

Football as 'social world': conceptual considerations and a case study

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The paper argues that the study of grass roots football can substantially benefit from a 'social worlds perspective' as it has been introduced by Anselm Strauss. In a first step, a general outline of the theoretical argument and its applicability to football will be given, followed by a case study that will illustrate the empirical scope of the approach.

The sociology of social worlds approach conceptualizes football as a sphere of action with its own special stock of knowledge. The football world is segmented into various subworlds (amateur and professional worlds, fan clubs, the world of referees, etc.), it intersects with neighbouring worlds (like the media or the business world) and it uses strategies of legitimation to maintain its position within the wider social world. The social worlds perspective allows for the empirical analysis of football without presuming the relevance of sociological categories like race, class or gender. Instead, it offers an approach to everyday life knowledge within the football world and to the social categories that are made relevant by those active in the various subworlds of football.

Einfach (simple, ordinary, common) is a term that features prominently within the German grass roots football world. It is evoked by coaches when they instruct their player, by chairmen when they discuss their club's philosophy and by fans when they comment on players. *Einfach* is surrounded by a field of related concepts (like *bescheiden/modest*, *anständig/decent* or *freundlich/friendly*) that stretches to a variety of different phenomena (like sports facilities and food). *Einfach* gains its discursive meaning as the opposite to the spectacular, the fancy and the exaggerated that is characteristic of the global professional football world. Amateur and professional worlds are linked together in the football world (since, for example, they are part of an integrated league system and under the umbrella of joint associations and because amateur players are, as fans, also integrated into the professional world). Being linked to the 'big game' makes it a constant necessity for the members of the amateur world to distance themselves in order to maintain their authenticity and integrity. On the face of it, *einfach* seems to lean towards a 'taste of necessity' and a milieu of 'the common people'. However, on closer inspection it also appears to appeal to member of the amateur world with a larger 'global volume of capital' and has no clear basis in a social class. It is also a cognitive bridge between different ethnic milieus within the grass roots world.