Focusing ethnography
Theory and recommendations for effectively combining video and ethnographic research
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Abstract
Building theory with ethnography and filmic research increasingly requires focussing on key practices or settings, instead of painting a broad panorama of a culture. But few authors discuss why and how to focus. This article provides a systematic discussion of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of focusing ethnographic research by comparing different schools of thought and suggesting a practice theory-based approach. It argues that many research projects are focused but do not reflect on the process of focusing, describes how to identify focal settings or practices, and introduces sequential analysis as a tool for studying them. Analysing videos, documents and language are discussed in turn, and methods for ensuring quality in focused ethnography are suggested. Finally, the paper provides recommendations for publishing focused ethnography as text or film.

Keywords
Ethnography, videography, practice theory, ethnomethodology, filmic research
Introduction

Focusing ethnographic inquiry on settings, practices, or events in which the phenomenon or dynamic under study crystallizes or comes to the fore most clearly is a central part of ethnographic work. Classic masterpieces of ethnography have always zoomed in on the richness of perspicuous cases. Focused ethnographies give both authors and readers space and time to pay attention to nuances and defining details. Arguably, they are thus often superior in insight compared to unfocused ethnographies. At the same time, contemporary ethnographic work in consumer research in particular—and the social sciences in general—no longer produces broad, sweeping surveys of unknown cultures. Instead, it is instead enmeshed into a thick web of prior research, parallel projects, pre-existing or electronic data, and publication processes privileging concise gap-filling and theory building (Kozinets & Arnould, 2017). In effect, ethnographies focused on particular problems and phenomena are often the norm. The spread of digital media and the increasing technological and theoretical opportunities for visual research imply a move from time-extensive to data-intensive research projects, which invokes both opportunities and dangers. Filmic and videographic research in particular faces two challenges. First, it has to convey a scholarly message in relatively short time. Second, it needs to use the medium effectively to not just illustrate or entice, but build theory directly from the data in convincing ways. I argue that focusing filmic research offers an effective solution to both problems. But in spite of the reality and the opportunities of focusing, no efforts have yet been made in marketing research (and only a few in neighbour fields) to discuss this key ethnographic practice, or to delineate a theoretical grounding for it. This is especially problematic because increasingly, the focus of an ethnographic research project is already given by the time data collection begins, so that a key phase of the hermeneutic process is potentially placed outside of the frame of methodological reflection. The aim of this article is therefore not to argue that all ethnographies must be focused, and even less that all focused ethnographic work must subscribe to the practice-based methodology I recommend for it. Instead, my call is for ethnographers and videographers to take into consideration a) the extent to which
their ethnographic work is or should be focused, b) the practical process that leads to their focus, c) the explicit or tacit theoretical assumptions that inform and justify their focusing (or lack thereof) and d) how their analysis, theory-building and dissemination techniques are geared to the chosen focus (or lack thereof). The arguments laid out here are meant as a background against which the contours of alternative approaches and individual solutions can stand out more clearly, in the hope that all ethnographic work – focused or un-focused, filmic or textual – can profit from this reflection. The following sections explain what defines focused ethnography and introduce its theoretical antecedents and discuss persistent problems. Arguing that practice theory provides a solid theoretical foundation for focussing ethnography, it then shows how ethnographic research can be focused; which role videos, interviews and documents play in focused ethnography; and how focused inquiries can be published so as to maximize their potential.

**Focused ethnography**

My discussion is building on the notion of focused ethnography that was introduced as a label for a growing type or school of ethnography which studies in-depth well-defined settings whose context in contemporary society is already known, primarily with the help of (video) recording techniques (Knoblauch, 2001, 2005). This type is most prominent in Science and Technology Studies, Organizational Studies and Health Research (Hughes, King, Rodden, & Andersen, 1994; Shapiro, 1994; Watson-Gegeo, 1997), and has sparked insightful debates on methodology. While few would dispute that this trend has clearly gathered strength, the term ‘focused ethnography’ has also drawn critique to the extent that it is read as a normative program for how to conduct ethnographic work (Hirschauer & Breidenstein, 2002; Knoblauch, 2002, 2005). Sidestepping this debate, this paper employs the felicitous distinction between focused and unfocussed ethnography as a means to discuss the methodology behind focusing qualitative inquiry. It is not my aim to suggest that all ethnographic or videographic work should adopt the style of this type of ethnography. Instead, discussing the benefits and weaknesses of *focused* ethnography offers insights for the necessary but often neglected process of *focusing*
ethnographic research. This seems particularly important with regard to video methods which are at the heart of focused ethnographies (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012) and require focus – literally and metaphorically – if they are to be effective (Mengis, Nicolini, & Gorli, 2016). For the sake of this discussion, I will use the following definition: A focused ethnography a) centres on participant observation of a focal practice or type of situation, b) of which the ethnographer is a reasonably competent practitioner, and c) uses records, and in particular purposefully collected audio-visual recordings, to enable fine-grained analysis of the focus area, so that d) the temporal extension of the fieldwork is not per se a necessity or an indicator of quality. As the visual metaphor suggests, focused ethnography is best organized around visual rather than verbal methods for data collection, analysis, and conveying results (Knoblauch, 2005). However, I stress that focused ethnography should be distinguished from visual ethnography (Pink, 2007a) as well as visual methods more generally (Pink, 2007b), or studies of visual culture (Dikovitskaya, 2005). To avoid confusion, I should state that not all filmic marketing research must necessarily be ethnographic in nature, and that my arguments extend only to research which aims to build theory.

**Origins and antecedents of focused ethnography**

The term focused ethnography was coined by Hubert Knoblauch in the context of a thorough methodological debate in German sociology. In slight deviation from my definition, he suggested the metaphor to capture the idea of deep ethnographic inquiry into a well-defined social phenomenon within a well-known context, and also to allude to the use of audio-visual recordings that the method inherits from the traditions of ethnomethodologically informed ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; ten Have, 2007b) and workplace studies (Hindmarsh, Heath, & Luff, 2000; Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010). While researchers in these fields have not...
picked up the term, they arguably continue to produce work fulfilling its premises, whereas it is explicitly being used in health research (Higginbottom, Pillay, & Boadu, 2013). The central and surely most controversial aspect of focused ethnography concerns the length of the fieldwork, because the aim is to move from time-extensive to data-intensive fieldwork. Notably, this does not per se mean that less hours of work are dedicated to collecting and analysing data, but that the time spent “in the field” is reduced. Most contemporary ethnographic research practice is characterised by teamwork, relatively quick publication of relatively short journal papers (compared to monographs), third-party funded research projects with clear goals and timeframes, the use of digital tools for collecting and analysing data, and the aim of building middle-range theory responding to currently ongoing discussions. Extended field stays do not necessarily align well with these circumstances, and years of fieldwork are no longer the norm in many research fields once an author has passed the PhD stage. While some might argue that this automatically means a loss in terms of quality of work, it must be noted that the most prestigious journals and institutions overwhelmingly do not treat long fieldwork as a marker of quality per se, and clearly not as a sine qua non. Implicit in this reality, I argue, is the conviction that focusing the inquiry does not harm the quality and impact of ethnographic work, but can in fact help to increase them. What this situation calls for, then, is explicating the theoretical reasons why this might be the case, and which practical implications can be drawn.

