

Ethnography as a methodology

The exploration of spaces and spatial practices

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“Ethnography isn't a prescribed set of methods—it's a methodology that acknowledges the complexity of human experience and the need to research it by close and sustained observation of human behaviour.” (Karen O'Reilly 2005: i)

Ethnography is considered a key method in anthropological spatial research, focusing on the analytical observation and comprehension of spatial practices, which are constituted by means of spaces and reinterpret, appropriate, or recreate those spaces. An ethnographic research perspective can serve as a useful starting point for spatial research as it is particularly appropriate, in terms of both its epistemology and the methodology, for “reconstructing places and spaces beyond their alleged ‘reality’ as a principally contingent social and genuine political practice” (Siebeck 2011: 1, own translation). The objective of this article is to describe the reciprocal relationship between spatial practices and both material and immaterial spaces. In ethnography, these spaces are understood as interrelated references whose constitution is the object of research. Many different subject areas are faced with the methodological challenge of understanding the complexity of intricate everyday experiences in socio-spatial frameworks, interactions, and infrastructures and translating this onto a larger scale at an abstract level. In this case, ethnography can be combined with interdisciplinary, aesthetic, and creative approaches to capture and experience socio-spatial change, everyday practices, and implicit spatial knowledge.

As the central and systematic research method in anthropology, ethnography is considered a methodology, meaning a comprehensive *route to understanding* (O'Reilly 2005). Therefore, ethnographic methods cannot be limited to individual methodological tools, but rather they combine a wide range of qualitative methods and can thus be regarded as a *multimodal methodological approach* for analyzing socio-spatial practices. Ethnography also offers an interdisciplinary benefit for qualitative spatial research. Research in

the social sciences involves diverse interdisciplinary ethnographic approaches (e.g., the *focused ethnography*, see Wetzels in this handbook). After all, the systematic and thus focused observation of socio-spatial practices extends beyond what is tangible and visible, encompassing the full sensory levels of spatial experience.

In this article, we would like to begin by addressing the concept of spatial practices as an epistemological starting point for anthropological spatial research to then provide methodological insights into the ethnographic exploration of spaces and spatial practices for other approaches and debates in this handbook. Following the question of how spatial practices can be studied methodologically, we introduce *participant/participating observation* of spatial practices as a key ethnographic method. At the same time, we explain and discuss methodological challenges, the relevance of the ethnographic study of space (and spatial practice), and the socio-spatial positionality and involvement of researchers in the field. Against this backdrop, our text provides insight into a practical methodology for analyzing socio-spatial transformation processes that establish a relationship with the actions and everyday lives of the actors, allow those actors to participate in employing the methods, and open up opportunities for methodological reflection.

1 The ethnographic observation of spatial practice

“An urban neighborhood [...] may be laid out physically according to a street plan. But it is not a space until it is practiced by people’s active occupation, their movements through and around it. In this perspective, there is nothing given about a ‘field.’ It must be worked, turned into a discrete social space, by embodied practices of interactive travel.” (Clifford 1997: 54, in reference to de Certeau 1984)

Ethnography and its holistic research approach focus on the logics and semantic structures of practices and daily routines in their social, spatial, and cultural contexts. In the wake of urbanization, *urban anthropology* was established as a sub-discipline of anthropological spatial research starting in the 1960s, with influences from *urban sociology*, *feminist geography*, and *critical urban theory* (Simmel 1903; Lefebvre/Kofman 1996; Low 1999; Massey 2005; Katz 2004; Harvey 2001; Brenner 2009). Therefore, ethnography is relevant for sociology, architecture, urban planning, and geography, especially because it deals with socio-spatial practices and embodied spatial experience, which has made it popular in these disciplines over the last few years (Müller 2012).

Taking into account everyday interactions and how space is treated as a constitutive element of social transformation processes within those interactions provides for a practice-oriented perspective on space (see Schatzki 2002; Miettinen et al. 2009). In this respect, an ethnographic approach to observing spatial practices first considers concrete physical material spaces in which people move, live, work, speak, and act in order to obtain information about the spatial dimensions of practices and the constant interactions between them, which involves increasingly incorporating dematerialized links of spaces into the approach. Due to a focus on socio-spatial practices and thus explicitly physical forms of behavior, attention is additionally paid to implicit, embodied knowledge concerning everyday actions, through which spaces are continuously being

(re)constructed. As a result, praxeological vocabulary keeps “mentalistic sociological action theory” in particular (Schmidt 2017: 339, own translation) at a critical distance and sometimes enhances the consolidation of non-verbal dimensions. An ethnographic approach can be used to clarify implicit knowledge, the performance and representation of practices, resulting questions, and implications. Consequently, as an “epistemological objective,” ethnography makes it possible to observe the social production of space (Streule 2014, para. 16) and thus to observe the praxeological production of space (and spatial knowledge).

