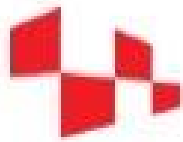University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland
School of Social Work

# Using ethnographic methods in homelessness research – comparing Swiss and Croatian research experiences

Esther Mühlethaler, Paula Greiner
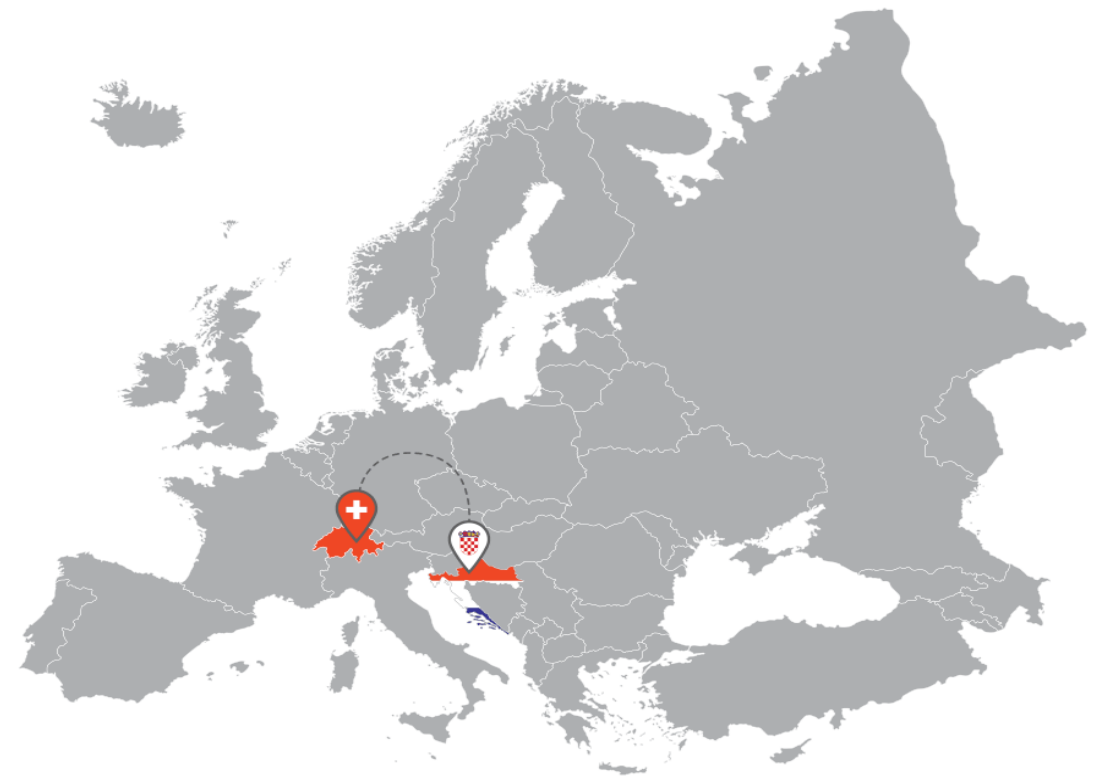
# CSRP Project_Homelessness

