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POWER DYNAMICS AND RESEARCH ETHICS IN SENSITIVE RESEARCH

Fieldwork with People Experiencing Homelessness in Croatia

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Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among people experiencing homelessness in Croatia, this article explores power dynamics between researchers and participants in sensitive research. This study shows that these power dynamics are continually shifting depending on researcher positionalities and field sites (shelter facility vs public spaces). In addition, this becomes more complex in interdisciplinary teams where members within an internal team power hierarchy have different positionalities and aspirations. This article also challenges the adequacy of procedural ethics and recommends ethics in practice or relational ethics, which is essential in qualitative research characterized by a discourse of immersion, reflexivity, and rapport.

Keywords: power, positionality, field site, vulnerability, ethics

Introduction

This article aims to understand the complexity of relations between researchers and research participants by focusing on how power relations between them are constituted by positionality and the locations in which research is carried out. Power dynamics in research relationships refer to the ways in which power is negotiated, established, and experienced between researchers and research participants as well as within the research team(s). These dynamics can significantly influence the research process, the quality of research materials collected, and the ethical issues involved. In sensitive research,[1] power dynamics between researcher and participant are accentuated when working with individuals experiencing homelessness and marginalization. For this reason, the implications of our positionalities on the people we work with require careful reflection throughout research and analysis. Apart from positionality, locations also influence the research process. The unfolding of power dynamics and social relations during research influences the sorts of knowledge produced through these relationships. Accordingly, how researchers and research participants relate to research sites and are situated within the multifaceted power

1 Using Lee's (1993: 4) definition, sensitive research is "research which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it," which encompasses the topic, the consequences, the situation, and any number of other issues that may arise.

dynamics of a particular site is of interest. As a contribution to the research field of power and research ethics, research sites can be explored to help us understand power/trust relations and the social identities of all those participating in research. Based on fieldwork with people experiencing homelessness,[2] I show how research is negotiated and experienced in specific spaces and how place, as well as positionality, become important elements in the research process.[3] Specifically, research sites are understood as places with certain ways of being and behaving that may significantly influence the interactions between researcher and research participant. To highlight the power relations manifest in particular research spaces, ethnographic fieldwork[4] in homeless shelters and public spaces will be compared.

Towards More Inclusive Research Practices

As homeless people are generally positioned as "vulnerable"[5] within research relationships, there is a recognized need to transform research from a "top-down" researcher-led encounter to a "bottom-up" participant-led encounter (Aldridge 2014). Qualitative researchers may face several ethical challenges when working with groups positioned as "vulnerable" that require an ongoing commitment to reflexivity and adherence to ethical practices, prioritizing respect, dignity, and empowerment in research. Ethical questions may include: Do research participants fully understand the research process and potential risks (i.e., emotional distress, negative consequences) that may be involved? Is their consent truly voluntary, without coercion? Is there a risk of reinforcing stereotypes or misrepresenting the experiences of homeless people in research findings? Conversely, when qualitative researchers work with people experiencing homelessness, they may face several vulnerabilities themselves, such as emotional strain, safety concerns, professional isolation, etc., that are often taken for granted. By understanding power dynamics in this more nuanced way, the binary constructions of researched/powerless and researcher/powerful (Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004) must be reconceptualized to reflect the complexities of power relationships that exist within these interactions. This entails rethinking and redesigning research practices along more inclusive, collaborative lines

2 This was a joint research project entitled: Exploring Homelessness and Pathways to Social Inclusion: A Comparative Study of Contexts and Challenges in Swiss and Croatian Cities that is a part of the Croatian–Swiss Research Program. This qualitative study seeks to break new ground in social research on homelessness by delivering a better understanding of the dimensions and impact of exclusion on people who are experiencing homelessness in the cities of Switzerland and Croatia. This study also aims to explore the everyday practices of people experiencing homelessness and how this knowledge could contribute to more effective solutions.

3 Throughout this article, I am writing as the Principal Investigator of the Croatian team referring to what we did as a team and, for this reason, use "we" throughout this article.

