

STUDYING FAMILY, WORK, AND MIGRATION IN SMALL RETAIL: An Ethnographic Approach to Family-Run Migrant Kiosks

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Research on work and family has long been structured around an analytical distinction between the private sphere of family life and the public sphere of paid employment. Classical sociological accounts conceptualized the family primarily as a site of reproduction and socialization, while economic activity was located outside the household (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Although this separation has been widely criticized, it continues to shape much contemporary research on work–family relations, particularly in policy-oriented and quantitative strands of the literature.

Family-owned small businesses challenge this conceptual division in fundamental ways. In such enterprises, family and work are not merely balanced or coordinated but deeply intertwined. The business often operates as a family project in which economic activity, care work, learning, and identity formation are organized across kinship relations and generations (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). This overlap is especially pronounced in micro-enterprises, where spatial proximity, informal labor arrangements, and flexible role expectations blur the boundaries between household and business. Within sociology and related fields, the concept of family embeddedness has been central to understanding how entrepreneurial activities are shaped by family structures, resources, and obligations. Studies show that family ties influence opportunity recognition, access to capital, labor allocation, and risk management (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Jennings & McDougald, 2007). At the same time, research on work–family conflicts and enrichment highlight how competing demands between paid work and family life generate stress and role overload but also enable the transfer of skills and mutual reinforcement (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). However, much of this literature implicitly assumes a structural separation between the workplace and the family home, even when analyzing conflict or spillover. As a result, family-run micro-businesses, particularly in low-margin retail and service sectors, remain under-theorized. Existing research

tends to focus on growth-oriented firms, succession in medium-sized enterprises, or formally registered family businesses, thereby overlooking small, precarious enterprises in which family members' everyday lives are inseparable from the business itself (Ram & Jones, 2008).

From an educational perspective, family businesses are not only economic units but also distinctive sites of informal learning, moral socialization, and generational ordering. Families are commonly understood as primary spaces of care, protection, and emotional security. When the family simultaneously functions as an enterprise, this caring role becomes morally charged with expectations of contribution, loyalty, and shared responsibility. Participation in family labor is often framed not merely as work but as helping, supporting, or "being there for the family," blurring the distinction between care and economic necessity (Katz, 2004; Tronto, 2013). Within this context, children and adolescents acquire a wide range of skills, work habits, and dispositions through everyday participation in business activities, often outside formal educational frameworks. Drawing on theories of situated learning, such involvement can be understood as legitimate peripheral participation, through which younger family members gradually move toward more central roles in the enterprise (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Research shows that family businesses foster the accumulation of practical skills, entrepreneurial know-how, emotional labor capacities, and social competencies that may translate into human, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Rogoff, 2003). At the same time, access to such learning opportunities is uneven and shaped by gender, age, and migration histories. Family enterprises also function as arenas in which generational and familial order is produced and reproduced. Work becomes a medium through which authority, responsibility, and expectations for the future are negotiated across generations. Older family members may claim decision-making power based on ownership or experience, while younger members are positioned as learners, helpers, or successors, sometimes with limited room to articulate alternative aspirations (Danes et al., 2009; Valdez, 2016). Educational trajectories, vocational choices, and notions of autonomy are thus closely intertwined with family obligations and business needs. Examining family businesses from an educational perspective therefore requires attention not only to learning outcomes but also to the relational and power-laden processes through which work, care, and family life are organized.

These familial and economic processes, however, are rarely examined in conjunction with economic vulnerability and the long working hours that characterize many small family enterprises. Bringing these strands together reveals several analytical tensions that structure everyday life in family-owned small businesses:

- First, there is a persistent tension between economic security and success on the one hand, and family relationships, affection, and care on the other. Economic survival may require long opening hours, unpaid family labor, and constant availability, which can strain emotional bonds and caregiving capacities.
- Second, family enterprises are characterized by a tension between role diffusion and formal hierarchy. Family members often occupy multiple roles simultaneously: as parents, spouses, children, and workers, leading to ambiguous authority relations and blurred responsibilities. While such flexibility can enhance resilience, it can also generate conflict, particularly when generational hierarchies intersect with business decisions (Danes et al., 2009).
- Third, and less frequently discussed, is the tension between autonomy and self-determination, often cited as a key motivation for self-employment, and obligation and moral indebtedness toward family members. Participation in the family business may be experienced as both an opportunity and a duty, especially for younger or migrant family members, raising questions about consent, aspiration, and constrained choice (Katz, 2004; Valdez, 2016).

Family enterprises thus constitute spaces in which learning, care, and family relations are closely intertwined with economic prosperity. They shape everyday understandings of responsibility, contribution, and belonging, while simultaneously transmitting skills, values, and expectations across generations. These processes are not uniform but vary according to social position, economic resources, and cultural context. In small, often precarious family businesses, such dynamics tend to be particularly dense, as economic survival, family cohesion, and intergenerational futures are negotiated simultaneously within the same social and spatial setting. This is especially evident in migrant family enterprises.

