

# (Spatially) focused ethnography

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The study of spaces has now attained the status of a key social category (Löw 2016), even in the field of ethnographic research (e.g., as *urban ethnography*, see Johnston 2013; Pardo/Prato 2018). However, when talking about *ethnography as a method* in general, it is important to point out the differences. Not all types of ethnography are alike, rather they contain different application strategies (Eisewicht 2016), which determine the method that is best suited for a certain field and a certain research question, also in terms of the data (e.g., [historical] texts, audiovisual material, ethnographic notes). This article sheds light on the ethnographic concept of *focused ethnography* (Knoblauch 2002, 2005; Rebstein/Schnettler 2018) and its adequacy for the study of spaces.

Professional football<sup>1</sup> is used as an example here, where the use of focused ethnography has brought to light new insights into the significance of space beyond the mainstream research literature on football (Horak 2006; Sülzle 2005; Thalheim 2019). In this sense, this article focuses on three areas: First, the method is classified within the context of the discourse on ethnography in order to underscore its suitability for the study of space (Section 1). Football is then used as an example to illustrate how to apply the method to ethnographic research with a focus on the category of *space* (Section 2). Finally, a brief overview of the prospects for potential interdisciplinary research strategies is provided (Section 3).

## 1 What is focused ethnography?

First of all, it is necessary to define what distinguishes focused ethnography from conventional ethnographies and what characterizes it as a method for qualitative social research.

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1 In order to avoid misunderstandings between British English and American English, it should be noted that “football” in this article refers to the American term “soccer.”

## 1.1 Conventional ethnography versus focused ethnography: Establishing the status quo

Focused ethnography stands on the shoulders of basic ethnographic research methods but differs from conventional strategies in terms of its field-specific research questions and temporally limited participation in the field. Focused ethnography is not interested in observing cultures in their entirety, but rather it concentrates on “regularities [...] in an [...] ongoing interactive process of social order taking shape” (Tuma et al. 2013: 56, own translation) in order to “determine the *temporal and spatial arrangement* of the operational structures behind the processes transpiring in the field” (Rebstein/Schnettler 2018: 619, own translation, emphasis added). Firstly, this means that focused ethnographers concentrate their fieldwork on *certain stages* of social processes. The word “focused” should be taken literally here. That is to say, the researchers make an informed decision as to what type of object should be made the subject of discussion and analyzed in a specific field and which processes should be brought into focus. For example, in the field of football, conventional ethnographers would be interested in the culture as a whole (e.g., fans, history, stadiums, emotions, etc.). By contrast, focused ethnographers would be interested in *one* (or several) aspect(s) of the field, such as how *space* is produced in a specific case (e.g., the club *Hertha Berlin*). Secondly, the informed decision of this focus is based on the research question and the possibility to participate in the social fields. The fields challenge researchers to act according to their own dynamics, to focus, and to raise certain questions about the field. Several examples of this include: The dynamics of a marketplace or a football game can be distinguished based on both their temporality (duration of the event, taking place daily/weekly/monthly, etc.) and their spatiality (market stalls, stadiums, etc.). Therefore, as opposed to conventional strategies, it is necessary to know exactly what is to be the object of *focus* in a certain case. If the *mise-en-scène* of “collective emotions” in a football stadium is being observed (Wetzels 2022), then the research should be tied to a specific period of time: namely, the 90 minutes of a football match. Only during this period can this phenomenon be observed and the locality, the stadium, accessed. Conventional strategies that require field participation for several months or years on end (Breidenstein et al. 2013: 33) are not as effective here if specific focal points have been defined in the research questions (Rebstein/Schnettler 2018: 622). However, this does not mean that focused ethnography is considered a “better” form of ethnography. Rather, it is intended for the outlined interface (specific research question, temporally limited participation) to enable researchers to carry out data-intensive research projects systematically. Focused ethnography is a variation of conventional ethnography and is not meant to replace it.

## 1.2 Research design in focused ethnography

Focused ethnography is an interpretative research method in the social sciences. It is used to collect *natural data*<sup>2</sup> in order to obtain data-intensive information in a relatively short period of time (Knoblauch 2005: 2). For this purpose, the use of video technology is preferred for preserving communicative processes and ensuring a constant observation process. The ethnographic descriptions are thus detached from the researchers and can be analyzed by others, which significantly improves the reflexive content and the quality of the data analysis (Lindemann et al. 2018: 213).<sup>3</sup> However, videos are not the only means of collecting data in focused ethnography. “Classic” ethnographic notes, interviews, and the inclusion of discursive material (e.g., newspaper columns, online articles, websites, podcasts, or historical books) are key components in focused ethnographies since, in addition to situational sequences (*sequentiality*), they also focus on the creation of the context (*simultaneity*) (Knoblauch et al. 2019: 164).

