

ETHNOGRAPHY FROM WITHIN: A
REVIEW ESSAY OF ALLISON PUGH'S
*LONGING AND BELONGING; PARENTS,
CHILDREN, AND CONSUMER CULTURE*

REVIEW

Allison J. Pugh. *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009, 320 pp.

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ABSTRACT

This review essay provides an overview of Allison Pugh's ethnography *Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children, and Consumer Culture*, with particular attention to her methodological approaches and positionality as both an insider and an outsider within the context of her research. Through participant observation and interviews with children and parents in three schools in Oakland, California that span social classes, Pugh is able to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of how childhood consumerism in the North America is centered on a desire to belong rather than influences of advertising and marketing. She is able to deploy various concepts such as performivity, economy of dignity, and consumption to examine the deeper symbolic and socio-cultural significances attached to children's desire to belong and parent's

feelings of obligation in their decisions to purchase consumer products.

All North Americans are aware of the impact that consumer culture has on our lives to some degree. Through a case study of schools and families in Oakland, California, Allison Pugh demonstrates the degree to which consumer culture influences childhood and the structure of families in the United States. *Longing and Belonging* is a well-written, thoroughly researched multi-sited ethnography that reveals an important perspective on childhood belonging and consumerism across social classes. In this unique study of social inequality, Pugh, a sociologist, provides important contributions to methodological approaches in this strong example of insider ethnography. Throughout Pugh's ethnography, there is a cohesive and well-articulated presentation of methodological frameworks that can be useful to the disciplines of anthropology and sociology.

In this review essay I will provide an overview of Pugh's research project and findings regarding childhood consumerism and belonging. I will then explore the ways in which Pugh's position as an insider in her research has both methodological strengths and challenges. I allude to how Pugh's position as an American, a mother, and a consumer place her, to varying degrees, as an insider. Throughout my review, I will examine Pugh's positionality and access to sites and informants in order to determine the degree to which she is able to retain a position as an insider across social classes and institutions. In addition, I will identify the challenge of how her position shifted to that of an outsider in particular contexts of her study.

Pugh provides a unique perspective about children who desire particular products and the symbolic reasoning for consumer purchases on the part of the parents through participant observation among children in various schools and interviews with the parents of these children. She conducted participant observation in three schools, Oceanview and Arrowhead, both of which had predominately affluent students, and Sojourner Truth. Research at Oceanview and Arrowhead was conducted during school hours while her research at Sojourner Truth was conducted at an afterschool program, which was provided to lower-income students. After gaining access to these schools, Pugh was able to interview families to obtain a parental perspective on issues related to consumerism and belonging.

Drawing upon Erving Goffman's (1967) work on 'saving face,' Pugh uses the term 'facework' as the performance aspect of what she describes as 'the economy of dignity.' The economy of dignity is a process of justification for product consumption used by both children and parents. Children use facework to explain to themselves and to their peers the reasons for not possessing the products they desire. What Pugh discovers through her observation of both lower-income and affluent children is that all children experience desire for a sense of belonging among their peers regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, space, and the employment of diverse facework. In addition, for the parents, the economy of dignity is based on a desire for their children to belong. Furthermore, Pugh argues that parents are very responsive to their children's consumer wants regardless of socio-economic status, but lower-income and affluent parents have different symbolic attachments to their buying habits.

Later in the book, Pugh explores parental buying habits and provides further detail on the economy of dignity. She notes that the economy of dignity is not necessarily based in materialism of the actors but rather in the socio-cultural meanings that are attached to material items and how these meanings are negotiated in the child's and parent's worlds. She then introduces the process of *symbolic deprivation* whereby affluent parents tend to contradict their culture, beliefs, and values with their buying practices. While parents would feel anxiety and express ambivalence in purchasing the products their children wanted, symbolic deprivation allowed them to provide self-justification for their purchases. She further explains this through interviews with affluent parents. The affluent parents say they do not buy their children certain items, such as violent video games or "cheap" toys, but later make the purchases in order to enhance the child's belonging among their peers. Furthermore, Pugh describes how lower-income parents tend to attempt to add value to their child's social world by purchasing 'wants' that are outside of the family's means though what she terms *symbolic indulgence*. In this case, lower-income parents tended to draw back on personal and family necessities in order to make purchases for their children. In both lower-income and affluent cases, despite instances of having to say 'no,' parents tended to want to provide hope and shelter their children from their own experiences of not belonging in their own childhoods.

