USING BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH TO UNDERSTAND EXPERIENCES OF CRISIS AMONG HOMELESS PEOPLE IN CROATIA

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This article attempts to show how biographical research can be used to understand experiences of crisis among homeless people and how their personal biographies uncover different contexts and processes. Following an overview of biographical research, an analysis of the post-transition period and homelessness will be discussed. This article specifically explores and traces the social transformations and crises in personal biographies obtained through ethnographic research with people who sleep at homeless shelters throughout Croatia. Findings show how biographical research facilitates a **fuller examination** of their homelessness experiences and the structural similarities that underlie these experiences.

Key words: biographical research, homelessness, crisis, context

Biographies as Ethnographies of Social Reality

Homelessness is a relatively new phenomenon in Croatia that has been largely ignored by policymakers and social scientists over the last two decades. In many ways, homeless people in Croatia are an embodiment of the social inequalities of a post-transitional society. Crises in the lives of homeless people are complex episodes when larger economic, social, political and historical processes interlink with personal trajectories narrowing the scope of possibilities for this vulnerable group. To explore their experiences of crisis, this study took a biographical approach, exploring issues such as experiences during and prior to homelessness, their daily lives as well as the relationship between their life histories and their homelessness. Biographical research is an exciting, stimulating and fast-moving field which seeks to understand the changing experiences and outlooks of individuals in their daily lives, what they see as important, and how to provide interpretations of the accounts they give of their past, present and future (Roberts 2002:1). How people actively 'learn' their world, their place in it as well as how this may be challenged is at the heart of much biographical research (Merrill and West 2009:4). The value of "biographical" research on homelessness and how life histories "reveal" important aspects of the social context has been noted by other researchers (see May 2000; Chamberlayne et al. 2002; Pleace et al. 1997; Mayock and O'Sullivan 2007). Biographical-style research is useful when attempting to relate the personal to the social and structural and generates insights both into social processes and individuals' understanding and reaction to those processes (Giddens 1984). For Thomas and Znaniecki (in Faraday and Plummer 1979) the life-story is the 'perfect type of sociological research' because if social scientists want to research any kind of happenings accurately, they need to take into account the life histories of those individuals involved. For May (1993), it is a means for exploring the 'truth', by finding out what people actually did and what actually happened instead of what experts think they did or think happened to them. Undeniably, this type of research

provides a rich source of information from a historical, present-day, social policy and individual (agency) viewpoint and are useful for understanding the choices that people make in the light of the constraints and assumptions placed on their lives (Chamberlayne et al. 2000 cited in Ravenhill 2008:83). Sociologist, Daniel Bertaux views individuals and their stories as living illustrations of social conditions and has argued that biographical narratives have potential because social contexts are not 'visible':

> To me narratives are ways to describe courses of action, and from there to move on to a better understanding of the social-historical contexts… The point is to discover constraints and opportunities characteristic of a given context, the unwritten rules of social games which actors have to "play". Social contexts are not visible. You cannot take a picture of them. Statistics, a rapid study of inner law and regulations, some knowledge of formal power relations, will help sketch their outer shape. But it is what people do when trying to develop their courses of action which will allow one to visualise hitherto invisible barriers – such as the glass walls of everyday sexism and racism. (Interview with Weil 2008:13-18)

Hence, biographical research enables researchers to explore how far social structures provide opportunities and constraints for human agents at the same time as showing how individuals, with their own beliefs and desires, take actions despite the social structures that underlie the immediacy of their experiences (see Hubbard 2000). Relevantly in this study, biographical studies of individual citizens are a valuable means of exploring the conditions of life in rapidly changing societies because they can illuminate the experiences and problems of *transitions* from one social situation and milieu to another (Chamberlayne et al. 2002:2).