4 This involved participant observation, casual conversations, open-ended interviews, walk-alongs at different sites in Zagreb, and repeated visits to Split.

5 Vulnerability is a complex, multi-dimensional concept that is not static but socially constructed and dependent on circumstances. By using a relational approach, researchers, von Benzon & van Blerk (2017: 897) show that vulnerability is not only material but context-dependent, with groups being more or less vulnerable to exploitation (in the widest sense of the word) based on the particular circumstances of an encounter.

that sometimes require case-by-case qualitative methodological approaches. In this study, an ethnographic approach was chosen because this is particularly well suited for working with "vulnerable" populations since it incorporates time for trusting relationships to develop (Cloke, May, and Johnsen 2010) and it can facilitate access to hard-to-reach groups (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). One of the difficulties is that the consequences of lengthy, intense, and dynamic fieldwork can be difficult to predict or control. Okely (2012: 200) reminds us that there are no blueprints for fieldwork; it depends on individual inclinations and potential. Inevitably, it is difficult to predict and prepare for exactly how the research will impact the research participants or researcher(s) and which "vulnerabilities" will be exposed. Qualitative researchers often encounter ethical situations that do not fit strictly under the procedures specified by international and institutional review boards, which usually just relate to procedural ethics rather than ethics in practice or relational ethics, as was the case in this project. "Ethics in practice" or situational ethics help researchers deal with the unpredictable, often subtle yet ethically important moments that come up in the field, while relational ethics "recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the community in which they live and work" (Ellis 2007). This relates to ethics that goes beyond what the review board states to define detailed descriptions of ethical problems as they emerge in actual research situations (Paoletti, Tomas, and Menendez 2013). Importantly, Fujii (2012: 717) argues that no set of rules can cover every "ethically important moment" in the field, compliance can be meaningless, participants may not understand what they were consenting to, and researcher ethics can conflict with participant ethics.

Since this study is based on a complex collection of social interactions, approaches towards ethical problems needed to be more flexible, ongoing, and variable than was originally stated in ethics statements for this project. Moreover, this is indispensable when working in teams on international projects due to different positionalities and our positionings in relation to our research participants throughout the research process. A growing mismatch between increasingly standardized ethics procedures and the complex nature of qualitative social research has been observed, as have the dangers inherent in assuming ethical universalism (Miller and Boulton 2007). In this article, I would like to draw attention to how researcher positionality and the locations of our research also influence situational and relational ethics during the research process. As this cannot always be anticipated in advance or controlled, it is highly likely that there will be shifting boundaries in which researcher power cannot always be assumed. In the research design and ethical considerations of this project, managing and protecting the well-being and emotions of research participants were the main priorities, while researcher risks were not envisaged; these were dealt with once in the field (see Šikić-Mićanović et al. 2020).

Using a practice framework, this study entails an examination of the wider context and is interested in the systems of relationships that "[hold] together all three sides of the (theoretical) triangle: that society is a system, that the system is powerfully

constraining yet that the system can be made and unmade through human action and interaction" (Dirks, Eley, and Ortner 1994: 15). Apart from drawing attention to the power relations that operate within social systems including marginalized peoples' relations with structures and members of society, I am particularly interested in their relationships with us as researchers. I frame these experiences using a social constructionist perspective, which recognizes that both the researchers and the research participants engage in a process in which data and relationships are "co-constructed." In other words, knowledge is jointly produced rather than collected by researchers, and relationships are dynamic and do not comply with dualistic models of researcher and researched interaction. For this reason, power should not be "statically defined as residing in the explicit structural positions of either the researcher or the research participant" but rather as "an ambiguous, fluid, multi-directional dynamic, which can flow unevenly across and between different positions in the research relationship" (Neal and McLaughlin 2009: 695). Notably, Nilan (2002) explained the challenge of effectively moving between the two researcher subject positions in contrasting research paradigms (i.e., between "formal" methods – interviews, surveys, focus group work, and ethnographic fieldwork – participant observation). She notes that the first is constituted within a discourse of control, objectivity, and even emotional detachment, while the second is constituted within a discourse of immersion, reflexivity, and rapport. The possibility of danger and risk for the researcher most commonly arises in the second position of least control and enhanced emotional vulnerability.[6] Hence, it is my understanding that constellations of power between the researcher and the researched are not fixed at the outset because they largely depend on the nature of the research relationships and interactions within any study. For example, as Goodwin, Pope, Mort, and Smith (2003: 576) write: "The community being researched is not a passive component; it also has a bearing on what the researcher is included in and excluded from." Research participants can be seen as agents in the shaping of the data, the data-collecting opportunities, and the course of the fieldwork. Hence, each person's role toward the other is not fixed and permanent within ethnography; rather, "their behaviors and expectations of each other are part of a dynamic process that continues to grow throughout the course of single research projects" (Angrosino and Mays De Perez 2000: 683). Likewise, meaning making in which meanings are generated relationally is fundamental in qualitative research and can only be explained through relationships with others, e.g., interactions between researcher and research participants.