Close analysis of key settings, core practices, or singular revelatory incidents has always been a defining feature of the ethnographic method. To mention only one classic, Geertz (1972:28) argued that his famous thick description of the cockfight provides deep insight into Balinese culture as a whole, because it brings the “assorted experience of everyday [Balinese] life to focus.” The ethnographer’s ability to recognize such quintessential performances is frequently treated as a key sign of competence vis a vis a field. (Canniford, 2005; Mariampolski, 2006). Turning this point around, I argue that if the researcher already possesses cultural competence with regard to the object of study (or can rely on sound prior research), identifying focal practices should not require
year-long cohabitation with ‘the natives.’ In fact, many projects are already focused by the time the fieldwork starts: by working out a grant application, PhD proposal or book outline, the researcher and his reviewers have drawn on decades of experience and whole streams of literature in order to identify the focal setting or practice. A study on, say, breastfeeding in public is already focused. Pretending that the ethnographer starts with a blank slate as if entering a recently discovered island is methodological make-believe. That said, I stress again that not all ethnographies can and should be focused instead of open. It also bears keeping in mind that some fields of inquiry are already focused by design, so to speak. Ethnographies of computer-supported work, teaching in classrooms, or doctor-patient interaction do not call for fieldwork spread out over a great number of different field settings, but instead for attention to definitive details.

Theoretical antecedents
Apart from changes in the research process and topics under study, a key driver for the spread of focused ethnographies were the theories informing the research. A central theoretical antecedent of focused ethnography are Goffman’s (1971) micro-studies of the public order and his conviction that one should not study “men and their situations” but rather “situations and their men” (cit. in Streeck & Mehus, 2005, p. 384). Other key sources include performance theories (Alexander, 2004; Turner, 1995), laboratory constructivism (Knorr Cetina, 1981), situated cognition (Hutchins, 1995), and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The greatest impact, however, had the radical critique of ethnography (and interpretative methods in general) voiced by the founder of ethnomethodology Harold Garfinkel, who called fieldnotes “documented conjectures” (2002: 221) and insisted that the “local, endogenous audiovisuality [of any social phenomenon] (...) is sine qua non” (2002: 283). The radical position taken in EM leads to a methodology that arguably denies the possibility of theoretical analysis altogether, because it refuses to give accounts of the phenomenon under study.\(^2\) Fascinating as these

\(^2\) Instead, Garfinkel (2002) reverted to writing instructions for exercises through which the ethnomethodologist can create situations in which she or he can experience the research phenomenon first hand.
writings are, the most fruitful contribution of this radical approach for research methodology arguably lies in that it inspired a school of “ethnomethodologically informed ethnography” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; ten Have, 2007b) that responds to the maxims „Do! Focus! Detail!“ (Pollner & Emerson, 2001, p. 126). Two key tenets characterize this form of ethnography, which I discuss in detail below: First, the ethnographer must be(come) a competent member of the studied culture – a strict requirement for skilful participation in the key practices under study (ten Have, 2002). And second, they centre on the use of recording devices to capture naturally occurring activities (Lynch, 2002). Ethnomethodologically informed ethnographies are not necessarily – but often – focused. But their methodological principles align most clearly with the theoretical framework which in my view all but demands the use of focused ethnography: practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001). A consensus has emerged that ethnographic and/or historical methods offer the best, if not only, option to adequately study social practices. Notably, said consensus is shared by practice-minded authors from different theoretical schools, including ANT (Mol, 2002), Bourdieuan praxeology (Wacquant, 2009), ethnomethodology and workplace studies (Hindmarsh et al., 2000), human geography and STS (Shove, Pantzar, & Watson, 2012), studies of organizational practices and strategy-as-practice (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012), and Wittgensteinian practice theory (Schatzki, 2012). Furthermore, these authors also agree that ethnographic inquiry needs to be adapted to the premises of practice theory. A key issue that has been pointed out repeatedly is the lack of adequacy of most interview methods for studying practices, and of verbal quotes as the primary means of expressing findings (Halkier & Jensen, 2011; Woermann, 2016). Visual methods offer a strong and well-established alternative for analysing social practices because they are capable of capturing the tacit, embodied, pre-conscious and local dimensions of social conduct (Toraldo, Islam, & Mangia, 2016) – dimensions whose systematic inclusion into theoretically understanding social life is a key concern (and strength) of practice theory. The turn to video methods invoked by sociological theory dovetails with decades of work conducted in visual anthropology (Ruby, 2000) that equally aim at “exploring dimensions of social
life different from those already defined in verbal and quantitative forms.” (MacDougall, 2005, p. 269) Adding whole dimensions to the list of relevant and researchable things worth knowing, however, increases the need for thinking about how certain elements of lived life end up in focus, while other are relegated to the background, if not cropped out of the picture entirely. Especially if these dimensions must indeed be thought of as inevitably tacit and at least partly beyond the reach of linguistic expression and theorizing (Toraldo et al., 2016), or if we even think of video as enabling some form of tacit-to-tacit transmission of knowledge – as most proponents of visual anthropology suggest (MacDougall, 2005; Ruby, 2000) –, then the by implication equally tacit procedures of finding focus require all the more careful deliberation and reflection. In the same vein, many practice-minded researchers have argued for ‘zooming in’ on the situated performance of practices, especially in organization studies (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2009; Toraldo et al., 2016) and medical anthropology (Mol, Moser, & Pols, 2010). Here, zooming is taken both literally by employing cameras and analysing video sequences in detail, and also metaphorically in that it is recommended to iteratively zoom in and out of situated performances, echoing the strategy of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995). While I fully concur that investigating well-selected key sites enables ethnographic insight into global phenomena, the strategy of investigating multiple sites at once and iteratively moving back and forth between different scales of analysis arguably requires broad, long-form and long-term research projects – or else it can become an excuse for unsystematic and fuzzy analysis. Focusing is a procedure intended for ethnographic research projects of different purpose and design, despite the fact that my arguments draw heavily on the practical procedures employed, and the methodological arguments forged by these researchers. In particular, it rests on a particular stance towards three classic problems of ethnography, which I will discuss next.

**The stance behind focusing ethnography**

Different approaches to ethnography disagree over three key issues: the possibility of representation, the role of the ethnographer, and the role of data. Focusing ethnographic inquiry implies a particular stance towards
these three issues, and I argue that those who disagree with this approach mostly do so because they take a
different stance, not because they dismiss the implications drawn from them. Said stance, in turn, largely de-
pends on the theory informing the inquiry. Before detailing how focusing ethnography works in practice, I will
therefore briefly discuss the three issues and point out the arguments focused ethnography rests on. While
practice theory is not the original basis on which earlier proponents have argued for focused ethnography, I
will show how and why it provides a particularly firm ground for focusing.

