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# AUTHOETHNOGRAPHY IN THE STUDY OF FOOTBALL FAN CULTURE. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS BY WAY OF FOOTBALL RIVARLY RESEARCH

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**Abstract:** The article reflects on the use of autoethnography in researching football fan culture. It identifies the benefits and challenges of using autoethnography as a strategy and a research method for understanding football fan culture. Despite numerous examples of the use of autoethnography in football research, including supporter studies, it has yet to be considered from a strictly theoretical perspective on the methodological dilemmas of the researcher–football fan. The article critically analyses the entire process of autoethnographic research, which led to the conceptualisation of a research project on perceptions of football competitions. This paper is the result of a clash between a junior scientist's original research concept and a more experienced ethnographic researcher's critical approach and reflects the discussion between them. The authors believe that the conclusions reached may be helpful for researchers in the field of humanities and social sciences considering using autoethnography in their research.

**Keywords:** autoethnography; football; football fans; research method; rivalry.

## Introduction

The emergence, development and growing importance of autoethnography in the humanities and social sciences came about because of the post-modern turn in these sciences that has taken place over the last few decades. This paper is an attempt to determine the usefulness of autoethnography in research into broadly understood football fan cultures, including attitudes and behaviours relating to football rivalry. Despite numerous instances of the use of autoethnography in research on contemporary sport, including football, the theoretical and methodological issues related to such an approach to the world of football fans have yet to be explored in separation. Our ambition is to fill this gap.

The main purpose of this paper is to determine the usefulness of autoethnography in football fan studies. Defining the subject of our research in this way has two important implications.

Firstly, we take for granted the fact that autoethnography is a kind of umbrella concept for research that fits into different currents and is carried out using various research methods

and data collection techniques. Further on in the article, we will refer to the most recognised and common ways of defining and internally structuring autoethnography to show the relevance of our research to this area.

Secondly, our goal is not to make a methodological breakthrough in the use of autoethnography in research on modern sport in general. We take it as obvious that there are works of an autoethnographic nature in sports-related research. We will refer to these later in the article, on the one hand, in order to review the scope of these works, and on the other hand, to show that they do not cover the area that has become the subject of our investigation. The latter is clearly defined and concerns research on the fan culture of a particular discipline – football. Given its global reach, popularity and universality, we consider it appropriate to treat football as an separate area of research in the broader spectrum of thinking on the cultural and social aspects of modern sport.

Our paper consists of five integral parts. The first is this introduction, in which we try to present the context of our investigations and conceptualise the research problem, as well as present our main thesis. The second part tackles the methodology and demonstrates we have found most important for understanding autoethnography useful in our research process and presents the way we have conducted it. In the third part, we discuss autoethnographic plots in the football rivalry research conducted by the younger author (Seweryn Dmowski). The fourth part is devoted to an analysis of these threads set against the existing literature on the subject and the criticism (including hrough subsequent autoethnographic threads) by the more experienced author (Piotr Załęski). We believe that this double voice will strengthen the shared conclusions and give a fair showing of the areas where we are less confident in our conclusions, which are the subject of the fifth and final part of the article. It is worth emphasising that the article is constructed in this way so it ties in with autoethnographic approaches, fulfilling some of the assumptions of duoethnography (Bielecka-Prus, 2014, p. 86).

The main thesis of our paper is that application oof autoethnography to the study of football fan culture can prove advantageous primarily in terms of conceptualising larger research issues and creating a substantive basis for large research projects, but in practice it runs into a number of challenges and difficulties. Formulating our thesis in this way does not appear to contradict the prevailing guidelines in anthropology and ethnology: that before studying the socio-cultural reality one should formulate only the issues, the subject of the research, and not set out a detailed thesis, for that might close down or hamper the pursuit of a broader, more accurate view of the reality being investigated. In what follows, we will try to convince you of our view on this issue.