The Impact of a Researcher's Identity and Positionality

Importantly, there is a need to reflect on the bearing of the researcher's positionality on both fieldwork and the generated research materials since the "self" of the

6 In this research study, we obtained some "formal" research materials through questionnaires and open-ended interviews but also sought seeks to support or probe it through ethnographic research materials gained through long-term fieldwork and immersion in their everyday lives.

researcher influences every aspect of the research process. "Positionality" refers to aspects of identity in terms of race, age, class, gender, religion, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, personality, and other attributes that are markers of relational positions in society. Further, Chacko (2004: 61) reminds us that acknowledging positionality as a critical element in formulating, conducting, and reporting fieldwork can make the researcher more vigilant about power relations and their impacts on the exchange and production of information and knowledge. In this study on homelessness, it is important to consider relationships between female researchers and male-dominated populations,[7] especially when relationships can be difficult to establish for certain groups of people with limited access to different forms of capital.[8] In her ethnographic study on homelessness, Hoolachan argues that her young female status heightened her vulnerability but also assisted in minimizing power differentials (2016: 39). Similarly, Johnson and Macleod Clarke (2003) argue that the age and life experiences of the researcher influence how undertaking research impacts upon them. For example, less experienced researchers are often impacted by the emotional pressure of undertaking research (Kennedy, Hicks, and Yarker 2013), and perceptions of risk can vary considerably from one person to another and may be the result of previous experience or "close calls" (Bahn and Weatherill 2013). Experience and seniority may help mitigate threats, including ethical dilemmas and safety concerns, because experienced researchers have more extensive knowledge of best practices that allow them to navigate complex situations effectively. "Shifting boundaries" (Davison 2004: 338) and potential researcher vulnerability clearly show here that assuming researcher power can be misleading; this is highly contingent on researcher positionalities and research contexts. Vulnerability can be seen as a varying characteristic of all individuals (Davison 2004) regardless of their ascribed role as researchers. In other words, vulnerability and extreme discomfort cannot be uncritically removed from any qualitative researcher's situation. Bahn and Weatherill (2013) propose that what one researcher perceives as low risk, another may view as much higher risk. For example, one researcher may feel able to exercise considerable control over the emotional demands of a research study, while another may feel distressed and ambivalent. Clearly, not all researchers experience research in the same way. For this reason, there is a need to reconceptualize notions of authority,

7 The Croatian research team is predominantly female (6 vs 2); while only one (author) has many years of working closely with "marginalized" populations such as rural women, Roma, children, and people experiencing homelessness. Inevitably, more fieldwork experiences in sensitive research may make researchers more attuned to and aware of potential dangers and risks. In contrast, as an impeding factor, five research assistants had not extensively engaged in long-term fieldwork with people experiencing homelessness prior to this project while the other two senior researchers were not directly involved in fieldwork. It should also be mentioned here that none of these research assistants were a part of this project for its entire duration (55 months), which undoubtedly also had an impact on the research outcome. Their engagement for this research ranged between 7, 15, 19, 36, and 48 months, which provided an opportunity for some to develop trusting relationships over time through continual contact. For various reasons (better employment opportunities, frustration that science was too slow in solving actual homelessness challenges, fatigue, burnout, etc.) there was a high fluctuation of younger staff.