In this context, “praxiography” (Mol 2003) serves as an ethnographic methodology for the specific and analytical investigation of physical and material practices and is closely related to practice theory (Schatzki 2002; Reckwitz 2008). As a central topic of research, practices refer to perspectives and methodological approaches in action theory that originated from the *practice turn* in various social science disciplines (Garfinkel 2003 [orig. 1967]; Bourdieu 1977; de Certeau 1984; Giddens 1984). *Social practices* can be understood as manifolds of interrelated actions consisting of “doings and sayings” (Schatzki 2002: 71). These considerations based on practice theory can be expanded by also relating them to bodies, which are in turn seen as products of culturally specific practices and exist only by exercising these practices (Reckwitz 2008: 125). Bodies become visible only in the context of socio-spatial interactions, and the same holds true for spaces, which are first configured by means of concrete actions (de Certeau 1984).

Based on these epistemological approaches, *field research* is a key method in ethnography. The term *field research* is a long-standing concept in anthropology and sociology, and it has been common in related interdisciplinary fields since the 1990s, such as geography and architecture. In this context, ethnographic research breaks away “[...] from the assumption that society is always already familiar to, understood by, and available to social scientists as a research topic” (Breidenstein et al. 2015: 7, own translation). The direct understanding gained from “fleeting” observations in relevant daily routines does not result in the immediate understanding of complex social worlds (Bourdieu/Wacquant 1996). Therefore, ethnographic research is closely connected to the notion of *empiricism* and focuses on “thick” and thus long-term *field research* in order to explore socio-spatial practices, artifacts and relationships within and between social lifeworlds.

To study spatial practice, *participant/participating observation* generally play a key role as a method in the context of ethnographic field research. In this regard, researchers engage over an extended period of time with the relevant actors to share their everyday lives and experiences and to obtain access to epistemological processes. The findings from the observed practices are the result of the interactions between researchers and further actors and depend on the experienced situations, temporal contexts, and visited spaces. In particular, *participant/participating observation* involves actively and consistently participating in group life and everyday life—and not simply observing situations as an outsider—since only then is it possible to experience “key cultural scenes such as typical everyday situations” (Kaschuba 2006: 206 et seq., own translation). The involvement of the researchers in everyday routines, which are documented and interpreted in various ways, plays a decisive role. For ethnographic spatial research, actively *participating* in what is happening is fundamental and essential for developing an incorporated understanding of the physical, spatial, and material conditions of the logic of action.

The term “thick description” was coined to describe such an interpretive and participatory approach to the constitution and formation of social contexts (Geertz 1973: 3). This term serves to convey a feeling of *being there (in the field)* by means of the ethnographic medium, which comprises symbolic and interpretative dimensions (of the space), as well as sensory impressions. This produces a constant stream of ethnographic media in the form of texts, soundscapes, mapping, images, or multimodal combinations of these and other sorts of media. These types of immersive moments provide the reader, listener, or observer with a deeper basic understanding for a more elaborate analysis. As a result, it is possible to examine existing symbol systems in particular, according to which socio-spatial frameworks and daily routines are organized and which specific logics of socio-spatial action follow. Empirical data are understood as “a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another,” similar to the understanding of culture as “webs of significance,” humans themselves have spun, and which they are both connected to and woven into (Geertz 1973: 5). Much is hidden at first, becoming revealed in the course of the analysis. The objective is to pay special attention to what is supposedly self-evident in order to pursue socio-spatial phenomena and upheavals.

