finally got him off, but it took a long time.*

In each of these situations, White privilege may account for the preferential treatment that was received. These young men recognize that they are able to “get away” with crimes that would not be tolerated if they were committed by someone who was not privileged enough to be a good old boy.

### **Feelings of Being Self Sufficient and Financially Responsible**

Based on their responses to questions and conversations with one another, the participants appear to value being self-sufficient. Several of the participants spoke of becoming self-sufficient as a result of rural living. Perhaps this notion comes from rural inhabitants historically having to be self-reliant to survive. Rural youth are often taught at an early age to be fiercely independent, and they hold a dim view on those who are dependent on others to do something for them or to give them handouts. These youth believe in working for what you have, they value the self respect that comes from working hard, and they view those in the community who work hard to earn a living with high regard.

Rural living often requires one to develop a sense of independence and skills that are viewed as a necessary part of rural life.

*Chip - You learn how to do stuff quicker than other people. You learn how to shoot a rifle and do things in the woods.*

Rural living also may teach one how to make do with what one has.

*Johnny – Basically living in an area like this you realize that money isn't everything. You can make as much money as you want to and as long as you spend it on something that makes you happy that's fine. Or you can make no money and you can still be happy.*

The value that is placed on becoming self-sufficient may explain why all of the participants began working around the ages of 14 or 15. For these young men, being self-sufficient meant buying gas and taking care of their other wants/needs. While they were not directly asked about how they spent their money, it appears that these young men

who were raised in middle class families were not expected to supplement the family income nor were they were expected to buy their first vehicles. For most participants their primary reason for getting a job was to be, at least to some degree, financially independent.

*Bud - [I got my first job because] I needed money. My parents got tired of paying for my stuff.*

For two participants getting a job was as much about staying busy as making money for their wants/needs.

*Jake - It [getting my first job] was as much about me wanting to find something to do as to get money to buy stuff. I can't stand to sit around.*

*Brantley - I liked working I guess.*

For one participant it was also about being able to help others.

*Johnny - I hate being broke. I am a nice guy. I like being able to not necessarily help each other out, but I like having money to be able to do what I want to do and to be able to help someone else.*

None of the participants felt as if their parents forced them to get a job their first jobs.

*Brantley - It was my decision [to get a job].*

Getting a job may be viewed as a rite of passage for rural youth. It is a way for youth to show others that he is a valuable member of the community.

The participants have also proved their self-sufficiency through outdoor activities such as hunting and fishing which provide the thrill of a sport and food for the family.

*Brantley - I like hunting and fishing. I mean we do our own little thing.*

*Chip – My brother and I usually fill up our freezer every deer season. This year I killed three deer. I killed a 9- pointer with a bow.*

Two of the participants displayed self-sufficiency through the use of carpentry and electrical skills in building and to making repairs on the family's property.

*Jake - We [our family] own a trailer park, and we are always rigging up something. Nothing in a trailer is really square, so you have to do all the walls differently, and when the electricity is messed up, you have to do all that.*

*Chip - I chose construction as my vocational class because you know you can always use construction. You are always going to have to build something around here.*

During a focus group interview, the participants spoke openly about their disapproval of two situations in which they feel that others are not being self sufficient. Pulling one's own weight in the rural community is very important. Those who live off the wealth of others are often viewed negatively within the community - sometimes by family and friends.

*Chip – Blake is the different one in the family. He has never (with emphasis placed on the word) had a job in his life. He says that when he graduated from high school he retired. He still lives with his mama, and he is 50- something years old. He smokes dope all the time, and he has never had a driver's license. He just walks wherever he wants to go. Every now and then he comes around our place. He comes down to the store a lot of days. He is lazy as hell.*

Although Bud now works at the county's recreation department, it was discovered during a focus group interview that he freely uses his Papa's credit card. His unbridled use of Papa's credit card in conjunction with his flippant attitude about spending Papa's

money is a source of contention for him and his friends. They appear to think that Bud is taking advantage of his Papa. During the discussion about Bud using his Papa's credit card, two of the participants made their feelings of disapproval known:

*Brantley – Years from now you will probably still be spending Papa's money.*

*Jake – Bud and his brother are steadily raping Papa of his money.*

Bud's justification for his spending appears to fall on deaf ears.

*Bud – He has plenty of money. He worked in banking in Genoa City for 52 years and drove back and forth each day. My grandmother died last year. He's 82 years old, and he is retired. Now he just cuts stuff out of wood every day. He lives in town about five miles from me.*

In conjunction with being self-sufficient, being financially responsible is also a character trait that these young men appear to appreciate. Most of the participants appear to place a priority on saving some of their money, and they appear to understand the dangers of buying on credit. After showing their disapproval of one member's use of his grandfather's credit card, focus group members warned their peer about his spending habits.

*Bud – I got my own credit card right now.*

*Brantley – You with a credit card? Shit.*

*Bud – Yeah, Bank of America.*

*Chip – What's your limit?*

*Bud - \$500.*

*Chip – Are you at the limit?*

*Bud – No, but I'm close.*

*Chip – That’s not surprising. Credit cards can get you in big trouble.*

In considering the theme of being self sufficient, it was noted that with the exception of Chip, who lives in a detached garage apartment behind his parents’ house, none of the participants are anxious to leave their parents’ residence. It was also noted that money was rarely a factor in choosing an occupation. Job security appears to be far more important than a high paying salary, as several of the participants mentioned working at the same job 10-15 years from now. When the topic of money was brought up in the focus group interview, the guys joked about spending it all on beer, but on a more serious note Chip and Brantley both admitted to saving money. Chip is saving for a new truck, and Brantley is saving for the future. Perhaps this participant’s comment best summarizes these participants’ thoughts about the future.

*Lane – I just plan on settling down and making the best of it.*

“Making the best of it” is a common expression among rural folk. Although it may be interpreted differently, for this participant it means enjoying life with family and friends and living within his means by not allowing his spending to exceed his earnings.

### **Thoughts on Girlfriends, Wives, and Homosexuals**

During a focus group interview the participants spoke openly about going to strip clubs, cheating on their girlfriends, and characteristics they would eventually look for in a wife. Many of their comments were stereotypical of the macho male. Therefore, it came as no surprise that the topic of homosexuality elicited negative responses from the participants.

While several of the participants admitted to having steady girlfriends, it appeared that at least two were not committed to a monogamous relationship. One participant likened cheating on his girlfriend to driving someone else's truck.

*Bud – I have several girls. (He laughs with the guys). It's like I have my main truck out there, but I like driving my friends' trucks too. I drive Brantley's truck sometimes, but I still go back to my truck. That's how it is.*

*Brantley – Yeah, I am like him. I play around too. We like to “travel.” Liquid courage helps with that. (He is referring to the consumption of alcohol.)*

*Bud – Sometimes I am not even drunk when I do it.*

*Researcher – So you have one serious girlfriend and then you see other girls too?*

*Bud – Yeah, it's easier to tell the other girl if she wants to mess around that I have a steady girlfriend rather than trying to hide it. We [my buddies and I] just hide it from the main girlfriend. But it just depends on if I feel that I can get away with it or not. If I don't think I can get away with it then I won't mess with a girl. Like there is this girl from the college, she's damn fine. She wants to eat lunch, here in Pleasant Grove. I don't think I can get away with that, so I am not going to do it.*

The participants feel that girlfriends sometimes interfere with the guys' time together. In one situation, the bond shared between a participant and his male peers was more important than his relationship with his girlfriend.

*Jake – I broke up with her because she was suffocating me. She was always bitching about me hanging out with Chip. I want my next girlfriend to be like tin foil and not Saran Wrap.*

*Chip – Yeah, she just sucked the fun out of him. She would come over here with him sometimes, and then she would bitch about being here.*

It is noted that Chip kept quiet about his relationship, or perhaps it may be better termed his living arrangement, with Betsy.

During a focus group interview it was discovered that one participant felt that spending time with his girlfriend is worth the sacrifice of spending less time with his friends, yet his friends don't seem to understand.

*Jake – Ben always has a serious girlfriend. She is a senior at the high school.*

*Researcher - Do you think he will marry her?*

*Jake – We don't know what's going on with them. We hardly ever see him anymore.*

*Bud – I saw him the other day at the Dairy Queen. It was the first time I had seen him in two months.*

*Chip – She's always up his ass. Always.*

*Bud – He's up hers too.*

*Jake – Always. He is just as far as she is.*

*Chip – You don't ever see them apart unless she is at school. I mean never.*

*Golly.*

The participants place great importance on relationships with their male friends, and although they like to give one another a hard time, they appear to show genuine concern for one another. During the interview, the participants laugh when Chip, who has been whittling on his red Solo cup with his pocketknife, almost nicked his thumb on two separate occasions. However, it is interesting to note that on both occasions, as a follow

up to the laughs, at least one of his friends directed a sincere comment of concern toward him.

*Brantley – Did you get it? (Making reference to if he had cut his thumb.)*

*Jake – You are going to cut your thumb off.*

When discussing what they looked for in a wife, serious consideration to the characteristics they desired was not given until after one of the participants shared a racy joke with the focus group.

