



### **Book Review for Anthropology in Action 16(1) 2009**

*Doing Anthropology in Consumer Research* – Patricia Sunderland and Rita Denny (Eds). Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 2007, ISBN 978-1-59874-091-2

As the nature of applied anthropology has evolved, and the number of applied practitioners has swelled, so the number of books charting these developments has grown. The authors, both anthropologists, locate their book within the overlapping domains in which their work is situated – applied consumer research, market research, the pre- and contemporary history of applied anthropology and academic anthropology. Their history of the early uses, and advocates of anthropological theory, methods and analysis within American business (such as Levy, Henry and Gardner) shines new light on the development of the discipline, prior to the schism which saw applied anthropologists cast out by their more purist academic colleagues.

It is this schism, now waning, that provides one key context for Sunderland and Denny's volume. However, it is to their credit that they do not allow the tired (and ultimately fruitless) tussle between academic and applied practitioners to beset their book. Instead, they provide what amounts to an ethnographic account of cultural analysis in the consumer research setting. They offer a strong and convincing argument for 'anthropological ethnography' (page 46) and provide a riposte to those who accuse applied anthropologists as lacking in theoretical

sophistication. They achieve this through substantive chapters that detail projects they have conducted (such as explorations of the meaning of offices and identity in New Zealand) and which, taken together, constitute a 'long intertwined explorative ethnography of contemporary life' (page 32). Newcomers to such applications of anthropology will find these accounts illuminating. Rather than simply focusing on the story of their projects, and how the research was conducted (though we learn of methodological innovation in the process), Sunderland and Denny explore their use of theory and analysis to make intelligible and meaningful their fieldwork. There is also much insight into the ways such work is used and received within their clients' organisations. To this extent the book represents the first ethnography of commercially applied anthropology. Later chapters discuss the 'entanglements' – epistemological, practical and strategic – that their work involves. Their reflections and suggestions (for this is an eminently practical book) on the use of photography and video are especially timely given growing interest in visual strategies in anthropology.

This book is not a 'how to' guide (like Hy Mariampolski's *Ethnography for Marketers*) but it is a manifesto for cultural analysis. It speaks to a wide audience. One can imagine the book being useful and inspiring for many types of reader: those teaching research methods, students thinking about career trajectories, seasoned applied anthropologists looking to sharpen their thinking on current practices or market researchers wishing to develop their anthropological understanding. As a book that explores the politics and poetics of applied anthropology the volume is itself an intriguing ethnography of applied anthropology that anyone interested in the evolution of the discipline should consider reading. Sealing their achievement is the enthusiasm and commitment to their craft that the authors display which, in an eminently anthropological way, they temper with a sense of critical reflection on their research practices.