

# An Extensive Analysis of The Life of J. D. Vance

For many people, the definition of success depends on one's income, happiness, or quality of life. For J. D. Vance, author of *Hillbilly Elegy*, success meant escaping the toxic aspects of Appalachian culture-- the vicious cycle of poverty and domestic violence that plagued his family for generations—while preserving the positive aspects and strong connections with his cultural identity. An unstable homelife, drug abuse, and lack of adequate material wealth nearly destroyed his life. Nevertheless, opportunities to develop and practice perseverance, support from family members, and a dash of luck helped Vance build a prosperous adult life.

The outcome of Vance's story is rooted within his cultural legacy, the behaviors and attitudes he subconsciously inherited from his parents and environment. Malcolm Gladwell, author *Outliers: The Story of Success*, explains the significance of cultural legacies as “powerful forces [with] deep roots and long lives. They persist, generation after generation, virtually intact... and they play such a role in directing attitudes and behavior that we cannot make sense of our world without them” (174). In other words, our cultural legacy influences our mindsets. It is the authority of how one navigates the world; therefore, to an extent, cultural legacy dictates one's future.

The impact of cultural legacy is observable in the lives of Vance's family members. His grandmother and grandfather, whom he lovingly refers to as “Mamaw” and “Papaw,” are self-proclaimed proud “hillbillies” that moved from Jackson, Kentucky, a poverty-stricken and extremely isolated area of the Appalachian Mountains, to Middletown, Ohio, in hopes of creating a better future for their children. Gladwell describes the areas that most “hillbillies” are from, as “remote and lawless territories” where “people are steeped in violence” (Gladwell

167). Mamaw and Papaw transplanted their culture into their new house. Positive aspects include having a tight-knit family, supporting neighbors and friends through tough times, and fierce loyalty. Negative aspects include having personal issues, regardless of what they are, remain private. What happens in the family stays in the family, and getting third-party help or involvement is heavily frowned upon. Domestic violence and constant yelling, norms in Appalachian familial relations, created an unstable homelife for Vance's mother and her cultural legacy made it difficult for her to get help. Her brother, Jimmy, recalled that Mamaw hurled a flower vase at Papaw after he came home drunk one night. At other times, Mamaw sabotaged Papaw's wardrobe, hid his wallet in the oven, and "devoted herself to making [Papaw's] drunken life a living hell" (Vance 43). Papaw was a violent alcoholic, but Mamaw was a "violent nondrunk" and "she channeled her frustrations... [into] covert war" (Vance 43). In Appalachian culture, "no aspect of this homelife is concerning" (Vance 43). Domestic violence is so ordinary that it almost becomes customary.

Since these demeanors were a part of her cultural legacy, Vance's mother, as an adult, acted in a similar malicious manner. She created a precarious homelife for Vance and regularly physically and verbally abused her boyfriends. These dispositions are entrenched in the Appalachian cultural legacy. Vance reiterates this idea, explaining that his mother's "struggles weren't some isolated incident. They were replicated, replayed, and relived by many of the people who, like [Vance's family], had moved hundreds of miles in search of a better life. There was no end in sight" (Vance 142). As a consequence of his mother's behaviors, multiple strange men frequently entered and exited Vance's personal life. His family continuously moved from

one house to another, and the lack of having a permanent safe place-- a home-- amplified a sense of instability. In turn, he began developing adverse childhood experiences (ACE).

ACE introduced a whole new set of tribulations. Paul Tough, the author of *The Atlantic* article “How Kids Learn Resilience,” explores the consequences of a disturbing homelife. He discovers that toxic stress “can cause an array of physiological problems and impede development of the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that controls our most complex intellectual functions, as well as [the] ability to regulate ourselves both emotionally and cognitively” (Tough 4). In other words, children with ACE struggle to perform in school on a neurobiological level. Throughout *Hillbilly Elegy*, Vance reiterates the notion that his household turmoil contributed to poor grades. In turn, Vance developed learned helplessness, the fixed mindset that one does not have control over their future, so it is meaningless to make an effort to succeed.

Although Vance’s background presented complicated issues, these disadvantageous circumstances taught him how to adapt to new environments and strengthened his grit. In Gladwell’s words, “As is so often the case with outliers, buried in that setback was a golden opportunity” (Gladwell 124). When Vance found refuge in the peaceful atmosphere of Mamaw’s house, he began focusing the extra energy he was exerting to cope with unstable environments into school instead. Vance explains, “those three years alone with Mamaw-- uninterrupted-- saved me.... My grades began improving immediately after moving in” (Vance 137). His enhanced adaptation skills, as well as Mamaw’s strict rules to achieve good grades, pushed Vance to overcome adversity.

A compulsion to impress Mamaw and inclination to make her sacrifices meaningful heightened Vance’s determination for success. This attitude easily observable after she bought

him an expensive graphing calculator. Vance felt that he “had better take school work more seriously” because he “owed it to [Mamaw]” to accomplish in an academic setting (Vance 137). Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld, authors of *The New York Times* article “What Drives Success?,” explore which factors fuel children of immigrants to achieve. They conclude that the primary motivation is rooted in “an acute sense of obligation to redeem their parents’ sacrifices.... [they] feel that ‘family honor’ depends on their success” (Chua and Rubenfeld 4). Although Vance is not an immigrant and Mamaw is not his mother, there is significant symmetry between his mindset towards hard work and the attitude children of immigrants have towards justifying their parents’ sacrifices because there is a notable amount of resemblance between Mamaw’s story and that of immigrants. This outlook on work ethic sustained Vance’s motivation to accomplish during his service in the Marine Corps and throughout his academic career at Ohio State University and Yale Law School. Angela Duckworth, author of *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, elaborates on the benefits of endurance, explaining that “grit still predicts success. Regardless of specific attributes and advantages that help someone succeed in each of these diverse domains of challenge, grit matters in all of them” (12). In other words, advantages are meaningless without grit; perseverance determines success. Thus, despite his disadvantaged background, Vance achieved upward mobility because he was consistently determined to overcome adversity.

