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### The Book-CASE: Introduction

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## The Ethnographic Case



# 1. The Book-CASE: Introduction

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¶ 1 *By Emily Yates-Doerr and Christine Labuski*

¶ 2 We launch this book with a question: *What is an ethnographic case?* As ethnography is a process and practice of authorship, this question produces another: *What can it be made to be?*

¶ 3 The pieces in this text explore what cases can generate, and our reasons for resisting or embracing them as modes of analysis. There is a rich and variable history to “thinking in cases” (Forrester 1996). The expository medical case, attentive to the unusual and particular, has long been used as a tool for both diagnosis and instruction. The psychoanalytic case is built from fragments of remembered details with therapeutic objectives. The legal case establishes a precedent, while the criminal case comes to the detective as a mystery to be solved. The ethnographic case may be all of these things at once: instructing, dis/proving, establishing, evoking. It may achieve different ends altogether.

¶ 4 We make a case for our field and our fieldsites through the use of ethnographic cases. Often told in the form of a story, the case can be an illustrative representation. It can also be an exception that draws attention to a rule. It can bring into exquisite detail a micro that is situated, like the tiniest of matryoshka dolls, within a macro. At other times it destabilizes these nested hierarchies, showing that what is big is (also) small, or that significant power resides in that which may be very hard to see. The ethnographic case can interrupt the networked connections of any cybernetic system by attending not to a whole (and not even to its capillary endpoints) but to the details of a situation that is at once expansive and immediate. Though explicitly incidental, cases distinguish themselves from other short forms of narrative by way of the expertise they invoke. Solving, learning from, or interpreting the case requires a level of engagement that presumes both knowledge and curiosity, the proficient habitus that makes improvisation possible. Interpretive expertise, in other words, transforms the extemporaneous into the routine, the anecdote into the lesson. Case closed. Or is it?

- ¶ 5 What follows our introduction is a series of “ethnographic cases.” We will feature entries by scholars whose cases illuminate, even as they unsettle, how we work with cases. To pay homage to the traditional ethnographic monograph, the pieces have been assembled as an expanding bookCASE. The format of this bookCASE makes evident that changes are underway in the practice of ethnography. Above, we referred to ethnography as a technique of *authorship* in order to highlight relations of power (authority) that accompany the assembly of cases. But the method of this authorship – writing, drawing, filming, illustrating – is not given, any more than an author’s singularity.
- ¶ 6 In medical, law, and business schools, exemplary cases have long been used as pedagogical tools. Similarly, we hope this collection can serve as a resource for teaching. You might use them to encourage your students to consider how to narrate an occurrence or event from the material of the everyday. Along the way, we might find that ethnographic cases produce a very different form of expertise than those produced in medicine, law, or business.
- ¶ 7 This bookCASE might be taken as a response to a recent challenge that the term ethnography is too vague and too overused to be useful (Ingold 2014). Rather than displace the term, the bookCASE seeks to shore it up— to invigorate it with the insights and interferences offered by attentive fieldwork. In many ways, “the case” and ethnography may seem antithetical: the former a short reflection, the latter based on a commitment over time. However, we suspect that a case becomes *ethnographic* in the way that it situates the narration of any given event within other narratives. The particulars of ethnographic cases may not aspire to generality, but may instead change the practice of and possibility for generality. The questions we began with are not ones we seek to answer definitively, but to open up and turn around— ones that we hope will lead to other questions and help us to narrate other conditions of possibility.
- ¶ 8 The chapters in this book focus on the worlds that materialize through research. Taken together, they offer an intervention into our craft of re-description. We hope they make you want to author cases.
- ¶ 9 **A note on Further Reading**
- ¶ 10 Above we have cited: Forrester, John (1996), *If p, then what? Thinking in cases. History of the Human Sciences* 9(3):1-25; from the terrific book, *Science Without Laws* (2007), edited by Angela Creager, Elizabeth Lunbeck, and Norton Wise. (The book is dedicated to Clifford Geertz, who, in the company of many involved in *Writing Culture*, gave sustained, critical attention to the practice of telling stories. See this 2012 issue in Cultural Anthropology for an update). We have also cited a recent piece Hau piece by Tim Ingold (2015) *That’s Enough About Ethnography* 4:(1), as a point of departure.
- ¶ 11
- ¶ 12 *Emily Yates-Doerr is assistant professor of Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam. She is carrying out a study of the UN’s efforts to improve human capital through maternal nutrition. She is author of *The Weight of Obesity: Hunger and Global Health in Postwar Guatemala*.*
- ¶ 13 *Christine Labuski is an anthropologist and assistant professor of Women’s and Gender Studies at Virginia Tech, where she also directs the Gender, Bodies & Technology initiative. Her book *It Hurts Down There: The Bodily Imaginaries of Female Genital Pain*, tracks the emergence and physiological realization of vulvar pain conditions in the contemporary United States.*

## Comments

### 1 Comment on the whole Page

1. **Ayo Wahlberg** 19th April 2018 at 6:54 pm

Christian Lund has written a pearl of a piece called “Of What is This a Case?: Analytical Movements in Qualitative Social Science Research”

<http://sfaajournals.net/doi/abs/10.17730/humo.73.3.e35q482014x03314?code=apan-site>

To paraphrase, I have always found it exceedingly fascinating and helpful to think along the lines “of what is this an ethnographic case?”