*Exploring Homelessness and Pathways to Social Inclusion: A Comparative Study of Contexts and Challenges in Swiss and Croatian Cities*
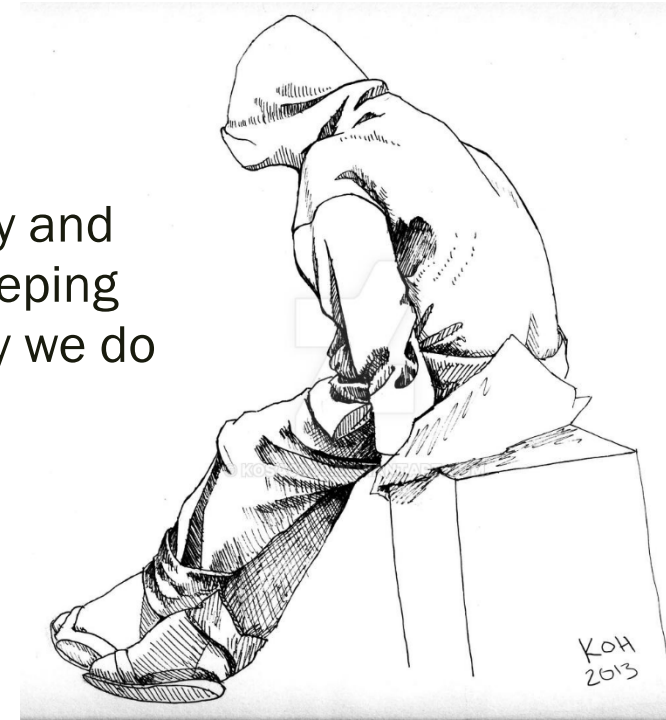
- Basel, Bern, Zagreb, Split
- Different national contexts and ways of access

# People affected by homelessness as research subjects and participants

- Who/what are we talking about?
  - Complex problems and needs (poverty, unmet basic needs, (mental) health and addictions, vulnerability)

- Where do we meet these people?
  - Public places, institutions, invisibility, lack of accessibility

- What capacities for participation do these people have?
  - Experts on their own situation; a lot of experiences, limited energy and resources, mistrust, challenges of respecting agreements and keeping schedules, challenges to understand our research – how and why we do research/analyze/represent/disseminate

  → **Conclusion: ethnography as suitable approach**

# Aims of research and values of ethnography
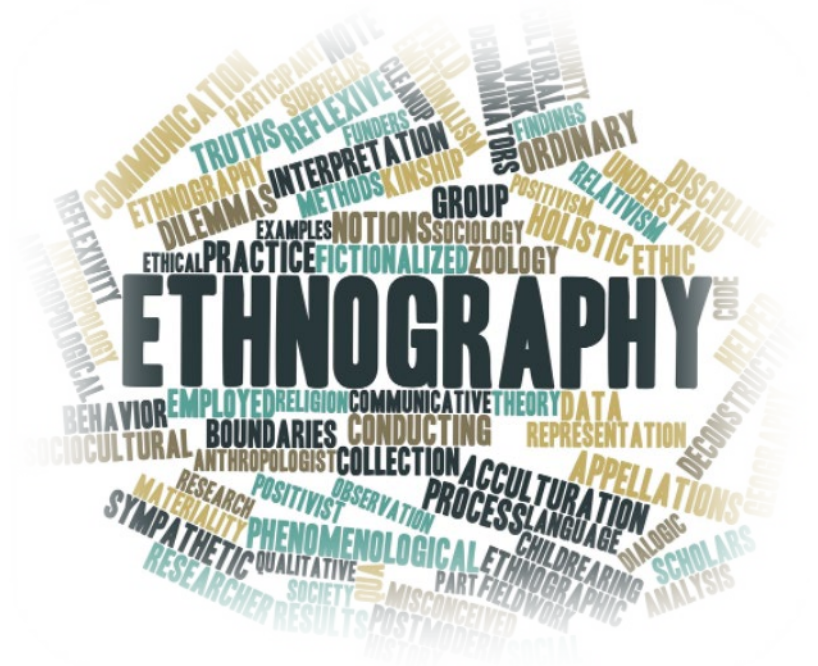
- Aim: Exploration of a complex social phenomenon

*"The more secretive and amorphous the activities of the researched, the more it is necessary for the researcher to participate in their activities to learn about their culture"* (Li, 2008 : 103).