Situations do not *simply* occur, but rather they are profoundly characterized by different social dynamics whose relevance can only be determined by focusing on and collecting context-based data (e.g., newspaper reports, blogs, flyers). Collecting diverse data is crucial for achieving sufficient empirical saturation for the object of investigation (Wetzels 2022). Thus, focused ethnography is a method that is “available to basically any observer in the same way” (Rebstein/Schnettler 2018: 624, own translation). But what makes this method challenging is the fact that it requires extensive knowledge of the research field. Focused ethnographies are intended for “experts” (Knoblauch 2002: 130) since it is only possible to collect data and conduct in-depth analyses within a short period of time with a certain degree of confidence in the field (Rebstein/Schnettler 2018: 620). Three things are needed to become an expert based on personal experiences and reflections in the field of football (Wetzels 2022): First, researchers should be sufficiently engaged in the field before actually collecting the data. Inquiries, collecting materials, and sporadic stays in the field can help familiarize researchers with the relevant structures and processes. This also requires a certain affinity for immersing oneself in the field and confronting one’s own self. The time-consuming and data-intensive work can result in mechanisms of rejection but also belonging, which can require sustained reflection (Lindemann et al. 2018: 208). Confrontation is inevitable in the process as the search for entry points into the field and contacts without any data collection strategies runs the risk of encountering closed doors. Second, in the event of resistance, this can lead to an appropriate adjustment of the data collection strategies. For example, in my research endeavors, I discovered restrictions that made it difficult to collect audiovisual data. Therefore, this called for a workaround using other data (ethnographic observations, discourse

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2 In this context, the term *natural data* refers to the fact that, firstly, the research question is not brought into the field of study but rather arises “naturally” through the actors, and, secondly, the researchers do not actively influence the local communicative processes and actions (Rebstein/Schnettler 2018: 624–625).

3 However, videos must not be considered a “depiction” of reality. Focused ethnographies do not represent a positivist notion of science (Rebstein/Schnettler 2018: 629), but rather they are linked to the competences and decisions of the researchers.

data, etc.) to develop new strategies for the field and thus collect the audiovisual data that were relevant for my research question (see Section 2.1). Third, it is important to keep a research journal (Rebstein/Schnettler 2018: 625) in order to obtain a detailed overview (data, precoding, strategies, etc.) of the field. This narrows down the research question being studied in order to create a guide for the observations, a system for collecting data, and exemplary abstractions.

For example: In my case with football, I asked how *collective emotions* in a stadium can be identified and analyzed. Based on the focused ethnography method, I developed the concept of “affective-dramaturgical constellations of knowledge” (Wetzels 2022, own translation). This concept makes it possible to investigate the phenomenon of “collective emotions” in three analytical dimensions—discursive, structural, and situational constellations—and to demonstrate that collective emotions are performative productions in football that are *interpreted* socially as emotions. This was possible only because the constant confrontation with the field produced new insights, both analytical and methodological, which led to theoretical abstractions and new collections of data. This, in turn, allowed me to narrow down both the research question and the conceptualization. Therefore, focused ethnographies can always be considered a *work-in-progress*, allowing for an object-related, focused observation thanks to their flexibility.<sup>4</sup> This will now be explained based on the restrictions (Section 2.1) and the spatial formations, interpretations, and *gestalts* (Section 2.2) in the field of football as an example of the study of space.

## 2 (Spatially) focused ethnography based on the field of professional football

First of all, I would like to clarify several fundamental points about the general body of data I collected during the research process. A total of 25 observations were made during a period of two and a half years at various events (e.g., Bundesliga, European Championship, etc.). These observations generated:

- 25 hours of video footage
- 25 ethnographic notes
- 6 interviews
- More than 700 pieces of discursive data (newspaper and online articles, Internet statements, podcasts, audio notes, images, club and association statutes, etc.)