*Jake – I have a good one for you. (He becomes very solemn and begins to tell the joke in a very serious voice) I am sorry sir, but your application for E-harmony.com has been rejected due to your response to, “What do you like most in a woman?” We at E-harmony believe that “my dick” is quite frankly not an appropriate answer. (The members of the focus group all laugh. The researcher anticipates the group dynamics has provided these young men with an added sense of bravado, and this idea is supported by the research which suggests that participants’ responses during focus group interviews may be more extreme than those provided individually (Berg, 1998),)*

*Brantley – I may not get married until I am about 60 or 70 and that’s so I can have someone to take care of me. (He laughs.) You know to fix me my liquor and drink.*

*Chip – I am not looking for anything right now.*

*Bud – She better have lots of money.*

*Brantley – She better be looking good.*

*Chip – She needs to have a job, so she can make money.*

*Bud – She has got to be able to cook, be good looking, and willing to put out. I was just kidding about that last one.*

*Jake – She can't smother you.*

While the participants enjoy male bonding through what is considered to be stereotypical male activities such as fishing, hunting, mud bogging, and drinking beer, during a focus group interview two of the participants show very little tolerance for those who are homosexual during a focus group discussion.

*Brantley – We're not queer, and we don't know any faggots.*

*Bud – I think Billy is because he dated Annabel and never did anything with her.*

*Brantley – I don't think I could be around them [homosexuals].*

*Bud – I know a gay guy. He works at the grocery store. There ain't nothing wrong with him.*

*Chip – He's a fag.*

*Bud – I mean he's a fag but...*

*Chip – Something's wrong with him right there.*

*Bud – Yeah.*

One participant's show of open-mindedness was quickly squelched by his buddies. The idea of group mentality is apparent among these rural youth.

### **Ignoring the Obvious**

During the first part of the individual interview, each participant was asked how he would describe himself, and then he was asked how he thought others would describe him. It was interesting to note that, during this initial part of the interview, none of the young men described themselves as being White, male, heterosexual, or rural/country. The researcher's initial inclination was perhaps they perceived these facts as being obvious since they had been already been informed that she was doing a study on rural

White males. Later in a focus group interview with five of the participants, the group was asked why they did not include these characteristics when describing themselves. The responses received leaves one to wonder if being a member of the dominant group prevents the need for acknowledging these aspects of their identity, or if they simply did not come to mind during the interview.

*Researcher – In the previous interview you did not describe yourselves as being White, male, heterosexual, or rural/country. Why did you not include those characteristics?*

*Ben - I'm not really sure why I didn't say that. I guess I just didn't think about it.*

*Jake - I don't know why either. That's what all rural people are. That's all we hang out with really. I am a straight up down home White country boy with a girlfriend.*

*Chip - I thought that was the only people you interviewed so why would be tell you that? You can already tell that I am White country boy, and you know that I like women. (Chip lives with his girlfriend, and they have a child together.)*

The most revealing comment perhaps was the one that follows:

*Bud – We didn't want to describe ourselves like that because that's just what we are.*

Perhaps these young men feel that they do not have to describe themselves as White males because they choose to ignore the obvious. It is likely that these youth have grown accustomed to the elevated status, at home and within the community, which is reserved for White males.

**Christian Roots**

During our conversations, the participants appeared to take pride in their family and cling to values they had been taught. All of the participants appear to have been raised with conservative, Christian beliefs which have influenced these young men; however, their youthful actions may cause one to question if they are practicing what they were taught as children. When asked if they considered themselves to be religious, two of the participants appeared to believe they may have possible short-comings in their religious beliefs/practices.

*Jake - I believe in God. I go to church now and then, but I am not as faithful as I should be.*

*Johnny - I am not as religious as I could be, I still do believe in the general ideas. Even if you don't agree with religion, you don't really voice your opinion because most people in Pleasant Grove do [believe in God].*

For another participant, believing in the right things, which one would assume he is referring to values that he was taught during his childhood, makes him religious.

*Lane - I consider myself to be a religious person, but at times I have questions about it. I think everyone does for the most part. I do believe in all the right things.*

While they all claim to believe in God, most of the participants do not attend church regularly, and they offer no explanation as to why. At this point in their lives most of these young men find that participating in other activities on Sunday have replaced attending church.

*Researcher - Do you go to church?*

*Johnny - I went to church when I was young.*

*Researcher - Was that because your parents took you to church when you were young?*

*Johnny - Yes, but they never forced me to go.*

None of the participants spoke of being forced to go to church as a youth, but it was noted that they all attended church, some more regularly than others, as children..

*Ben - I go to church every Sunday. No matter what everybody else thinks, I go.*

Those who continue to attend church report that it is their choice to attend, and that they are not influenced by their peers' decision not to attend. Their choice to attend or not to attend church, as with their occupational choices, may be more influenced by their parents than they realize.

### **Rural Adolescent Males and Their Possible Selves**

Possible selves, which are derived from one's social experiences, represent the ideal self that one wants to be become and who one does not wish to become. The idea of possible selves is socially determined and constrained (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It would appear that growing up in a rural area has, at least to some degree, influenced most of the participants' decisions of who they wanted to become and who they did not want to become.

*Researcher - Do you think that living in the country has influenced some of the things that you did or that you wanted to do in the future?*

*Lane – I think so. I mean you see a lot of city boys that grow up in the big cities and they go off to college and get good degrees and they become doctors and what not. I guess you would say country boys are more like working on the farms and maybe*

*working in a line of work doing power lines – just working outside – and running heavy equipment, stuff like that.*

*Jake - I don't know. It really didn't have much to do with my career choice because I want to be an engineer. I mean, it might because living on a farm in my free time I love building stuff and making it work, that's why I want to be an engineer. I just haven't decided what kind yet. I guess that is what influenced me to do it. Around here I do what I want to do.*

Staying physically active is apparently an important consideration in choosing an occupation. When discussing what occupation they would never like to have, five of the participants responded that they would not like to have an office job.

*Researcher – What is an occupation you would never consider?*

*Brantley - Working inside. I would rather be outside. It's just something about living in the country, I guess.*

*Ben – Doing accounting or something like that, where you would be inside all day. I would never want an office job.*

*Chip – lawyer, doctor, school teacher. I wouldn't want to be a teacher because I ain't got the patience for kids. I wouldn't want to be a lawyer because I would have to read, and I hate to read. I wouldn't want to be a doctor because I wouldn't trust myself to work on somebody else.*

*Lane - I would not want to work indoors, and I definitely would not want to work in politics. All politicians are crooked, and they all lie.*

*Johnny - One thing that I don't want to become as a civil engineer is one who sits behind a desk all day. I don't like sitting at a desk. I don't want to be one of those guys*

*who just work behind the scenes. I want to be a civil engineer who draws the plans and then takes them to the jobsite and explains it as part of the process.*

For two participants, occupations they would never choose were related to prior work experiences.

*Johnny– [I would not want to do] Anything in the restaurant business because I worked at two seafood restaurants over the last four years, and I never want to have anything else to do with it. I hate the smell of seafood now.*

*Jake - I laid sod one time, and I swore I would never have anything to do with landscaping or sod in my life because I hated it. I absolutely despised it.*

An occupation one participant would never choose had to do with his need for routine and familiarity which is possibly the result of having grown up in a small rural community.

*Stephen - I don't think I could be in the military.*

*Researcher - Why?*

*Stephen - I don't like the whole sense of never knowing what is going to happen.*

*Researcher - So you like routine?*

*Stephen - Yes, I like routine.*

For another participant, what he would not like to become had more to do with how he would be perceived in the community.

*Jake - I was going to say [that I would not want to be a] police officer, but I might could do that. I wouldn't want to do it around here because you know too many people. It would be like I was back-stabbing, but you would have to do your job.*

One participant's work experiences helped him to recognize what he would not want to do for the rest of his life.

*Researcher - Has it ever been tempting for you to stay here and continue working at the bank rather than going away to college?*

*Stephen - No. I like it [being a teller], but it is a headaches, and I would rather not do that the rest of my life.*

When asked if they could have any occupation which they would most like to choose, two of the eight participants mentioned occupations that appear to be based more of dreams rather than reality.

*Chip - I would like to be a race car driver. If that was all you had to do for a living was go to the track and race that would be the ideal job. (laughs)*

*Jake - I would probably be a professional scuba diver. I love scuba diving, and I would love to be able to make a living out of doing that.*

In considering what occupation he would most like to have, it was interesting that one of the three participants who have already entered the full time work force chose his current occupation. This participant felt that his occupation best matched his desire to be outside and the thrill of using his physical strength and agility; however, it may suggest passivity.

*Lane - I would probably choose the same job. I really love what I do. I have a passion for it. I chose to be a lineman because working outdoors is what I just really really like. It's exciting, but it is dangerous. Being outdoors is where I am at.*

For one participant, the ah-hah moment of what he would become or not become came as a result of his father's circumstances.

*Johnny - I guess I decided to go to college after seeing my dad going from his job making really good money to being laid off and not really being able to find another one, just because he didn't have a degree. He has his certifications, but he doesn't really have a degree in what he does.*

One participant's work experiences have helped him to realize the value of hard work and the consequences of not being financially prepared for the future.

*Stephen - Working in the bank has really helped me a lot. Being at the bank I see a lot of the day to day aspects of banking, and I also see the effect of being a lower income class. I know I don't want to be in that situation, so I am always working hard to get what I want.*

In considering his possible selves, one participant who plans to become an engineer believes that he is open to many possibilities; however, it was later discovered that moving was not one of them.

*Jake - I am really open to a lot of things.*

*Researcher - Is that something that your parents encouraged?*

*Jake - I guess that's part of my personality.*

It was interesting to note that in considering their possible selves and the occupations each would most like to have, only two participants mentioned income as being a contributing factor. In considering his choice of occupations, one participant believed that owning a farm or business would give him certain financial advantages; this notion may be a direct result of his uncle having several businesses and being a poultry producer.