Nevertheless, even though these studies can provide the researcher with information about 'a social reality existing outside the story that is described by the story' (Bertaux 1981 cited in Atkinson 2001:129) a key debate within much biographical research is 'realism' versus 'constructionism' in the study of lives. The view that life stories reflect reality or empirical truth is simplistic and misconceived – a 'biographical illusion' for constructionists. Namely, Bourdieu (2000:297-302) argued that autobiographies or life histories can be read as pure fiction: a 'biographical or rhetorical illusion'. He states that the autobiographical narrative is motivated by a concern to select significant events from one's own past and to create causal links between them. In other words, these biographical presentations are not simply referential of experience. Bourdieu identifies this process when interviewees try to be more coherent as "the artificial creation of meaning" (Bourdieu, 2000:300). Furthermore, Bourdieu argues that life history is closer to the official presentation of the self since these public presentations do not contain intimate dialogues or exchanges between very close friends. In this perspective, a biographical presentation is a social construction, created by the interviewee in interaction with an environment in which certain parts of an identity are strengthened while others are ignored. Importantly, stories are never told in a vacuum because they are situated within a particular context as well as a wider cultural context at the same time. In this study, the particular context is predominantly the interview in which interviewees are not so much storehouses of knowledge as they are constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers. Accordingly, Holstein and Gubrium (1995:4) propose that interviews are not pipelines for transmitting knowledge but reality-constructing, meaning-making occasions. The meaning-making processes in active interviewing are pursued with the help of patterned narrative linkages that Holstein and Gubrium (1995:58) call *horizons of meaning*. Hence, within this framework, the biographical project is an illusion, for any coherence that a life has is imposed by the larger culture, by the researcher and by the subject's belief that his or her

life should have coherence (Denzin 1989:61). Nonetheless, Denzin (1989:62) aptly argues that the point to make is not whether biographical coherence is an illusion or reality. Rather, it is more important to establish how individuals give coherence to their lives and the sources of this coherence.

In relation to other methodological issues, there is the tricky practical question of whether society can be studied from the subjective reality of one person or a few biographical interviews. Evidence that this is a viable approach has been presented in a number of classic anthropological life stories that give accounts of human beings in social contexts. These works are acknowledged and valued since they not only document the socio-historical particulars of an individual's life, but because they provide insight into particular cultures at a given point in time and space (see Caplan 1997; Crapanzano 1985; Freeman 1979; Radin 1999 [1926]; Shostak 2000 [1981]; Werbner 1991). Other methodological issues directly relate to difficulties in constructing detailed biographies that encompass life trajectories and lived experiences using retrospective methods. Namely, in life histories or biographies, people do not tell their lives in temporal order but rather digress or talk about their lives without clear temporal markers unless guided by interviewers. As Bourdieu reminds us: 'an interviewee offers events which may not all or always unfold in their strict chronological succession' (2000:300). Moreover, apart from losing the thread of a strict chronological order because respondents' memories fade with time, the data that they yield may be prone to inaccuracy. Particularly among older persons, the data may be both partial and biased as past experiences are repressed or merged with others (Parry 1999:1.2). Researchers have also found that people may lie or tell the interviewer part-truths (Ravenhill 2008:84) or may present a conjured, fabricated or strategic story (Atkinson 2001:126). Undoubtedly, parts of their narratives are probably performances they have practiced many times before with other interviewers (social workers, therapists, counsellors), friends and relatives, or in solitude (Järvinen 2000:385). Conversely, there are some stories which some people never tell or reveal only partially because they are too painful or even traumatic (Merrill and West 2009:6). Inevitably, people's biographies often contain details that are personal and private so recounting these lived experiences may be just too embarrassing, belittling or painful for them. A lack of cooperation or rapport between the interviewer and interviewee may also hinder the production of knowledge. For instance, if the interviewee loses interest and grows reluctant to divulge information, his or her story may be brief and unemotional. Unelaborated, dispassionate responses that resemble factsheet data are a significant departure from the rich anthropological information that can be obtained through biographical approaches. In any case, all these methodological issues may have an impact on the accuracy of the information gained and validity of the data that are important for the success of any research. Subsequently, the researcher must be able to skilfully extract the anthropological/sociological meanings from these stories as interviewees are not necessarily aware of the context or able to present it explicitly during the course of an interview. In fact, it is the researchers that must discover and construct the context in order to be able to understand and give meaning to the stories. However, to suspend values and to extract the wealth of meanings latent in life stories that remain implicit in a person's lived experience is no easy task as according to Bertaux (1990):

> (…) some lay persons do possess it – to look through a particular experience and understand what is universal in it; to perceive, beyond described actions and interactions, the implicit sets of rules and norms, the underlying situations, processes and contradictions that have both made actions and interactions possible and that have shaped them in specific

ways. It takes some training to hear, behind the solo of a human voice, the music of society and culture in the background.