*Video Methods beyond representation*

The richness of video is a curse as much as a blessing in that it can easily be mistaken for an accurate or au-
thentic representation of social reality that alleviates the need for theory-laden interpretation (Schembri &
Boyle, 2013). In light of this, discussions of visual methods in general and videography in particular often cumu-
late in a critique of representationalism (Hietanen, Rokka, & Schouten, 2014). But the debate on the
(im)possibility of representation has not started with the advent of video. It is maybe as old as ethnographic
research itself. Different schools of ethnography have accused one another of naïve representationalism for
decades (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Feyerabend, 1975; Garfinkel, 1967). While such interventions are often use-
ful to spur reflection and innovation, the critique is also nearly unavoidable as long as the ethnographer under-
takes to say something about social life at all. Ultimately, the debate is a reflection of different standpoints
regarding the questions what is possible to convey with the help of method, theory, and medium of expression,
as well as what is worth conveying. Hence, in my view, what matters much more than the charge of naïve rep-
resentationalism itself is the alternative offered by those bringing it forward in each critical intervention. Be-
because said alternative inevitably will rest on certain assumptions itself; assumptions that can be scrutinized and
weighted against the assumptions held by those criticized. At this stage, some positions disqualify because they
offer not much more than rousing claims of what is impossible; and little concrete suggestions of what to do
instead (Geertz, 1998). But it is of outmost importance to stress that it is a fake alternative to allow either for
positivist representation or for some mystical allusion to authenticity and deep insight. Since tacit dimensions of social life and culture are by definition difficult – if not impossible – to capture in words, there is a danger that they are being folded back into rather coarse analytic categories such as the subjective experience (Ruby, 2000), material consciousness (MacDougall, 2005), or “a feeling for the endless flux” (Gibson, 2010: 8). Broad and underspecified categories thwart efforts of bringing out nuances and specific details of lived life, and open them up to scrutiny and discussion. There are many clever and systematic concepts to define just how social scientists can say something meaningful and adequate about social life without pretending to describe the exact truth of ephemeral events. For lack of space I will only list some examples, each of which has potent alternatives: The idea of giving voice to one subjective recollection of a participant (Thompson, 2000). The notion of the ideal type that (in the sense of Schutz) orients the participants’ actions although it is ultimately unrealistic, so that describing an ideal type is not an exercise in realism (Eberle, 2010). The concept of conveying tacit dimensions of the social through various modes of expression including prose (Hirschauer, 2007), poetry (Canniford, 2012), art (Gibson, 2010) or film (Hietanen et al., 2014; Toraldo et al., 2016). Attempts to create visceral resonance through artistic forms based in cultural phenomenology (Denzin, 2001; Sherry & Schouten, 2002; Wood & Brown, 2012). The more radical approach of understanding research texts as manuals that allow readers to practically work out tutorial problems which will provide a lived experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Garfinkel, 2002). Ethnographers using video methods have embraced many of these alternatives, some of which lend itself to the medium better than others. But just like any ethnographic inquiry, their legitimacy and effectiveness rests on specific theoretical assumptions. These assumptions provide the quality criteria with the help of which good attempts can be sorted from bad (Seale, 1999), and the usefulness of the work at least within academia further depends on the contributions the theory perspective enables. Therefore I argue that videographic or filmic methods must be held to task not only for their expressive qualities, but also for the way in which they make accessible for academic debate a) enabling theoretical foundations, b) the meth-
odological arguments these imply, and c) the contribution in terms of theory development. Given that contemporary social theory is largely manifest in the form of written language and mathematical formulas, these requirements represent a substantial challenge especially for those forms of videographic research that result primarily or even exclusively in filmic forms of scientific communication. In an age of multiple and converging forms of media, moving past mono-medial formats might be necessary, because further progress and success of filmic consumer research and video methods in ethnography will depend on how well future works live up to this challenge.

One key step will be to reflect on how videographic research, or indeed any form of ethnography that includes the use of cameras, becomes focused – and then adequately document and discuss that process in the final product. More clearly than in any other forms of ethnographic inquiry, focusing is literally built into the video-based research process. This lends the form some of its strength, but also entails the danger that the antecedents and implications of the found focus are being overlooked by either researcher or their audience. Indeed, many of the arguments Hirschauer (2007) makes with regard to classic ethnographic writing equally apply to videographic methods. He argues that the obligation to write fieldnotes configures the ethnographers’ observation practices in that they sharpen her senses and force her to look for (and in the logic of) orders and domains. The same is true for the skilled videographer, user of audio recorders, netnographer or analyst of document and archives. First, despite the multimodal richness of data traces contemporary technology produces, selections still need to be made at the spot: when to hit the record button, what to zoom on to. Second, because she will be aware that it is all too easy to collect an overwhelming mass of data in the shortest of time, the research will discipline her record-gathering based on the research objective. High-density data are a burden as much as they are a blessing, and ultimately, any competent form of ethnographic research practice will take the form of selective and order-inducing data gathering. The procedure of focusing ethnography seeks to
implement this process systematically into the research process and advancing from on-the-spot, gut-feeling based focusing towards systematic focusing that is explicit and can be reflected upon.

*The role of the ethnographer*

All theories, and hence the methodologies they inform, build on certain philosophical a-priories. The posit something as given, and then unravel the endless detail and ubiquitous indexicality of lived life on the basis of that taken as given. For most schools of cultural anthropology, these are the ánthrōpoi, humans as ‘cultural animals’ that are constantly interpreting and reproducing culture on the basis of the cultural knowledge they possess, including symbolic Know What and pragmatic Know How. The ethnographer, then, studies a culture by acquiring that knowledge over the course of extended exposition to the culture, purposeful data collection, and the systematic production of records. Metaphorically speaking, she is thus at the same time seen as an instrument of data collection, a container to store said data, and the mayor tool for analysing it. Because acculturation takes time and iteration between these three tasks ensures the consistency and quality of findings, cultural anthropologists have criticized the premise of focused ethnography that valid insights can be gathered in absence of long-term field work (Hirschauer & Breidenstein, 2002). As I have indicated, I do not suggest that every ethnography can or should be fully focused; only that focusing is part of every ethnographic research process. The extent of focus that is adequate and possible depends on the aim of the study, the field of inquiry, the theoretical lens applied, and the pre-existing competence of the ethnographer vis a vis the field. In order to clarify the importance of the latter two points, it helps to sketch out the theoretical foundation on which focused ethnography has been proposed, and the changes implied by switching the theoretical lens to practice theory.