*Brantley - I would want to work for a company welding, probably, or own my own farm or business.*

*Researcher - Why would you want to do that?*

*Brantley - (Laughs and states in a matter of fact manner) You make more money with your own business.*

*Researcher - Do you like farming or have you ever lived on a farm?*

*Brantley - No, ma'am, but I thought it would be interesting.*

When discussing an occupation that he would never choose or what he would never want to become, making more money was also a major consideration for another participant. From his point of view a job is simply a means to earn an income. He appears to give no regard to level of interest, skills possessed, or self fulfillment, and therefore, there is no job that he would not do.

*Bud – There are plenty of jobs that I would do. As long as it pays there is not any job that I wouldn't do. I would shovel shit if it paid. I am open to anything and everything.*

The researcher believes that this participant, who has not chosen an occupation, may have been exaggerating when he spoke of doing any job as long as it paid well. The researcher anticipates that making a joke about one's future occupation may be more comfortable than admitting to being undecided about one's occupational choice. The researcher suggests that the participant's occupational choice will be influenced by more than the income it offers; otherwise, the choice would have been much easier.

### **Perceptions of Expectations of Parents**

Parents no doubt play a significant role in youth's ideas about their possible selves. Parents can foster their children's interests and activity choices through their parenting practices and the experiences they provide at home (Eccles, 1993). According to Jodl et al., 2001, parents may significantly impact youth's occupational visions of themselves in the future and their exploration of who they are and who they want to become. By the age of 13, the self-perceptions and expectations that young adolescents hold for their educational futures are relatively stable (Eccles et al., 1989). In the later years, although parents may lose some amount of direct influence over their youth's lives to teachers and coaches, early lived experiences play a determining role in youth's occupational choices.

Upon reaching adulthood, one should feel at home in one's body and possess a sense of "knowing where one is going" and an inner assuredness resulting of approval or recognition from significant others (Erikson, 1968, p. 165). Receiving approval from their parents is very important to most youth; however, seeking to obtain approval from parents may lead to identity foreclosure. According to Marcia's theory of identity foreclosure (1966), adolescents seem prepared to step into predetermined roles within one's family and culture. The participants in this study do not seem to be fully aware that their aspirations may be formed by their desire to obtain approval from their parents.

#### **Relationships with parents.**

In response to how they would describe their relationship with their parents, those participants whose parents were still married reported that they had a close relationship with both of their parents; some of these participants even stated that they were very

close. While some of the participants expressed that they could talk with their parents about any topic, others expressed that certain perhaps more personal topics are off limits with their parents.

*Stephen – I can talk to my parents about anything and everything.*

*Jake – We are real close. We can talk about anything.*

*Ben – We have a pretty close relationship, but not very open. We never talk about real personal things. Stuff they wouldn't agree with, I wouldn't talk with them about.*

*Bud - There is some stuff that we talked about, but I kept some stuff to myself because I didn't want to talk about it with them. But we have a good relationship overall.*

Two participants, both of which their parents were divorced, expressed having a much closer relationship with their dads.

*Lane – With my dad, we are very very close. Any time I need to talk with someone I can talk to him. With my mom, we are definitely not on good terms, but we are trying to work things out. Other than that, me and my dad are very close.*

*Johnny– I can talk to my dad [about anything] more so than my mom, but now that I am getting older it is getting to where I can talk to my mom, too.*

### **Seeking approval from parents through academic performance.**

Parental expectations of the participants' academic performance varied:

*Chip – I couldn't make anything lower than a B. One time I made an 84 and I got bitched at because it was a low B.*

*Bud – If I made a C, my mama was happy.*

While each of these young men sought to please their parents, it was interesting to note the basic assumption that college educated parents would hold higher expectations

for their children's academic performance is reversed in the case of these two participants. As stated earlier in the biographical sketch, Bud's parents are both college graduates, and Cole's parents are high school graduates.

During a focus group interview with Chip, Bud, Lane, and Brantley, the participants admitted to working to please their parents through their academic performance; however, in most cases that only meant making passing grades. Several of the participants spoke of just doing enough schoolwork to pass. Chip was the only participant who felt that his parents, primarily his mom, held high expectations for him to succeed academically.

#### **Influence of parents and family.**

When the participants were asked to identify the person(s) who were most influential in helping them prepare for their future, all of the participants indicated that their parents' guidance had influenced their occupational choices. Sometimes it was both the mother and father who were attributed with helping the participant choose his occupation. Close relationships between the parents and their sons appear to be a key factor with regard to this influence. The researcher suggests the youth were influenced by conversations with their parents and the youth's desire to emulate their parents.

*Stephen - Probably my mom and dad [were influential in helping me prepare for the future]. They have really helped through the whole thing.*

*Researcher - Did your parents ever suggest any other choices other than banking?*

*Stephen - I mean they have, but once I set my mind, it was done.*

*Brantley – My parents [were influential in helping me prepare for the future]. My construction/welding teacher had some influence, too.*

*Researcher - How do your parents feel about your plans to become a welder?*

*Brantley – They support me. It don't matter what it is.*

*Researcher – When you were growing up, did you and your parents ever talk about what you were going to do?*

*Brantley - Mama always talked to me about it, and so did Dad. My dad always said to have your own business so you won't have no boss. Be your own boss.*

(Brantley's uncle – his dad's brother - owns several small businesses in the area.)

*Researcher - What did your mother say?*

*Brantley - She said that she wanted me to be happy.*

Some participants identified one parent as being more influential than the other.

**Father's influence.** Several participants spoke of their occupational choices being influenced by their father; however, the extent of the influence appears to vary significantly.

*Chip - My dad [helped to influence my occupational choice], but I pretty much did it by myself.*

Another participant believes he was somewhat influenced by his dad in conjunction his teachers.

*Johnny – It was kind of my dad [who helped me decide to study civil engineering] but at the same time it was some of my math teachers who encouraged me because I was a good math student. My welding teacher also helped.*

As a result of discussions with his father about his plans for the future two participants believe that their fathers significantly influenced their occupational choices. The oldest of the participants, however, eventually left the field of work which was familiar to the family and chose an occupation that gave him the most enjoyment.

*Lane – My father worked for the state for almost 30 years. He has helped me a lot. I chose to start out in law enforcement.*

*Researcher - Because of your father? (At one time dad worked in the law enforcement.)*

*Lane - Yes ma'am. He was in law enforcement. At first I wanted to do something in law enforcement, but over time I wanted to change and get away from that. I had so much family in law enforcement that I wanted to take that step and get away from it.*

Another participant believed that his father's success as a land surveyor had greatly impacted his choice of occupations.

*Ben - Dad helped me to make my decision.*

This participant made it clear that mom had no input in influencing his decision.

*Researcher - What does your mother think of your plans [to become a land surveyor]?*

*Ben - She don't ever say nothing.*

*Researcher - So then it's more you and father talking about your plans?*

*Ben - She stays out of it.*

***Mother's influence.*** For other participants, their mothers played a significant role in influencing their choice of occupations. This finding is interesting given that these young men appear to have closer relationships with the males in their lives. According to

Jodl et al.'s (2001) study, adolescents who strongly identify with their mothers place a greater emphasis on school as a means of preparing for their future and aspire to higher levels of educational levels. Two of the eight participants interviewed expressed a strong connection with their moms. While both of these participants plan to earn a college degree, one has not made a choice of occupations.

*Bud – I don't know what I am going to do yet. I am just chilling and going to college right now. My mama told me that I needed to be a pharmacist because they make good money. I thought about underwater welding because they make good money. She finds high paying jobs that will be a steady job that will never go under. She suggested a pharmacist because everybody will always need medicine. (Bud's mother is a media specialist.)*

*Researcher – What does your father say?*

*Bud - I guess he doesn't push me as much as my mom. He just tells me to get a good education and to find a job. My mama really wants me to go to Georgia. I would rather go to Georgia College and State University in Milledgeville. I don't know what I am really going to do yet; they haven't talked to me much about it.*

In a later conversation about his plans for the future and choosing an occupation, Bud added:

*Bud - I just hope that I can graduate from college.*

Another participant also identified his mother as being most influential in helping him prepare for the future.

*Jake - Probably my mom. She is the one who is always on my case.*

*Researcher - How so?*

*Jake - She gets on to me about getting all of my stuff done and going to class.*

***The influence of other family members.*** The participant who has not chosen an occupation was asked if he felt pressured by family and friends to make a decision.

*Bud – Yeah, Papa.*

*Brantley – He says Bud needs to get a damn job and quit using his credit card.*

*Bud – Yeah, Papa makes comments like that every now and then. He tells me that I need to stop spending his money because he ain't got any.*

In this situation, the participant's grandfather and his peers appear to recognize that as long as participant has a proverbial financial cushion, he may continue to postpone making an occupational choice. None of the other participants spoke of being influenced by other family members regarding their occupational choices; however, the researcher suggests that given the close relationships among extended family members and the similarities shared among the relatives, it is likely that interactions with extended family members also played a role in the participants' occupational choice.

### **Perceptions of School and Teachers' Expectations**

Youth spend eight hours a day at school; therefore one would expect that academic and vocational education teachers' expectations would, to some degree, influence youth's occupational choices. The academic paths chosen by these participants include the following: college preparatory, vocational education, and college preparatory/vocational education. Those who graduated with a dual seal appeared to be very proud of this accomplishment, and they were quick to point it out during the interview.