### 3 Comments on paragraph 3

1. **Thomas Scheffer** 21st March 2018 at 2:49 pm

Law, medicine, psychoanalysis ... I like your selection. However, not all cases in law become a precedent, not all criminal cases are mysteries, not all medical cases are unusual. The standard or normal case is as relevant for the understanding of thinking in cases. Case-work may learn from the both in relation: ordinary and extra-ordinary.

2. **Shaozeng Zhang** 21st March 2018 at 7:00 pm

the?

1. **Emily Yates-Doerr** 23rd March 2018 at 7:08 pm

Thanks! Fixed. 😊

### 1 Comment on paragraph 4

1. **Thomas Scheffer** 21st March 2018 at 2:59 pm

The ethnographic case entails more, I think, than just a narrative. There might be various obligatory components that make a case a complete case: consisting of thick description, relevant theoretical or conceptual references, categories that identify what the case is a case of.

The legal case, for instance, consists of matter-rule-verdict. All components are integrated to one unity. The case-worker needs to work on all components, not in a series, but in relation, in order to make them one whole. The case-reports use all three components to place them close to relatively similar/different cases.

A similar operation is done with ethnographic cases. They are more than just a collection of stories. It would be interesting to ask, when exactly an ethnographic case is completed and how it can be related to similar/different cases. By the analysed activity field, by comparable theoretical frames, by similar/identical/related concepts.

### 2 Comments on paragraph 5

1. Thomas Scheffer 21st March 2018 at 3:04 pm

The author is an ordering device rather used in literature studies. Thinking with ethnographic cases would be stronger, in my opinion, if the strong author-function could be weakened in light of the field-concept-theory. Not the author and its ethnographies, but ethnographic fields and their authors. But this might be an empirical, not an analytical question.

Styles of writing in relation to the other components might be a forgotten or undervalued component. How does the style articulate the field and the author and certain theoretical preferences?

2. Thomas Scheffer 21st March 2018 at 3:09 pm

I like this! Teaching ethnographic cases is cool. The question that derives from this: How do we learn from related cases? How do we discover similarities and differences that teach us something about our own field and how it could be shaped and articulated ethnographically.

The same case-practice, or doing ethnographic cases, applies to referencing the work of others. To place our field in the midst of related others would inform our work and would turn the rather individual work of an ethnographer into a matter of collective learning of the ethnographic community. However, most of the time, ethnographic cases are too hermetic, too little explicated in the relevant components. Cases then remain unrelated.

## 1 Comment on paragraph 7

1. Thomas Scheffer 21st March 2018 at 3:14 pm

I am not happy with this concentration of narratives. The lack of conceptual and theoretical work in order to complete the ethnographic case may cause the difficulties that I mentioned above: that we are not able to relate different ethnographic cases.

This includes certain ways/styles of cutting or delimiting the field to one more or less coherent whole that allows us to say something about it in terms of modes, structures, orders, multiplicity, networks etc.

I guess you have a broad understanding of narrative, but probably it might be useful to think more in terms of necessary or minimal components. A sense of sufficiency, of completeness even that would make us go on with the research circle, because the ethnography is not completed yet.

## 1 Comment on paragraph 8

1. Thomas Scheffer 21st March 2018 at 3:19 pm

I don't think that worlds could materialize through research (alone). The worlds offer themselves to research as well, and provide a set of events and materialities that can be translated into data or stories or experience.

Sometimes, our ethnographies do not live up to the world as it works; we then would not recognize the field in the writings, or the natives would not recognize themselves and what they tried to tell and teach the ethnographer about their ways and views.

The ethnographic ontologies and epistemologies are not at all one-directional. Materialization, at least, is a complex, distributed, ongoing inter-objectivity and inter-activity.

## 1 Comment on paragraph 10

1. Thomas Scheffer 21st March 2018 at 3:22 pm

Sorry, for my farreaching comments. I fully understand when you stick to your agenda. Perhaps my comments remind you of the huge differences within the field of ethnography and the different ways, ethnographic cases are brought into interplay. This may explain why we do not have one ethnographic casuistic, something that classical ethnography once tried to achieve. We rather find different case-systems, each with its own ordering, case-formats, modes of relating, etc.

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