Knoblauch (2001, 2005) suggested focused ethnography within the framework of the (so-called phenomenological) sociology of the lifeworld (Eberle, 2013). In the tradition of Schutz (1953), the ethnographer is sup-
posed to be guided by the same relevance structures that are also orienting the subjective experience and actions of the members of the lifeworld under study. The aim of ethnography, then, is not the correct representation of objectively true events or facts (since that is impossible), but an adequate reconstruction of the (shared features of the) members’ point-of-view and knowledge. Therefore, “video recordings are to be seen as indications, that is, recollections of actions” (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2015, p. 639). For Knoblauch (2001, p. 134), this also implies that the issues or topics under scrutiny must be relevant for the members themselves. In my view, this unduly narrows the scope of research questions to inquire into. In particular, key social problems have their root in the fact that consumers do not seem to notice problems, cannot fathom change, or are slow to embrace it (Shove, 2010). Practice-based consumer research has to a large part emerged as a response to these challenges by seeking to explain why and how certain aspects are experienced as relevant, problematic, or (un-)changeable by consumers for social reasons that take a different form than knowledge structures or value systems. Accordingly, from such a perspective the methods of inquiry must not be restricted to those that register subjective knowledge or values (Hill, Canniford, & Mol, 2014), or use them as an obligatory point of passage in that any entity is only taken into account in so far and in the form in which it is meaningful within said cultural knowledge structures (Woermann, 2016). One theoretical alternative is provided by ANT or assemblage theory (Canniford & Bajde, 2015), which have primarily been used in order to study and theorize the sociomaterial foundations of lived social life. However, we still lack a systematic methodological argument about what exactly follows from framing the ethnographer – and everything else – as an assemblage. In contrast, for other theoretical lenses that can equally well be mobilized to understand sociomateriality, much more clear methodological considerations exist. In particular, it has been shown how participant observation

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3 I do not wish to suggest that one cannot follow an assemblage approach when conducting focused ethnography; in fact I would argue that many of the phenomena assemblage theorists are interested in (Hill, Canniford, & Mol, 2014) are best studied using focused ethnography. Instead, echoing the point I made about the need for methodology or how well enabling theory and applied method align, it should be kept in mind that assemblage theories focus on the social production of boundaries (e.g. of settings) and do not take practices, but actors, as (relatively) stable.
and video methods can be combined with the lenses of material interaction (Dant, 2008), or practice theory (Hindmarsh & Llewellyn, 2016). In comparison to assemblage theories, practice theory offers a related, yet more clearly explicated choice in that doing ethnography can easily and stringently be conceptualized as a practice, the implications of which have been discussed in detail (Gobo, 2008; Mengis et al., 2016; Silverman, 1998).

To see why, it is important to reiterate something that is too often misunderstood or overlooked, namely that in a practice-based epistemology, practices replace both sides of the coin of subjectivism or interpretivism. Just like the knowledgeable subject is seen as responsible for both making meaning and interpreting meaningful acts or objects, social practice theories hold that practices are both ways of expressing understandings and of understanding expressions (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2012). And just like interpretivists can only speak of culture when makers and interpreters are part of said culture, practice theorists ‘see culture’ in bundles of expressing and understanding. (Notably, making and interpreting meaning do not have to occur immediately at the same time for a culture or community to be diagnosed – only a ‘reasonable’ reliability as well as temporal and spatial extension is implicitly expected. Just the same is true for social practices. While expressing and understanding must not fall together immediately, it usually does – but at a minimum it needs to be expectable.)

While this way of framing enables practice theory to loosen the reliance on and restriction to the innate cultural capabilities of the subject (Whiting, Symon, Roby, & Chamakiotis, 2016), it in turn requires heightened dependency on what is taken for granted about social practices, namely that they are distinguishable, stable entities. That does not spare practice thinkers the trouble of having to lay out in detail how distinguish-ability and stability come about, but it does mean that they can, and indeed must, take for granted their possibility. This recourse into practice theory should help to explain the basis on which the concrete procedural recommendations that will follow rest. A practice-based research posits that the local performance of focal practices express the understandings at the heart of the subculture or field – if they would not, then the participants of the situa-
tion would intervene and mark the situation as a failure and abnormal, as long as they themselves are competent members of the subculture in question (ten Have, 2002). This assumption, in turn, hands the focused ethnographer a license to treat the recordings of such situations as containing traces of expressions of core understandings – traces for which there is a good chance of salvaging them. As I will detail later, however, this license comes with an obligation to a) first competently focus the inquiry and b) be able to competently spot cases in which a particular performance or event is abnormal and thus not an expression of a core understanding. Before showing how both can be achieved, I will turn to the third issue and discuss the role that (video) data plays in capturing the understandings expressed in performing a practice.

The role of (video) data

The centrality of video analysis in focused ethnography is rooted in the centrality of the visual for much of human conduct. However, this does not imply that it is a method restricted to capturing the visual dimension of lived life. As I have detailed, it is merely a tool employed to aid the ethnographic analysis, an analysis necessarily rooted in participant observation and encompassing all aspects of lived life, such as embodied, symbolic, semantic and emotional aspects. Focused ethnographers – unlike videographers – use video methods not because they are visual researchers, but because as a type of data, video has special qualities that enable unlocking some features of social life better than other types. It captures rich traces of background sound, speech, material set-up, spatial layout, body position and posture, visual attention and lines of sight, gestures and body language (Belk & Kozinets, 2005; Knoblauch, Schnettler, Raab, & Soeffner, 2006) – and all of these in their sequential order, so that pauses, rhythms, and speeds can be recovered during the analysis, for example when the temporal unfolding is of interest (Woermann & Rokka, 2015). Attending to the sequential unfolding of the embodied orders of situated performances social conduct is arguably important for grounding qualitative inquiry of many types (Woermann, 2016), but it is especially important from a practice perspective (Hindmarsh & Llewellyn, 2016; Toraldo et al., 2016). That is because it is rooted in Wittgensteinian language philosophy in
which every interaction or situated conduct is seen as an improvisation over a set of formal and informal rules, and where the resources that enable competent rule-following include bodily skills, material tools, and emotional routines (Stern, 2003). As I will detail below, sequential analysis aims at tracing this multi-modal, interactive and collaborative accomplishment of rule-following.