*Bud - I graduated with a dual seal. I took four years of welding for my technical classes, and I took Spanish which gave me the credits I needed to be college prep.*

*Stephen - I did not take any vocational classes. Well, technically I did, but I did the business route instead of something like construction. I took business law, accounting, and introduction to entrepreneurship. I earned a dual seal.*

It appears that the vocational classes taken during high school may have helped these young men in making their occupational choices; however for Ben and Jake, both of whom attended private schools, they did not have an opportunity to take vocational classes. Some participants concentrated in one area, while others explored several vocational options. For some participants, the skills they learned during these vocational classes have influenced their occupational choices, for others it helped them to realize that this was not the vocational pathway for their future. Brantley, who took construction/carpentry and welding classes, is currently using the skills that he learned in high school in his job as a construction worker; he hopes to eventually use the other skills that he learned when he secures a job as a welder. Lane, who took law enforcement, welding, and electrical classes, is currently using his electrical skills in his job as a lineman. Stephen took business and college preparatory classes to earn a dual seal; currently he is attending college and working part-time as a teller at a bank. Johnny, who took welding classes, is currently attending college and he plans to one day use his knowledge of welding when he becomes an engineer. In spite of taking construction/carpentry classes, Chip decided to become a machinist. After taking welding classes and Spanish to earn a dual seal, Bud is currently enrolled in college and is undecided about his occupational choice.

When asked why he chose construction as his vocational education class, one participant explains that the class selected did not relate to his occupational choice.

*Chip - Construction was about the only thing that they had. I thought about choosing welding, but I figured it would be better to learn some construction skills. You know you can always use construction. You are always going to have to build something.*

*Researcher - You didn't ever consider going into construction?*

*Chip - Naw, not in the construction business. (Laughs) It's [construction] not doing too good right now. (This comment shows that Chip is aware of the current economy and the sharp decline in new construction.)*

When asked why he chose construction/carpentry and welding as his vocational education classes, perceived skill appears to have influenced his decision.

*Brantley - I chose construction/carpentry because I like working with my hands, and I chose welding because I could do it good. I was good at both, I guess.*

Two participants chose their vocational classes as a result of their father's influence. One admitted his father's influence:

*Lane - I took law enforcement classes because my dad was in law enforcement.*

However, the other participant, who cites his mom as having more influence in helping him to make an occupational choice, does not realize that his decision to take welding was most likely a direct result of dad's influence.

*Researcher - Who helped you choose welding?*

*Bud - I did. I just always wanted to do it, and I enjoy doing it.*

*Researcher - You told me that dad is a logger. Does dad know how to weld?)*

*Bud - Yes ma'am. He knows how to weld. He quit, but he knows how.*

One participant cites his experiences in his welding class in helping him to make his occupational choice.

*Johnny - I did welding for three years and that is what really kind of started me on this track of where I am going.*

In discussing general thoughts about high school, it would appear that the social aspects were the highlight of high school for most of the participants.

*Bud – I didn't care for it [high school] too much. I went just to socialize.*

*Johnny - I had a great time in high school. It was really good for me. Being there with my friends was the best part.*

Playing sports was also another highlight of school.

*Lane – Oddly, I actually liked it [high school]. In fact, I loved school.*

*Researcher - What was it about high school that you liked?*

*Lane - I played football.*

With regard to the schoolwork, participants appeared to see little value in the content of the subjects. They saw their educational assignments, rather, as tasks that had to be completed in order to graduate. One participant spoke of school not being challenging and/or doing the work just to get by.

*Bud - I didn't like doing the work. I went through just to go. We are f---king lazy in school. I could have made straight A's, but I didn't do anything. I did just enough to get by.*

One participant, who attended a small private school, felt that high school was a waste of time. While the majority of his classmates looked at high school as a path to the college of their choice, this young man felt that he was preparing for his future by working with his father during the summers and on school holidays to learn the skills necessary to become a land surveyor.

*Ben – I didn't like it [high school]. I just never applied myself to the academic work because I always just saw it as pointless. My teachers didn't say anything to me about it because I always passed. I didn't fail anything.*

Another participant also saw school as a waste of time; he would have dropped out of high like his father had done, if his parents had let him.

*Brantley - I thought high school was a waste of time when I could be out there working instead. I would have dropped if I could have, but I would have never told my parents that because I would have gotten bitched at.*

*Researcher – If you had dropped out of high school, what would you have done?*

*Brantley – I would have found a job. (That is exactly what he did right out of high school.)*

When asked during the focus group if anyone else had considered dropping out of school, none of the participants admitted to doing so. A few were adamant that such an idea was never even a consideration.

*Jake - Hell no.*

*Chip – No. You have got to have a high school diploma just to get a job at McDonalds now.*

It is interesting to note that the participant, who admitted that he would have dropped out of school if given the chance, has had a change of opinion about school after working full time as a construction worker for less than a year.

*Brantley - I wanted to get out [of school] as quick as possible, but I regret it now. I would rather be there [high school] than working.*

One participant believed he would have done better in school if his high school teachers had been able to help him and those like him to realize the importance of obtaining an education.

*Ben - The [high school] teachers need to help us [rural White southern males] realize that school is not just pointless.*

Another participant believed that school had a change in focus over the last 10 to 15 years, and apparently he believed those changes were for the worst. As the youngest of three children, with approximately 12 years difference between him and his older brother, it is possible that he either heard these comments from his parents or his older brother. This participant perceived that teachers at the local high school were more concerned about dress code infractions than education matters.

*Chip - Senior year was good. The rest of the time it was ridiculous. It ain't like it was 10 to 15 years ago.*

*Researcher - What do you mean?*

*Chip - I guess there are stricter rules. It's all the stupid rules – like dress code. You get in trouble for stupid junk. I was just glad to get out of there.*

*Researcher – So you didn't have a problem with the schoolwork?*

*Chip - No, the schoolwork really didn't bother me. It was just all of the other stuff. A shirt tail out, no belt, you know – a hole in your pants. They [the teachers and administrators] worried more about stupid stuff than school.*

Another participant also had little sentiment for the school staff.

*Brantley - I didn't like school because the teachers and the principals were all buttholes.*

*Researcher - Tell me about the relationship with your teachers.*

*Brantley - I had some good teachers, but some of them just didn't like some people. They didn't like me because I said whatever was on my mind, I guess. If they were wrong, I would tell them that they were wrong.*

Other than occasional differences of opinion or not liking the teachers and principals for enforcing the school rules, the participants did not express having any difficulties with teachers that may have stemmed from racial or cultural differences.

The participants did not express many thoughts about teacher expectations, perhaps because the expectations were conveyed more through actions rather than actual words. Two participants, however, felt that their teachers contributed to their occupational choices.

*Stephen - My business teacher, Mr. D, was always very helpful to me. He encouraged me to go into banking.*

*Jake - My math teachers always said that I was good in math and trig. They always encouraged me and said that I was really good.*

Six of the eight participants are currently attending college. The majority of those participants have already made their occupational choices, and they understand the educational requirements for obtaining their goals. For one participant, however, college appears to be an unnecessary step for becoming what he wants to be.

*Ben - It [college] is probably the most pointless thing that I have ever done. I have to have a four year degree in surveying or engineering to get my land surveying license, but I can do everything that I need to right now. During my first year of college I*

*almost decided not to do surveying just because of all the schooling. But after that first year, I realized that I could do it.*

### **The Influence of Previous Work Experiences**

Most of the participants began working around the age of 15, and they have held a variety of part-time and full-time jobs, from loading hay in the fields to working at the local bank. Many of these young men share similar outdoor work experiences. They expressed that the reason for beginning their first job was the desire to earn their own money. Two participants' occupational decisions were obviously influenced by their experiences of working with their fathers. Both of these participants have had no opportunities to experience other jobs.

One participant has worked for his father since he was a young adolescent; however, he did not consider his work experience with his father as an actual job.

*Ben - I worked for my dad since I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. I have worked for him full time every summer or whenever I had a break from school. Other than that I have never had an actual job.*

*Researcher - So did he encourage you to go to work with him when you were in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade? Did he say something like, come on I am going to teach you something or did you ask to go with him?*

*Ben – No. I wanted to go. He never pushed me. Even to this day if I told him that I didn't want to work then I don't have to.*

This participant's choice to follow in his father's footsteps in becoming a land surveyor may be viewed as a wise financial decision or Marcia's (1966) identity foreclosure.

*Ben – I chose to become a land surveyor because that's what I know how to do, so that's what I am going to do.*

*Researcher - So you saw it [becoming a surveyor] as a good opportunity.*

*Ben – It seemed like the smart thing to do.*

This participant does not ever mention that he enjoys surveying. In fact, earlier in the interview, when asked if he could choose any job, he did not even mention surveying.

*Researcher – If you could choose any job what would you most like to do?*

*Ben – Something with animals, hunting, biology, or wildlife. Something like that. I like animals.*

Chip has also worked for his dad throughout his adolescent years. Although Chip did not choose to go to work with his father at the family's tire and automotive repair shop, it would appear that working with his dad has obviously influenced him to choose an occupation within the automotive industry. Chip learned about his occupation when he was picking up parts his father's business and for the family's race cars.

Given that Chip's dad has a successful business in the community, the researcher was curious as to why Chip would not choose to go to work in the family business. A conversation with Chip's father, answered this question. "I never suggested that Chip come to work full time at the tire store because I knew that he wasn't interested. I encouraged him to go into the machine shop where he could earn some benefits. He still works for me at the chicken houses, and eventually they will be his."

### **Attachment to Place**

Another common thread among these young men was that their families owned what would be considered by the general public to be large tracts of land of 80 acres or

more. The majority of this land has been held by their families for generations. While the means by which Americans measure their material sustenance may be differ from the mid-century for many, power and influence continue to be attached to ownership of land (Gilbert, Wood, & Sharp, 2002), and it would appear that these each of these young men recognize that, at least to some extent. They each spoke of their family's land with great pride, and they expressed a connection to the land through hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities. Those participants whose families owned many acres spoke of one day living on that same land.

