
Book review: Of what is this a case?

332**For Ethnography**by *Atkinson, P*

2015

London

Sage

232 pp

£35.99

ISBN: 978 1 8492 0608 2

Thinking Ethnographicallyby *Atkinson, P*

2017

London

Sage

216 pp

£32.99

ISBN: 978 0 8570 2590 6

Review DOI [10.1108/JOE-10-2022-092](https://doi.org/10.1108/JOE-10-2022-092)

In the first of this pair of books, Paul Atkinson repeatedly exhorts us to ask of our field work sites: “of what is this a case?” We will do the same in reviewing his writing. What then are these books examples of? We would suggest that they are a forceful statement of a particular view of ethnography. They are, in part, textbooks (indeed, they are marketed as such), but they are also a gentle polemic against some developments that Atkinson refers to, dismissively, as “Romantic” (2015: pp. 22–23). As such, they make some welcome observations whilst revealing some of the personal gripes of the author.

Welcome is the critique of the application of grounded theory. Atkinson argues (2015: pp. 61–62) that the process of coding and building theory from the data, as presented in textbooks and taught in methods classes, too often implies work done on a passive data-set. Instead, as ethnographers well know, we are speculating and theorising in the field whilst reading and engaging with ideas in a process that is more abductive than inductive. Perhaps an even more heinous outcome of the use of grounded theory, particularly alongside data analysis software, is the focus on what people say. Transcribed interviews are more amenable to manipulation and coding than our messy and extensive field notes. Too often, months or even years in the field are glossed over, the ethnographer’s observations playing second fiddle to a quote as exemplar harvested from NVIVO and presented out of context or alongside another quote from a different person on another occasion. Atkinson argues (2015: p. 67) for “thick description” (Geertz, 1973), though a more analytical version and not of a “vulgar” sort that emphasises detail. To support this analysis, much of these two volumes under review is a reminder of the classic theoretical and, in particular, sociological approaches to the task.

The second book develops upon these classic theoretical frameworks but approaches them in a helpful manner. Rather than chapters on, for example, symbolic interactionism, Atkinson discusses the concepts with which we might approach an understanding of our field. These are dealt with under themes of “encounters”, “language and performance” and so on. This does make for a useful review and, much as in the first book, this is a welcome and



readable resource for anyone undertaking ethnographic fieldwork. It also develops, and repeats, some of the warnings about grounded theory to be found in the first.

These restatements are helpful, in part as a resource but also as something to rebel against. There is something of the old, pale and male about the ideas presented. There is no proper exploration of feminist standpoint ethnographies or of autoethnographies. Furthermore, recent developments towards multispecies ethnography and netnography (heaven forbid, autonetnography) and their implications for “crafting ethnography” (the title of his fourth book), analytically and methodologically, are completely ignored. Sarah Pink scarcely appears. Dorothy Smith gets a passing mention. Arjan Appadurai appears in brief. Bruno Latour and actor-network theory get a paragraph. A reader would not learn of the contributions of Barbara Czarniawska or of Dvora Yanow, to pick just two. Autoethnographies are largely dismissed as introspection and autobiography (2015: p. 165), focussed too much on the experience of the ethnographer (2015: p. 22) and “inappropriately Romantic” (2015: p. 23). This is a little ironic given that, as we will discover in a future review of the third and fourth volumes in this quartet, Atkinson is not averse to a bit of navel gazing himself.

For these reviewers, further questions emerge as Atkinson treads ground outside the familiar “classics” of Western Europe, North America and, perhaps, Australasia. A sure-footed handler of symbolic interactionism reveals himself to be a little clumsy in engaging with non-Western thinking. He comments that “repeated studies have demonstrated that various forms of non-Western, indigenous reasoning are reasonable, given premises that are context specific” (2017: p. 112). That final clause suggests a lack of engagement with these ideas. He goes on to describe, no, dismiss them as “categorical”, “habitual” and “self-justifying” (2017: p. 113). Such a summary is hard to read now. Is it perhaps an indication of progress that, after only five or six years, we would hope and expect a reviewer of a proposal, or the reader of a draft to waive a red flag after these statements?

The two volumes are, as we suggested, a useful restatement of the classics and of a particular view of ethnography and of ethnographic analysis. Perhaps they mark a point in time after which we have acknowledged the need to go beyond these ways of bounding our fieldwork and analysis that restrict “the social” to humans-only, as Atkinson persistently does. With his many references to particular “classics” in the genre, there is also a tendency for Atkinson to suggest what belongs to the canon, the genuine heart of ethnography, as approved by the master craftsman himself. Perhaps these comments are unfair? To review so broad, a range of literature and fields is an enormous undertaking. Perhaps this was becoming evident to Atkinson. In his final sentence, he indicates the need for a third volume to “complete this trilogy” (2017: p. 173). We will return to review the two further volumes in what has become a quartet. Perhaps, though, there is room for something more, perhaps written by others?

Mike Rowe

University of Liverpool, Liverpool, UK, and

Harry Wels

*Department of Organization Sciences, VU University Amsterdam,
Amsterdam, The Netherlands and
African Studies Centre, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands*

Reference

Geertz, C. (1973), *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York.