8 This refers to four different forms of interconnected, interdependent and context-specific capital (cultural, economic, social, and symbolic) that together constitute advantage and disadvantage in society (Bourdieu 1986).

sensitivity, vulnerability, and power not as fixed qualities inherent to the researcher or the participant but rather as fluid and relational.

In this project, gender, age, and life experiences had the potential to shift boundaries unevenly across and between different positions in the research relationship. Conversely, minimizing power differentials was in the interests of this project as we sought to develop trusting relationships over time through continual contact for the duration of this project (and beyond), considering the sensitive nature of this type of research.

Working Towards Non-Hierarchical Research Relationships

When the topic of study focuses on underprivileged or marginalized groups, researchers are assumed to hold higher status in the research relationship (Pante 2014). However, it has been noted that a high level of dissimilarity between researcher and research participants is not necessarily an encumbrance; instead, it can offer rich potential for developing new and improved understandings of the field setting (Powdermaker 1966). Beyond doubt, researchers' social characteristics, as well as emotions and personal experiences, all have an influence on the research process (Mauthner and Doucet 2003; Punch 2012). This is especially applicable in collaborative research teams that most likely will include members from different backgrounds, various disciplines, and contrasting positionalities.[9] This is particularly relevant in this joint research project because it included diverse teams from Switzerland and Croatia with very different positionalities. For this reason, we practiced reflexivity, which is the critical consideration of the researcher's self, their biases, and how those affect the research (Jacobs-Huey 2002: 791; Rose 1997: 308). In this study, researchers were encouraged to reflect on their own biases, values, experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives and how these factors shape their interactions, interpretations, and research outcomes. Reflexivity also allowed researchers to adapt their ethical approach as situations unfolded rather than adhering to procedural ethical guidelines. Group reflexivity, referring to the collective process by which a group reflects on its assumptions, practices, and relations, was regularly practiced at weekly team meetings. This dialogue and shared reflection contributed to the overall rigor of this qualitative research as it fostered critical examination of research processes and enhanced our effectiveness as a team, where we were able to navigate challenges more effectively. By taking detailed field notes following any fieldwork, keeping a research diary throughout the research process, and (joint) team meetings, we at-

9 For example, attributes that are markers of relational positions in society, such as age, gender, sexuality, class, religion, ethnicity, nationality, etc., were markedly different between team members. Incontestably, each researcher has their own history and beliefs about ethics that they bring to the research endeavor. In addition, different personalities (e.g., the propensity to show empathy, compassion, and understanding towards people experiencing homelessness) and the varying aspirations of team members inevitably have an impact on the research outcome. Besides anthropology, team members of this joint research project have educational backgrounds in other disciplines, such as sociology, social work, theology, or geography.

tempted to minimize the distance and separateness of researcher-participant relationships. In contrast to field notes, i.e., what was happening in the field, diaries give us insight into how the researcher feels about the research process: "difficulties, issues surrounding coping in the field, relationships with participants and how these change over time feelings" (Hume and Mulcock 2004: xxiii). Meetings or debriefing sessions gave us time and space to exchange and compare feelings about our fieldwork experiences in a supportive way. Aptly, Cloke et al. (2000) point out that reflexivity does not dissolve ethical tensions but opens up possibilities for new ethical and moral maps with which to explore ethical terrains more appropriately and more honestly. In other words, in relation to our fieldwork experiences, reflexivity makes us much more aware of asymmetry, injustices, exploitation, and our own prejudices in our research work.