While biographical interviews provide an opportunity for researchers to locate personal experiences within the wider social context (Hubbard 2000:113) this requires skill and know-how. Obviously, it is work of the researcher to work through the specific socio-historical circumstances within which lives are lived to uncover a person's place in the social order of things in addition to the social background, structures and processes that are at work in a particular context. No doubt, personal biographies can help the researcher become more aware of the range of possible roles and norms that exist and the situations that unavoidably have an impact on people's decisions and choices within a particular social context.

Homelessness and the Post-Socialist Context

Clearly, homelessness as a social phenomenon takes different forms depending on social, economic, political and legislative factors in a particular country. Researchers confirm that homelessness existed in the socialist period, but rough sleepers with no job or shelter were treated as criminals and, for this reason, they tried to hide their conditions (escaping at least into workers' hostels or hospitals) (Tosics and Hegedüs 2001:129). According to Andrusz (2001) 'the socialist city had its quota of poor people. They were, though, almost wholly invisible, did not form pressure groups or demonstrate, and were rarely, if ever, the subject of articles in daily newspapers and popular magazines or even scholarly journals… Ideologically, such groups could not exist, when they did appear the agents of social control dealt with them under the appropriate anti-parasite legislation.' Undeniably, the risk of homelessness became a gruelling reality for many people in post-socialist countries as economic reforms and political liberalisation transformed institutional structures, including social services, beyond recognition. There are unique factors concerning the sudden political and economic changes, e.g. the transition from a planned economy to a market society. These include great increases in public utility prices, elimination of job security and security of tenure, disappearance of workers' hostels and the reduction of beds in hospitals which effectively increased homelessness in the larger cities of Eastern and Central Europe (FEANTSA 1999 cited in UNCHS/Habitat 2000:5). These socio-economic and political changes resulted in 'a rapid and large growth of social inequalities in all transition countries' (Bićanić and Franičević 2005). Many citizens were unprepared for these changes, which jeopardised their 'cradle to grave' security that seriously affected their well-being in the post-transition period. Social policy in socialist countries was part of the ideology; it was integrated in the political systems and part of the political rhetoric. Many of the advantages such as full employment, social security, food/flat subventions, free health care, free education, gender equality, etc. during socialism were lost or transformed which increased vulnerabilities. Further, the transition phase of the economy from a socialist to a market economy was complicated by the war in Croatia (1991-1995). This had a devastating impact on Croatia's economic and social fabric characterised by hyperinflation and a decline in output, especially industrial output, depreciation of the country's currency, increasing rates of unemployment, higher levels of poverty, and the growth of an informal economy (Crnković-Pozaic 1997). This 'produced' an enormous population of poor unemployed persons, displaced persons, and refugees that were dependant on relatives, friends, humanitarian organizations and the state. Moreover, there

was a marked lack of NGOs in Croatia in the early 1990s to alleviate these problems. Unfortunately, very little data is available on the social inequalities that were exacerbated and the poverty that emerged prior to and as a result of these changes. As inequalities were largely ignored at the political level, survey-based social statistics were not developed in Croatia prior to transition. Correspondingly, hardly any media attention was given to these themes and any attempt to document inequalities was hidden from public view.[1] Accordingly, following the collapse of socialism, Croatia was literally unprepared for a phenomenon such as homelessness as it lacked resources and understanding. Undisputedly, the post-socialist transition induced major changes and had complex consequences for person's biographies.