Migrant family-owned small businesses as a special case

Research on migrant entrepreneurship has consistently shown that migrant small business owners face structural conditions that differ markedly from those of non-migrant or native-born entrepreneurs. Compared to their local counterparts, migrant entrepreneurs are more likely to operate in low-margin sectors, face restricted access to formal credit, and encounter barriers related to language proficiency, legal knowledge, and regulatory complexity (Kloosterman, 2010; Ram et al., 2017). These constraints are

often compounded by experiences of racialization and discrimination in customer relations, supplier networks, and interactions with public authorities (Essers & Benschop, 2009). The mixed embeddedness approach emphasizes that migrant entrepreneurship emerges from the interaction between individual or ethnic resources and the opportunity structures of specific local markets, including regulation and welfare regimes (Kloosterman & Rath, 2006). Migrant entrepreneurs frequently compensate for limited institutional access by relying on informal practices, long working hours, and family-based labor arrangements. While self-employment is often framed as a strategy of upward mobility or autonomy, empirical studies highlight that it is frequently a response to blocked opportunities in the formal labor market, underemployment, or precarious employment trajectories (Light & Gold, 2000; Volery, 2007). As a result, migrant entrepreneurship is often characterized less by innovation and growth than by risk management and economic survival.

These challenges become particularly pronounced in family-run migrant small businesses, where economic vulnerability intersects with family relations and intergenerational dynamics. Research indicates that migrant enterprises are disproportionately organized as family businesses, not primarily due to cultural preferences but because family labor offers flexibility, trust, and cost reduction in contexts of limited financial capital and insecure legal or market positions (Ram & Jones, 2008; Valdez, 2016). Family members often substitute for formal employees, legal advisors, or accountants, compensating for gaps in institutional knowledge and professional expertise. At the same time, family-based organization intensifies specific tensions. Reliance on kinship networks may limit access to broader professional networks and external knowledge, reinforcing economic marginality. Unequal distributions of legal knowledge (particularly regarding taxation, licensing, or labor law) can place significant pressure on family members who act as informal intermediaries between the business and regulatory institutions. Moreover, experiences of discrimination and stigmatization may further strengthen inward-looking family solidarity while simultaneously restricting opportunities for expansion or integration into mainstream business environments (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Ram et al., 2017). Children, spouses, and extended kin may be drawn into the business not only as workers but as translators, cultural brokers, and emotional supporters, often without clear boundaries or formal recognition. Family-run migrant small businesses thus represent dense social formations in which economic activity, migration histories, and family life are negotiated simultaneously under conditions of heightened constraint.

Context – The Trinkhallenkultur in the Ruhr Area in Germany

The Ruhr área in western Germany is one of Europe's most emblematic industrial and migration regions. Shaped by rapid industrialization from the mid-nineteenth century onward, the region developed around coal mining, steel production, and large-scale industrial labor. This economic transformation attracted successive waves of intra-national and international migrants, including workers from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, later, so-called “guest workers,” particularly from Turkey, Southern Europe, and the Balkans. As a result, the Ruhr área has long been characterized by dense working-class neighborhoods, high population turnover, and a form of everyday multiculturalism rooted in shared labor histories rather than elite cosmopolitanism. Within this socio-historical context, kiosks (also known as Trinkhallen, Büdchen) emerged as a distinctive form of small-scale retail closely tied to industrial urban life. Unlike corner shops in other regions, Ruhr area kiosks developed in direct relation to the rhythms and needs of industrial labor. From the late nineteenth century onward, they were initially established as water kiosks intended to provide clean drinking and mineral water to shift-working miners, thereby contributing to public health and the prevention of alcohol consumption during working hours. This early health-oriented function, however, was quickly complemented and in practice overshadowed by the sale of newspapers, tobacco, sweets, and alcoholic beverages, transforming kiosks into multifunctional sites of daily supply and social exchange. Throughout the twentieth century, kiosks became a stable and culturally recognizable feature of the Ruhr area's urban landscape. Often located at street corners, near factory gates, or in residential neighborhoods, they functioned as what urban scholars later conceptualized as “third places”: accessible, informal spaces of interaction beyond home and workplace. At the same time, their economic position remained fragile. Limited retail space, restricted product ranges, long opening hours, and dependence on constant presence made kiosk operation a labor-intensive and often precarious form of self-employment. These structural vulnerabilities became more visible from the late twentieth century onward, as supermarkets extended opening hours, petrol stations expanded their retail offerings, and delivery services transformed everyday consumption patterns. Since the early 2000s, public and academic discourse has repeatedly diagnosed a process of an alleged but unconfirmed “kiosk decline” or “kiosk death”, pointing to the disappearance of traditional kiosks under conditions of intensified retail competition and rising operating costs. Paradoxically, it was precisely this perceived threat that triggered renewed cultural and political recognition. In 2021, kiosk culture

in North Rhine – Westphalia was officially inscribed on the state's list of intangible cultural heritage, acknowledging its historical, social, and symbolic significance for the region. Much of the existing literature accompanying this recognition, however, has focused on architectural, urban-cultural, or heritage-related dimensions, while the everyday realities of kiosk operators themselves have often remained in the background.