Dealing with Situational and Relational Ethics

Ethical conduct was managed and negotiated in an ongoing manner in this project; this responsibility is guided by sensitive and informed decisions following reflective practices as explained above by each researcher. This was not elaborated in this way in the research proposal or when seeking approval from our institutional ethics board. Rather, we adhered to standardized procedures and regulated ethical practices (e.g., guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality and no harm policies) as these are the required norms and integral to the good practice of qualitative research. For example, this included an information sheet with general information about the project (purposes, its voluntary nature, and risks; who and what is involved; levels of participation, compensation; privacy issues; use of and access to research materials; publication; ethical approval and contacts). To ensure non-hierarchical research relationships in this study, our research participants were treated as knowledgeable experts. People with lived experiences of homelessness have valuable insider knowledge, unique insights, and extensive experiences of homelessness in all its forms that we do not have as researchers. Through this joint research project, we aspired to let them know their voices and perspectives are important and that we were willing to listen to them actively. We also aimed to create research relationships that highlight the importance of treating those we study "with the utmost dignity and seeing them as experiential authorities capable of speaking back to, and speaking with, researchers" (Patti and Ellis 2017). We also encouraged them to be involved in processes of anonymization, interpretation, and dissemination of research materials if they were willing to contribute to the project in this way. To give them some degree of control in the research encounter, they could choose interview locations and times as well as skip questions, ask questions, or end the interview/interaction. It was also possible for them to talk at length on matters of particular significance to them, even if this was not directly pertinent to the research. We also avoided using the label

"homeless" and any reference to negatives, deficiencies, etc., and included all those persons who wished to be a part of this study regardless of mental health issues. Nevertheless, researchers have pointed out that research is now carried out in social contexts in which experiences of agency, power, and risk all shape the qualitative research encounter in ways that cannot be anticipated by or encapsulated in information sheets or signed consent forms (Miller and Boulton 2007: 2209). Likewise, our fieldwork in this study was very unpredictable because it was highly contingent on each researcher-researched relationship with a whole array of individual partialities and possibilities. As this project involved continual fieldwork from May 2019 until December 2023, ethics cannot be a discrete task to be checked off a "to-do" list (Fujii 2012). Relevantly, Iphofen (2015: 29) explains that "there is considerable 'fluidity' in consenting – it is not an event, it is a process… Relationships between researcher and subject will vary in duration, intensity, tone, and depth… [consent] may best be seen as episodic with distinctive 'markers' throughout – only one of which may be a signed consent form." On the other hand, a precise protocol for field conduct would be difficult to draft in advance because fieldwork relations and the knowledge they produce are always socially constructed, multi-layered, and shifting.

Clearly, constellations of power and positioning really depend on the nature of the research relationship, and this can never entirely be known in advance. Procedural ethics usually assumes a single event, such as acknowledging informed consent, but "ethical moments" will always come up and cannot be ignored or negated. Ultimately, as Guillemin and Gillam (2004: 269) state, responsibility falls back to the researchers themselves – they are the ones on whom the conduct of ethical research principally depends. To reiterate, coordinating and supervising interdisciplinary teams becomes more complex where members within an internal team power hierarchy have different positionalities and aspirations. This suggests a compelling case for adopting a more specific approach to ethical practices in qualitative research rather than a one-size-fits-all model. Furthermore, we have learned in this study that researchers must use case-by-case qualitative methodological approaches based on their reflective and responsible judgment. For example, although we are aware that it is not possible to obtain consent from every person who enters the research field (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), it is important, when working with "vulnerable" groups, to honestly foreground our research roles and not engage in covert research or establish "fake" friendships. Conversely, we realize that continually checking consent can burden relationships, making it "too official" and can have the opposite effect of raising suspicions. As we mostly work with people who hide their homelessness situation by constantly hiding from the police to avoid criminalization, we know that we need to be very responsible when it comes to managing their privacy as well as our representations of this group. It is also difficult to ensure that they are all similarly (let alone identically) informed about the nature of the research (Bryman 2004: 512), but again, it is the responsibility of each researcher to communicate this comprehensively for the duration of the research.