## Methodology and the state of the art

In thinking about what the optimal understanding of autoethnography might be, we are closest to saying that "while all personal writing could be considered to examine culture, not all personal writing is autoethnographic; there are additional characteristics that distinguish autoethnography from other kinds of personal work. These include (1) *purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices*, (2) *making contributions to existing research*, (3) *embracing vulnerability with purpose*, and (4) *creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response*" (Jones et al., 2016, p. 22). Sparks

and Smith (2014, p. 158) add that "autoethnography, or 'narratives of self' as it is sometimes called, is highly personalised, revealing writing in which researchers tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural" and name a number of ways the approach can be applied to contemporary sports research. Collinson and Hockey (2005, p. 179), on the other hand, state that "autoethnography, in common with its ethnographic parent, is a particular *methodology:* a research strategy which underpins the use and selection of specific methods in order to approach certain research questions".

It is worth emphasising once again at this point that for the purposes of this paper, autoethnography is understood as a strategy and research method as presented above. Our aim is primarily to confront our research experience with the way autoethnography is understood by renowned scholars and in the light of their research findings.

We must therefore underline that there are at least two main approaches in authoethnography that may (but need not) be perceived as contradictory: the analytical and the evocative approach. As Denshire and Lee argue, these approaches "can be characterized in terms of different relationships between the personal and wider social and cultural world the writing seeks to inquire into" (2013, pp. 222–223). Thus, they can connect analytical autoethnography to a broader set of social phenomena than that provided by data analysis, while evocative autoethnography is based on the writer's personal stories (Denshire & Lee, 2013, p. 223). In the following paragraphs we understand the autoethnographic research process to be analytical if it fulfils Anderson's criteria (2006, p. 378): "(1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis". However, we consider the autoethnographic research process to be evocative if it focuses mainly on the writer's personal experience, emotions, thoughts and physical feelings such that it ultimatey captures social and cultural elements of everyday life (Bielecka-Prus, 2014, p. 85; Bochner & Ellis, 2016). In the context of the first criterion, the thread of the status of researcher–fans and their "deep immersion" in the culture under study are particularly interesting (Kossakowski et al., 2012).

Our autoethnographically described research process can be placed within the broader scope of qualitative research into Polish football fans, including the use of a case study on a community of club supporters as an initial pattern of reflection. This approach can be found for instance in recent work by Radosław Kossakowski (2021, pp. XV–XIX). Kossakowski also considers the use of autoethnography in football fan research, reflecting on the potential, limitations and closures of autoethnography (Kossakowski, 2014, pp. 108–110) and the use of autoethnography to understand the Dualistic Model of Passion proposed by Keith D. Parry (2012). In addition, several papers use autoethnography as an approach or research strategy to explain individual case studies of football fan culture: immigrant assimilation through being a supporter of Western Sydney Wanderers FC (Knijnik, 2015) and a supporters trip to Bilbao as a form of resistance against globalisation and the standardisation of modern football (Groves 2011). These successful attempts seem to confirm that we made the right decision in conducting an in-depth analysis of the use of autoethnography in football fan research, with a particular emphasis on notions of football rivalry.

In our article, we reproduce the autoethnographic research process carried out by Seweryn Dmowski, in 2016–2018, which led to the conceptualisation of a larger research

project on the perceived importance and appeal of rival teams among football fans. The project therefore has a specific territorial scope but is nonetheless, according to the researcher, universal and could be used as an analytical framework for studying the phenomenon of football rivalries around the world. For the sake of the narrative order this section has been marked [SD] to show that it has been written by the younger author: an assistant professor and devoted supporter of Legia Warszawa. He has been attending matches (including away ones) since 1994, but is not affiliated to the official fan club and does not consider himself an 'ultra'.

Piotr Załęski then critiqued the reconstruction of the autoethnographic research process. These reflections are included in the subsequent section of the paper on the debate on the use of autoethnography in contemporary sports research, with particular emphasis on football and its fans. Again, for the purposes of clarity, this section has been marked [PZ] to show that it was written by the older author: a professor who has regularly attended Legia home matches for more than 30 years, but considers himself a distant follower.

Beyond that, it should be made clear that neither this article nor the research process are aimed at expanding thinking on how to define and categorise football fans; there exists a very broad literature on this subject (e.g. Giulianotti, 2002; Fillis & Mackay, 2014, Samra & Wos, 2014). We define a football fan is anyone who feels they are a supporter of a club and acknowledges they are a member of that community, regardless of the form of their involvement.