- Aim: Understanding how people feel, negotiate and deal with their circumstances

- Aim: Capturing general and individual changes over time

# Aims of research and values of ethnography

■ Aim: Conducting engaged research / generate benefit for participants

*"Responsible ethnography seeks a commitment to change the factors that contribute to the vulnerability of the research community, including the stigma they face, policies that make their work and lives more difficult, and systems that perpetuate social and economic inequality" (Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau, 2018: 10 ).*

– *Possible positive effects of participating in an interview (e.g. : therapeutic, cathartic, educational, empowering, altruistic and social (Aleksander et al., 2018)*

→ Conclusion: co-creation of knowledge in the researcher-researched relationship that contributes to understand homelessness

# Dilemmas in researching homelessness using ethnographic methods

- **Establishing and maintaining relationships and trust**
  - *Access to homeless people:  Influence of gatekeepers / institutions*

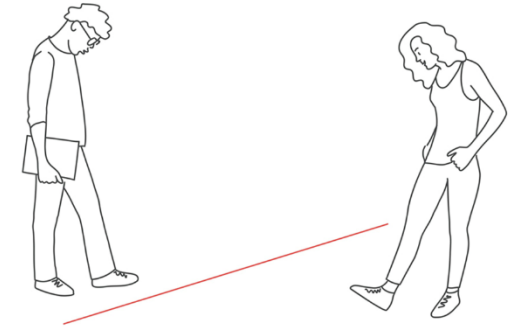> *"During a conversation with the head of the day shelter, a conflict arises between a guest and an employee. My interlocutor intervenes and forbids the guest to enter the house for two weeks. (...) When the guest left, my interlocutor looks at him, shakes her head and smiles at me. I realize that she automatically assumes that I stand on her side and I feel uncomfortable about it. "* (Esther, 4.7.2019)

- *Boundaries in relationships: personal vs. professional*
  - forming friendship (participants minding the researchers role, feeling of using the participants)
  - romantic interest

*"Again, today there were statements close to the tolerance limit: expressions of affection or even compliments that are directed to me as individual shouldn't get any place in our professional research relation. On the other side I feel that it is inevitably me as a person with all my personal characteristics that is in the role of building up a certain relationship of trust which is needed for some interlocutors to open up. Finding the right balance is not always easy and a lot of experience is needed to act professionally and exclusively in the role of researcher without denying and rejecting any personal relationship."* (Esther, 17.7.2019)

*"I asked O. how he was, and after responding O. commented with an annoyed tone that I should 'just write it in the notes'. He is aware that he is the subject of research, and it could be that he is bothered with it, or at least not sure how he feels about it. Probably he feels that he has to censor himself. I did not know how to react. I knew he wanted to have a friendship, and the fact I was writing notes made him uncomfortable, and I felt insincere."* (Paula, 2.10.2020)

- Dual role of researcher & volunteer
- Unequal power relations
- *Potentially exploiting role (incentives)*

*"S. asked me to take his temperature. I measured 37.5. To my surprise, S. said that this was fine and that the thermometer was not very accurate. I have a divided opinion about this approach. I was glad that the rules were not as strict as initially announced - I had expressed my fear in earlier notes that if I measured 37.1, I would have to throw them out from the Center." (Filip, 11.11.2020)*

*"I help out serving breakfast in the day shelter. I don't like being asked by the users for another slice of cheese or a second coffee because this puts me in a role in which I get the power to decide about their hunger. It puts me also in the role of a host which has more rights than the visitors who are not allowed to help themselves at the breakfast buffet. I realize that I cannot change these structures but I try to balance the power difference by sitting at the table with the guests whenever possible and trying to have more active conversations than the other employees." (Esther, 6.8.2019)*

- Dual role of researcher & volunteer
- Unequal power relations
- Potentially exploiting role (incentives)

*"E.'s statements in the interview were sometimes confusing. I had the feeling that E. felt a lot of shame when he talked about his homelessness. He had told me that he was doing the interview because of the compensation, because he needed the money urgently. He was also suspicious about data protection in the research project."(Gosalya, 8.8.2019)*