But this was only possible by adjusting the method to suit the field of research. During the game, these adjustments allowed me to obtain audiovisual footage from up to

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4 This can certainly be challenging since focused ethnography is infinite in theory. The stopping point depends heavily on the research question. In this sense, focused ethnography connects to the “theoretical sampling” of grounded theory (Strauss/Corbin 1997), which means “the end of the research process [...] is evident in processes of *theoretical saturation* when including new data does not yield any further findings or when the research question being addressed appears to have been answered within the framework of the available resources” (Keller/Bosančić 2018: 904, own translation, emphasis in original).

three perspectives (e.g., playing field, spectators) and within a certain time interval (up to five minutes) without having a strong influence on the “naturalness” of the field. The videos, photographs, and ethnographic notes were taken using a smartphone. In addition, material was collected on site (flyers, reports, etc.) to record the relevant context. The data were coded spatiotemporally in the analysis (e.g., “23022020\_303p.m.\_Olympicstadium\_Ostkurve”) and then systematically related to one another (photographs supported notes, flyers reproduced spatial and temporal contextualizations, etc.). This led to further stays in the field and to the comparison of multiple matches based on a single case (*Hertha Berlin*), thus augmenting the body of data through the principle of the snowball method (*identification*) and refining the observations of the object (*focus*). Below I show how applying this method had a direct influence on the collection processes in the field *in combination* with a theoretical abstraction regarding the category of space.

## 2.1 Field restrictions as spatial order

Field restrictions refer to both the field research itself and the abstraction, meaning how the place being accessed is *configured* spatially. By no means is every space accessible to the public. This can be illustrated by the difference between a marketplace and a football stadium. Marketplaces are usually accessible to all. Researchers can visit them, make observations without any major limitations, and even record sales conversations (Tuma et al. 2013: 89). In the case of professional football, however, specific rules apply since this space is not public but rather *semi-public*. Tickets, checks, restrictions—all this required, and this is at the same time a major advantage of focused ethnography, a flexible approach to dealing with the field. The research strategies had to be adjusted to identify new data collection techniques and generate the desired data.

One specific example from the field: It was not possible to take professional equipment (e.g., video cameras with tripods) into the stadiums because at the entrance they checked which types of equipment was allowed inside and which was not. These were not arbitrary rules either. Signs at the stadium entrances containing the *General Terms and Conditions for Tickets* (GTCT) referred to the *structural* stipulation of these rules (see Fig. 1).

Simply buying a stadium ticket in no way granted me open access to the stadium with all of my video equipment. Instead, paying for the ticket meant concluding a *contract*: By entering the stadium, the spectators agree to the terms and conditions for all intents and purposes. This had far-reaching implications for the research process with video data, as illustrated by Point 10.8 in Section e) of the GTCT. According to this point:

“Media reporting on the event (television, radio, Internet, print, photography) and/or the collection of data about the match are only permitted with the prior consent of the club and in the special areas designated for these purposes. Without the prior consent of the club, recording or collecting audio data, photographs and/or images, descriptions or results, and data about the event is prohibited, unless this is done exclusively for private, non-commercial use.” (Hertha Berlin 2019)