In a context of economic transition/recession and high unemployment, political agendas that focus mostly on financial savings often translate into cutbacks in social services to the most vulnerable. The main structural causes of vulnerability that contribute to increasing homelessness in Croatia are manifold. First, the right to housing is not explicitly specified in the Constitution (*Narodne novine* 28/01) even though this is a basic human right.[2] Moreover, there are no national housing programmes for vulnerable groups such as homeless people. More importantly, there are no national prevention programmes specifically for children who grew up in state institutions and become susceptible to homelessness when they leave formal care at 18. It should also be mentioned that until recently homeless people could not realise any of their rights, because there was no law ensuring their inclusion in society. Positively, a new Law on Social Welfare (*Narodne novine* 57/11) was passed in 2011, where a 'homeless person' is referred to as a recipient of social welfare -- Article 30 (8), who is entitled to other forms of assistance -- Article 93 (1) and (2). However, this Law -- Article 2 (11) narrowly defines a homeless person as 'a person who has no place to live nor the means to meet housing needs and is temporarily housed in a shelter, or lives in a public space or other places not intended for housing'. Although some of these descriptors are open to interpretation, this definition does not include people staying with friends and relatives or living in unsafe family circumstances, e.g., families in which child abuse or domestic violence is a threat or has occurred. International research has already shown that it is important to use a broad definition including gender aspects in the definition of homelessness in order to acquire a full understanding of the problem. Namely, although homeless people share a lot of common (social) experiences, the experiences of homeless women in particular reflects their subordinate and disadvantaged position in society (Doherty 2001:9). The difficulty of obtaining agreement on a set of figures to indicate the number of homeless people is attributable, in part, to the problem of how homelessness is defined or, who to include as 'homeless'. Nevertheless, it is inevitable that the numbers of homeless people will increase in Croatia as unemployment figures uncontrollably rise[3] on the eve of Croatia's integration into the European Union. Bleakly, the experiences of newer EU member states have shown that the latest transition (integration) has increased the number of homeless people in Europe.

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[1] For example, a 10 minute documentary film by Petar Krelja called "Splendid Isolation" (1973) that describes the fate of homeless people at the former Red Cross Shelter in Zagreb that was almost next door to the luxurious five-star hotel Esplanade was banned by authorities and was not publicly shown until 1992.

[2] Instead the Constitution states that the state must ensure the right to assistance for weak, helpless and other persons unable to meet their basic needs owing to unemployment or the incapacity to work (Article 57). Articles 35 and 62 refer to a dignified life and the promotion of the right to a decent life but do not make specific reference to housing.

[3] According to the latest figures the current number of unemployed persons is 369,851 (Hrvatski Zavod za zapošljavanje) while statistics indicate that this number has increased over the past three years. The average number of unemployed persons in 2009 was 263,174; while in 2010 it was 302,425 and in 2011 it was 306,333 (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2012:29).

Researching Homelessness in Croatia

This study is a part of a larger qualitative project which specifically focused on the ways women and men experience homelessness. This research project tends towards holistic forms of understanding, viewing an individual's homelessness within larger processes in society. Namely, it seeks to discover the social and cultural conditions that are linked to an individual's experience of homelessness as well as offer a portrait of the complexities of this lived experience. Although this pioneering study was multi-sited, it was not designed to obtain a representative profile of homeless people but to increase understandings of homelessness in Croatia. Focus is on the social background and life histories as well as present living standards, life cycles, experiences and aspirations of those who are homeless. Ethnographic methods (participant observation and interviews) as well a content analysis of media representations of homelessness were employed in the research project. Fieldwork for the entire project was carried out in seven cities: Zagreb (capital of Croatia); Varaždin; Karlovac; Osijek; Rijeka; Split; and Zadar[4] by a team of researchers from the Institute of Social Sciences *Ivo Pilar* and a number of students. Fieldwork with homeless women took place at two large shelters in Zagreb (Heinzelova and Red Cross), in Osijek (Caritas) and a separate homeless shelter for women in Split (MOST). As female homelessness is more hidden, there are fewer women in this sample (20) compared to the number of homeless men (65). Field research was conducted between April and November 2009 and involved both day and night visits depending on the opening times of the shelter.