*"For some users, I have noticed that, recognizing only my role as a volunteer, they deliberately say positive things about the association - in this context, the information I receive is not complete. Also, they see me as potentially useful, a person who they can ask for an extra portion of food or clothing, so some of them treat me very kindly, and are sometimes more willing to answer the question. I noted a change in behavior towards me from the time I first started volunteering and than later when I was experienced as a volunteer." (Paula, 6.10.2020)*

- **Challenges related to informed consent**
  - Limits of understanding on the side of participants
  - Scope of action within the ethical principles
  - Continuous consent

*"Only now it becomes clear that this was a misunderstanding, namely that the young man thought that I was from the social services and wanted to help him. He said indignantly: 'Ah, you're from university? You do not want to help me at all? Then forget it!' And he run away."* (Esther, 2.7.2019)

*„ Z. (the leader of the NGO) was very resolute, as soon as he found out it was about borrowing money again, he said 'no'. D. got very angry and started attacking him, to which Z. left the conversation. I stayed with D. and immediately became a target of his anger. He screamed how he will investigate and destroy all of the NGOs and the project. He made accusations about the project getting money from Switzerland, and asked where was the money, why he has nothing from it as a homeless person. I explained to him once again that we were researchers and that I had repeatedly explained to him what the project was about, but none of that calmed him down."* (Paula, 2.3.2021)

- **Researcher vulnerability**
  - *Feelings of discomfort, fatigue, stress, sadness, fear*
- **Impact of the researcher's position and identity**
  - *Emotions, inhibitions and biases of the researcher*

*During the interview we found out his wife died a few days ago. It seemed to me that G. was unwell and that he was under the impression that no one cared about him, and gave up asking for help and support. This made me very sad. He clearly felt a deep sadness, and perhaps was in a state of shock. That conversation exhausted me emotionally, especially since it was after a long day. (Paula, 11.2.2020)*

*"The conversation is challenging and emotional for me because P. says things that contradict my personal values. He for example blames others and makes racist comments. On the one side I feel anger and powerless in such a conversation, on the other side I rationally can understand why a person like P. might say such things. Because of his demanding manner of speaking I feel it would be better not to disagree because I would have to fear aggressions. I dodge and nod off things that I find unbearable. And I realize that my role as a neutral observer is completely at odds with me in such a situation." (Esther, 6.6.2021)*

- **Participant vulnerability issues**
  - Possible negative impact on participants (e.g. stress, …)

*"Furthermore, he said he could not recover from the interview for two days. He explained that it was because the things he told contained some memories that were not dear to him; some difficult periods he went through. I said I was sorry about that and asked how he felt now about it, and if it was a good idea to have the interview. He said not really, because he remembered the ugly past." (Paula, 10.3.2020)*

*"Dealing with a very vulnerable group makes me sometimes afraid to harm them or to make their situation even more difficult due to my presence or my investigations: 'Did this person leave the street kitchen because I was present?' Such thoughts make me hesitant and feel uncomfortable and force me to define my role in a better way and to discuss the impact of my presence with service providers and social workers." (Esther, 2.4.2021)*

- people being positively affected by the interview

*„I had the impression that this interview was extremely important for him, he was older, and he felt that rarely people listen to him. He was sick so also maybe preparing to die soon. This interview was an opportunity for him to tell his story. He felt important and was very thankful for it. He said later this was the first time in his life he shared some important stories that happened to him." (Paula, 25.7.2021)*

# Conclusions

- Great need of constant reflexivity in field notes, diaries and group sessions

- Importance of considering the dilemmas that arise during fieldwork: especially ethical considerations, negotiation of different demands/roles

- Considering the local contexts of the field

- Maintaining relationships outside of institutions to be as independent as possible

- Constant reflection about personal boundaries as researcher and as individual. Claim these boundaries to be respected

- Researchers vulnerability - being aware of potential positive effects of interviewing vulnerable persons can have a positive impact

# Thank you for your attention!

Project website: https://homelessness.eu/