Historically, the operation of kiosks in the Ruhr area has been closely associated with socially marginalized groups. Much like similar institutions elsewhere in Europe, kiosk licenses were often granted to war invalids, widows of miners, or individuals excluded from stable employment, making the kiosk a means of subsistence at the margins of the formal labor market. This pattern positioned the kiosk as both an economic safety net and a socially embedded institution: a place where modest entrepreneurship, survival strategies, and neighborhood sociability intersected. From the outset, kiosks thus fulfilled a dual function, commercially modest but socially dense, providing everyday goods while simultaneously serving as informal meeting points within working-class districts. In contemporary Ruhr cities, the social composition of kiosk operators has changed markedly. Today, the majority of kiosks are operated by people with migration backgrounds, and many of these businesses are organized as family enterprises. For migrant entrepreneurs, kiosks offer a comparatively low-threshold entry into self-employment, requiring limited start-up capital and allowing the mobilization of family labor. This shift raises important questions about continuity and change. Have kiosks themselves transformed in their social function, or do they continue to operate according to long-established logics of marginal entrepreneurship and neighborhood embeddedness? To what extent do migrant-run kiosks function as spaces of arrival, integration, or informal support within super-diverse urban neighborhoods? And how are family life, economic survival, and social participation negotiated behind the counter of these small but symbolically charged enterprises?

Guiding Questions and Ethnographic Access

The methodological approach of this study is guided by a set of interrelated questions that emerge from the specific configuration of family, work, and migration in small, family-run kiosks. Rather than treating the kiosk solely as an economic unit, the study asks how family life is organized, experienced, and negotiated within a small entrepreneurial context under conditions of migration and economic precarity. Central to this perspective is the question of how family relations shape everyday work practices and, conversely, how

entrepreneurial demands restructure family roles, responsibilities, and forms of care. More specifically, the study is guided by three clusters of questions:

- First, how is family enacted and negotiated in the everyday operation of migrant-run kiosks? This includes questions of role allocation, intergenerational cooperation, gendered divisions of labor, and the moral meanings attached to participation in the family business.
- Second, what does the kiosk mean as a place—simultaneously a place of work, a family space, and a site of migration-related experiences? Here, the kiosk is understood not merely as a retail location but as a socially produced space in which belonging, familiarity, and recognition are actively created.
- Third, how does the kiosk function as a site of arrival and settlement for migrant families? This perspective draws attention to processes of place-making and home-making, in which economic activity, social interaction, and everyday routines contribute to a sense of anchoring in the host society (Blunt & Dowling, 2006; Ralph & Staeheli, 2011).

Approaching kiosks through these questions foregrounds their position at the intersection of multiple vulnerabilities. Migrant kiosk operators often occupy structurally disadvantaged positions as small entrepreneurs, operating in low-margin sectors with limited institutional support. Their businesses frequently rely on informal practices, extended working hours, and unpaid family labor, situating them at the blurred boundaries between formal and informal economies. At the same time, migration-related factors such as insecure legal statuses, language barriers, and experiences of discrimination shape interactions with customers, authorities, and researchers alike. Families running kiosks thus constitute a group that is not only economically precarious but also socially exposed, making the investigation of their everyday lives methodologically sensitive. These characteristics pose specific challenges for empirical research (on research ethics in ethnography Eisewicht & Hitzler, 2023; Schmid & Eisewicht, 2022). Much of what structures family life in migrant small businesses unfolds in backstage settings: behind the counter, outside formal business hours, or within intimate family interactions that are not easily verbalized. Moreover, kiosk operators may be wary of external scrutiny, particularly when researchers are perceived as potential representatives of regulatory authorities or as outsiders unfamiliar with the constraints of small-scale self-employment. Standardized interviews or survey-based approaches risk reproducing socially desirable narratives or missing the situational, embodied, and relational dimensions of everyday practice.