Positionings at a Field Site

In the following section, I would like to draw attention to the important role of the research setting itself in structuring research encounters and potentially creating barriers to or facilitating access. The field/interview site embodies and constitutes multiple scales of spatial relations and meaning, which construct the power and positionality of all those involved in the research encounter. Locations hold great amounts of power and can provide the opportunity for a holistic understanding of research topics (Ecker 2017). For example, providing a choice of interview location (as we did in this project) may be a small opportunity to empower participants while offering the possibility of co-creating authentic data if this occurs in an environment familiar to the participant (Warr 2004). According to Elwood and Martin (2000), the site of an interview plays an important role in how interviewees position themselves with respect to questions being asked. They argue that there is "no neutral place" and interview participants may offer different kinds of information, depending on where they are interviewed. By interview location, they refer to the physical location where the interview is carried out and the social context in which the exchange of information between researcher and participant occurs (Herzog 2005). Researchers have shown that the interview location is not a technicality; it can be a valuable tool to examine the researcher's position and perspective, evaluate subjective responses and interpersonal dynamics during the interview, and promote rich insight into the research process (Gagnon, Jacob, and McCabe 2015: 2011). Others have argued that the interview subject should be the determining factor in terms of location. For example, interviews dealing with highly emotional, sensitive, or private issues are best conducted in the participant's home since such a setting offers a sense of intimacy and friendliness (Adler and Adler 2002: 528). In this project, research with people experiencing homelessness is always sensitive and highly emotional, yet this was not an option; fieldwork was carried out either at shelters or in public spaces such as the streets, parks, or cafes. These locations, without doubt, had a significant bearing on research relationships where power dynamics, social relations, identities, and meanings unfolded in multiple ways.

Homeless Shelters

Shelters do not have the elements of a home (e.g., privacy, the freedom to come and go, safety) and, therefore, must have an impact on the research encounter and outcome. Service providers in this study often place rigid controls over the behavior of their users wherever there is (video) surveillance, which in many ways strips shelter users of individuality and dignity. Most programs in homelessness services also have policies on daily life activities, such as designated smoking areas, required participation in chores, a specified wake-up time and lights-out time, and set closing and

opening times. This can be linked to what has been referred to as shelterization in the research literature. This is "a type of institutionalisation specific to homelessness, which refers to the effects of prolonged dependency on institutional regimes that tend to colonize a homeless person's everyday routines in ways that render long(er)-term life paths and objectives impossible even to contemplate" (Arapoglu, Gounis, and Siatista 2015: 140). Applicable to this study, relationships between service providers and service users are inevitably underscored by the service provider's position, which is one of authority, power, and knowledge (Hoffman and Coffey 2008; Jost, Levitt, and Porcu 2011; Zufferey 2008). Researchers have observed two particularly powerful types of responses people gave when explaining their experiences at organizations and interactions with staff and providers, which they have termed "objectification" and "infantilization" (Hoffman and Coffey 2008: 208). These authors explain that shelter users did not feel they were treated as fully recognized adults or respected as equal citizens but as numbers and children. Pertinently, Holdsworth and Tiyce (2012: 485) claim that the service users in their study often remained silent on issues that could negatively impact their level of assistance, their identities, and their lives. Likewise, the power relations and social inequities inherent in the relationship between service providers and service users unquestionably played a role in homeless people's responses and reactions to us as researchers. Deverteuil (2004) provides valuable and place-specific reflections on how a homeless shelter might become a "research setting" full of barriers, opportunities, negotiations, and shifting positionalities. He eventually surmounted these barriers through negotiation by adjusting to the research setting, moving from initial spatial and temporal isolation to clashes with the staff to an ensuing resolution (2004: 378). The following section will discuss some of our field experiences at homeless shelters and how these had an impact on the knowledge produced at these locations.