*Bud – They already know that I plan to build a house just across the road in one of our fields. We already have all the land. That's where I plan on living after I find a job.*

Rural inhabitants with ties to the land locate their identity within a specific parcel of land which may explain why, "Where are you from?" is commonly asked question in the rural culture. A family's landholdings represent their heritage, and it provides the family members with a permanent sense of home. For land owners, family land can be likened to a birthright; keeping the land within the family is much more important the amount at which it is appraised.

When asked if he and his parents had ever discussed him leaving the community, the majority of the participants stated that this topic had not been discussed with their parents. Based upon my conversations with the participants, it appears as though many are content to remain in this community. The lack of conversation about relocating, provides evidence that the possibility of relocating is either being ignored or has never been considered by the parents and/or the adolescent.

*Researcher - Have you and your parents ever discussed you moving away?*

*Ben - No.*

*Researcher - Did it ever cross your mind that one day you would leave?*

*Ben - Yeah, I don't want to leave Heartland County, but I want to get out of my parents' house.*

Only one participant spoke of discussions he had with his father about moving. This conversation was initiated by his father.

*Lane - My father always talked to me about joining the military and stuff like that, just to see the world, but not too bad. I have always just wanted to stay right here. (Is it possible that dad encouraged Lane to see the world because this is something that he wanted to do in his youth?)*

When discussing where they plan to live 10 to 15 years from now, most of the participants envision themselves living in this same area.

*Lane - I plan on getting married and maybe having kids. I plan on staying where I am at, settling down, and just making a good life for myself.*

Even if that requires commuting to another location for work:

*Researcher - Do you think you will come back to this area after you graduate from Georgia Tech?*

*Jake - I will probably come back to live here, but I probably won't work in this area.*

One participant felt that a discussion about moving was not necessary, as it was his decision as to where he would live.

*Brantley - It [moving away from the area] is more about whatever I want to do, I guess.*

Two participants recognized their jobs may necessitate their moving away from the community. It would appear that both young men would prefer to remain in this same rural community. The differences lie in how they believe their parents would react to them relocating. One participant felt that his parents would be open to him living in another location:

*Researcher - Do you think you will come back here to this area to work in banking after you earn your degree?*

*Stephen - Yes, ma'am.*

*Researcher - Would you consider moving anywhere else?*

*Stephen - I would consider it, but I would like to stay in the state of Georgia.*

*Researcher - Would you prefer to come back here?*

*Stephen - It's up in the air. That depends on where my job takes me.*

*Researcher - How do you think your parents would feel about you taking a job somewhere else?*

*Stephen - I don't think they would mind because they would know that I was working and it would all work out eventually. (Does this comment imply that he will eventually move back to the area?)*

However, the other participant appeared to believe that his parents would not be receptive to the idea of him relocating to another area:

*Johnny - I want to stay in Georgia, but I don't know if I will be living here per se.*

*Researcher - How do you think your parents would feel about that [moving away from the community]?*

*Johnny - I am sure they would not be happy about it, but at the same time they would be happy for me.*

*Researcher - If you had your choice between staying here or moving which would you choose?*

*Johnny - To live here with my family.*

These young men take owning land for granted, in stark contrast to the young men in the community whose family's roots are not in this area. For young men who were ineligible for this study because they did not have connections to the area for the past two generations, owning land may be an unobtainable dream, or simply a desire that they have never had. When the researcher's parents got married, her maternal grandparents gave them two acres of land on which they could build a house. In the rural culture, providing land for one's children gives them a financial advantage and a sense of security in settling in a familiar location. However, providing land for one's children also acts as an invisible force to keep them close to home. The researcher's parents built their first house only one tenth of a mile from her maternal grandparents. They later bought 50 acres in a different location in the community where they established their own farm and continued the cycle. When the researcher and her sister each got married, her parents also gave them two acres of land. All three houses were located within sight of one another. After six years the researcher moved away because of her husband's job; her sister and her parents, however, remain in the same location today.

Knowing that you have a place to call home is a secure feeling, and being known for your family name within your community is an equally secure feeling. It is possible that these young men whose roots are in this area recognize they are financially better off not only because of the land owned by their family but even more importantly because of the family's connections in the community.

### **Membership Has Its Privileges**

Being White and middle class, perhaps even upper middle class, in a small rural community provides these young men with advantages - many of which they may not be fully aware. These young men live in a community whose government officials and law enforcement officers are mostly White. Although racial identity was not fully explored in this current study, the researcher perceived that these young men exhibited a sense of entitlement or prestige that comes with being White (McIntosh, 1988). For example, during the focus group interview when the researcher inquired if the participants had any Black friends, Bud commented, "Dave is Black. He goes duck hunting with us sometimes, but he doesn't act Black." For these participants, similarities are essential, and to a large degree social status ensures interaction with those who are similar. According to Gilbert (2008), family income, which places one within a particular social class, provides a certain lifestyle and connections with others who share a similar lifestyle. The residents of this community who view themselves as part of the White middle class create a strong community of like-minded individuals who provide support for one another.

Based on the interviews and family's estimated annual income, which most were somewhat reluctant to reveal, all of the participants' parents are economically stable.

Money is something that is not discussed openly in the rural culture. For some, their Southern manners dictate that it is not polite to ask how much someone earns or what something cost; for others who enjoy the benefits of capitalism without considering Uncle Sam, it is the fear of Internal Revenue Service investigating why one's earnings does not match one's reported income. Although some of the participants may have been brought up by the rural creed of "making do with what you have," they obviously have not experienced the financial woes of not being able to make ends meet. At this point in their lives, it is questionable if any of these young men fully understand how much it costs to live independently.

Interestingly, many of the advantages that the participants and their parents have received over the years are a direct result of connections within the community. At an early age these participants have been taught that knowing "the right people in the community" and following the adage of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" is the key to gaining privileges in the community. As a result of their family's connections, the participants have been able to avoid legal troubles, negotiate better prices for purchases, and perhaps most importantly, obtain "good paying" jobs. Lane, Brantley, and Chip, who have already entered the work force, acknowledged how their family's connections in the community were a key factor in them being hired.

*Brantley – My dad's friend helped to get me own at the plant. That's the only place I applied.*

*Lane – I had some friend that worked for Shazam Electric Company. They talked to their supervisors and helped me to get hired.*

These young men recognize that they are fortunate in that since they entered the workforce fulltime they have never been unemployed and they have never had to work for minimum wage. In fact, although they do not hold college degrees, this year each of these young men will earn salaries that are equal to or more than that of a beginning teacher in Georgia. As a result of the connections they have within the community, it is likely that each of these young men will be successful in achieving their goal – the American dream - of owning their own homes. These young men’s experiences suggest that there is much truth in the old country saying, “It’s not what you know but who you know that will help you in life.”

### **Discussion of Online Survey Results**

To explore similarities and differences between the young rural White adolescent male participants and their counterparts in other rural Georgia areas, an online survey was conducted. The survey was available for two months. Invitations were sent to 4-H agents and teachers of rural students. An invitation to participate in the current study was also posted on a social network site. Participation in the survey was not as high as expected; the researcher believes that the narrow criteria for participants may have limited participation. A total of 35 surveys were completed. The researcher decided not to include five of the surveys in the data analysis, as those respondents did not meet the age limit criteria and/or they did not respond to the question about land ownership. The surveys were categorized by the amount of land held by each respondent’s family, with results ranging from less than two acres to more than 50. Unlike the land holdings of the core participants’ families, land ownership was evenly represented within the following four categories: 30% of the respondents’ families owned less than two acres; 37% owned

2-10 acres; 3% owned 11-50 acres; and 30% owned more than 50 acres. (See Table 1, Appendix F). All but one of the core participants' families owned more than 50 acres with their land holdings ranging from 75 to 300 acres.

Based on the data collected through this online survey, it appears that respondents whose families owned more than ten acres were more inclined to remain in the area; 70% planned to stay, 20% planned to move to another location, and 10% were undecided (See Table 2, Appendix F). The core participants showed an even stronger connection with the land, as all of the participants reported planning to remain in the area. Stephen and Johnny, both of whose families own 100 acres while enjoying the conveniences of living in "town," were the only two participants who had entertained the idea of moving away from the area if their occupation took them elsewhere; however, both stated that they would prefer to stay in the area. Participants whose families owned ten acres or less were less attached to their residential location, and they were evenly divided regarding their decisions, with 30% planning to stay, 40% planning to leave, and 30% undecided. Ironically, although his family owns less than two acres of land, Brantley was resolved to remain in the area, but this decision is likely a result of strong relationships with extended family. Land ownership and a connection to the land may best explain the differences in the choices among these young rural men. For those whose families are privileged to own land, an opportunity to eventually settle on some of the family's acreage may have influenced participants' decision to remain in the area.

Twenty of the 30 online participants planned to go to college; a similar pattern was found among the core participants. Immediate plans after high school did not seem to be influenced by the amount of land owned by the family (See Table 3, Appendix F).

While the data did not reveal a pattern between the amount of land owned and the youth's immediate plans for the future, four of the nine participants who live on more than 50 acres had at least one parent who was a college graduate, and five of these participants planned to attend college. Only one online participant who lived on less than two acres had a parent who was a college graduate, which may explain why over 50% of this group did not plan to attend college.