Ethnography offers a particularly well-suited approach to address these challenges. As a field-sensitive and reflexive research strategy, ethnography emphasizes prolonged engagement, participant observation, and attention to context-specific meanings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Rather than assuming transparent access to actors' perspectives, it treats access, trust, and interaction as integral components of the research process. This is especially relevant in research on marginalized or low-visibility groups, where everyday practices and implicit norms cannot be fully captured through verbal accounts alone. Ethnographic approaches have been widely used to study the intersections of migration, family, and work. Studies on migrant labor, ethnic entrepreneurship, and family economies demonstrate how everyday practices, moral obligations, and survival strategies are embedded in social relations that extend beyond formal organizational structures (Basch et al., 1994; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 1994; Portes & Zhou, 1992). Research on family labor and informal economies further shows that economic activity within families often operates according to logics that differ from those assumed in formal employment relations, requiring methods attentive to ambiguity, contradiction, and negotiation (Stack, 1974; Smith & Wallerstein, 1992). In this sense, ethnography is a methodologically plural program combining participant observation, informal conversations, interviews, and the analysis of documents and material arrangements. Its reflexive dimension is crucial: researchers must continuously reflect on their own positioning, role performance, and the effects of their presence in the field. By engaging with kiosks as lived spaces ethnography allows for a nuanced understanding of how family, work, and migration are practically intertwined in everyday life.

Data Collection

Conducting ethnographic research on family-run migrant kiosks requires particular attention to the conditions under which field access becomes possible. Unlike many organizational settings, kiosks are semi-public spaces: they are formally open to customers, yet access to the perspectives and everyday practices of operators (especially "behind the counter") remains restricted. Field access, therefore, cannot be treated as a preliminary step that precedes data collection but must be understood as an integral part of the ethnographic process itself (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; Gengler & Ezzell, 2018).

Initial access to kiosks was generally unproblematic at the level of customer interaction. Researchers could enter the shop, purchase goods, and engage in brief exchanges without raising suspicion. However, attempts to move beyond transactional interaction toward conversations about the

business, family involvement, or working conditions were often met with hesitation or refusal. Such guardedness reflects the structural position of kiosk operators, who frequently experience inspections, regulatory controls, or stigmatizing public discourse and may therefore perceive researchers as potential threats rather than neutral observers. Drawing on ethnographic access literature, these reactions can be understood as typical of low-visibility and vulnerable fields, where actors have little incentive to expose themselves to external scrutiny (Laurila, 1997; Kaufmann & Wilz, 2024). Rather than interpreting failed access as a methodological setback, the research treated these moments as analytically meaningful, providing insight into operators' perceptions of risk, trust, and institutional power.

One key strategy for improving access involved careful attention to timing (Eisewicht, 2025). Visits during peak business hours, when customer flow was high, rarely led to sustained interaction. In contrast, evening or late-night hours, particularly in peripheral neighborhoods with lower foot traffic, proved more conducive to conversation. In these moments of relative calm, kiosk operators were more likely to express curiosity about the research project or to engage in informal talk. Ethnographic presence extended beyond brief visits. Researchers spent time "hanging around" kiosks, observing routines, customer interactions, and spatial arrangements without immediately pursuing formal interviews. This form of prolonged, low-key presence helped normalize the researchers' role and reduced the perception of intrusion, a practice widely described as central to ethnographic fieldwork (Whyte, 1984; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Importantly, such presence also allowed researchers to identify situational openings for conversation that emerged organically from everyday interactions rather than from predefined interview schedules.

Researchers entered the field primarily in the role of customers, a position that enabled initial legitimacy and minimized disruption. From this position, conversational entry points were often created through attention to products, services, or spatial details (such as unusual goods, multilingual signage, or extended service offerings). These seemingly mundane observations frequently opened pathways to broader discussions about supply chains, customer relations, family labor, and migration histories. This approach aligns with ethnographic understandings of access as relational and performative, emphasizing role management and impression work rather than formalized recruitment procedures (Goffman, 1959; Gengler & Ezzell, 2018). Rather than relying on consent procedures alone, access was cultivated through everyday interaction, reciprocity (e.g. purchases), and responsiveness to the rhythms of kiosk work. In some cases, conversations preceded any discussion of recording or formal interviewing, allowing trust to develop before research procedures were made explicit.

A critical methodological distinction in kiosk ethnography lies between frontstage interactions with customers and backstage practices among family members and operators. While frontstage behavior often follows established norms of friendliness and service, backstage interactions reveal how work is coordinated, how family members negotiate responsibilities, and how challenges are managed (Goffman, 1959). Gaining access to these backstage moments, such as being invited behind the counter or into informal seating areas, marked a qualitative shift in field relations. Such invitations were rare and contingent on accumulated trust. They cannot be forced or scheduled but emerge from repeated encounters and demonstrated sensitivity to the constraints of kiosk operation. Once granted, backstage access enabled observation of practices that would remain invisible in interview-only research, including informal accounting, family coordination of shifts, or discussions about regulatory concerns (Jerolmack & Khan, 2014).