However, while attention to detail is important for an analysis informed by Wittgensteinian practice theory, it is crucial to point out that the implication is not that capturing and representing as many details as possible – for example in a ‘rich’ and ‘authentic’ video, or a multiplicity of ‘voices’ – will enable better understanding. The opposite is true: focus on definitive detail is essential. This point is worth underlining in particular in light of a number of recent notable papers that each spell out how video methods can be combined with a practice perspective in order to solve a different critical challenge of (organizational) ethnography: the problem of relevance of the material (Hindmarsh & Llewellyn, 2016), the problem of elusive or tacit knowledge (Toraldo et al., 2016), the problem of accountability in the constitution of research knowledge (Whiting et al., 2016), and the problem of performativity of data collection technology (Mengis et al., 2016). All these notable contributions share the same reasoning underlying my argument, and taken together, they also demonstrate why finding focus is a key necessity for video-based, practice-minded research. Because the practices of knowing that underlie both lived social life and ethnographic inquiry are multimodal and multi-dimensional, they must operate on the basis of a foreground-background logic that puts into focus only one of several possible (or affordable) figurations of meaning at any given moment. Accordingly, understanding how focus is established and maintained collaboratively and multi-modally in ordinary situations comes to be seen as a central task of modes of ethnographic researching, knowing and (re)presenting findings. This necessity is not unique to video-based methods but only accentuated by it. The particularities of dealing with sociomateriality, the participant-research relationship, or the impact of technicalities such as the camera angle thus can be seen as reiterations of a more general process of finding focus that characterizes any kind of epistemic work. This work is unavoidable and ubiquitous because the full
richness and creativity of any concrete moment of lived life always consists in more than expression of the particular practice templates under study. Hence, focused ethnography does not and should not attempt to capture this indexical “more.” The extent to which ‘reality’ in the form of the rich indexicalities of an event is present on video data is thus not a critical matter of concern for this methodology. Michael Lynch (2002: 535) sums the approach to (video or audio) recordings up nicely by calling them “exquisitely detailed reminders.” With this, he emphasizes that they can only function in tandem with an analysis based on practical understanding gained in competent first-hand participation in the situation recorded on video. While this requirement is quite similar to classic calls for achieving in-depth familiarity with the culture under inquiry as the prerequisite for reliable ethnographic work, it must be noted that a) it is bound to a particular notion of practical understanding formulated by the theory and b) focused on what I call members’ epistemic work. Experienced practitioners share particular ways of seeing, problematizing, documenting, recording, learning, and so forth (Garfinkel, 1967; Lave & Wenger, 1991) that are not merely operations of the mind but embodied, emotional, rule-guided, material, routinized and collective accomplishments. Ethnographic research must and should rely closely on these forms of epistemic work that can be found in any field setting, because doing so should reproduce the relevance structures inherent to the practices (but strictly speaking not the subjects) under study. Said reproduction does only include explicit documentation, but can also and crucially take the form of focusing the inquiry. I will detail this idea after introducing the forms and functions of focusing ethnographic inquiry in the next section.

**Focusing ethnographic research**

**Strategies for finding focus**

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4 I stress that this is a statement about the role of recordings as data to be analyzed. Showing video recordings as a form of disseminating findings via a research film can well imply different quality criteria, for example in conveying a sense of “what it is like” to an audience essentially unfamiliar with the practice under study.
As noted, many contemporary ethnographic research projects are already focused by the time data collection begins – and thus before the process of reflecting on the ongoing work, its premises and its implications by iterating between collecting, analysing and theorizing has begun. While I warned against dismissing the potential ‘wisdom of the academic crowd’ at work in judging grants, reviewing book proposals or formulating implications for future research, I also pointed out that said wisdom is a) often not informed by the practical experience central to ethnographic inquiry and b) necessarily beholden to procedural, axiological, theoretical and/or methodological orientations and constraints alien to the project in need of focus. The first strategy for focusing ethnography therefore consists in re-reading the findings and arguments found in prior research as well as the academic processes preceding and embedding the project through the lens of its own unfolding theoretical and empirical findings. Quantitative researchers have become very adept at re-using empirical data gathered in prior studies, and by building not only on the aggregated and summarily interpreted results of the recent literature, but also picking out useful particular findings or parts of data sets. To some extent, their ability to do so rests on epistemological assumptions qualitative researchers find problematic for good reasons. Still, given the richness of current ethnographic work, the many adjacent disciplines studying consumption phenomena, and not the least the relatively broad consensus in terms of basic principles of adequate ethnographic research, much is to be gained by work more systematically with and through prior research when conducting qualitative inquiries.

If the research purpose is more open, such as understanding a certain subculture or field of practices, then the first aim of a focused ethnography must be to identify the focal practice(s) in which the characteristics of the field are being uniquely expressed. Identifying focal practices can require prolonged and multi-modal ethnographic work that goes beyond the scope of focused ethnography in terms of methods and scale. The art and craft of focusing is essential for ensuring the quality of focused ethnography (Seale, 1999), and the main risk in choosing a focused research design consists in sloppy focusing that misleads the entire project (Hirschauer &
Breidenstein, 2002; Knoblauch, 2002). Traditional accounts of ethnographic methodology (e.g. Geertz, 1972) often suggest that the ethnographer – as data collector, analyst, and author – will over time learn about or even stumble upon the rituals, practices or sites central to a culture. Moving past subject-centred notions of ethnography implies relying on something other than individual insight or some mystical eureka effect. A practice-based epistemology in particular implies turning to practices and not individuals in order to find focus (Whiting et al., 2016). The first and most basic rationale of practice-minded inquiry is that the vast majority of events occurring within a social domain (such as a community, organization, or subculture) are routine performances of the same core practices. Rejecting the idea that they are not only places the researcher outside of the practice paradigm, but also requires a very different justification for focusing ethnography than the one laid out here. Accepting it implies that the basic method of inquiry consists in triangulating across different performances occurring in different types of settings in order to figure out the structure of the practices being performed, often described as a set of three to five elements. In this way, however, a large number of practices can often by identified within a certain domain. Triangulation alone will not suffice to find focus in primary data, visual or otherwise. By building on the observation that all social domains exhibit some form of what I called epistemic work, a number of practical strategies can be employed. Put in more abstract terms, practice theorists hold that practice performances are routines orchestrated largely for functional or pragmatic reasons that centre on reproducing and sustaining orders of everyday life, organizations, or social formations such as communities (Schatzki, 2002). Several strategies – beyond the first one already mentioned – can be deducted from this.

The second and most simple strategy is to look for persistent routines. Often, the focal practice of a field or subculture is simply the central routine that dominates participants’ time schedule. Lifestyle sports such as skateboarding, for example, primarily take place in the form of endless and near-daily ‘sessions’ often taking place at more or less the same spot. Systematic observation of such spots will further reveal that participants
spend most of their time watching others skate and waiting for their turn to skate – a fact that ethnographic interviews or discursive representations of the scene will usually pass over. Sessions of training, watching and waiting thus suggest themselves as focal settings within which social phenomena such as community structure, gender identity or risk and power can be observed up close and in action, as opposed to rationalized or partial accounts of them produced in interviews (Beal & Wilson, 2004; Canniford & Shankar, 2013). The third strategy can help if trying to study focal settings as a whole provides insufficient focus, or if the target phenomenon is spread out across many different routines. It builds on the premise that practice performances are inherently organized bundles of doings and sayings. Said bundles are frequently organized towards and around performances of focal practices and a good part of their structure serves to direct attention and understanding towards them within but also across settings. Continuing the example, close analysis of the interactions during a skate session will reveal that watching, waiting, and training are inherently oriented towards one another e.g. in that being watched and watching complement each other. In fact, practicing lifestyle sport is generally organized towards making stylish performances visible and this purpose is designed into the structure of skate parks, websites, contests, videos, advertisings, and so forth. While this insight might not come as a startling revelation, it provides a clear focus and in fact carries quite far in explaining the practitioners’ interests and media use, as well as the structures of the subculture and industry dynamics (Ferrell, Milovanovic, & Lyng, 2001; Wheaton, 2000; Woermann, 2012). The fourth strategy for finding ethnographic focus extends on this point by drawing on what one might call the architectures for observation, judgement and reflection prevalent in a field. Examples are rule books, stages, cameras, competitions, popular sayings and stories, exercises or even visual effects, all of which can be understood as pragmatic devices employed in routine performances towards focusing attention on crucial moments and details. Notably, despite being accustomed to their use, practitioners themselves are not necessarily aware of the organizing and orchestrating functions of such devices, yet their prevalence suggests that they orient conduct towards something pivotal for the successful repro-
duction of the field of practices in question. However while practitioners might not be aware of how architectures or orienting devices work and especially what they are turning attention away from, their mere importance is in fact obvious to them. A sport competition in absence of any rules, for example, would immediately cause uproar. Picking up a point made by Krämer (2016), a fifth strategy is thus to read emotional regimes or structures of affect such as caring about something as pointing to the understandings underlying focal practices. The sixth strategy exploits a similar effect by looking for elements of practices whose absence or failure causes the (near-) breakdown of a performance. Very likely they are focal elements of focal performances. This strategy is based on the theoretical premise that elements of practise are generally interchangeable in that different versions of the same practice often exist, and in that every performance is in part an improvisation making up for the indexicalities of the momentary circumstances. Irreplaceability therefore demands close ethnographic attention.