Thus, the socio-spatial significance of local milieu, the ways of life of actors, and changing formations of space come to the fore in ethnographic observations (Schwanhäußer 2010). This also involves a critical analysis of the symbolic orders that structure and/or refigure spaces (Löw/Knoblach 2019). In this respect, it can be stated that ethnography as a methodology can provide a praxeological and actor-centric perspective of socio-spatial transformation processes, which are generated and thus become visible by observing socio-spatial practices (Genz 2020: 51 et seq.). Ethnography can therefore be conceived as an epistemic perspective capable of operationalizing action-oriented constructions of spaces and social reality through the process of participant/participating observation, thus incorporating not just a spatial but also a spatio-temporal component.

2 Fields of application

Ethnography offers a wide array of applications and a broad set of different qualitative methods. Aside from participant/participating observation, these include field notes, open interviews, sensory and digital methods (Pink 2008; Pink et al. 2016), go-alongs (Kusenbach 2003), actor-network analyses (Fariás/Paulos in this handbook), and critical and reflexive mapping (Roberts 2016). Urban ethnographic studies in particular allow for the fluid interplay between different human and non-human actors, such as the city itself, artifacts, infrastructures, and technology. These approaches are employed following Bruno Latour’s (2005) *actor-network theory* in dealing with *urban assemblages* (Fariás/Bender 2010) for qualitative spatial and urban research (see Wietschorke 2013). Further intersections with urban ethnographic and spatial research can be found in *science and technology studies* (Latour/Woolgar 1979; Haraway 1991), in studies on “urban scenes” (Schwanhäußer 2010a), and in works on mobility, especially in connection with urban spaces and migration (Glick Schiller/Çağlar 2011)—to name just a few. In this

context, and due to the growing interest in *engaged anthropology*, ethnographic methods are being used increasingly to investigate *urban activism* and spatially oriented social movements (Juris/Kasnabish 2013; Genz 2020; Portelli/Tschoepe 2020).

The go-along and ethnographic mapping can be considered two adequate methodological approaches for understanding the reciprocal relationship between space and spatial practices. While the “ordinary practitioners of the city”—everyone walking the streets—have the ability to be wanderers (de Certeau 1984: 93), the practices of wayfinding and mapping require the ability to reproduce spatial surroundings within the social and cultural contexts (Ingold 2000). Mapping is a way of producing visual-graphical or multimodal ethnographic artifacts, helping to represent and interpret spatial structures and blind spots in research (see chapter on *Drawing and visualizing* in this handbook). Therefore, mapping can be considered a modern and interdisciplinary research method that can be used to reveal and document the cognitive, performative, or divergent associations, attributions, and constructs of meaning and to represent ethnographic information.

In the wake of digitalization, physical spaces, objects, bodies, and socio-spatial practices are increasingly being integrated into digital infrastructures. By reflecting on the growing mundaneness of the digital and thus the resulting changes in cultural processes, it is possible to study spaces beyond their material boundaries (see Pink et al. 2016; Koch 2017; Lettkemann in this handbook). Moreover, the critical digital transformation in spatial research has allowed for the “thicker” documentation of ethnographic information (such as texts, audio, photos, video, tracking, geolocalization) and multimodal, collaborative representation options for creating non-hegemonic, emancipatory archives of the past and future (Yildirim Tschoepe 2016). In turn, this gives rise to new approaches to exploring socio-spatial practices and the praxeological constitution of space. The intuitive use of everyday localization, observation, and documentation technology also calls for us to take a reflexive and critical stance toward sensory and localized information, which can contribute to a better understanding of spatial networks, mobility, accessibility, belonging, intersectionality, dependencies, and power structures. From an ethnographic, social, and cultural perspective, spatial research is tasked with countering any “objectification tendencies” in spatial configurations—and tracing the inherent power relations and hegemonic structures by which places and spaces are governed as a social practice.

3 The possibilities of spatial ethnographic research (in practice)

In summary, using ethnography as a methodology provides for a differentiated and praxeological perspective in spatial research. An ethnographic approach can reveal material traces that can be captured empirically in order to pursue elusive political logics and power relations, for example (Adam/Vonderau 2014: 9). Consequently, the translocal interactions of actors at multiple levels and political processes steeped in power come to the fore in critical knowledge production. Adopting a concrete ethnographic perspective allows for the critical analysis of actors and practices, as well as specific structures and power relations in spaces and in specific places (Rose 1997; Roy 2014; Streule 2018).