Given the precarious position of many kiosk operators, ethical considerations were central throughout the research process. Researchers avoided pressuring participants into formal interviews and respected refusals without attempting to renegotiate them. Anonymity and confidentiality were emphasized, particularly in relation to discussions of informal practices or experiences with authorities. Reflexive attention to the researchers' own positioning (as academics, outsiders, and occasional customers) was maintained throughout the fieldwork, in line with calls for reflexivity in ethnographic research in unequal and sensitive settings (England, 1994). In sum, the application of ethnography in this context relied on a flexible, adaptive approach that treated access not as a hurdle to be overcome but as a key site of empirical insight. The strategies described here – attention to timing, sustained presence, role sensitivity, and reflexive negotiation – were essential for studying family-run migrant kiosks as lived spaces of work, family life, and migration. Migrant kiosk operators can be understood as a particularly vulnerable research population, positioned at the intersection of small-scale entrepreneurship, migration, and intensified regulatory scrutiny. Research on migrant-owned micro-enterprises highlights how these actors are disproportionately subject to inspections, informal surveillance, and moralized public discourses that frame them as suspicious, non-compliant, or marginal economic actors (Bloch & McKay, 2016). Such experiences shape everyday interactions with representatives of the majority society and often foster a cautious or defensive stance toward outsiders, including researchers. Studies in migration and urban ethnography show that refusals, silences, or strategic self-presentation should not be interpreted as lack of cooperation but as rational responses to asymmetric power relations and histories of institutional mistrust (Schuster, 2011; De Genova, 2002).

From a methodological perspective, these dynamics foreground the importance of reflexivity in ethnographic research. Ethnographers are not neutral observers but enter the field as socially positioned actors whose ethnicity, language, class, and institutional affiliations shape access and interaction (Mullings, 1999). In encounters with migrant entrepreneurs, researchers associated with academic or majority institutions may inadvertently be perceived as extensions of regulatory or controlling authorities. Ethnography, however, provides analytical tools to address rather than obscure these asymmetries. By treating moments of resistance, hesitation, or rejection as data, reflexive ethnography allows researchers to reconstruct how vulnerability, power, and boundary-making are enacted in everyday encounters (Duneier, 1999; Bourgois & Schonberg, 2009). In this sense, positional reflexivity is not only an ethical requirement but a substantive methodological resource for understanding the social worlds of migrant kiosk operators.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the ethnographic material followed an iterative and reflexive process that unfolded alongside fieldwork rather than after its completion. Observations, informal conversations, interviews, and fieldnotes were continuously revisited, compared, and refined as new insights emerged. This circular movement between data collection and analysis is characteristic of ethnographic research and allows emerging patterns, tensions, and contradictions to inform subsequent observations and interactions (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Analytical work thus began in the field, through selective attention, memo writing, and ongoing reflection on situations of access, refusal, and engagement.

A central analytical strategy consisted of comparing practices and narratives across different kiosks, families, and interactional situations. Particular attention was paid to recurring themes related to family involvement, economic vulnerability, migration histories, and the spatial organization of kiosks as places of work and social interaction. Frontstage encounters with customers were systematically contrasted with backstage interactions among family members and operators, allowing for the reconstruction of how meanings, roles, and responsibilities shifted across contexts. In addition, moments of tension—such as conflicts over labor division, expressions of exhaustion, or accounts of regulatory pressure—were treated as analytically productive rather than exceptional, as they often revealed underlying normative expectations and structural constraints. Reflexivity played a key role throughout the analytical process. Researchers' own experiences of access, rejection, and

role negotiation were documented and analyzed as part of the data *corpus*. Rather than being treated as methodological noise, these interactions were used to examine how migrant kiosk operators perceive and manage encounters with representatives of majority institutions. Analytic memos were employed to reflect on how researchers' positionality shaped what could be observed, said, or withheld, thereby contributing to a more nuanced interpretation of the material (Emerson et al., 2011; on writing Pfadenhauer & Eisewicht, 2025).

To systematize analysis across a heterogeneous body of data, elements of Grounded Theory methodology were applied, following the approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This involved an open coding process in which fieldnotes, and interview *transcripts* were examined line by line to identify relevant actions, meanings, and interactional patterns. Codes were continuously compared across cases using the constant comparative method, allowing similarities and differences between kiosks, family constellations, and migration trajectories to become visible. Sampling decisions were guided by theoretical considerations rather than representativeness, as emerging categories directed attention toward contrasting cases, such as kiosks with different family arrangements or varying degrees of economic stability. Throughout this process, theoretical sensitivity (the researcher's capacity to recognize what is significant in the data and to relate empirical observations to existing theoretical concepts) was actively cultivated (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This sensitivity was informed both by engagement with relevant literature on family, migration, and small-scale entrepreneurship and by sustained immersion in the field. Selective coding was used in later stages of analysis to integrate categories around core themes, such as family solidarity, economic precarity, and the kiosk as a space of work and arrival. Rather than aiming at formal theory generation, the grounded-theory-informed analysis served to develop empirically grounded conceptual insights that remain closely tied to the lived realities of family-run migrant kiosks.