This last strategy foreshadows an important reservation necessary for ensuring the quality of focused ethnographic inquiry: the analysis of focal practices must be based on data stemming from normal performances, not from unique and abnormal incidences. I will suggest how to ensure this, again by making use of what I called the epistemic work inherent in (almost) all practice performances themselves, but only after first laying out how the analysis of focal practices works.

**Focused data analysis**

Once the focal practices of a field have been identified, systematic analysis can begin. As the name suggests, focused ethnography is a form of ethnography, i.e. a multi-method approach centring on participant observation that uses triangulation across different types of data in order iteratively develop its findings. In my view, most of the data collection and analysis procedures prevalent in other forms of ethnography can be applied in focused ethnography as well, provided that they are directed at the focal practice or setting. While there is no
space to detail the argument here, it must be noted that focused inquiry is informed by the principle of methodological situationalism (Knorr Cetina, 1988; Woermann, 2016), that is, the social or cultural context – or even the context of context – should be taken into account only in so far, and in the form in which, it can be shown to be empirically present or operant in the focal situations. This principle does not at all mean that contexts do not matter in focused inquiry, quite the opposite. But it does imply a safeguard against unfounded presuppositions that do not stand the test of close empirical scrutiny proving their relevance for the actual social interactions at hand. In the following, I will discuss how to analyse three key forms of ethnographic data, with a focus on video data, because the sequential analysis of video recordings should be the centrepiece of focused ethnographic inquiries.

**Focusing video: Sequential analysis**

At the core, a social practice works like a template that orchestrates bodily doings and sayings. Accordingly, the sequential orchestration of embodied performance is of key interest to practice-minded researchers, and sequential analysis of video recordings of naturally occurring conduct are at the heart of focused ethnography (Hindmarsh, Heath, & Luff, 2010). While it can seem tedious and overly fastidious to closely track bodily positions, postures, lines of sight, intonation, facial expressions, and so forth, countless studies have shown that breaking down social activities from the extreme – such as climbing vertical walls (Jenkins, 2017), or proving mathematical theorems (Livingston, 2006) – to the most mundane – beginning a service encounter (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2013), standing in line (Garfinkel & Livingston, 2003), buying bread politely (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005) or placing orders in a bar (Yamauchi & Hiramoto, 2016) – reveals time and again that competent performances of any kind are never the effect of mystical genius or some invisible working inside the brain of a lone expert. Instead, problems of any kind are solved by breaking them down into small steps, and then combining bodily skills, material tools, mental templates, interactive collaboration and so forth to proceed iteratively towards something that will be jointly acknowledged as a ‘good enough’ solution within a community of practice.
(Lave, 1988). While creativity and emergence characterizes “each another next first time” performance (Garfinkel, 2002: 182), practice theory holds that taken together, clusters of unique social events are recognizably performances of the same practice template not by virtue of inherent structural sameness, but because they are organized with the help of the same skills, tools, rules, and so forth so that they can function as exemplars of the same social practice. Because it has profound implications for how to conduct a sequential analysis, let me briefly illustrate this point using the hypothetical example of a study of greeting practices on the basis of video recordings of real-life encounters. Greeting a professional acquaintance can be done in any number of ways ranging from mere nodding to elaborate ritualized kissing of cheeks, and it will on many occasions happen in the middle of an ongoing conversation or while passing each other in the hallway. Notably, half-baked attempts of lifting some fingers of a hand while carrying a heavy bag in a way indicating some attempt of greeting while continuing talking on the phone and walking past the other will often do perfectly well as an expression of both professional politeness and professional busyness (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2005). But why? From a practice perspective, pointing merely to the context of the situation, or to the subjective interpretation of the gesture as a reasonably polite greeting would mean to ‘explain away’ what is the definitive social phenomenon occurring here: that the sequential organization of hand and body posture and movement, eye contact and lines of sight, material props such as bag and phone, symbolic meanings such as waving, informal rules of busyness as excusing lack of ritualistic decorum, and the cultural understanding that informal behaviour suggests certain personal closeness taken together amount to an interactive expression of the mutual understanding that polite greeting has occurred. Neither context nor subjective interpretation can capture the definitive detail of this accomplishment, which is at the heart of what is going on. A typical recollection in an interview, for example, would simply state that the other is a polite person, thus glossing over a complex phenomenon of interactionally produced order by reifying a category of folk psychology. Likewise, an ethnographer’s attempt to list all the material and immaterial props and tools that could be employed in staging polite-but-busy greeting, or
all the forms such greeting can take, will not result in uncovering the organization of elements that turns the myriad unique performances into performances of the same basic practice. It is for this reason that at the core of practice-minded focused ethnography is an analysis of the sequential organization of practice performances with the aim of extracting and analysing the practice elements that ensure said organization. It is a misunderstanding to think that just because something was used in some way for accomplishing a practice is therefore already an element of said practice.

