

(3-2) Cautionary Tales: Erikson Critique

Instructions: Review the following critique of Kai Erikson's Everything In Its Path.

Erikson's work has serious methodological shortcomings that should not be repeated on contemporary studies. These include:

1. Erikson's findings were based largely upon interviews conducted by lawyers to collect evidence for a lawsuit brought by victims of the disaster against the corporation that owned and maintained the coal waste reservoir that flooded the valley. Because the information was gathered from a purposive sample by lawyers for a specific legal purpose, it does not qualify as an acceptable social scientific methodology. (Dynes 1978, p. 722; Ewen & Lewis 1999, pp. 23, 26-27, 33-36).
2. Erikson supplemented the depositions with survey questionnaires of disaster victims. However, he did not have a plan for identifying respondents, did not examine his sample for bias and representativeness, and had no way of checking for reliability or validity (Ewen & Lewis 1999, p. 37).
3. Erikson's research appeared to be unprofessional and unsystematic. When asked if anyone had tabulated the results of written questionnaires, Erikson first asked what that meant. Then replied that he had done the tabulation until, about halfway through, when he determined that there were no discernible differences in the survey responses. So, he ceased tabulating the survey responses. Under cross-examination, he admitted that he had not kept the tabulation totals and could not remember the specific questions on the survey. (Ewen & Lewis 1999, p. 36).
4. Erikson's findings on collective trauma were based upon evidence of individual psychological trauma; he collected no systematic collective / social level data on Buffalo Creek (Ewen & Lewis 1999, p. 36).
5. Erikson relied upon popular books written by a lawyer and a minister, but ignored academic work on the region, in writing his historical overview of Appalachia. As a result, his understanding of the region is inaccurate and based upon a "fictionalized past" (Billings and Maggard 1978, p. 723; Ewen & Lewis 1999, p. 28). He specifically ignored the region's history of labor activism when he portrayed the region's population as passive and fatalistic (Ewen & Lewis 1999, p. 33).
6. His portrayal of the region is contradictory and reproduces stereotypes –for example, people in the region are simultaneously prone to independent and dependence, the region is "frozen in time" as an "arrested frontier," and that people of the region require the assistance of trained professionals and outsiders to solve local problems (Billings and Maggard 1978, p. 723; Ewen & Lewis 1999, pp. 27-28).

7. The legal depositions upon which Erikson based much of his account contradicted his conclusions that the community was completely destroyed, people were apathetic, passive and powerless, and that outside assistance was required for their community building efforts. Rather, there were many instances where residents organized their own self-help groups and resisted government efforts to assist them in favor of their own individual or community efforts to re-build their homes and communities (Ewen & Lewis 1999, pp. 37-38).

8. Though Erikson no doubt had good intentions, his victim-blaming paradigm coupled with his poor methodology, biased sample and lack of knowledge about the region resulted in a flawed study which “reaffirmed what America already believed about Appalachians” and did “damage . . . to the dignity and well being of the Appalachian people” (Ewen & Lewis 1999, p. 42).

*** Based on the following critiques of Erikson:**

Dynes, Russell R. 1978. Review of Erikson. *Social Forces*. 57(2): 721-22.

Billings, Dwight and Sally Ward Maggard. 1978 Review of Erikson. *Social Forces*. 57(2): 722-23.

Ewen, Lynda Ann and Julia Lewis. 1999. Revisiting Buffalo Creek and *Everything in its Path*: Deconstructing an Outsider’s Stereotypes. *Appalachian Journal: A Regional Studies Review* 27(1): 22-45.