Positive Aspects

Family and work emerge in the interviews not as separable spheres but as deeply entangled dimensions of everyday life in migrant-run kiosks. Rather than presenting the family business as a voluntary entrepreneurial choice, many interviewees frame the kiosk as a response to structural constraint and economic vulnerability. Decisions to enter self-employment are repeatedly described as being taken "as a family," often under conditions of financial pressure, limited alternatives in the labor market, and negative experiences with welfare institutions. In one interview, a kiosk operator recounts how the family rejected social

assistance after being told that eligibility would require selling their car while yielding only a minimal monthly payment: “They told us we had to sell our car for basic support... Then we went to the bank, took a loan, and said: we’ll become self-employed, we opened the kiosk”. Here, the kiosk appears not as an opportunity for accumulation but as a collectively borne survival strategy, one that mobilizes family resources to avoid perceived dependency and loss of dignity. Economic vulnerability is not only articulated in abstract terms but grounded in concrete memories of deprivation. The same interview recounts periods of extreme scarcity, when everyday subsistence became a collective challenge: “We were really in poverty... there were times when we couldn’t even manage to buy one bread roll to share”. Such statements highlight that family solidarity precedes entrepreneurial organization. It is because family members share hardship that they later share responsibility for the kiosk. Across interviews, family is often the condition that makes the business possible.

This becomes particularly evident in the organization of labor and care. Interviewees describe highly compressed daily routines in which paid work, unpaid family labor, household tasks, and recovery from physical exhaustion are tightly interwoven. One operator details a rotating schedule between herself and her husband that coordinates kiosk shifts, shopping, paperwork, household duties, and short periods of rest: “Three days a week I open in the morning. When my husband comes at two o’clock, I go shopping, I do paperwork, whatever has to be done. If nothing else is needed, I go home and sleep for two hours to recover, then I come back... I send my husband home later and I stay until midnight”. This *description* illustrates how family labor compensates for the absence of employees and formal support structures. Rest and care appear as fragile, provisional achievements rather than guaranteed rights. Health-related limitations further underline the precariousness of this arrangement. After a medical operation, the same operator explains that the family decided to close the kiosk one day per week, as a necessity for physical survival rather than work-life-balance: “After the surgery I don’t have the strength like before... so we said: one day we close, so we can switch off and get some rest”. Importantly, illness does not lead to substitution through hired labor but to temporary closure, revealing how closely the viability of the business is tied to the bodily capacity of family members. Family solidarity here takes the form of mutual adjustment to vulnerability, even at the cost of reduced income.

Intergenerational arrangements constitute another central dimension of family–work entanglement. In several interviews, children (most often sons) are involved in kiosk operations, typically framed as “helping out” rather than formal employment. A young man working in his father’s kiosk explains: “Through my father, it’s a family business. I’m just filling in for him... on

weekends I help him”. This framing downplays obligation while normalizing participation as part of family life. At the same time, such involvement facilitates the acquisition of practical knowledge about customers, products, and neighborhood routines, often described as tacit expertise built over time: knowing “exactly what people want” or how demand fluctuates across days and seasons. In other cases, intergenerational relations are articulated more explicitly in terms of hierarchy and ownership. One interviewee refers to his son as the formal head of the business: “That’s my son, he is the boss”. This statement points to family enterprises as sites where authority, responsibility, and status are negotiated across generations. While family labor is often presented as flexible and supportive, these hierarchies structure decision-making and shape expectations about loyalty and succession. Extended kin also appear as labor resources; one operator notes that an uncle regularly helps in the kiosk, illustrating how family boundaries expand to include relatives when economic necessity requires it.

Beyond the household, the interviews reveal how notions of family extend into relationships with customers and the surrounding neighborhood. Several operators describe their interactions with regular customers in explicitly familial terms, emphasizing emotional closeness, trust, and moral responsibility. One kiosk operator explains: “I talk with my customers like family... that’s why I have so many regulars. You have to do it with love, many do it just for money and leave humanity behind. I don’t need to get rich, but I must not forget my humanity”. Here, the kiosk becomes a space of relational labor in which economic exchange is embedded in ongoing social ties. Family is invoked as a moral framework that distinguishes this mode of operation from purely profit-oriented retail. Practices such as allowing customers to buy on credit (“running a tab”) further illustrate the kiosk’s role as a node of informal care within the neighborhood. Operators describe carefully calibrated decisions about whom to trust, often linked to knowledge of customers’ income cycles, such as welfare payment dates (“You have to be careful who you let run a tab... otherwise you won’t survive”). One interview details how credit is typically extended until the beginning of the month, when social benefits are received, while simultaneously emphasizing the risks involved. Field observations corroborate this logic, documenting handwritten notebooks with names and amounts and customers calculating their own debts aloud, underscoring the mutual trust on which these arrangements rely. These practices position kiosk operators as intermediaries between economic scarcity in the neighborhood and a moral economy of support.