For this reason, sequential analysis of video recordings of naturally occurring conduct seeks to document the structures of that govern practice performances, in contrast to producing “rich”, “authentic”, or “thick” and thus ostensibly complete but non-hierarchical descriptions. The classic way of conducting and representing sequential analyses consists in documenting video stills and very close frame-by-frame transcriptions of very short exemplary sequences (typically under 1 minute) that have been documented in detail elsewhere (Hindmarsh et al., 2010; ten Have, 2007a; Toraldo et al., 2016). These procedures, however, are based on ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EM/CA), so that sequential analysis rooted in contemporary practice theory should be expected to take slightly different forms. EM/CA situates the decisive elements of interactions at a more microscopic level of detail compared to more recent strands of practice theory and thus relies on extremely fine-grained transcriptions (Nicolini, 2012). The charges of positivism, empiricism, or representation-alism that this procedure has invited are misled in that neither EM/CA in particular nor practice theory in general suggest that merely adding detail can lead to complete description or reliable understanding. As with any form of transcription, what aspects are included to which level of detail depends on theory-laden assumptions about ‘where’ to find the empirical phenomenon in question, and what it might consist in (e.g. in the sequential organization of conduct). In practice theory, it is always bundles of doings and sayings that jointly express the know-how (or practical understanding) that is at the heart of a practice. Hence, the analyst will pack slightly larger bundles of empirical detail together, commonly distinguishing between three and five elements of prac-
ties (Woermann & Rokka, 2015). Such bundles of similar empirical phenomena that ensure the organization of performances are read as expressions of the same element (e.g. bodily skill underwriting all forms in which bodies are used to accountably practical ends in the situation).

Unfortunately, there is a dangerous pitfall when analysing recorded data using practice theory: When coding data for the appearance of practice elements (e.g. “bodily skill”), there is great danger that instead of coding only the aspects that demonstrably organize or govern the moment-to-moment conduct, any detail appearing to belong into the general empirical dimension (e.g. “body”) is being coded instead. While practice theory follows in the footsteps of a long tradition of visual anthropology reaching back to Mead and Bateson in recognizing the embodied nature of social life, it draws substantially different conclusions from this fact. All doings are bodily doings – hence every performance could be coded “body” if the criterion would be mere presence of a body. Practice theory, however, asks a much more specific question. Namely, what bodily routines or skills are central for organizing the situated improvisation of lived social life that amounts to expressing the core understanding of the core practice of the domain under study? Many insightful illustrations of sequential analysis can be found in the literature. A recent example is the analysis by Toraldo et al. (2016) of how a volleyball team interactively and tacitly coordinates movements in order to execute a certain winning strategy. “Having” a winning strategy does not simply consists in having it written down somewhere, but in playing it out on the field in the middle of an action-packed match. The winning quality of that play in turn rests in the minute details the let the individual movements of the players converge into a fluid execution of a winning strategy.

Returning to the example of skateboarding, the question when coding the bodily elements of skating would be something like: Which recurrent bodily aspects of the skaters’ performance make it apparent for competent observers that what a person is doing is indeed stylish skating, instead of e.g. an amateurish attempt at skating? Once the art and craft of seeing the style of skating a flurry of skateboard movements has been identified
as the focal practice of the field, a deeper dive into the richness of her data on the focal practices would start. For example, one might zoom in onto details which can easily be glossed over in a standard fieldnote or interview. What exactly, a focused ethnographer would ask, does skating with style consist in? How is it evident in the data; and what kind of know-how or practical understanding does it express? Likely, a sequence analysis would reveal that this style-expressing-understanding manifests less in what a skater does, but how she does is – it rests in identifying details of sequentially unfolding actions. Identifying style as an organizing template that can be expressed in many different forms, the practice-minded researcher would thus seek to distil and interpret the way in which style governs the field of skateboarding from which e.g. insights about market structures or industry dynamics could be derived.

The effectiveness of methods of analysis directly depends on the forms of documenting results that it can harness. Sequential analysis is no exception. Focused ethnography will best choose forms that neither single out detail that is distracting from the key elements from a PT perspective, nor zoom out to an undue extent. Simply naming practices, as it is unfortunately sometimes practiced in consumer research, appears insufficient. Definitive detail should be adequately documented, ideally through multi-modal means combined with both detailed theory-laden analysis and visual documentation. A videography, for example, might document findings via video sequences showing practice performances in real time that can be seen as ideal types because all key elements of skilful conduct are present. What form works best depends on purpose and audience: different modes of dissemination lay bare the systematic procedure of the analysis to different degrees and thus offer different forms of accessibility and applicability within different reception practices.

*Focusing forms of talk*

Among the different ways of expressing central understandings, those involving the use of language can of course not be overlooked. The question how to approach language from a practice perspective is a complex
one that cannot be discussed here in detail. But it should be noted that a distinction should be made between analysing language as part of finding focus, and language-use that forms part of the focal practices or settings of the domain under study. From a practice view, interviews in particular are seen as idiosyncratic performances that express understandings of competently answering interviews rather than descriptions with truth value (Atkinson & Coffey, 2003). If the interview setting allows for it, what can be gathered from them are colloquial figures of speech, discursive tools and formative rules employed by members in pursuit of practices which can be helpful in finding focus – if it is kept in mind that conscious awareness and explicability to not extend to all aspects of practice performance, and especially not all aspects of epistemic work. In the case of talk being part of focal practices, the basic stance underlying sequential analysis also applies in that language-in-use is framed as one element or tool among several which are sequentially and interactively applied in working out some practical end.

**Focusing on documents**

Visual data does not only come in the form of recordings produced by the researcher directly over the course of the research project. Longitudinal and historical methods are of increasing importance in consumer research (Giesler & Thompson, 2016; Karababa & Ger, 2011), and ethnographic research projects that do not entail long-term field visits often make extensive use of pre-documented data. In particular, historical recordings of naturally occurring conduct are a potent source of rich insight, and videography is arguably especially well-suited to make such rich historical data accessible to an audience. Focused ethnography is uniquely positioned to offer a methodology that circumvents some of the key challenges longitudinal methods is facing. While the topic demands a full-length paper, some desiderata can be pointed out here. First, longitudinal research requires a theoretical footing that enables the researcher to take for granted a certain stability of the artefacts being studied. That is because if all social processes are seen as entirely emergent, or all meaning as irredeemably subjective and tied to unique moments in time, no meaningful analysis is possible. Assuming stability in social
science is a tricky business, however, given the pitfalls of determinism, structuralism, or chronocentrism. Practice theory offers a viable solution for balancing repetition versus emergence in social phenomena because it developed out of philosophical wrestling with exactly this challenge (Rouse, 2007). I argue that practice-minded qualitative inquiry offers a notion of understanding that can provide answers to the question “Which historical data traces can be understood adequately, and which not?” The simple version of the answer is: if the historical artefact can be put into a practice which the researcher can not only understand, but which is also the very practice she seeks to study. Any type of historical document, for example, can be made subject to some interpretation – a practice the researcher understands. However, strictly speaking this only enables her to get to know something about interpretation, but not the practice(s) the performance of which left the document behind as a trace (Shove & Pantzar, 2005). In this view, medieval scriptures documenting the torture and subsequent burning of a witch cannot ever be truly or adequately understood by a researcher hopefully unfamiliar with such practices. A vintage video of early skateboarding, in contrast, can arguably be understood to a large degree by a someone competent at watching and understanding skateboard movies – which in turn arguably pre-supposes knowing how to skate well enough. A consumer researcher studying data traces of historical consumption practices, I would thus demand, needs to be familiar with performing a (usually contemporary) version of said practices. I stress that most data traces are outcomes of practices of producing data (writing, filming, collecting statistics, etc.) rather than consumption practices themselves. In this case, practical understanding of both producing data and the documented consumption practices is necessary. In the same vein, using archival data raises similar concerns, both because archiving is a particular practice subject to its own logics, and because uncovering such historical logics can itself be a source of rich insight.