The parents' level of education appeared to influence the youth's plans after high school (See Table 4, Appendix F). Of the 12 online participants whose parent(s) graduated from college, ten of the participants planned to go to college after high school, one planned to enter the military, and one was undecided about his future plans. Six of those whose parent(s) had attended vocational school or earned some college credits also planned to attend college; one planned to enter the military; three planned to enter the work force full time; and one was undecided. Of those participants whose parents' highest level of education was a high school diploma, four planned to go to college, one planned to join the military, and two planned to get full time jobs. Five of the eight core participants also planned to attend college after high school, and three of these participants had a parent or parents who had graduated from college. Bud and Stephen's parents are both college graduates, and Ben's father also earned a college degree; interestingly, three out of five of these degrees were in education. Although his mother is a college graduate and an educator, Brantley chose to enter the work force rather than attending college. Based on this data collected from both groups, it appears that rural youth are more likely to attend college if their parents are college graduates.

Based on the data collected, it would appear that parents are strongly influential in their sons' occupational choices. Twenty of the 30 online participants identified their parents or guardians as being most influential in helping them make their occupational choices; however, relying on one's parents/guardians for guidance in making occupational choices did not seem to be related to the amount of land owned by the family (See Table 5, Appendix F). Of the 20 youth who planned to go to college, 15 sought guidance from their parents (See Table 6, Appendix F). Regardless of their plans for the future, all of the core participants indicated that their parents were influential in their occupational choices. Interestingly, only a few of the online participants aspired to follow in their "dad's footsteps" by choosing the same occupation; as mentioned earlier, only one of the eight participants interviewed chose the same occupation his father had chosen when he was younger .

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this ethnographic study was to provide educators with a glimpse into the rural White southern male's world of reality. Through creating a better understanding of how identity and the perceptions of the expectations of teachers and parents influence occupational choices and other life decisions, it is anticipated that the teachers' ability to relate to these youth will be improved. This chapter summarizes the research findings of this ethnography; additionally, the researcher discusses the implications for this study and provides recommendations for future studies.

#### **Review of the Study**

The current study sought to determine how rural White southern male adolescents' identities and the perceptions of parents' and teachers' expectations influence rural White southern male adolescents' aspirations and occupational choices. The researcher's interest in this study was prompted by her personal lived experiences of growing up in a rural area. After first discussing the influence of rural living upon youth and their aspirations, the researcher then provided the background of the problem and presented a rationale for studying the aspirations and occupational choices of rural White southern adolescent males in particular. The researcher's primary goal for conducting this study was to increase educators' awareness of the influence of geographical and socio-cultural contexts and to highlight the perceptions these young rural White males have regarding their aspirations and occupational choices.

Prior to conducting this study, the researcher recognized how rural culture influenced her own identity and occupational choice. Taking into consideration the

influence of geographic locale on identity development (Elder et al., 1994) and how lived experiences affect one's perspective of reality (Crotty, 1998; Gergen, 1985; Schwandt, 1994), the researcher chose to use Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism to frame this current study. Social constructivists recognize that realities are socially constructed and that individuals' actions are informed by their views of the world (Gergen, 1991; Shepard, 2002). Erikson's (1968) theory of psycho-social development was also used to support the current study, as Erikson (1968) posits that these lived experiences form the adolescent's identity.

An examination of the related literature revealed a dearth of studies of the occupational choices and other life decisions of White adolescent males living within a rural southern context. However, findings of the current study provided affirmation of several key points made in the literature review. Analysis of qualitative data revealed similar responses among the participants, which may be explained by the similar experiences of living in the same rural area. From analysis of the data the following themes were derived: (1) Rural White southern males' occupational choices are primarily influenced by their parents. (2) Rural living influences White southern males' occupational choices. (3) Rural White southern males choose occupations with which they are familiar. (4) Rural White southern males feel strongly connected to the community in which they were raised. (5) Rural White southern males whose families are rooted within a community enjoy the benefits of White privilege and an elevated socio-economic status.

**1. Rural White southern males' occupational choices are primarily influenced by their parents.** All of the core participants identified their parents as being

most influential in helping them make their occupational choices, and 67% of the online participants identified their parents/guardians as being most influential. The majority of rural high school students may look to their parents as a major source of information about occupations (Griffin et al., 2011). The overwhelming reliance on the guidance of parents may be explained by their racial identity and gender; as White rural students are more likely than Black students to seek information about occupations from their parents; and rural males are less likely than their female counterparts to seek advice about occupations from various sources of information or to explore a wide range of career opportunities (Griffin et al., 2011). The positive relationships with their fathers would also explain the youth identifying with their fathers as role models (Jackson & Meara, 1974).

The occupational aspirations of rural youth are influenced more by the primary socialization processes that occur within the nuclear family than within the educational system (Shamah, 2009), and the positive interactions with immediate family members lead to the youth being more insightful and self-directed with regard to their aspirations (Hedlund, 1993). All of the core participants expressed having a close relationship with their parents. In the case of Stephen and Jake, they believed that they could talk with their parents about anything; Ben, however, did not believe that his relationship with his parents was as open – *“We have a pretty close relationship, but not very open. We never talk about real personal things. Stuff they wouldn’t agree with, I wouldn’t talk with them about.”* Parental influence may be attributed either to conversations with their sons about possible occupations, or to the youth’s choosing an occupation which he is most familiar, based upon his lived experiences (Peterson et al., 1986). For example,

Brantley's occupational choice was formed by conversations with his mother, and Chip's occupational choice was influenced by his love for racing and his experiences in the family's tire and automotive repair shop. Considering that social attachments are an important part of the lives of these rural youth, the influence of parents may, however, negatively impact youth by leading to identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966). Two online participants and one core participant chose to follow in their father's "footsteps." While it is unclear if the online participants had given any thought to other occupations, for Ben, it was the perceived parental expectations of becoming a land surveyor like his father that led him to choose not to pursue his dreams of working with animals.

Although each of the core participants, including Ben, believes that his decisions are voluntarily conceived, there is a strong element of passivity, and it appears their decisions were more of a result of parental expectations. Rural youth may be influenced by their parents to choose an occupation which they have deemed as a "good job." Alternately, in making their own choices, youth may unconsciously choose an occupation which will allow them to remain within the community. (This theme will be addressed separately.).

## **2. Rural living influences White southern males' occupational aspirations.**

This theme was evident among all but one of the core participants. The identities of rural youth are formed primarily by their parents through lived experiences within their cultural context (Findlay & Rawls, 1984; Jodl et al., 2001; Korthli & Harrison, 1988; Lee, 19894). From a theoretical standpoint, social experiences are a primary factor in shaping one's perception of the world (Crockett & Crouter, 1995). The social experiences of urban youth play a profound role in establishing and constraining the manifestation of

one's goals, aspirations, and fears (Sirin et al., 2004), and the current study indicates that the same may be said for rural White southern male adolescents. In considering what they would never want to become, seven of the eight core participants said that they would never want to be confined all day in an office. Stephen was the only core participant who anticipated choosing an occupation that would require him to spend all of his time in an office. The researcher suggests that the social experiences of these rural youth may explain their choice of occupations. It would appear that the rural outdoor experiences these young men have enjoyed throughout their childhoods have influenced their decision not to work in an office, and it may explain why Stephen, who grew up in "town" and had less rural outdoor experiences than the other participants may be more inclined to work indoors. The findings among the online participants, however, were not similar to those of the core participants: 18 of the online participants chose occupations which the researcher would consider as office jobs; ten of the online participants chose jobs which the researcher would consider as non-office jobs; and two of the online participants were undecided about their occupational choices.

**3. Rural White southern males choose occupations with which they are familiar.** Males were less likely than females to explore a wide range of career opportunities through the use of various sources (Griffin et al., 2011), and such was the case with participants in the current study; as it appears that all of the core participants chose occupations which they had been exposed to as youth; either through a vocational program or social experiences with family and friends. For example, Brantley chose his occupation after working in a bank during his senior year of high school, and Lane chose his occupation as a result of conversations with friends. While this theme cannot be

determined among the online participants' choice of occupations, their occupational choices included such diverse occupations as cinematographer, political analyst, sportscaster, and professional fisherman. Parental expectations are often attributed to youth's lack of exploration of occupations (Hart & Bauknight, 1992), which may possibly explain why the core participants did not express an interest in researching occupations; however, another explanation could be the fact that rural youth may be particularly resistant to asking for help as a result of the value they place on self-reliance (Seaton, 2007).

None of the core participants utilized the assistance of the school counselor, and very few had conversations with their teachers about occupations. One participant's mom provided him with unsolicited information by researching occupations and future projections for occupations on the Internet. Considering that none of the participants sought help from their guidance counselor and very few felt influenced by their teachers, one must seek to understand the perceived expectations of teachers and the suggested lack of distrust of teachers and counselors. The researcher suggests that some educators do not adequately provide the guidance and support that rural youth need in preparing for the future, which is perhaps a result of the recent emphasis on No Child Left Behind. Teachers may lack the time and resources, and guidance counselors may devote their time and energy into helping targeted subgroups prepare for the future. If the teachers and school counselors do not have a relationship with rural White adolescent males, how can they effectively convey to them, especially to those who have already determined their occupational choices based on their parents' expectations, the world of occupational possibilities? That is the proverbial million dollar question.