Migration shapes all these dynamics and provides a broader frame within which family, work, and trust are negotiated. Interviewees repeatedly refer

to experiences of control, inspection, and suspicion, particularly in interactions with authorities. Such experiences inform a general caution toward outsiders and contribute to a guarded communication style. In one interview, broader reflections on legality, migration status, and public discourse reveal how operators perceive themselves as subject to heightened scrutiny, reinforcing the need for discretion. This context helps explain why researchers, especially those associated with majority institutions, may encounter hesitation or refusal when seeking access, a pattern also documented in the accompanying ethnographic field notes. At the same time, the kiosk emerges as a site of arrival and belonging. Operators articulate strong attachments to Germany as a place of life and work while maintaining emotional ties to countries of origin. One interviewee summarizes this ambivalence succinctly: “I can’t give it up, Germany is also my home... but there, I would have family yet no circle of friends”. The kiosk plays a central role in resolving this tension by anchoring migrant families within local social networks. Through daily interactions, regular customers, and routines of care, the kiosk becomes a space where home is actively created.

Taken together, the interviews based on the ethnographic field work show that family and work in migrant-run kiosks are organized through a dense web of mutual dependence, moral obligation, and pragmatic adaptation. Family functions simultaneously as economic infrastructure, care arrangement, and moral reference point, extending beyond the household into neighborhood relations. These findings underscore that understanding kiosks as family enterprises requires attention not only to labor and income but also to vulnerability, health, migration histories, and the everyday practices through which solidarity is enacted under conditions of constraint.

Critical Aspects

Despite its strengths, the ethnographic approach applied in this study is subject to several limitations that should be critically reflected upon. These limitations are not merely technical constraints but are closely linked to the specific characteristics of the field, the positionality of the researchers, and the ethical requirements of research with vulnerable populations:

- First, access to certain practices remained structurally limited. While ethnography enabled close observation of everyday routines, family interactions, and informal coordination of work, it did not provide systematic access to illegal or semi-legal practices that may occur in kiosk operations, such as undeclared labor, tax evasion, or illicit

sales. Given the heightened regulatory scrutiny experienced by migrant kiosk operators, such practices are particularly sensitive and unlikely to be disclosed to researchers perceived as outsiders or representatives of majority institutions. As a result, the study captures how operators talk about legality and risk but cannot fully reconstruct hidden economic practices.

- Second, field access was selective and uneven. The ethnographic strategy relied on repeated presence, informal interaction, and voluntary participation. Kiosks whose operators were strongly distrustful of outsiders, under acute time pressure, or experiencing severe conflict were less likely to grant access. Consequently, the material may overrepresent cases in which a minimum level of trust could be established, potentially underrepresenting the most precarious or conflict-laden family enterprises.
- Third, the semi-public character of kiosks shaped what could be observed. Although kiosks are publicly accessible spaces, many central family negotiations, such as conflicts, financial decisions, or emotional strain, take place outside opening hours or in private settings. Even when backstage access was granted, observation remained situational and contingent. This limits the extent to which family dynamics can be observed longitudinally or in moments of acute crisis.
- Fourth, the researchers' positionality as members of the majority society introduced asymmetries that could not be fully neutralized. Differences in language, class, institutional affiliation, and migration status shaped interactions in the field and likely influenced what participants chose to share, emphasize, or withhold. While reflexive ethnography allows these dynamics to be analyzed as data, they nevertheless constrain access to certain perspectives—particularly those associated with fear of sanctions, discrimination, or social stigma.
- Fifth, the study is contextually specific. Focusing on kiosks in Dortmund and the Ruhr area allows for a rich, historically grounded analysis but limits generalizability. The findings cannot be directly transferred to other forms of migrant entrepreneurship, other regions, or national contexts with different regulatory regimes, welfare systems, or migration histories. The study aims for analytical rather than statistical generalization.

Taken together, these limitations highlight that ethnographic research in migrant family enterprises necessarily involves trade-offs between depth, access, and ethical responsibility. Rather than undermining the validity of the

findings, they delineate the boundaries within which the insights presented here should be interpreted.

Contributions and Recommendations

This chapter has presented an ethnographic approach to studying family-run migrant kiosks that foregrounds the entanglement of family life, work, and migration under conditions of economic vulnerability. In conclusion, this section summarizes the central methodological contributions of the study and formulates recommendations for future research on family enterprises, migration, and everyday economies.