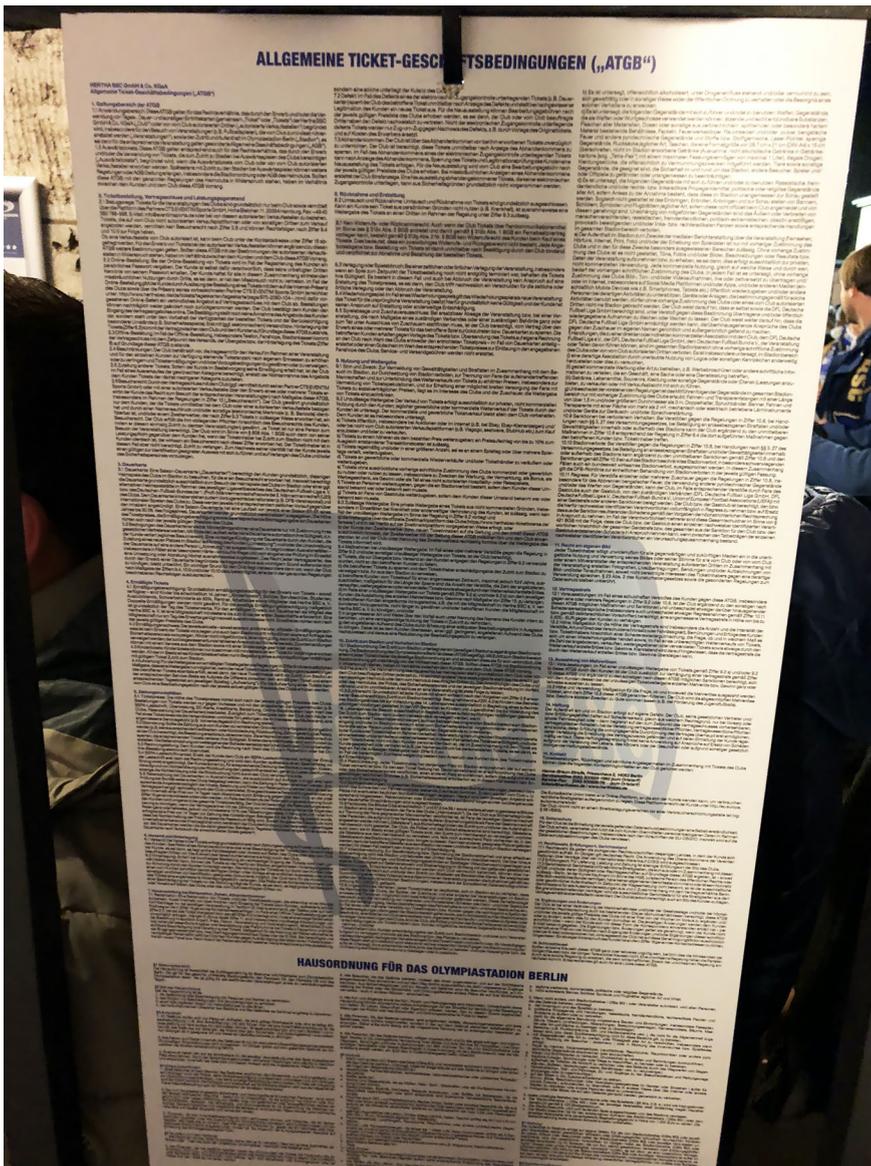


Fig. 1: General Terms and Conditions for Tickets of Hertha Berlin football club. | ©Michael Wetzel

Thus, only the event organizers are allowed to take videos and any violations can result in criminal prosecution. Being flexible required me to approach the field differently, but not to start from scratch. I asked the question: How can I take videos in this specific space *despite* the prevailing restrictions? This called for me to incorporate discursive data into this early stage of the research process, which also led me to integrate the sociology of knowledge approach to discourse ethnography (Keller 2019).<sup>5</sup> The confrontation with the GTCT and the local observations required me to make changes to the research process in order to record videos in the stadiums. This is explained in two points:

- Although Point 10.8, e) of the GTCT stipulates that filming is permitted only with the consent of the club, if the videos are generated for non-commercial purposes, which includes science, then this is possible without prior consent.
- By means of local observations, I realized that people did in fact record videos in the stadium—namely, with their smartphones—which led to my decision to record videos with this medium as well.

It was thus possible to circumvent the field restrictions in a creative and flexible manner, encouraging abstractly interesting insights about *space* in the process: specifically, that different interpretations of space may exist and that the fields are characterized by *spatial orders and arrangements* (Löv 2016: 135). Whether participants and researchers are on the football field or at a marketplace makes a major difference as different spaces call for distinct practices. The space for football with its specific setting (stadium, stands, football field, etc.) is framed quite differently than a marketplace (stalls, passageways etc.), thus distinguishing it from other spaces not only verbally but also due to its structural setting. Hence, field restrictions are not a handicap, but rather they serve as a source of both methodological and theoretical knowledge about the space being studied.

## 2.2 The formation, interpretation, and gestalt of spaces

Now that the first hurdle has been overcome, the field research can be continued under the modified conditions. But I should warn you that even though you may have a fundamental overview of the structural “logic” of the space, this does not automatically mean that you can move about freely and conduct your research by the book. An example of this is a stadium ticket (Fig. 2).

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5 The sociology of knowledge approach to discourse ethnography is related to the focused ethnography method (see Keller 2019: 53) in that it also favors the generation of textual material or audiovisual data since “social actors, and their communication (inter-)acts within pre-existing social fields of practice and institutional structures” (Keller 2011: 64).



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Preis: 27,00 EUR inkl. VBB Anteil 1,39 EUR

Block: 2.2 Reihe: 9 Sitz: 13

HERTHA BSC - SC Freiburg

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Fig. 2: Ticket for Hertha Berlin home matches. |

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Purchasing a ticket not only represents the conclusion of a contract but also an assignment to a specific *sector* in the stadium. This means that a decision was made when buying the ticket: in which spatial formation within the stadium the research will be conducted. It is not possible to simply change sectors during a match, but rather the purchase of a ticket determines the location of the ethnographic work in the stadium.<sup>6</sup> Deciding in favor of a certain location at the same time means deciding against another potential perspective, which is why researchers are encouraged to reflect on and justify their decisions—be it in the field of football or in another social space. The flexibility offered by the focused ethnography method poses an advantage here, too. When attention and focus are placed on various materials of the field (see Section 2.1), this results not only in various insights into the spatial structure but also in the possibility to move through that structure. In this regard, the defined research question plays a decisive role in the local research pragmatics: Where is the best place in the space to move about in order to achieve the highest possible yield in terms of generating data for my specific topic of interest? In my research, this constituted the sectors of the local collective formations of *Hertha Berlin*. Furthermore, the focus on *collective emotions* showed that these appeared to be related to the *competitive spatial formations* in the stadium. While a relatively clear spatial arrangement can be observed at a marketplace, perhaps the stalls with the operators on one side and the potential buyers on the other (Tuma et al. 2013: 88), the formations in a football stadium are arranged and positioned *competitively* to one another in spatial terms (Knoblauch et al. 2019: 173). These spatial formations are reproduced and legitimized by the spectators, thus highlighting specific *gestalts* in the space of the stadium (ibid.: 168).<sup>7</sup> This once again illustrates the importance of differentiating between fields when talking about space. While interactions between individuals selling and buying products can be observed at a marketplace, a match between two teams is observed in football (see Fig. 3).