The impact of cultural legacy and Vance’s rationale to impress Mamaw is also discernable when considering how religion shaped his mindset. Mamaw was a non-churchgoing Christian who was powerfully influenced by her faith, often citing a compelling combination of strong work ethic and God as the key to success. She deeply instilled the notion that Vance “should never despair, for God had a plan.... God helps those who help themselves” (Vance 86).

In turn, this attitude significantly affected his convictions regarding the power of hard work and persistence. In Vance's words, "To coast through life was to squander my God-given talent, so I had to work hard. I had to take care of my family because my Christian duty demanded it" (Vance 86). Through his perspective, adequately repaying Mamaw for her support meant serving God by creating a successful life. Ignoring his talents would starkly contrast Mamaw's principles of prosperity. As such, Vance felt obligated to triumph upward mobility, regardless of the challenges that he may encounter. Even after he eventually grows out of his faith, Vance continues to be dramatically impacted by Mamaw's religious values.

Although adverse childhood experiences (ACE) and religion helped Vance develop a powerful sense of perseverance, the support he received from Mamaw and his sister, Lindsay, is priceless. Lindsay shielded Vance from a significant portion of their mother's destructive behaviors, drug use, and lifestyle. Vance describes her "as more adult than child" because she consistently filled the role of a parent. Vance explains "depend[ing] on her so completely" that he "didn't see Lindsay for what she was: a young girl, not yet old enough to drive a car, learning to fend for herself and her little brother at the same time" (Vance 82). Despite her young age, Lindsay was not a naive child. She carried herself with the composure of a mature adult and raised Vance. Her support provided a buffer between the constant exposure to drug use, including the potential to have more ACE, and became a compelling role model. Similarly, Mamaw and Papaw were the authority figures who provided enhanced security by protecting Vance when his mother became unruly. Despite the toxic aspects of Appalachian culture, the "tight family bonds" and prioritization of "loyalty to blood above all else" saved Vance (Gladwell 168). Together, Lindsay, Mamaw, and Papaw provided stability, asylum, and love to help him

overcome the challenges ACE, and boosted his willpower to accomplish. In adulthood, Vance's wife, Usha, supports him in a complementary manner by helping him adjust to life outside of Middletown and Appalachian culture.

Despite Vance's grit and reliable support system, luck and advantages that are not initially obvious have monumentally propelled his success. Unlike his peers, Vance was incredibly privileged in the sense that he always had a reliable support system, and all the opportunities to develop his grit fell perfectly into place at the right time. Vance supports this notion, clarifying that "despite all of the environmental pressures from my neighborhood and community, I received a different message at home. And that just might have saved me" (Vance 60). He is lucky that Mamaw understood the value of education, and that Papaw strengthened his love for learning. They nurtured "positive mindsets and effective learning strategies," the key attitudes that develop academic perseverance, which is not typically encouraged in Appalachian families (Tough 18).

In a similar manner, the Marine Corps helped Vance realize his potential by showing him that resilience, self-control, and determination leads to success. The military dismantled Vance's fixed-mindset by promoting tolerance for failure, then providing opportunities for redemption. A repetition of this process bolstered his determination, confidence, and grit. In turn, this encouraged the development essential aspects of growth-mindset, such as "competency [can] grow with effort", he can succeed with adequate effort, and that all "work has value for [him]" (Tough 20). The military transformed Vance by completely extracting all characteristics of a fixed-mindset and replaced it with a growth-mindset and positive attitudes. They effectively wiped away a majority of the toxic inclinations in Appalachian mentalities.

Likewise, Vance had substantial social capital that helped him navigate life after escaping Middletown. Professors and classmates helped him develop his "practical intelligence," which includes 'knowing what to say to whom, knowing when to say it, and knowing how to say it for maximum effect.'... It's knowledge that helps you read situations correctly and get what you want" (Gladwell 101). Without compelling communication skills and capable practical intelligence, it is highly unlikely that Vance would have succeeded in college, much less, even applied to Yale Law. Vance reinforces this idea, explaining that his social capital, the "network of people and institutions around [him had] real economic value" (Vance 214). His network helped him gain access to unique opportunities and learn how to navigate institutional systems. Receiving guidance and having mentors aided Vance in making instrumental career choices that fortified his success. Referring to both social capital and cultural legacy, Gladwell reiterates the conviction that "Successful people don't do it alone. Where they come from matters. They're products of particular places and environments" (Gladwell 119).

Vance's story highlights the toxic aspects of Appalachian culture by embodying the challenges of upward mobility among working-class white people. Notwithstanding his childhood, he built a prosperous life. However, this would not be possible without a strenuous childhood fueling an invigorating sense of grit, a strong support network, and a sprinkle of luck to assist him along the way.

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