A first contribution lies in conceptualizing ethnography as an access-sensitive approach to semi-public, family-run businesses. Kiosks occupy an ambiguous position between public accessibility and social closure: while they are formally open to customers, access to family dynamics, backstage practices, and sensitive topics remains restricted. This study demonstrates that field access in such contexts cannot be treated as a prerequisite to data collection but must be understood as an integral part of the research process. Moments of hesitation, refusal, or selective openness are not methodological failures but provide insight into operators' experiences of regulation, mistrust, and vulnerability. For example, the authors experienced skepticism and rejection as soon as they disclosed themselves as researchers, shifting the interaction from an informal customer relation to a formal interview setting. Treating access itself as data allows researchers to reconstruct how power, risk, and legitimacy are negotiated in everyday interactions. A second contribution concerns the study of family beyond the household. By focusing on kiosks as family workplaces, the ethnographic approach makes visible how family relations are enacted, reorganized, and strained within entrepreneurial contexts. Family appears not only as a private sphere of care but as an economic infrastructure that mobilizes labor, absorbs risk, and compensates for limited institutional support. Observing family practices in the workplace enables a processual understanding of "doing family" that would remain inaccessible through interview-based or household-centered designs alone. This perspective contributes to family studies and educational research by highlighting informal learning, intergenerational coordination, and moral obligations as situated, everyday practices. Third, the study contributes to research on migrant entrepreneurship by moving beyond success–failure narratives and growth-oriented perspectives. Ethnographic attention to daily routines, exhaustion, health concerns, and moral economies reveals migrant family businesses as sites of endurance rather than accumulation. This approach

challenges idealized representations of entrepreneurial autonomy and instead emphasizes how self-employment often functions as a strategy of survival under constrained conditions. Methodologically, this underscores the value of ethnography for capturing dimensions of work and family life that are poorly reflected in survey data or formal business indicators. Finally, the study advances reflexivity as an analytic resource rather than a purely ethical obligation. The researchers' positionality as members of the majority society shaped access, interaction, and interpretation throughout the fieldwork. Rather than attempting to neutralize these asymmetries, the study systematically reflected on how they structured encounters in the field. Experiences of skepticism, guardedness, or silence were incorporated into the analysis, enabling a more nuanced understanding of migrant kiosk operators' relations to institutions, authorities, and outsiders. This demonstrates how reflexive ethnography can transform positional constraints into sources of empirical insight.

Several methodological lessons emerge from the research process. First, access in vulnerable and low-visibility fields requires time, repetition, and situational sensitivity. Short visits or formal recruitment strategies are rarely sufficient; instead, prolonged presence and attentiveness to the rhythms of everyday work are crucial. Second, meaningful conversations often precede formal consent and recording. Informal exchanges, small talk, and repeated encounters can establish trust before research intentions are explicitly articulated. Third, ethnographic observation is indispensable for understanding the overlap of family and work. Interviews alone tend to reproduce normative narratives of solidarity and cohesion, whereas observation allows researchers to identify tensions, fatigue, and unspoken hierarchies. Fourth, ethical research practice in such contexts often entails restraint rather than maximal data extraction. Respecting refusals, avoiding pressure, and accepting partial access are central to maintaining trust and minimizing harm. Finally, collaboration among researchers and systematic memo writing proved essential for maintaining analytic coherence and reflexive awareness across the fieldwork and analysis phases.

Building on these insights, several recommendations can be formulated for future research. At the design level, studies of family-run migrant enterprises would benefit from longitudinal approaches that capture long-term dynamics such as health trajectories, business succession, or intergenerational mobility. Including multiple family members, across generations and genders, can further illuminate how responsibilities and aspirations are negotiated over time. At the methodological level, future research should put more emphasis on the systematic analysis of moments of access refusal, silence, or withdrawal as empirical material, which has only been rudimentarily examined in the

present study. Multilingual research teams and culturally diverse fieldworkers may further enhance access and interpretation in super-diverse urban contexts. At the thematic level, greater attention should be paid to the health implications of family-based self-employment, the educational effects of children's involvement in family businesses, and the role of small retail spaces as sites of arrival and belonging in migrant neighborhoods. Such perspectives can deepen the understanding of how economic, familial, and migratory processes intersect in everyday life.

In conclusion, this chapter demonstrates that ethnography offers a powerful methodological framework for studying family, work, and migration in small, family-run enterprises. Ethnographic research can reveal the relational, moral, and embodied dimensions of everyday entrepreneurship. While the findings are contextually grounded in the Ruhr area, the methodological insights developed here are transferable to other settings in which family life, economic vulnerability, and migration intersect. As such, the chapter contributes to ongoing methodological debates in family research, migration studies, and qualitative inquiry more broadly.

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