4. **Rural White southern males feel strongly connected to the community in which they were raised.** Many rural people are committed to where they live, and they may choose occupations that allow them to remain within their community (Howley, 2006). Based on the data from the core participants and the online participants, it would appear that rural White southern males are likely to remain in the community in which they were raised. The online survey revealed that land ownership may play a role in the participants' decision to remain in the area. Participants whose families owned ten acres or less were less attached to their residential location, and they were evenly divided regarding their decisions, with 30% planning to stay, 40% planning to leave, and 30% undecided. Of the participants whose families owned more than ten acres, 70% planned to stay, 20% planned to move to another location, and 10% were undecided (See Table 2, Appendix E). All of the core participants showed an even stronger connection with the land; as all of the participants reported planning to remain in the area. Although some of the core participants were open to moving away from their home community if their job required doing so, the findings of this study suggest that rural White southern males have a sense of attachment to their family's land. Remaining in the community provides a sense of security, belonging, and a sense of familiarity (Corbett, 2007). These youth are essentially choosing to remain in their "comfort zone." They may perceive the advantages of family connections which can help with acquiring jobs and getting out of trouble with the law. For some core participants, there are financial advantages to remaining in the community. Bud anticipates being given acreage on which to build a home – *They [his parents] already know that I plan to build a house just across the road*

*in one of our fields. We already have all the land. That's where I plan on living after I find a job;* and Ben plans to eventually inherit the family business.

Adolescents who want to be like their parents place more importance on living near family and less on moving away from the community (Johnson et al., 2005). All of the core participants appeared to place a great importance on family relationships, and their responses revealed strong community and familial ties. The pull of family and significant others within the community is commonly viewed as a constraint that works against rural youth taking a job outside of their local area (Elder et al., 1996). In discussing the possibility of moving to another location for their job, Stephen and Johnny were aware of the fact that their parents would be less than happy if they moved away from the community. The devotion these participants have for their parents may explain why most of the participants appear satisfied with their residential choice; however, the researcher questions if their decision to remain in the area is based on true satisfaction or resigned contentment. It is possible that their reluctance to move away stems from fear of leaving family and a familiar environment.

**5. Rural White southern males whose families are rooted within a community enjoy the benefits of gender privilege, White privilege, and an elevated socio-economic status.** By virtue of their Whiteness and gender, rural White Southern males are more privileged than their minority counterparts. The core participants were found to experience enormous benefits within the community, some of which they were not aware. As a result of their conservative upbringing, these young men have become accustomed to the invisible power associated with being male and White. Although the means by which Americans measure their material sustenance may differ from those used

earlier, power and influence continue to be attached to ownership of land (Gilbert et al., 2002). Given the pride that each participant exhibited in discussing his family's land, it appears that each of these young men recognize, at least to some extent, the prestige that is attached to land ownership. Although current information about the private ownership of land appears to be limited to agricultural land accounted for by the U.S. Census of Agriculture, earlier data suggests that the concentrated ownership of land (and wealth) is on the increase (Geisler, 1993). The core participants' annual family income places them among the middle class and also provides these young men with financial benefits. They have not experienced the struggles of doing without basic necessities or working to make ends meet. Perhaps most importantly, these young men benefit from what is known as "the good old boy network." Connections within the community have allowed them to avoid legal troubles, negotiate better prices for purchases, and obtain "good paying" jobs. Lane, Brantley, and Chip, who have already entered the work force, acknowledged how their family's connections in the community were a key factor in them being hired.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

The future of rural White southern males is strongly influenced by their parents. As a result of their dependence upon their parents for guidance in choosing an occupation, the choices of rural White southern adolescent males are limited; however, these young men do not appear to recognize the control which their parents have. Resolving to stay in the area in which they were raised is likely a result of their parents' expectations or their feeling as though they have no other options. From the present study, the following implications may be made:

Rural adolescents, unlike their urban and suburban counterparts, may perceive rural life as the ideal. As one participant states, “I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.” The majority of the participants had never considered moving outside of their community. Because rural adolescents are likely to remain in the area in which they were raised, the researcher suggests that parents are not having conversations with their youth because the world, as they know it, may be limited to their own lived experiences in this locale.

The majority of the responses obtained through interviews and the online-survey indicated that their mothers and/or fathers were influential in helping study participants determine their occupational choices. While some parents may be equipped to facilitate their youth’s occupational choices, there are other parents who may limit their youth’s opportunities as a result of lack of information. The researcher understands this situation all too well; her parents could only provide information about occupations which they were familiar, and the researcher perceived that the high school counselor was more interested in assisting students from other subgroups. During the researcher’s only visit the counselor’s office, she was discouraged about applying for a scholarship to the local college; in the counselor’s words, “There were many qualified applicants who have already applied.”

Because rural adolescents are most likely to seek guidance from their parents regarding occupational choices, the researcher suggests it may be beneficial for school counselors to develop close relationships with parents during the early years of high school as a means of providing the youth with occupational and educational guidance. The researcher also suggests that teachers and school counselors find methods to address

the social issues which rural youth face by providing information about alcohol abuse, safe sex, and drinking and driving. The researcher believes that the youth's needs are best met when there is extensive collaboration between school counselors, teachers, parents, and the youth. Creating such relationships may be difficult as they require trust, a sincere interest in the youth's future, and most importantly, time.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings of the current study, the researcher makes the following recommendations for future research.

The researcher proposes expanding the current study to include a more diverse sample of adolescent males from rural areas across Georgia. A larger sample would offer a clearer picture of the impact of the rural locale/culture on one's identity. It may also allow the data to be generalized to other states in the Deep South. To fully obtain the information needed, individual interviews would have to be conducted, which would be very time consuming. Gaining access into some communities may also be difficult.

The current study was limited to 18 - 25 year old White southern males who live in a rural area in which their families have lived for at least the past two generations. The researcher decided not to include all rural White southern males based on her belief that participants who did not have family roots in the area would be less influenced by their geographical locale/culture. The researcher proposes that future studies include White southern males from rural areas whose families are not rooted in the area to determine if there are differences between the two groups.

The participants of the current study represented the middle class. The researcher proposes conducting a study that would focus on those below the poverty line. The

researcher believes that the comparison between the two groups of rural males would provide insight into how social class affects one's lived experiences and the perceived expectations of parents and teachers.

The researcher proposes conducting a study of rural White males that would span two to three generations. The researcher believes that more about rural males' identities and their occupational choices would be revealed by interviewing the youth and their fathers and grandfathers.

Choosing an occupation is a difficult decision for adolescents, and it is perhaps even more difficult for rural adolescent males. Although all but one participant spoke confidently of his plans for the future, it is possible that some of these young men have not actually determined what occupation they will hold 10 to 15 years from now. While there is no research to support the number of jobs the average American will hold in his lifetime (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012), there is evidence that job changes are common among those less than 25 years old (Bialik, 2010). In seeking to capture the self-images of young rural White southern males and explore how their identities have shaped their occupational choices, it appears that their choices of occupations and residence are strongly influenced by their parents. These young men, however, do not appear to feel limited in their choices. They appear to be satisfied with their choices and optimistic about the future. In most situations they view themselves as living in the same area and having the same occupation 10 to 15 years from now. Whether it is true happiness or resigned contentment that pulls these youth to occupations that allow them to remain in the area, drawing from constructivist theory the researcher anticipates that this pattern will continue for generations.

### **Reflective Statement from the Researcher**

With the best of intentions, we often impose our world views on others.

However, as I have come to find in this current study, my views of world – the truth as I knew it prior to this study – has changed. Like the participants in this study, I looked to my parents for guidance in choosing an occupation. There were never any discussions in my home about moving away from the community, and even as I approached adulthood, I never envisioned leaving the area that I considered home. Why would anyone want to leave the security and support of family and friends?

Engaging in this study provided me with an opportunity to revisit my life choices. As I look back, I recognize that my occupational choices and choice of residence were constrained as a result of my parents' influence, but at the time I was content with my decisions. My parents conveyed to me that which they knew, as a result of their lived experiences in a rural area, and I treasure the values and beliefs that they instilled in me.

Similar to my experience, the participants in this study have been strongly influenced by their rural experiences. These rural White males are obviously comfortable in their surroundings, and they express satisfaction with their occupational choices. Even if there is some level of passivity - perhaps even identity foreclosure, these young men are content in knowing that by remaining within the rural community, in which they were raised, they stand to benefit both socially and financially. It is likely that this cycle will continue in rural areas for generations to come. Even those who choose to leave may eventually feel a desire to return to the area that they consider home; I did.

