

Seminar 15: (zoom link) Ethnographic Methods in Homelessness Research: Reflections, Challenges and Values

Chair: Matthias Drilling, CH and Lyn Sikic-Micanovic, HR

Esther Mühlethaler, Paula Greiner, CH: Using Ethnographic Methods in Homelessness Research – comparing Swiss and Croatian research experiences



Esther Mühlethaler has an academic background in social anthropology and migration and citizenship studies and works since 2019 as research associate at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (School of Social Work). She is involved in an ethnographic research project on homelessness which explores pathways to social inclusion and compares contexts and challenges in Swiss and Croatian cities.

Paula Greiner graduated in Sociology and Anthropology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb. Her work experience includes working as a research analyst intern in the Croatian IOM office and as a project assistant in the Ministry of Interior -- Croatia European Migration Network (EMN) which is the National Contact Point for the Republic of Croatia. She joined the research project «Exploring Homelessness and Pathways to Social Inclusion: A Comparative Study of Contexts and Challenges in Swiss and Croatian Cities (CSRP)» as a team member in January 2020.



The aim of this presentation is to share some experiences within our joint project “Exploring Homelessness and Pathways to Social Inclusion: A Comparative Study of Contexts and Challenges in Swiss and Croatian Cities” (CSRP). The Swiss and Croatian team intend to present some of the values and challenges of using ethnographic methods in homelessness research. Participant observation, longitudinal, in-depth interviews, walk alongs as well as field notes and personal diaries are some of the ethnographic methods that we used within this holistic project that includes homeless people and practitioners. We hope that these methods will create a space for the articulation of authentic lived experiences of homelessness and further provide an in-depth understanding of the contexts and heterogeneity of homelessness in each respective country.

In this research, we gained access to homeless people through fieldwork at homeless shelters/centres and volunteering. This was of value because it allowed our teams to participate in and observe some homeless people’s daily practices, routines and behavior. By using ethnographic methods, we can witness and learn about how people feel about their situations and how they interpret their world. We were also able to gain a better understanding of the complexities of an individual’s situations in the context of homelessness. We will also present some of the challenges that we have experienced during our research related to building relationships and trust with homeless people, ethical concerns, possible loss of material due to authorization, staying in contact with research participants, the unpredictability of fieldwork and field locations as well as a range of emotional challenges that we encountered in the field. It is hoped that through presenting these experiences we can pinpoint the specific values and challenges of using ethnographic methods in homelessness research.

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Zsolt Temesváry, Sabrina Roduit, CH: Life Histories and Life Stories of Undocumented Central and Eastern European Homeless People Living in Switzerland



Sabrina Roduit is scientific collaborator at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland and coordinator in the Doctoral Programme for the Centre LIVES at the Universities of Geneva and Lausanne. She has completed her PhD in sociology in Geneva. Her main research areas are social inequalities in health, homelessness, life course and vulnerability, and HIV/aids.

Zsolt Temesváry is a senior lecturer at the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland. He completed his PhD in social policy in Hungary and was qualified as a professional of urban poverty and mental health in Germany. His primary research areas are migration and homelessness, and the development of social work in Eastern Europe.



According to estimations, in Switzerland there are approximately 30 000 EU citizens living without residence permit, whose vast majority arrive from the Central and Eastern European (CEE) region (Epple and Schär 2015). In the homelessness institutions around third of the non-Swiss service users originate from the CEE region, and 300-500 CEE homeless may currently live in the country. Most destitute Central and Eastern Europeans arrive to Switzerland as tourists and after the expiry of their 3-months legal staying (as EU citizens) they remain in the country as undocumented “overstayers”. In the absence of housing and work contracts, destitute Central and Eastern Europeans are not eligible for the Swiss residence permit. Without documents, they are excluded from social and medical services and are threatened by severe housing exclusion and homelessness.

The research project “Routes into Destitution” applies a novel method to explore vulnerabilities and resources in the migration trajectories of CEE homeless people. The project uses the combination of quantitative life history calendars (LHC) and qualitative narrative interviews to examine not only the objective life history, but the subjective life story of the target group. This method is particularly effective in multicultural and heterogeneous communities in expressing the objective, biographical life events during the life course and the subjective-narrative perceptions relating to these events, as well.

The data collection is carried out at homelessness institutions in the two largest Swiss cities (Geneva and Zürich). Interim results of the project show that CEE destitute are forming a new and steadily growing underclass in the Swiss society, and their fundamental social rights and social citizenship are questioned. They face penalizing social policy measures in both Switzerland and the home countries, and their housing conditions vary between unsecured housing and street homelessness. Nonetheless, some of the destitute find informal support either in their direct community or at low-threshold homelessness organisations.