Our joint conclusions summarise the text in its last section.

**Autoethnographic plots in research on football rivalry [SD]**

I went to my first Legia Warszawa home match in 1994 with a school friend and his father. I had been actively cheering on, or showing declarative support for Legia through my interest in the football results, tracking the results table in real time. The thing I remembered most was a sort of sense of regret that is wasn't my father taking me to my first live game. Additionally, to some extent I felt ashamed of my parents' general attitude towards my beloved Legia. My parents were not particularly interested in football. Our household was deeply anti-communist and, according to a logic that I still don't understand, they decided that the Legia Warsaw Central Military Sports Club, under the patronage of the communist-controlled army in the People's Republic of Poland, was politically "inferior" to Górnik Zabrze, a much wealthier club under the patronage of the Silesian mines and communist chieftains. To my despair, both parents liked to emphasise this point in the 1970s and 1980s, which was a period of strong competition between Legia and Górnik and growing antagonism between their fans. They always cheered on the opponents of my favourite team on TV.

My first match was against Lech Poznań. I can recall that the atmosphere in our stadium was full of negative emotion, one I could not name precisely. It was not hatred, or anger. But more contempt. The thousands of Legia supporters were annoyed at the arrival of the least honourable winner ever of the Polish football championships (Lech had been awarded the title in 1993 by administrative means, with points being taken away from Legia Warszawa and ŁKS for alleged and never proven unsportsmanlike behaviour at the end of the season – in other words, for suspected corruption charges – which meant that Legia lost the

championships). That had occurred just a few months ahead before I began actively cheering on Legia Warszawa, but then it dawned on me that it was an obvious reason to mock their opponent. As the whole stadium was roaring (not chanting but literally roaring) "Your title wasn't won on the pitch, Lech Poznań is a son of a bitch" and "Fuck the Polish Football Association!" I realised that for me the label of cheat would permanently stick to the Poznanians. The negative points caused frustration and pain, and punished Legia Warszawa in the 1993/1994 season. Nonetheless, I didn't leave the stadium convinced the team was considered an important rival. I realise now that this match was never discussed over beer in the years to come, that me and my fellow supporters never returned to it or went over the highlights. The reason was pretty simple – there was a bigger enemy on the horizon.

Memories began to surface. As I became involved in the Legia fan culture, I noted that older and more experienced fans uttered the word "Widzew" (a name of the rival team) with hatred on one hand, and some fear on the other. As I learned about the history of my club and the history of its fans (it took me many years before I realised that these were two completely different stories), from my perspective in the 1980s, an image of a tough "workers'" team with Zbigniew Boniek at the forefront began to emerge, of a team that was able to dominate national competitions and eliminate teams such as Manchester United or Liverpool FC from the European championships. The arch-rival team Widzew Łódź is inseparably associated with two of the most traumatic events in my life as a fan. In 1996, until the end of the season, Widzew Łódź had been competing against Legia Warszawa for the championship title, bathed in the glory of being the first Polish club to advance to the UEFA Champions League and make it to the quarter-finals. In the decisive match between the two teams played in Warsaw, Legia took the lead 1:0, to lose two goals in the last 30 minutes and eventually lose to Widzew, and not just the match but also the championship. I watched the match on TV during a May Day school trip as a primary school pupil; to this day, I still remember some of my schoolmates comforting me after their failure and some mocking the defeat of my beloved team. Total frustration and shame – that is how I remember that day. A bitter taste of humiliation and a sense of total disaster. As a result of that match, the Legia team, which had successfully played in European cups, broke up, with most of the players leaving the club (two of them, to our horror, went straight to Widzew), and my club played the next season decimated, with broken morale and even earmarked by some as a candidate for relegation. I remember the fear that this would be the season Legia would be relegated to the second division for the first time in the post-war era (and at the very beginning of my football fan journey!). It was like waiting for an execution – preparing for the strike you cannot dodge.