The first part of the research involved a questionnaire for demographic details followed by semi-structured interviews that allowed discussions to flow freely if participants wanted to explain something further. These biographical interviews, the primary method used in this research offered an opportunity for the speaker to construct his or her own personhood; to be *visible*. These interviews also allowed participants to identify and discuss the events and relationships that they believe are significant in their life transition, particularly their paths into homelessness. Our intention was to capture their individual life trajectories of homelessness, hardships and trauma in their own words. Another goal was to encapsulate the multiplicity of factors determining their actions at particular points in time and contexts. Although interview questions were constructed around a formal interview guide to gain biographical retrospective and current information, the interviews per se were all very different depending on those who took part. These face-to-face interviews focussed on the following areas: life prior to homelessness; paths to and out of homelessness/aggravating factors; typical routines – daily activities, relationships, social capital, etc; problems – existential, psychological, health, institutional, etc.; ideal constructions of femininity and masculinity; identity; plans for the future – and suggestions for improvement.

Biographies of Homelessness

The discursive productions of the homeless people interviewed reveal variety, thematic complexity and diversity. All the interviews invariably refer to traumatic experiences, displace-

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[4] The establishment of shelters for homeless people, particularly in the last decade, is evidence of their ever-increasing numbers and vulnerabilities. More recently, another shelter has opened in Pula as well as a second shelter in Rijeka. In addition, the need for more shelters in towns such as Vukovar, Slavonski Brod, Vinkovci, Dubrovnik, Sisak, and Petrinja has been conveyed in the media.

ment, relocation(s), fragmentation and loss because of their homelessness. Based on their biographical interviews, there is never just 'one path' or 'one situation' into homelessness but this path is a process that has many routes and aggravating factors. In most cases, individual experiences of homelessness were connected to larger social processes and conditions so that routes into homelessness were often triggered by situational factors rather than being inherent in the individual. For men, paths into homelessness were more likely to be triggered by job loss than was it was for women in this study. In comparison, the impact of violence on homeless women, past and present, is a significant factor that is related to women's routes into homelessness. Evidently, gender relations of power, especially family or household relations also structure women's homelessness and their experiences of homelessness commonly reflect their inferior and marginalised position in society. For instance, women in this study often talked about the discomfort of being outdoors,[5] particularly in smaller towns, where they often face stigmatisation and feel threatened by others.

> Well, women as homeless women are not only exposed to more, they are sometimes exposed to immoral propositions. You know, like – you come and live with me, as if you are an object ... a lot of our homeless generation are cruel towards us, you know... (Ivanka, 56 interviewed by M G Z)

Regardless of gender, many of the participants in this study have financial problems and do not feel valued, independent or connected to others because i) their social benefits/pensions are insufficient in themselves to secure a route out homelessness and ii) the work that they do to make ends meet is often characterised by irregularities, difficult conditions, poor pay, lack of security, discrimination and ill-treatment. Almost half (45 percent) attempt to supplement this by working in the shadow economy (e.g., collection of recyclables-bottles, construction work, care work, etc). However this work is often stigmatised, as in the words of this man, who collects recyclables to satisfy his needs in a small town where there is no anonymity:

> It is all so disgraceful for us. This is not ... it's humiliating. Everyone is watching you. It's not that ... it's not pleasant. (Ivan, 52 Interview by L Š M)

Unsurprisingly, just over a third of the research participants have a bank account, which implies that the rest do not have a need for bank facilities or access to savings. It should be noted that almost all of them were employed (61 out of 65 men and all the women except for one) prior to homelessness. Alarmingly, their years of work service in the formal economy are very high; two fifths are in the 10-20 year bracket while a fifth worked for 20-30 years. In response to a question related to the main reasons or causes of homelessness, a participant who was part of the formal economy for fifteen years before transition connects the high number of jobless people to the overall unstable situation in Croatia following transition. He has been using shelter facilities for the last eight years.

> There is no reason; in fact, the cause was in the whole country, all over Croatia. ... if it was only me one wouldn't mind but thousands and thousands of us lost our jobs and from '90 I haven't been able to find a job. During the Homeland War, I transported humanitarian aid from Germany and Holland to here, for the army and so on. That was all for a short period, all together two months when you add it all up, and that is it. (Darko, 55 interviewed by I M)

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[5] Depending on the shelter and season, most shelters are closed during the day. Women, in particular, find this difficult on a daily basis with few exceptions. Some of their discomforts include: being in public spaces all day, problems associated with maintaining cleanliness/public toilets, finding shelter from the elements, feeling unsafe and insecure, etc.