In our study, we experienced the phenomenon of "closed doors," i.e., the condition that "not all aspects of the setting you wish to observe or everyone you wish to interview will be available" (Lofland and Lofland 1995: 60). This involved both spatial and temporal constraints that were built into the research setting itself. In other words, the shelter's "private" sleeping and bathroom areas were automatically off-limits to our research team. Access to the shelter was only possible through prior arrangements and at specific times. Despite these gatekeeper rules, there were undeniable benefits for the research team. Easier access to research participants and regular visits allowed us to become familiar with their living arrangements at the shelter for at least part of their day, usually between 6 pm and 9 pm. Besides, our regular presence was another important element in building trust with shelter users. Considering all the surveillance cameras, this was certainly a safe environment to carry out research without any researcher risk, especially since team members usually worked together in teams at these sites. However, there were several challenges that, without question, greatly influenced our research relationships and the knowledge that was produced at these sites. As this fieldwork was carried out in shared living spaces with a definite lack of privacy, we were highly aware that participants

might feel uncomfortable speaking freely about some issues in places where other people are present and might overhear the conversation. Especially if they feel they have nothing to gain (Cloke et al. 2010) from sharing their life stories with us. Loss of dignity and sense of self-esteem (among other service users) and privileges (from the shelter) if they reveal too much were possible reasons. Correspondingly, it is very difficult to preserve anonymity and confidentiality in these contexts. While we knew that some people purposefully avoided us in these "communal" settings (yet were more willing to talk to us outside of the shelter), it was clear that there was less possibility of developing a personalized relationship at these sites. Finally, the most obvious ethical issue is voluntary consent because members of "captive" populations might not dare to refuse participation as there is always a subtle pressure instilled by institutions. For example, we often heard frequent repetitions of maxims from genuinely well-meaning shelter workers, including "You need to give back." or "You owe it to the community." We also were aware that, as a survival strategy, people "would do and say anything" to keep their place at these shelters. Faced with these challenges, we needed to adapt and transfer our research work to settings where persons could autonomously decide (outside of institutional settings and surveillance) to engage with us.

Public Spaces

Most of our later fieldwork was with people sleeping in non-institutionalized settings, i.e., the streets, where we had more time to develop trusting relationships because they were not subject to shelters' timetables and space, gatekeepers, routines, etc.[10] In comparison, this work was usually not carried out in teams but was more often single person research that "often enables easier access, a less threatening profile, low intrusiveness in the setting and a high capacity for personalised relationships" (Punch 1993). Although this is more advantageous for experienced researchers, novice researchers encounter many dilemmas, especially in unfamiliar settings. First, novice researchers may be unprepared for the level and extent of exposure to emotionally stressful situations (Sampson et al. 2008). Emotional risks may affect researchers in different ways and at different times over the course of their lives (Hubbard et al. 2001; Dickson-Swift et al. 2007), depending on their positionalities. From a safety perspective, open public spaces can make it difficult for researchers to scan areas for potential vulnerabilities (unknown persons/threats, protection from the natural elements, etc.), especially if on the move and in unfamiliar areas. For example, during walk-alongs, research participants took us to spaces that hold meaning for them, such as (former) sleeping places in abandoned buildings or forests. These

10 It should be noted that access to these people was usually through some non-governmental organization with homelessness services but not a homeless shelter per se. Long-term fieldwork was one way of tackling one problematic dimension (location) which is unavoidable when working with a group with complex needs using another tool (time).

hidden spaces can be potentially risky and dangerous; not even the research participant can anticipate what we will encounter at these places. Although some research has shown that dangerous places are the best places to access vulnerable or hidden populations (Warden 2013: 152), safety issues should always be a priority concern. Clearly, researchers do not entirely control the terms of the research, the encounters, or the research relationships "on the street." This is precisely where power can be exerted over the researcher and demonstrate how research participants can, and do, exercise power in research situations. Undeniably, public spaces are flawed in themselves because they do not necessarily produce a sense of safety/security for research participants at locations where they can be harassed by their peers, the police, etc. For this reason, we followed their lead and relied on their knowledge about potential dangers. The ability to choose a location for a meeting, interview, or walk-along has important potential as a strategy for disrupting power hierarchies between researchers and participants. From the researcher's perspective, this may create feelings of pre-interview anxiety concerning the journey to and from, especially in unknown parts of an unfamiliar city. Our fieldwork experiences show that people sleeping on the street may be more forthcoming in their territories, but we become more vulnerable in these research settings. As previously mentioned, meeting and talking with shelter users outside the shelters was much easier, even though they completely ignored us in the shelter setting. As further evidence, we heard less commendable reports about shelters after people found alternative "accommodation." They were also generally more forthcoming outside these institutionalized settings. In other words, meeting people outside institutional frameworks facilitated a more open, personalized relationship and a certain sense of security that we would not relay any information back to shelter providers or other service users.

