

Edited by Alexandra Plows

Messy Ethnographies in Action

SERIES IN ANTHROPOLOGY

Summary

This edited collection of chapters showcases original and interdisciplinary ethnographic fieldwork in a range of international settings; including studies of underground pub life in North East England; Finnish hotels; and bio-scientific institutions in the Amazonian rainforest. Informed by John Law's concept of ethnographic "mess," this book makes a unique, empirically-informed, contribution to an understanding of the social construction of knowledge and the role that ethnography can and does play (Law, 2004). It provides a range of colourful snapshots from the field, showing how different researchers from multiple research environments and disciplines are negotiating the practicalities, and epistemological and ethical implications, of "messy" ethnographic practice as a means of researching "messy" social realities.

Law notes that "social...science investigations interfere with the world... things change as a result. The issue, then, is not to seek disengagement but rather with how to engage" (ibid p14). Drawing on their own situated experiences, the book's contributors address the "messy" implications of this and also explore the (equally messy) issue of why engage. They reflect on the process of undertaking research, and their role in the research process as they negotiate their own position in the field. What is ethnography "for"? What impact should, or do, we have in the field and after we leave the research site? What about unintended consequences? When (if ever) are we "off duty"? What does "informed consent" mean in a constantly shifting, dynamic ethnographic context? Is ethnography

by its very nature a form of "action research?" By providing a wide range of situated explorations of "messy ethnographies," the book presents a unique, hands-on guide to the challenges of negotiating ethnography in practice, which will be of use to all researchers and practitioners who use ethnography as a method.

About the author

Dr. Alexandra Plows is a Research Fellow at Bangor University and has over 20 years of experience as an ethnographer. Her Ph.D. and early research work focused on the UK environmental direct-action movement from an "insider" perspective and was informed by feminist research practices, particularly autobiographical and reflexive approaches. She then spent several years undertaking qualitative research, including ethnography, exploring emergent public engagement with human genetic technologies. Through this research, she made an empirical contribution to Science and Technology Studies (STS) literature on public knowledge and public engagement, and STS debates on (scientific) knowledge as a social construct. Dr. Plows has also undertaken ethnographic research relating to the dynamics of regional labour markets, specifically an "embedded" ethnography of stakeholder organisations seeking to mitigate the impacts of deindustrialisation and redundancy in North Wales. Dr. Plows' research approach can be summarised as reflexive and participatory 'action research' informed by environmental and social justice frameworks. Many of her current research projects are focused on interdisciplinary, participatory research and knowledge exchange, particularly at the interface of social science and environmental studies, such as human/nature relationships, and associated practices and values.

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With a foreword by John Law

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