Thrown to the lions, the team, with fewer than 15 players that could play at the highest league level, unexpectedly played a sensationally good season, fighting for the title almost to the end against… Widzew. In the decisive penultimate league match, Legia was already leading by 2:0, wasting an opportunity to score, and then in the last five minutes, inexplicably losing three goals to lose the Polish championship to Widzew for the second year in a row. The whole world collapsed in a single moment—there had been a real chance for sweet revenge, we were so close and then everything disappeared. There was an acute sense of emptiness and a complete lack of hope. Shame and disgust—we were so close to mocking the eternal enemy, it was that close, and suddenly we were the ones who got humiliated on home ground.

Memories of the Legia–Widzew rivalry led me to recall one of the deepest socio-anthropological questions I had asked myself as a teenage football fan: why were offensive chants about Widzew sung at a match against Górnik? In a similar way, an almost intimate childhood experience came back to me. My parents were not particularly happy when I informed them at the beginning of my teenage years that I would like to become a regular at the Legia Stadium (the mid-1990s were the high point not just of the corruption on the league turfs in Poland, but also of the eruption of racism, neo-Nazism and hooliganism in the stands). And then, in 1994 at the very beginning of my experience as a fan, when Górnik Zabrze who my parents supported were the first rival in the fight for the Polish championship I "remembered". Legia Warszawa had started that season on negative points and with a sense of great injustice after losing the title in 1993, but not only did it quickly make up for the loss, it also actively joined in the fight for the top positions. The championship title was to be decided by the last match played in Warsaw against Górnik. At that dramatic encounter, Legia had been on the losing side for a long time (the referee awarded a goal to the away team, even though the ball left the pitch!), but they managed to score a goal to tie and then win the Polish Championship, and their opponents ended the match with eight in the team after receiving three red cards for brutal play. Warsaw enjoyed its first (recognised) championship title in 24 years, and for me, Górnik Zabrze turned out to be the first "serious" rival—an opponent whose defeat was the last step into football paradise. Enormous joy, a sense of relief and that bizarre feeling that the surrounding environment is not real and will disappear like a bubble blown in the air.

**A critical (somewhat autoethnographic) analysis of the above approach [PZ]**

As the researcher who undertook constructive criticism of the approach proposed above, I will start off atypically, namely, with the objective results achieved thanks to this approach as of today. The autoethnographic approach has led the more junior author to a potentially wider range of angles for tackling the perception of football rivalry. Therefore it has successfully fulfilled its role: it led to the idea of conducting international research and to funding for it. Thus, the autoethnography has come in handy "as one of the methods used in research, fitting into the triangulation procedure" (Kossakowski, 2014, p. 119). It is also worth noting that in order to establish the relationship between collective perception and individual rivalry, further triangulation of research techniques would be justified: through group interviews (I would suggest conducting them in a natural setting for the supporters: before a match, at a venue – and not as classic focus groups) or an analysis of the verbal folklore used by the supporter groups. Of course, at this point – as an ethnologist – I would undertake to explain why I do not reject the use of mixed techniques in research, or more precisely: their quantitative type. I agree that there are often-articulated dangers in using a combination: after all, such studies are based on "different ontological and epistemological assumptions" and involve a different type of relationship (clinical vs. statistical); moreover, conducting both types of study at the same time brings to mind "those who cut the branch on which they sit" (Kostera, 2005, p. 27). However, there is no simultaneity in the research concept proposed above and the quantitative research is to be constructed (as a tool) following the analysis of the material obtained through the qualitative research.

In my work as ethnologist, I had not heard of an autoethnographic approach like the one applied here. Yes, I was aware that as an ethnologist, I co-created the image of the groups I studied (and so my experience or personality left its mark). When publishing the results of field studies, I of course thought it appropriate to describe the research using the terms "confessions" (or "professions") as understood by John Van Maanen, and thus consider their "entry into the field/community" and problems functioning in the field (see Hammersley, Atkinson, 2007, pp. 204–206). I encountered information about autoethnographic research later on, but Karl Heider's approach to researching the Dani people, although appropriate, did not seem to differ from the much earlier approaches in Polish ethnography or qualitative sociology that were familiar to me (primarily Florian Znaniecki's autobiographical method), and so was just a methodological alternative. I also found an article on autoethnography interesting (Jones, 2005), but was not ready to consider it a legitimate approach. I must admit that the autoethnography demonstrated by my younger colleague is reassuring – he treats it above all as analytical autoethnography in the Leon Anderson sense (and not the evocative or performative sense). Luckily, the trauma of losing matches does not seem to affect people's personal lives to a degree comparable to that shown in the works of Carol Ronai or Tami Spry (Kacperczyk, 2014, pp. 55–62). In my opinion, the evocative and performative autoethnography approaches currents would prove much less useful for studying football rivalry than the analytical one (Kossakowski, 2014).