Another respondent claimed that inadequate social services considerably aggravated her situation. Dismally, even after 23 years of work service as a head analyst at a company that was privatised 13 years ago she was unable to find work in the formal economy that would provide her with more security. Regardless of her work experience, she was told that she was too old at 40. Quite typically, for this age group, particularly among the men -- this is their fate. In the post-transition/war period, many lost their jobs and were unable to find work again. Moreover, if they also have chronic health problems, it is often impossible for them to find work in the first place or manage work and these problems at the same time without any extra support from the state.

In the following case study, the overall precariousness of the current situation in Croatia is evident even though this participant is still formally employed. In short, her job (steady but poorly paid) was not enough to provide the security that she needed to avoid homelessness and the subsequent trauma that this has had on her family:

> Marija, 61 has lived in Split all of her life. She has a university degree, computing skills, a driver's licence and knows different languages. Given her vast cultural capital, she has worked at a reputable company for 40 years. She recalls that during the war (1991-5) she realised that they didn't have enough money to buy 'luxuries' such as newspapers. Her path to homelessness began when she and her husband were forced to sell their family home to pay off their son's debt (he carelessly bought an unsuccessful business that had no hope of being profitable due to technology advancements). The sale of their family home and their salaries were not enough to cover this debt and subsequent loans that were made to pay off the first loan. As a consequence of this hopeless situation, her husband committed suicide. Shortly after this, she also attempted to end her life. She has been on sick leave for the last two years, for most of which she received treatment at a hospital for depression. Her son is also homeless but lives on the streets and avoids shelters. He chooses this lifestyle because it is too risky for him to stay where he can be easily found. A lot of people are after him because of his unpaid debts. She doesn't know where her daughter lives; she just knows that she is unemployed even though she is qualified in a health care profession. In short, her family and home life are now shattered.

Considering the social, economic and political context of Croatian society and the history of social welfare in these spaces, the social welfare system is not adequately prepared to provide suitable help to homeless people or to solve their housing problems satisfactorily.[6] Frustration and feelings of abandonment, exclusion and isolation were common as well as a complete mistrust in institutions and the social welfare system. For instance, some portrayed the shelter as a ghetto[7] where those without any hope are put away and where minimum assistance (shelter, food, clothes) is considered sufficient. The following excerpts reflect the systematic and paradigmatic problems with social service provisioning within homeless shelters.

> (…) these people are left to decay. We are simply left, you know, pushed to the margins and we have to waste away, don't we? …they don't take human pride into account not even human morale, nothing. We are simply animals for them. I mean, I don't know what we are to

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[6] Generally, one of the basic features of the Croatian social welfare system is its centralisation, which results in work overload and an overall inefficiency of social welfare centres. Centres for social welfare have an ambivalent role. They are expected to solve individual social problems in which users' needs sometimes exceed the legal and real possibilities of the centre, but at the other side, centres are faced with many users in an absence of staff and inadequate spaces without the required technology… (Šućur 2003).

[7] Since fieldwork for this study a centrally located shelter has been closed down and in its place a new shelter on the outskirts of Zagreb has been established in Kosnica. Considering its inaccessibility and seclusion (as homeless people do not have cars), this shelter is at risk of becoming ghettoised.