Pugh provides a detailed analysis of the stratifications that exists across the three schools she conducted research. Additionally, she provides a comprehensive overview of her methodological approach, noting that her research intended to avoid the exoticization and exploitation of the Other (Pugh 2009: 44). Aligning herself with postcolonial and feminist schools of thought, she notes that she chose

to distance herself from other studies on social class and social inequality that have a tendency to focus on marginalized subgroups to demonstrate societal problems. Her intention is to explore the insider perspective rather than that of the Other through conducting her research in her own community of Oakland, which she goes on to describe as “studying up,” rather than insider ethnography.

Insider ethnography has challenged the tradition of the study of the Other and has enabled researchers to study their own people, cultures, and societies. This distances ethnography and the discipline of anthropology from its colonial past. When the ethnographer is native to the population of study, different challenges are presented. Without the presence of what Narayan (1993) describes as “genuine natives” there is less separation of the researcher and the self from the informants, society, and culture in which the research is being conducted.

Pugh is forthcoming about her position within the research. She notes that informants viewed her as a middle class white woman, a graduate student, and a mother. It is evident that while her informants viewed her as an insider in most instances, she remained an outsider in others. Pugh paid significant attention to her own personal understanding of social inequality to position herself within the complex situations of social stratification that were at play in her study. With social class as a central point of exploration in her approach to childhood consumer culture and the reasoning behind purchases, she exposes her own social class to the reader.

Pugh attempts to situate herself as an insider in both upper and lower class settings in which she conducted research through her own personal family narrative. Within this narrative Pugh notes that she felt she did not quite belong in either world as she had an immigrant grandfather as well as another grandfather who belonged

to an upper-class country club. In line with Narayan's (1993) assertion that anthropologists are neither insiders or outsiders in their research, Pugh's attempt to position herself as both within and between social categories. This narrative reads as justification of her position as an insider ethnographer whereby she felt it was necessary to demonstrate that her personal history allowed her to understand the significance of social inequality across social class.

In many instances, her position as an insider increased her access to knowledge, gave her freedom of movement and an ability to view things that would be overlooked by outsiders (Karra and Phillips 2008). Both Arrowhead and Oceanview were receptive of her research as they had experience with researchers in the past and parents did not take issue with the study. The shorter timeframes spent in both Oceanview and Arrowhead is reflective of her ability to retain an insider position within these institutions and among middle to upper class families. The familiarity with the researchers by school employees, and parents seeing Pugh as similar to themselves, allowed her to attain a higher degree of access much faster at Oceanview and Arrowhead than she was able to secure at Sojourner Truth.

Sojourner Truth was less responsive to Pugh's inquiry to study at the school and families were hesitant to participate in the project. Pugh conducted three years of fieldwork at the Sojourner Truth afterschool program. In addition, Pugh described the lower-income families as seeing her as distant where the affluent families were able to relate to her and in some instances said that the interview was like talking to a friend. Expanding on this information provided by Pugh, I contend that within Sojourner Truth and among the parents of lower social class Pugh was seen as an outsider rather than an insider.

Although she possesses a personal history that she partially identifies as lower class, the families associated with Sojourner Truth, viewed her as an outsider. As much as she articulated a desire to “study up” and distance herself from the concept of the Other, there is a degree to which this was difficult to avoid in the circumstances of the lower-income families and institution. However, despite initial difficulties, she was able to gain the necessary access, trust, and relationships to gain rich data on the lower-income aspect of her study. The longer timeframe at this site demonstrates the time commitment and difficulty of access that comes with being viewed as an outsider within a community of ethnographic study.

Insider research has to be as ethical, respectful, reflexive, and critical as an outsider would be in the same context (Smith 1999:139). Pugh as a sociologist, in a discipline that has a higher degree of focus on the problems in ones own society, was able to create a degree of balance of ethics, respect, reflexivity, and critique in her ethnography that allowed for a cohesive methodological approach that resulted in rich data on consumerism among children and parents in Oakland, California. The text is an excellent example of insider ethnography and provides a detailed methodology section that sets up the reader for understanding the ethnographic process that was carried out throughout the project. The methodological approaches set out by Pugh will also provide students with a useful model for questions of positionality within the ethnographic process.

A well-researched ethnography should not be subject of critique solely on the basis of ones position as an outsider or an insider; as eloquently articulated by Narayan “...as anthropologists we do fieldwork whether or not we were raised close to the people who we study. Whatever the methods used, the process of doing

fieldwork involves getting to know a range of people and listening closely to what they say” (1993: 679). Despite different methodological challenges when viewed as an outsider or an insider in research settings, a well-developed ethnography can create a necessary distance from the creation of the Other and demonstrate new knowledge about a new culture or, in the case of *Longing and Belonging*, our very own.

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