That is why, in the previous paragraph, I accepted the validity of the use of analytical autoethnography in football fan culture research. However, this needs clarification: it does not seem to comply with an important ethnological maxim – "the ethnologist goes into the field" – and the field is supposed to be alien, to some extent at least. As Monika Kostera states even more definitely (2005, p. 64): "a good principle of cultural anthropology, which has recently been challenged in its native discipline but is still proving very useful in the ethnography of the organisation, says: *you never study your own culture*." She applies an ethnographic approach to management science and writes about the dangers of using participatory observation, arguing that it may lead to the involvement and acculturation of the researchers, with the "risk that they will do it to such an extent that they will lose their anthropological attitude, start taking the surrounding reality as something obvious, and thus the research will become worthless" (Kostera, 2005, p. 117). Certainly, the Malinowski method of participant observation limits these risks, but that research concerned different cultures from the ones investigated by the researchers. It may therefore seem that I am engaging in cognitive dissonance in stating these points whilst accepting my junior colleague's use of autoethnography. Let us try to summarise this. Certainly, the use of autoethnography requires considerable reflection and an awareness of the risks, but it also provides great opportunities (after all, you already know a lot about the field and, as an insider, you also have access to silent knowledge as understood by Michael Polanyi). Moreover, the risks can be minimised through the triangulation of methods and studying other supporters' circles, not only our own. Besides, as Kostera pointed out, the principle she refers to has come to be questioned in ethnology... It seems that sometimes only insiders can question the conclusions drawn so far on a given culture; for example, Aldona Kobus in her work as a participant shows "the Polish specificity of fan culture, which essentially undermines most of the theses adopted in research on fandom" (2018, back cover). The

undoubted advantage is that time is saved "entering the field"[1]. However, I think it is unacceptable (for ethical reasons) to study one's own group (although also a different group, but also meaning full participation) without the members' knowledge; in my opinion, the group's consent should always be obtained[2]. I know that the fans surveyed are aware of the dual identity of a fan-scientist.

Now I will describe the situation from the perspective of a Legia Warszawa fan (I have been a fan for one year less than my junior colleague. My three biggest rival teams are, in no particular order, Widzew Łódź, Wisła Kraków and Lech Poznań. My comments may therefore lend plausibility to my colleague's description of the impact of his stadium initiation on how he identified these three main rivals. The moments in my memory relating to the teams we both consider rivals (Lech, Widzew) are the same as my co-author's (it was impossible not to know of the 'stolen' championship of 1993 quite simply because one of the chants is: "Your title wasn't won on the pitch, Lech Poznań is a son of a bitch"). I associate Wisła most with the first decade of the 21st century and its prime position in the top club category, but I also remember clearly that it was Legia that twice dislodged it from the top spot (2002, 2006).

I have some additional ethnographic recommendations. In my opinion, it is worth analysing the verbal folklore in the stadium chants that creates, despite the resistance to them, a kind of collective system of meanings. It includes disparaging the "opposing team through the use of sexual labels", as noted by Radosław Kossakowski (2014, p. 108–109). It seems to me that this is rarely the case with teams from smaller cities or those without many years of experience in the league. However paradoxical this may sound, the use of the word "fucking" and slightly longer lyrics may signal the extent to which a rival is important.