Concluding Remarks

Although this article focuses on researching homelessness and working with people experiencing homelessness, many of the issues raised resonate beyond this context. By recounting these experiences, I hope that I have been able to offer some interesting insights concerning power, vulnerability, and research ethics. This work has shown a need to reconceptualize notions of power and vulnerability not as fixed qualities inherent to the researcher or the research participant but as dynamic and relational. In sensitive research, it is critical to understand the power dynamics between researcher and research participants; these dynamics significantly impact research processes, research material quality/outcomes, and the well-being of all those involved. In this article, I have shown that positionalities and the location of the research encounter have an important role to play in the research process. For example, a researcher's communication skills and ability to build rapport and trust can either mitigate or exacerbate power imbalances in the research relationship. Similarly,

the research location can influence how power is perceived and enacted. In other words, researchers must always be attuned to these shifting dynamics to ensure that the research relationship is one of safety, well-being, and empowerment. Specifically, in interdisciplinary research teams, power dynamics become even more complex; internal hierarchies and different intersectional positionalities of team members can lead to potential tensions and challenges in collaboration. For this reason, it is essential for (interdisciplinary) research teams to engage in (group) reflexivity to navigate these complexities. By recognizing and addressing these shifting and diverse power dynamics, researchers can foster a more productive and collaborative work environment, ultimately enhancing the integrity and quality of their research.

Clearly, our research processes needed to be flexible, with "knowledge" negotiated through honest interactions between researchers and research participants, as ethnography requires time to build respectful and reciprocal relationships. By changing field sites to public spaces, we surmounted barriers inherent in institutionalized settings. This also came with the acceptance of potential vulnerability, anxiety, or disharmony from either side and the need to make time to reflect as a team throughout the research process. When working with marginalized populations, the potential to feel isolated, vulnerable, and distressed becomes part and parcel of the research encounter. For this reason, special consideration and care must be given to younger, inexperienced researchers in addition to all those we encounter in our research. Thus, critical reflexivity should focus not exclusively on the relationship between the researcher and the researched but also on all others who (un)wittingly become a part of the research process. Further, there is a need to adhere to situational and relational ethics in a project of this nature, as procedural ethics are inadequate in ethnographic research characterized by a discourse of immersion, reflexivity, and rapport. In other words, ethical reflexivity during all project phases should be continuous ethical reflection and renegotiation that may require on-the-spot decision-making. Informed consent obtained at the beginning of a project is meaningless in an ethnographic project of this kind due to its unpredictable nature. For this reason, it is each researcher's ethical responsibility to practice ongoing renegotiated consent in long-term fieldwork. In this move from a static to a dynamic understanding of consent, managing consent can become complicated, and researchers need to find a balance and be careful not to overdo it.

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Dinamika moći i istraživačka etika u osjetljivom istraživanju. Terensko istraživanje s osobama s iskustvom beskućništva u Hrvatskoj

Oslanjajući se na etnografsko terensko istraživanje među osobama s iskustvom beskućništva u Hrvatskoj, ovaj članak istražuje dinamiku moći između istraživača i sudionika u osjetljivom istraživanju. Ova studija pokazuje da se te dinamike moći neprekidno mijenjaju ovisno o pozicijama istraživača i o terenskoj lokaciji (prihvatilište naspram javnih prostora). Osim toga, situacija postaje složenija u interdisciplinarnim timovima gdje članovi unutar interne hijerarhije moći imaju različite pozicije i aspiracije. Ovaj članak također dovodi u pitanje adekvatnost proceduralne etike te preporučuje etiku u praksi ili relacijsku etiku koja je bitna u kvalitativnom istraživanju obilježenom diskursom uranjanja, refleksivnosti i odnosa.

Ključne riječi: moć, pozicionalnost, terenska lokacija, ranjivost, etika