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APPENDIX A  
QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARTICIPANTS

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age?
3. What is your address?
4. Which statement best describes your mother's level of education?
  - A. Did not complete high school
  - B. earned a high school diploma
  - C. attended vocational school
  - D. earned some college credits
  - E. graduated from college
5. What is your mother's occupation?
6. Which statement best describes your father's level of education?
  - A. Did not complete high school
  - B. earned a high school diploma
  - C. attended vocational school
  - D. earned some college credits
  - E. graduated from college
7. What is your father's occupation?
8. When did you/will you graduate from high school?
9. If you have dropped out from high school, at what age and grade level did you drop out?
10. If you could do any occupation, what would you choose?
11. What are/were your immediate plans after high school?
  - A. Get a job
  - B. Go to vocational school
  - C. Go to college
  - D. Join the military
  - E. I don't know

12. Who provided you with the most help in setting your goals for the future?
- A. Parents/Guardians
  - B. Other family members
  - C. Teachers/guidance counselor
  - D. Friends
  - E. No one
13. Where do you plan to live 10-15 years from now?
- A. In this area
  - B. In another location in Georgia
  - C. In another state
  - D. I don't know
14. Do you plan to get married?
- A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Undecided
15. Do you plan to have children?
- A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Undecided

## APPENDIX B

## RELEVANCY OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Questions	Literature	Research Question
1.How would you describe yourself?	Maltzan (2006); Melton, 1983; Thompson (2007)	Role of identity (Q1)
2.How do you think others would describe you?	Maltzan (2006); Melton, 1983; Thompson (2007)	Role of identity (Q1)
3.Do you consider yourself as “rural”? What does that word mean to you?	Campbell, Bell, & Finney (2006); Maltzan (2006); Thompson (2007)	Role of identity (Q1)
4.How would you describe your relationship with your parents?	Burnell (2003); Johnson, Elder, & Stern (2005); Ley, Nelson, Beltyukova (1996)	Perceptions of expectations of teacher and parents (Q2)
5.What part, if any, does religion play in your life?	Elder, King & Conger (1996); Salamon (1992)	Role of identity (Q1)
6.What are your thoughts on living in a rural area? Do you perceive any advantages or disadvantages to rural living?	Elder & Conger (2000); Hektner (1998); Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Howley (2006); Pozzoboni 2011	Perceptions of rural life (Q4)
7.How has rural living/living in the country influenced your decisions about the future?	Elder & Conger (2000); Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Howley (2006); Pozzoboni, 2011; Shepard (2002)	Perceptions of rural life (Q4) Role of identity (Q1)
8.If you could choose any occupation, what would you most like to do? Why would you choose that occupation?	Hart & Bauknight (1992); Shamah (2009)	Role of identity (Q1) Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)

		Recognizing choices (Q3)
9. What occupation would you NEVER consider? Why so?	Shamah (2009)	Role of identity (Q1)  Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)  Recognizing choices (Q3)
10. What are your immediate plans for the future? What prompted these plans?	Shamah (2009), Burnell (2003) Haller & Virkler (1993)	Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)  Recognizing choices (Q3)
11. How do your parents feel about your plans for the future? Why do you think they feel this way? Did your parents ever talk to you about your vocational choices? Did your parents ever talk to you about leaving the community?	Berzonsky (2004); Burnell (2003); Herzog & Pittman, 1995; Johnson, Elder, & Stern (2005); Ley, Nelson, Beltyukova (1996)	Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)
12. What do you think about school?	Shamah (2009); Stephen & Mear (1974)	Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)
13. How would you describe your relationship with your teachers?	Shamah (2009)	Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)
14. What career pathway did you choose in high school? Why did you choose this career pathway?	Corbett (2007); Gilligan (1982); Hart & Bauknight (1992); Ley, Nelson, Beltyukova (1996)	Role of identity  Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)

15. Who has been most influential in helping you prepare for the future? How were they influential in helping you prepare for the future?	Buikstra, Eley, & Hindmarsh (2007); Shamah (2009)	Role of identity (Q1) Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2) Recognizing choices (Q4)
16. When you consider your life experiences, can you think of a particular experience, either negative or positive, that cemented your plans for the future? (In other words, it helped you to determine what you wanted to become or what you didn't want to become.)	Carr & Kefalas (2009); Harter & Monsour (1992); Markus & Nurius (1986); Schaefer & Meece (2009)	Role of identity (Q1) Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2) Recognizing choices (Q4)
17. What part time/full time jobs have you held? When did you begin your first job?	Burnell (2003)	Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2) Recognizing choices (Q4)
18. What was your primary reason for getting a job?	Burnell (2003)	Role of identity (Q1) Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)

<p>19. How would you describe your future 10-15 years from now? (i.e. What job do you think you will hold? Where do you plan to live? Do you plan to get married? Do you plan to have children? )</p>	<p>Cobb, McIntire, &amp; Pratt (1986); Corbett (2007); D'Amico, Lanehew, Sankar, Merchant, &amp; Zurita (1996); Herzog &amp; Pittman, 1995; Johnson, Elder, &amp; Stern (2005)</p>	<p>Role of identity (Q1)                      Perceptions of expectations of teachers and parents (Q2)                      Recognizing choices (Q4)</p>
<p>20. Any there any other questions that you thought I would have asked? Do you have any other areas that you would like to discuss that we have not covered?</p>		

## APPENDIX C

**INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR PARTICIPANTS**

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. How do you think others would describe you?
3. Do you consider yourself as “rural”? What does that word mean to you?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your parents?
5. Do you consider yourself to be a religious person? In what way?
6. What are your thoughts on living in a rural area? Do you perceive any advantages or disadvantages to rural living?
7. How has rural living influenced your decisions about the future?
8. If you could choose any occupation, what would you most like to do? Why would you choose that occupation?
9. What occupation would you NEVER consider? Why so?
10. What are your immediate plans for the future? What prompted these plans?
11. How do your parents feel about your plans for the future? Why do you think they feel this way? Did you parents ever talk to you about your vocational choices? Did you parents ever talk to you about leaving the community?
12. What do you think about school?
13. How would you describe your relationship with your teachers?
14. What career pathway did you choose in high school? Why did you choose this career pathway?
15. Who has been most influential in helping you prepare for the future? How were they influential in helping you prepare for the future?
16. When you consider your life experiences, can you think of a particular experience, either negative or positive, that cemented your plans for the future? (In other words, it helped you to determine what you wanted to become or what you didn't want to become.)

17. What part time/full time jobs have you held? When did you begin your first job?
18. What was your primary reason for getting a job?
19. How would you describe your future 10-15 years from now? (i.e. What job do you think you will hold. Where do you plan to live? Do you plan to get married? Do you plan to have children?)
20. Any there any other questions that you thought I would have asked? Do you have any other areas that you would like to discuss that we have not covered?

## APPENDIX D

## ONLINE PARTICIPANT SURVEY

1. What is your age?
2. In which county do you live?
3. Which statement best describes your mother's level of education?
  - A. Did not complete high school
  - B. Attended high school diploma
  - C. Attended vocational school
  - D. Earned some college credits
  - E. graduated from college
4. What is your mother's occupation?
5. Which statement best describes your father's level of education?
  - A. Did not complete high school
  - B. earned a high school diploma
  - C. attended vocational school
  - D. earned some college credits
  - E. graduated from college
6. What is your father's occupation?
7. When did you/will you graduate from high school?
8. If you have dropped out from high school, at what age and grade level did you drop out?
9. If you could do any occupation, what would you choose?
10. What are/were your immediate plans after high school?
  - A. Get a job
  - B. Go to vocational school
  - C. Go to college
  - D. Join the military
  - E. I don't know

11. Who provided you with the most help in setting your goals for the future?
  - A. Parents/Guardians
  - B. Other family members
  - C. Teachers/guidance counselor
  - D. Friends
  - E. No one
12. Where do you plan to live 10-15 years from now?
  - A. In this area
  - B. In another location in Georgia
  - C. In another state
  - D. I don't know
13. Do you plan to get married?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Undecided
14. Do you plan to have children?
  - A. Yes
  - B. No
  - C. Undecided
15. Do you have any other comments about your career choice?
16. If you would like to participate in an individual interview, please provide your contact information.

## APPENDIX E

**PARTICIPANTS' BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION**

Name	Age	Area of Residence	Current Status	Occupational Choice	Family Income	Acres Owned
Chip	20	country	attended vocational school; works now works full time	Machinist	\$100,000+	112
Brantley	18	town	works full time as a construction worker	Welder	\$100,000+	2
Jake	19	country	attends local college	electrical engineer	\$80,000	75
Bud	19	country	attends local college	undecided	\$100,000	180
Ben	19	country	attends local college	land surveyor	\$100,000	300
Lane	25	country	works full time as a lineman	lineman	\$40,000 (personal income)	75
Johnny	18	town	attends a university three hours away	civil engineer	\$80,000 (step mom & husband)	300 (owned by father)
Stephen	18	town	attends local college	loan officer	\$80,000	100

## APPENDIX F

**ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS**

Table 1

*Amount of Land Owned by Survey Respondents' Families*

Acres Owned	Percent of Online Participants
Less than 2	30%
2-10	37%
11-50	3%
More than 50	30%

Table 2

*Survey Respondents' Desired Place of Residence 10-15 Years from Now*

Acres Owned	Remain in the Area	Undecided	Move to Another Location
Less than 2	3	3	3
2-10	3	3	5
11-50	1	-	-
More than 50	6	1	2

Table 3

*Survey Respondents' Immediate Plans after High School as Related to Land Ownership*

Acres Owned	Go to College	Join the Military	Get a full time job	Undecided
Less than 2	4	2	2	1
2-10	11	-	1	-
11-50	1	-	-	-
More than 50	5	1	2	1

Table 4

*Survey Respondents' Immediate Plans after High School & Parents' Highest Level of Education*

Parents' High Level of Education	Go to College	Join the Military	Get a Full Time Job	Undecided
High School Graduate(s)	4	1	2	-
Attended Vocational School or Earned Some College Credits	6	1	3	1
College Graduate(s)	10	1	-	1

Table 5

*Identified by Survey Respondents as Most Influential in Their Occupational Choices as Related to Land Ownership*

Acres Owned	Parents/Guardians	Teachers/Guidance Counselors	Other Family Members	Friends	No One	No Response
Less than 2	7	1	-	-	1	-
2-10	7	1	1	1	-	1
11-50	1	-	-	-	-	-
More than 50	5	1	2	1	-	-

Table 6

*Identified by Survey Respondents as Most Influential in Their Occupational Choices as Related to Immediate Plans*

Plans	Parents/Guardians	Teachers/Guidance Counselors	Other Family Members	Friends	No One	No Response
College	15	1	-	2	1	1
Military	1	1	1	-	-	-
Full Time Job	3	1	1	-	-	-
Undecided	1		1	-	-	-