## Conclusions

In our paper, we have shown that the autoethnographic approach can be extremely useful not only in our own research on football fan culture, but also for conceptualising the more extensive research project on the subject. Our autoethnographic reflection allowed us to define the purpose of our subsequent research and to formulate the thesis that in the football fan culture around a team there is both a hierarchy of rivals in the collective (that transcends the entire community) and some individual dimensions, and these dimensions need not be overlapping. This conclusion is also justified by the general definition of football rivalry: a multidimensional competition and/or conflict between two or more groups of fans supporting their football clubs and having different collective football identities (Dmowski, 2013, pp. 2-4). The autoethnographic account allowed us to formulate a secondary hypothesis: not everyone who opposes my team is a "rival" in the strict sense of the word, and not every rival can be or even is an opponent physically. In football fan culture, there is a complex system

[1] Time-saving was one of Monika Kostera's motives for using direct observation rather than participant observation (2005, p. 117).

[2] The ethics of this kind of research can be found in a popular work by Martyn Hammersley and Paul Atkinson (2000, pp. 77–78, 269–271), including the case of Simon Holdaway, a police officer and sociology expert, and his research involving the police.

of agreements and alliances between the supporters who must vociferously cheer on the team (the ultras) and the violence (the hooligans) of individual teams, and this phenomenon evolves and changes over time.

We have also strengthened the methodological credibility of football fan autoethnography as a viable strategy or research method in this field. However, there is a still one issue to be addressed: which autoethnographic approach is best suited to this field of research – the analytical one or the evocative one? Or rather, is the approach taken here analytical or evocative? But before we can answer that question, we have to ask whether there really is a contradiction here. On the one hand, Bochner and Ellis (2016, pp. 60-61) see the use of analytical autoethnography as a means of incorporating autoethnography into the mainstream social sciences – in their view analytic autoethnography is about reversing evocative autoethnography; it "wants to take what is unruly, vulnerable, rebellious, and creative about autoethnography and bring it back under the control of reason and analysis". As they see it, "in an analytic approach, stories are used either to illustrate a proposition or to reach a theoretical explanation akin to the 'discussion' section of traditional research reports. Analytic autoethnographers tend to treat stories as data useful for abstracting and generalizing" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 210). On the other hand, in their analysis of Anderson's work, Bochner and Ellis state that it

> blurs the boundaries between evocative and analytic autoethnography. Anderson claims to be blending emotional autoethnography with the theoretical goals of analytic ethnography, but he remains 'committed to an analytic model of autoethnographic writing'. (…) Though he is still wed to thinking about the value of story in terms of its role in the development of sociological analysis of larger trends, Anderson now says that he is seeking self-clarification—to understand things about himself better by integrating personal stories with analysis. (2016, p. 211)

We are strongly convinced that our research falls into the analytical paradigm of autoethnography. In this case the use of a personal account of the emotions fans attach to selected football rivals helps us to understand the general phenomenon and outline its features, and that leads us into analytical reflexivity and a commitment to theoretical analysis. However, we should not forget Bochner's key piece of advice:

> If calling your study 'analytic autoethnography' and using your lived experiences to formulate abstractions and generalizations allows you to sneak the precepts of evocative autoethnography into your more traditional work, well so much the better. You have to start somewhere. (…) If you are planning to do something akin to analytic autoethnography, the criteria should be more social scientific, such as considerations of validity, data collection, categorization processes, and generalizability across cases. Given that evocative autoethnography generally falls into the areas of interpretive/humanist and creative/artistic, both with critical elements, most of you doing this work will not be so concerned with these issues. (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, pp. 211-212)

We believe that our research and conclusions have demonstrated the usefulness of adopting an analytical autoethnographic approach (thus more focused on generalisation than on emotional vulnerability) to the analysis of the world of football fans, but that does not mean abandoning the evocative approach.

Finally, we have contributed to the existing knowledge on the status of the researcher–supporter and outlined some of the previously unknown methodological risks they face (the place and form of the research, qualitative research on larger groups of supporters. In addition, we have identified the most important areas (fan songs and chants) requiring further exploration, which should be the next step towards gaining a better understanding of football fan culture. Thus, we have achieved the basic goals we set ourselves before writing this paper and positively verified its main thesis. We hope that the fruit of our work will inspire autoethnographic research into the culture of football fans, and not only by "deeply immersed" fan researchers.

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