

ESO 285

DISCUSSANT PAPER FOR QUALITY OF LIFE SECTION

by

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Rural Sociological Society Meeting  
San Francisco  
August 1975

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The two papers which I am to discuss are interesting but not particularly innovative from a methodological perspective nor enlightening relative to a substantive perspective. Theoretical orientations tended to be completely lacking and from a theoretical perspective offer little to new knowledge.

Both papers relied heavily upon secondary data sources to document that extensive changes have been taking place within Appalachia. Unfortunately, the papers become excessive in terms of description of the changes taking place in the souther Appalachian region and southeastern Kentucky. Explanation of impetus for change was relegated to the background or entirely ignored.

Both papers were similar in terms of their strengths and weaknesses. Both papers were void of theoretical modeling, therefore, no theoretical hypotheses were presented for analytical testing. No theoretical ground-work was laid for stating that socio-economic changes would be identifiable and for predicting the direction of the changes. The authors appeared to have assumed that changes would be identifiable but ignored the task of explaining why the changes should be present.

Perhaps the primary objectives of the papers were to describe the changes taking place but the objectives are not clearly specified in either paper. If the goals of the papers were to describe some of the changes taking place in the study areas, then the authors were successful. I personally feel that the disregard for theory formation greatly reduced the utility of the findings for both studies.

Little emphasis was placed upon explanatory variables which could be used to explain why change should have been identifiable. Coughenour made reference to the numerous exogenous stimuli for changes (government programs) which had been introduced into the study area but did not show how these programs were instrumental or even related to the observed differences. While it is possible that the federal and state programs were operating in a manner that would generate socio-economic change, the conclusions made relative to the programs in the Coughenour paper may not be relevant to the data presented. No empirical evidence is presented to link the programs mentioned early in the paper with observed changes. The Murdock-McCoy paper was void of any attempt to explain what factors could be operating to produce change.

In general, the methodological thrust of the two papers is good. Longitudinal research is essential in social change studies but in the case of the two studies being discussed, I believe that little beyond description emerge. Why did the people in eastern Kentucky change as they did? What are the variables that are operating within Appalachia that would generate the types of changes noted in the Murdock-McCoy paper? What do the findings from the studies contribute to new knowledge or new theory formation? How are the findings to be used for planning purposes? Numerous other questions emerged as I read through the papers but few of the questions were addressed by the authors.

Coughenour does not provide a detailed explanation of the sampling methods used in the two data collection periods. It is obvious that a panel was not used. The question becomes, "how does one know that the differences noted in the primary data (attitudes) are a function of sampling error rather than "real" differences. I am not saying that defense cannot be made for comparing the two time periods (methodologies) but am only noting

that said defense is essential and was lacking. The Murdock-McCoy paper uses census data over extended time periods and changing measurement definitions may present a major problem. The authors recognized the problem in a footnote but ignored the limitation in the findings and conclusion.

The selection of the indicators of socio-economic change was quite arbitrary in both papers and in my opinion do not necessarily reflect "quality of life." Several people have noted that quality of life is a normative concept and is used as a nominal definition most frequently. Both papers tend to suggest that factors often associated with large scale social systems are indicative of quality of life. I would take strong issue with that position. Change has undoubtedly taken place in Appalachia but to suggest that more cars, more rooms per person, more televisions, more dense population, etc. etc. are closely associated with "quality of life" is a value judgment. The Murdock-McCoy suggestion that Appalachia should achieve equality with the remainder of the U.S. is also a value laden statement along the same lines. What are the social costs of large, complex, industrialized-urbanized social systems? Who wants high density of population, heavy industrial complexes polluting the environment or expansion of the extractive industries at the expense of the environment? What about concomitant deviant behavior that tends to emerge when communities "progress" along the lines suggested by the authors? Is that a desirable state to achieve? Does one have "quality of life" if he/she cannot walk down their own lane or street at night without fear of being ripped off, mugged or raped? Do indicators such as number of people per room reflect quality of life if the social environment within the family unit living in a spacious house is not conducive to interaction but fragmentation? Does the division of labor tell us anything about the type of interaction in a county or community? All I am suggesting is that the findings from both studies

are rather narrow and show that change of some sort has taken place. My reaction is so what? Change is a constant phenomena and we as sociologists realize that change will occur but what we do not know is why, in what direction the change will occur and what the probable social consequences of the changes will be. The direction question was addressed on an ex post facto basis noting what has happened in the past but little attention given to the basic research question of why they have occurred and what were the social consequences of the changes. From the data presented, certain trends emerge but since no theory was presented from which the data could be interpreted, little beyond noting the changes was possible.

A major problem presents itself in the Murdock-McCoy paper when aggregated data is used. Aggregated county data hides a multitude of variances within the county political boundaries. I am aware of the ease of data collection on a county basis but such aggregation may be misleading especially if one community (county seat) is growing or declining disproportionately to the others.

Using percentage change is also a problem in the Murdock-McCoy paper and to some extent in Coughenour's paper. Starting from a low base, a county may appear to have made great strides in achieving the goal of some arbitrary criteria of "quality of life" but in fact may have made little relative advancement toward the specified goal since the situation at the first observation was so low that any minute change would appear fantastic modification (the idea is often expressed that poor people have to look up at the bottom). A person who receives a pay increase of \$500 when he/she makes \$3,000 per year will appear to be in a much better position in terms of advancement than a \$1,000 increase for someone making \$15,000 per year. I would define the \$1,000 a year increase as more desirable advancement even if it was proportionately less.

I found the findings from both studies to be most interesting. Coughenour appeared to be surprised that people were no more satisfied with their income at time 2 than at time 1. I am not since relative high inflation may have eroded much of the purchasing power (unless this was controlled in the study). The data on perceptions of changing situations was quite interesting but pushed to the background (should have been emphasized more).

The data presented by Murdock-McCoy are most interesting but very poorly explained and not discussed. The reader must carefully pick through the tables and continually reread to discover what has been done. Even with careful review, the paper is at times unclear since several variables are not specifically operationalized.

In summary, the papers are often concise to a fault and lack theory formation and specification of certain methodologies. The findings, which are interesting, remain descriptive due to the failure to construct theory. I find relatively little new material presented in either of the two papers. Both conclude that Appalachia is changing but any mountaineer could tell you that. What we don't know is why and what will the future hold for us if we do.