

(3-3) Cautionary Tales: Loeff Critique

Instructions: Review the following critique of David Loeff's Appalachia's Children: The Challenge of Mental Health.

Critiques of Loeff:

Even though Loeff produced an interesting and thought-provoking study, his work has serious methodological shortcomings that should not be repeated on contemporary studies. These include:

1. Loeff's focus on psychologically disturbed children combined with his generalizing title (*Appalachia's Children: The Challenge of Mental Health*) could be easily, though incorrectly, be interpreted as an attempt to portray an entire region as emotionally disturbed. This was not the author's purpose or conclusion, of course. However, the title does leave one with the impression that the whole region is mentally ill.
2. Loeff bases his understanding of regional history, society and culture upon a flawed survey study (Ford) and a popular book written by a minister (Weller). As a result, his understanding of the region is inaccurate. He repeats the nonsensical assumption that Appalachian society and culture is "frozen in time," a stereotype of the region that was born in the late 19th century and continued to be popular in the 1960s and 1970s.
3. Loeff repeats contradictory and stereotypical notions of a regional culture that simultaneously fosters independence / individualism but, also, dependence and familism.
4. Loeff clearly recognizes the importance of socioeconomic diversity in the region and, consequently, collects baseline data from Appalachian families of three socioeconomic groupings. However, he accepts and repeats the claims of previous authors that their so-called observations of the culture of very poor and working class Appalachians apply equally well to middle class and wealthy mountaineers. His phrasing belies some skepticism ("most writers assert" on p. 158), though he never openly criticizes this assertion.
5. Because his study is "an attempt to extend what is already known about this particular people and their region into the area of their children's mental health" (p. xiv) and so much of what "was known" on this topic was either incorrect or grossly over-generalized, the validity of the entire study may be questioned.
6. Loeff himself over-generalizes by asserting that data collected from four counties in Eastern Kentucky is representative of Southern Appalachia and the Southern US.
7. In emphasizing the region's chronic economic depression, Loeff does not recognize the wealth that has been created in the region, stratification within the region, or variation in wealth across space and time. This is common to many studies of Central Appalachia. Many find region poverty interesting and, therefore, focus on these topics so exclusively that poverty has come to define the region as a whole.

8. Though he clearly recognizes the problems caused by poverty and deprivation (both for mental functioning and access to care), Looff's focus upon family dynamics, childrearing practices, and cultural traditions as the cause of mental disorder draws attention away from other possible social causes of psychological distress.