Focused ethnography makes it possible to precode space by combining different materials from the field—for example, audiovisual recordings, discursive material, or observations—in turn allowing researchers to carry out a more in-depth analysis both in theoretical and methodological terms. Studying the local settings showed that the spatial formations are also connected to the spatial *interpretations* of the participants *and* those of the researchers. At marketplaces, these interpretations might seem straightforward: At least two individuals meet at a stand and proceed to bargain over the price of the merchandise. In football this is different since participation is guided by multiple motives and can determine your own location in the stadium. Therefore, the spatial formations in football have different homogeneous and heterogeneous spatial *gestalts* than at marketplaces. Observing the arrangements of formations in a stadium provides information

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- 6 What is more, a ticket also represents a material piece of data, which not only documents the perspective in the field during the research process but also contains further information about space. For example, in addition to showing the identities of the teams in the *stadium*, the ticket also allows the holder to move through Berlin as an *urban space* using public transport in a certain period of time.
- 7 The perspective of the researchers is crucial here with regard to the spatial *gestalt* that is revealed. Consequently, this *gestalt* might appear differently depending on whether it is located and data material generated *outside*, *next to*, or *in* the relevant spatial formation.

about the spatial interpretations. Namely, a collective emotion can only be perceived and interpreted as a spatial gestalt within a certain spatial formation under certain spatial interpretations (e.g., cheering for a goal for *Hertha Berlin*). Only the focused ethnography approach made it possible to abstract this theoretical knowledge of and about space.

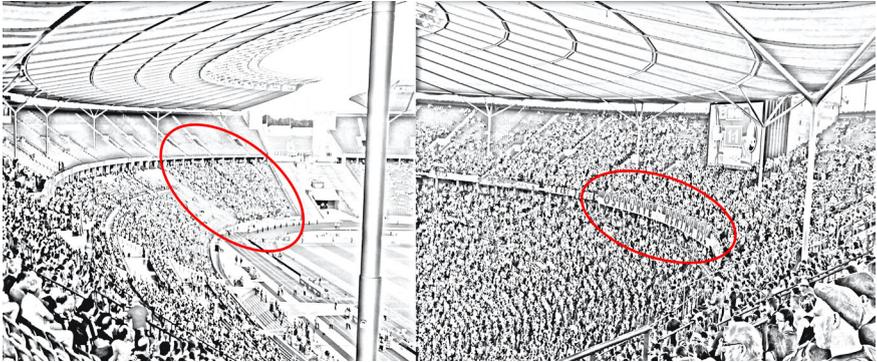


Fig. 3: Competitive spatial formations at Marathon Gate (left) and Ostkurve terrace (right) in Berlin's Olympic Stadium. | ©Michael Wetzels

### 3 Focused ethnography as a concept for interdisciplinary spatial research

The focused ethnography method proves to be extremely effective for the purpose of empirical research on space. It provides researchers with the flexibility to focus on a specific spatiotemporal setting based on their confrontation with the field, while allowing them to make adjustments to and develop strategic decisions for the research process. Furthermore, thanks its focused character, it can bring other data and methods to the fore in order to achieve greater empirical saturation and obtain new vantage points of the field. The case discussed here led not only to theoretical abstractions but also to methodological combinations (*sociology of knowledge approach to discourse ethnography*). The flexibility of this ethnographic method and the possibility to combine it with other methods makes it interesting not only for research in social sciences but also for interdisciplinary research. Focused ethnography can be considered a link in this regard. Thanks to its openness for different methodological combinations, it is possible to bring different academic disciplines closer together both methodologically and theoretically. Methodological discussions, theoretical abstractions, and the development of diverse research designs—focused ethnography can, due to its effective methods (methodologies) and integrative power, achieve what interdisciplinary work requires fundamentally: a common understanding regarding the significance of space for social realities.

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