3.1 A question of positionality

In a participatory and active research process, an *in situ* ethnographic approach focuses on complex socio-spatial phenomena. This approach is highly exploratory and is often susceptible to a “loss of control over the conditions governing cognitive processes” (Hirschauer/Amann 1997: 17, own translation). The constant involvement of the researchers in specific spaces and places, as well as their associated interventions, pose challenges as well—while at the same time offering opportunities as researchers are continuously required to (self-)reflect and incorporate this into the analysis. It is necessary to realize that researchers assume a position and role in every field of spatial research (Bourdieu 1993). Since the so-called *Writing Culture debate* in the field of anthropology (Clifford/Marcus 1992), which tied in with postcolonial critique within the spatial sciences in the 1980s (see Said 1978; Spivak 1988), the question of the positionality of researchers has continuously been put up for debate. Ever since, the *reflexive turn* in the wake of the *Writing Culture debate* has promoted constant self-reflection when adopting an ethnographic methodology, encouraging researchers to assess critically their own position, which has since become the *status quo* in ethnographic research. With regard to interdisciplinary spatial research, this means researchers must dwell on their own involvement, as well as social power relations and political struggles, from an actor-centric and praxeological point of view. This potential for reflection in ethnographic research practice is essential for perceiving and describing places and spaces as *social realities* and for tracing both implicit and explicit negotiation processes, which elicit a shift in present “realities” and new realms of possibility.

Spatial transformation processes are continuous and omnipresent, underlying a recurring process of rethinking in various disciplines, especially since the *spatial turn*. Last but not least, the concepts and significance of everyday socio-spatial practices, as well as the methodological questions of how to study and comprehend them empirically, are becoming increasingly relevant due to technological changes. Reflecting on the realms of possibility, as well as uncovering and exposing contradictions, should be important for every subject area and methodological approach. In this regard, it is necessary to further cultivate the above-mentioned debate in order to develop an engaged, critically reflective approach to ethnographic research devoted specifically to social problems and aspiring to intervene “in political fields of conflict” (Binder et al. 2013: 9, own translation). One of the key opportunities in this regard is advancing a feminist approach in ethnographic research practice that emphasizes an intervening, collaborative position for researchers (Binder et al. 2013) without neglecting the importance of self-criticism and the challenges of working as a team (Clerke/Hopwood 2014). In addition, developing an *engaged ethnography* framework means highlighting collaborative approaches to spatial knowledge production in order to, for example, gain insights into and methods for characterizing and making visible gender-specific power relations in public spaces. In the context of *engaged ethnography*, emancipatory practices are intended to uncover (and deconstruct) power structures that are part of spatial, social, and political regimes and manifest themselves as dominant norms.

3.2 Interdisciplinary connections

Ethnography represents a particularly interesting methodology for other disciplines due to its profound engagement with social practices and embodied spatial experience. An ethnographic perspective of (spatial) practices allows for an in-depth understanding of socio-spatial structures and mechanisms. Only the “frequently [...] condensed form” of ethnography as it is often applied in interdisciplinary fields poses a challenge: the findings obtained in the process are based on less “thick” research practices (Schwanhäußler 2015: 2, own translation). Ethnographic research, however, entails fully exploring all dimensions of spatial configurations and practices. Places and spaces are constituted by actions, negotiations, human and more-than-human-actors, which structure socio-spatial formations in a ways that can make them seem self-evident. Engaged ethnographic spatial research aims to avoid this supposed “self-evidence” at all times and instead to describe and thus reconstruct places and spaces in the course of field research as a processual, powerful, and socio-spatial practice within and beyond any material boundaries.

It is precisely this “interest in ‘doing’ and ‘making’ geographies, in performativity, power tactics, established practice, and embodied subjectivities” (Müller 2012: 179, own translation) that makes ethnography meaningful for various disciplines for the purpose of interdisciplinary qualitative spatial research; therefore, the axiom “*all knowledge is interdisciplinary*” (Clifford 1997: 59) also applies to socio-spatial knowledge production. A wide array of fields deal with the production and refiguration of spaces, sociocultural and geopolitical transformation processes, questions concerning the performance and constitution of space, and everyday practices of appropriation, which is why these topics cannot be assigned *per se* to one subject area. Therefore, the scientific, epistemological, and methodological ways of thinking behind the ethnographic exploration of (spatial) practices can be regarded as unconditionally interdisciplinary.

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