> them. If I have something to eat, if I have something to wear, okay what I mean is that even animals go to vets… but here… it boils down to this—she is fed, she is dressed and that is that!, I'm not saying that they [social services] didn't help me at all… but it was only when I became so depressed [after two suicide attempts] then things started to happen, but it was quite hopeless by then. I mean they should have reacted way before this, don't you think? (Anka, 56 interviewed by M G Z)

> No, they [social services] don't give us any allowances. They have stopped giving us anything. They constantly say there is no money. For clothes, they say you have Caritas, for food, you have Caritas, for medicines, you have Caritas… These medicines are suspicious. I don't like this, you poison yourself even more. Then with shoes and slippers, there are no large sizes; these are collected by those who work there and there are no clothes either. They take it for themselves and leave us the rubbish. Or they are from the dead. And the food is just the same. It's like that. Nice sauerkraut! (Nenad, 52 interviewed by L Š M)

Some participants drew attention to the lack of professional as well as incompetency of staff at shelters, which may also echo gaps in the overall system of health care. The next excerpt shows that the services that are available are basic and that overall care reflects that homelessness and its multidimensionality is not well understood.

> Yes, yes, you don't have anyone, you don't, you don't. I can maybe count three people out of us 96 here whom I can turn to for help. No one else at all! … there should be a psychologist, a psychiatrist who is available here all the time for these poor people; there are bad people but there are also really good and poor people who need help. A psychiatrist would be very good, but they are not aware of this at all. (Eva, 38 interviewed by I M)

Moreover, as their life histories convincingly show, if homeless people ever succeed in finding a home, their return to homelessness is inevitable as measures of prevention are not systematically implemented and monitored to ensure that they do not become homeless again.

Concluding Remarks

The aims in this study were to discover what was individual and particular about homeless people's stories and then to examine the ways their lives represented a more common experience that could be generalised. Thus, the focus is not on individual stories, but the significance and impact of their stories as a whole to understand the wider social processes under analysis. Specifically, a biographical approach gives space to a fuller assessment of the multifaceted ways in which people deal with the opportunities and constraints shaping their access to a home, employment and welfare. It also allows us to examine how these negotiations are shaped by an individual's status, vulnerabilities, circumstances, and experiences. Clearly these biographies must be grounded to social reality through a contextual analysis. In this study, the stories of the different homeless people fall into place only after the context is discovered, i.e., the ways in which men and women become homeless or the ways in which people move from one position to another -- all the stories are related. Each story or case, adds nuance to the whole picture. Thus, this approach recognises the individuality of homeless people and the need for an array of responses to the problems of homelessness without negating the structural similarities that underlie homelessness. Moreover, even if participants are not always aware of structural effects, their stories can be analysed to show

the impact of structure on homeless people's strategies and experiences. As a further way of unpacking our understanding of the homelessness experiences of crisis, this study showed that homelessness among women is a particular problem that has not yet been officially recognised. Clearly, the nature of this problem deserves closer policy analysis. In part, this is related to the tacit tolerance of violence in Croatia since gender relations of power, especially family or household relations structure women's homelessness.

Finally, it is especially important to extensively research homelessness and its causes in transitional countries as this is a relatively 'new' phenomenon. Without this research, policies are unlikely to be effective. A lack of data is a major impediment to the development of coherent policies and meaningful strategies (of prevention) on homelessness in Croatia. Quantitative studies on the socio-demographic characteristics of homeless people are inadequate and further perpetuate stereotypes as well as depersonalise homeless persons. Thus, it is important to conduct further qualitative research (biographical interviews) to ask homeless people themselves about their (past) situations and experiences to learn what their needs are and how they could be met more effectively. In addition, as a recommendation, longitudinal qualitative studies could be a vital approach to studying experiences of crises among homeless persons in the future.

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Upotreba biografskih istraživanja u razumijevanju kriznih iskustava hrvatskih beskućnika

Sažetak

Članak pokazuje kako biografsko istraživanje može doprinijeti razumijevanju kriznih iskustava beskućnika, te kako njihove osobne biografije ukazuju na različite kontekste i procese beskućništva. U radu se razmatra uloga biografske metode u kvalitativnim istraživanjima, te se donosi analiza post-tranzicijskog beskućništva. Članak se, u užem smislu, bavi detektriranjem socijalne transformacije i krize u osobnim biografijama korisnika smještaja za beskućnike u skolništima diljem Hrvatske. Rezultati istraživanja omogućavaju potpunije propitivanje iskustva beskućništva i strukturnih sličnosti tih isksutava.

Ključne riječi: biografska istraživanja, beskućništvo, kriza, kontekst