**Validation and Adequacy/Ensuring Quality**

Focusing can make ethnographic inquiry more efficient, deepen the level of insight, and integrate particularly powerful types of data. However, it also entails the risk of focusing the analysis on unimportant details on the
basis of inadequate understanding of the field. One important function of long-term field visits is to increase the chance that the ethnographer realizes that a preliminary analysis or apparent finding is indeed wrong. Focusing ethnography thus also means systematically ensuring the quality and adequacy of findings. The first and most important quality criterion is entailed in the very definition of focused ethnography, and derived from the ethnomethodological critique of traditional ethnographic praxis: the ethnographer must be a reasonably competent practitioner of the practices under study (ten Have, 2002). This criterion is on the one hand stricter than what most schools of ethnography demand. On the other hand, it is not unrealistic especially when studying consumption practices in contemporary society, because it is very likely the researcher is already a competent practitioner. Focusing ethnographic inquiry implies taking that fact into account systematically. When it comes to more ‘extreme’ practices such as the examples of lifestyle sports I mentioned, it should further be noted that various forms of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) are available in many social fields, including various forms of watching or being a fan. Here, it is key to reiterate that focusing ethnography can often be conducted by analysing the forms of epistemic work that can be found in any field setting, and that doing so can reproduce the relevance structures inherent to the practices under study. While the focused ethnographer might not always be able to stand in the heat of the action, participating competently in such epistemic work is often the key for ensuring adequately finding focus.

The second key quality criterion of focused ethnographic inquiry is likewise derived from the notion of collaborative epistemic work. Focused ethnography must analyse normal performances rather than abnormal ones. Again, subject-centred approaches would point to individual interpretation on the basis of cultural knowledge as the social mechanism for establishing the normality of an observed event. In doing so they are building on the ethnographer’s personal experience and knowledge for ensuring research quality. From a practice perspective, however, the accountable, evident normality of any social situation is a collective accomplishment of those present in the situation. It is held that abnormal behaviour will reliably incur interventions, exclamations,
or at the very least an exchange of irritated looks or similar bodily or facial expressions among those present. Any reasonably competent member of the situation will be able to spot them – and hence it must be required that the focused ethnographer can be considered at least reasonably competent with regard to not disturbing but understanding and participating in this collective, situated effort. As long as (and only if) the researcher will be able to control for the member’s success in interactionally establishing the normality of the events taking place, she can treat recordings made of such events as a window onto the normal practices of the field or subculture. I stress that this also requires the data to be adequate for that particular purpose. For example, if members do not express their concerns or disagreement out of politeness, or of the records to not cover the necessary dimensions, this infliction cannot be made. The reluctance of focused ethnographers to work with interview data in part stems from this prerequisite.

**Focusing videography and writing focused ethnography**

Different forms of dissemination and publication have always configured the styles and effectiveness of ethnographic work. I have argued that focused ethnographies are prevalent in part because the current system of academic publication pushes researchers into that direction. Turning the argument around, I suggest that focused ethnography is especially apt for forging strong contributions both in the form of journal articles and research films – if the mode and style of dissemination are chosen adequately. I begin with outlining the implications for written research products, before moving to their filmic counterparts.

**Focusing written research**

The institutional, political, and perhaps ideological push towards the journal paper as the primary and increasingly indispensable outlet for research of the highest regard and reach collides with the ethnographic tradition of extensive, rich ‘writing culture’ (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) that has always been organized towards the monograph. Ethnographers try to adapt by writing papers in top-level journals that accompany and sometimes
summarize their books, or by hoping for insightful reviews of their work in those same high-level journals. But both strategies really only work for a select few books that are standing out for reasons that might have to do with stardom or controversy as much as with the quality of novel insight gained. While I explicitly do not suggest focused ethnography as a cure to those woes of traditional ethnography, it is not plagued by the same conundrum. As far as the expert audience assembled in a high-tier journal is concerned, what matters most are the granular insights gained from the focal area, and the extension and development of theory that closely follows from them. Accordingly, just like the research process, the research paper can be focused on understanding and theorizing the focal practice. While it will always remain a challenge to express rich findings in the limited space offered by a journal article, focused ethnography requires much less extensive descriptions of context and affords authors more ways to ‘come to the point,’ to discuss the decisive particulars. Conventions for how the focusing can be documented adequately but efficiently will need to develop, but a combination of a review of prior (ethnographic) studies of the context and a documentation of the contextual data for example in the form of tables seems commendable. While the lack of inclusion of visual data from the field even in studies largely based on visual methods is lamentable, it bears noting that a published paper should not be mistaken for a documentation of the research process per se. The mere illustrative use of images, or their complete absence, in articles can well be due to the conventions of the journal and the necessities of getting through the review process. What is more, if a picture or video clip is necessarily the superior form for conveying research findings regarding social practices is not clear.

*Focusing filmic research*

Focused ethnography and filmic forms of reporting findings and building theory complement each other naturally; and it is regrettable that the conservatism inherent in academic institutions and processes seems to have hindered many authors to take advantage of this fact — including those strongly advocating video-based methods. Writing is at the heart of the traditional ethnographic method, and the transition from written fieldnotes
to theory notes to the final written ethnography is one that is purposefully and productively gradual (Hirschauer, 2007). Achieving the same reliance on one single medium for recording, analysing, expressing findings and building theory seems neither possible nor commendable for most ethnographic research projects at this point. However, in my view filmic forms of research dissemination offer the unique opportunity to move fluently from presenting original data in the form of video recordings to showcasing the different steps of a sequential analysis on the basis of video stills, slow-motion, or other visual effects. Here, written articles must help themselves with video stills and transcriptions, while research films can be more effective and avoid problems of translation between media. This is not to say that I suggest restricting filmic research to such a procedure. Triangulating across different types of data, switching between media during coding and analysis, and skilfully combining different communication media (talk, text, film) for disseminating results all add to the strength of a project. Ideally, research films can be seen as taking on the role of the classic long-form monograph in that they offer insights into the context of the focal setting that are both rich and broad, convey understanding of those crucial dimensions of the social world that resist verbal expression, and offer meticulous, detailed analysis of focal practices. Here, well-crafted videography achieves precisely what Hirschauer (2007, p. 430) demands of powerful and effective ethnographic writing when he argues that “the ‘slow-motion effect of language’” enables “utmost exactness and conceptual dissecting of tiny details.” The most important challenge that for filmic dissemination of focused ethnographic inquiry, however, is that theory in the social sciences remains fundamentally tied to the medium of language (and math) so that reviewing, criticising and especially building theory on and with video continues to pose challenges in search of new responses. My hope is that focusing ethnography can help to overcome some of these challenges, but further experimentation and innovation is necessary.
References


