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# *ARE WE LIKE GUINEA PIGS TO YOU OR SOMETHING?* ON THE ETHICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF RESEARCHING HOMELESSNESS *(Translation)*

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The article addresses the ethical and methodological dilemmas that emerged from research on socially marginalized citizens of Zagreb, specifically people with lived experiences of homelessness. In the first part of the paper, we provide a brief overview of selected features of previous research on homelessness. We then present the specificities of developing our research approach, or "methodological network," in which, through experimenting with classical and common ethnographic methods and experiences based on initial observations from a distance, through participation (volunteer work), and interviewing, we realized the importance of ethnography of non-intrusiveness: listening, waiting, and socializing. In the next section, we deal with the positioning, or more precisely, the overlaps of our research, volunteer, and, conditionally speaking, friendly roles in different fieldwork contexts, and the development of strategies to overcome these overlaps in order to achieve "research efficiency" and subsequently "calm" our methodological and ethical questioning.

Keywords: *homelessness, fieldwork, ethnography, ethics, methodology*

> *"I do not mean that a man with a home and family can see and feel the world as homeless women see and feel it. I do mean, however that it is reasonable and useful to try to do so."*
>
> (Liebow 1993:xv)

This article[1] will provide a reflection on some of the ethical and methodological dilemmas and problems we encountered (and continue to face) while researching certain aspects of the everyday lives of impoverished citizens of Zagreb, specifically people with lived experiences of homelessness.[2] More precisely, these are individuals who gather twice a week in the evenings in the city center, near the main train station, in the area between the so-called "black locomotive" and the Memorial to Victims of the Holocaust and the Ustaša Regime. They come to receive aid packages from humanitarian initiatives, which primarily contain food, but usually also include hygiene products, clothing, footwear, and similar items.[3] The number of people gathered there varies widely, ranging from approximately eighty to two hundred, depending partly on weather conditions and the time of year.[4] There are typically fewer people in the summer months compared to the rest of the year. These people, broadly speaking, "make up" the statistical data which show

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[2] It is important to note that some of these people are not "citizens of the city of Zagreb" in the formal sense, as they do not have a registered address of residence in the city. These individuals have (mostly) relocated to Zagreb from other parts of Croatia and live there without secure housing. Although this article does not address the obstacles this group of citizens faces in obtaining basic rights (food and shelter) or the ways it obtains them, it is important to highlight that proof of a registered address is crucial for them to claim these rights. At first glance, the paradox of this requirement (a homeless person with an address) is obvious, but many of the daily problems they face stem from this very requirement, something that civil society initiatives focused on helping this group of people continuously point out (cf. e.g. https://www.mirovina.hr/novosti/beskucnici-zanemareni-u-drustvu-nemaju-pravo-na-osobnu-iskaznicu-a-smjestaj-je-nedovoljan/; https://promise.hr/beskucnik-u-zagrebu-ziv-izgorio-pokraj-prihvatilista-za-rh-su-beskucnici-ionako-ljudi-koji-ne-postoje/; https://www.jutarnji.hr/vijesti/zagreb/ovako-se-ne-odnose-niti-prema-ratnim-zlocincima-jedini-u-eu-imamo-takav-zakon-zelimo-osobne-15427595; https://www.zagreb.info/vijesti/novi-prosvjed-za-beskucnike-u-zagrebu-ulica-nije-dom/601285/; accessed February 15, 2024).

[3] According to available information, assistance activities for impoverished citizens at this location were initiated by a humanitarian association in 2017, and it continues to operate there to this day. The work of a second initiative (with which we later became involved) began at the same location in the second half of 2020. It is likely that the choice of this particular location is related to its proximity to the city center and the Main Train Station, described as "the largest shelter in Zagreb, with 70 to 100 homeless people staying in abandoned buildings and wagons" (Pučka pravobraniteljica 2023). This area is also frequented by many people living in homelessness as part of their daily routines. Although the location for aid distribution is not directly connected to the monument or events of 1942, the symbolism of the place, flanked by the black locomotive (which is itself a subject of controversy, cf. e.g. Mamić 2018; Benačić 2018) and the Holocaust memorial (titled Present Absence by its authors when submitting it for competition), cannot be overlooked, as it once again brings together marginalized people who are often invisible or unwanted in public spaces.

[4] During our research, we learned that one reason for the decrease is that some individuals migrate to the coast, assuming that it provides better opportunities for seasonal work between late spring and early autumn.

that, in 2022, nearly twenty percent of Croatia's population was at risk of poverty and social exclusion. Unemployed individuals and people over the age of sixty-five, especially women, are most vulnerable to this risk (Državni zavod za statistiku 2023).[5] It is precisely people with these social characteristics, along with those living in homelessness — about whom there is significant disagreement in statistical data, as official figures differ greatly from those of organizations focused on helping this group[6]— who make up the so-called "locomotive crew," a term often used in volunteer jargon to refer to the people gathered at the Zagreb Train Station.[7]

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[5] Other indicators taken into consideration include factors such as not being able to afford adequate heating during the winter months, taking a short vacation away from home, having a quality meal every other day, or falling behind on financial obligations (loans, utilities), etc. (Državni zavod za statistiku 2023).

[6] The Ombudswoman also points out this issue, noting that in 2022, according to official data, the number of homeless individuals decreased to 380, while according to the Croatian Homeless Network, their number increased to about 2000, with nearly half residing in Zagreb (Pučka pravobraniteljica 2023). The key reason for this discrepancy is the absence of a unified register of the actual number of homeless people, as well as the failure to implement registration in accordance with the Social Welfare Act. The Act has been in effect since 2022 and it defines homeless people as "those who use organized accommodation services in shelters or overnight shelters" but also as "those residing in public or other places not intended for living" (Zakon o socijalnoj skrbi, 2024, čl. 15, t. 14). As a result, a large number of people living in homelessness are unable to claim rights within the social and healthcare systems, secure legal employment, etc. Additionally, anyone who lacks documentation proving residency in the area where they are found is at constant risk of being charged with "public order crimes," primarily "vagrancy" and "begging," for which the current law prescribes "a fine of 20.00 to 100.00 euros or imprisonment of up to 30 days" (Zakon o prekršajima protiv javnog reda i mira, 2023, čl. 11; for a brief overview of the relationship between homelessness and vagrancy, as defined by Croatian legislation since the 1990s, see Gjeri Robić 2017). This poses an additional burden on people who are already the most vulnerable in society.

[7] The remainder of the article uses the term the "locomotive crew," as we consciously avoided terms such as "vulnerable people," "marginalized people," and similar, which are often used in public discourse to describe this group. As mentioned earlier, the locomotive crew is a term used by the volunteers we worked closely with, and it does not carry negative connotations. In fact, it can be said that the term conveys a certain closeness, as in some conversations, when explaining an issue related to a particular individual, the phrase was often accompanied by the pronoun "our" (e.g., "he/she is/isn't from our locomotive crew"). It is important to emphasize that the word "locomotive" in this term refers solely to the gathering location ("in front of the black locomotive") and not to locomotives, wagons, or trains as places where many of these people sometimes sleep (which could potentially carry negative connotations).

## APPROACH OUTLINE

Although the mentioned statistical data can serve as a highly relevant starting point for critical research on poverty and homelessness, or some aspects of social policy in Croatia, we mention them here only to provide a broader context for our research. We also mention them to position our own research and chosen methodological approaches, keeping in mind that most studies on homelessness tend to focus on numbers and quantitative methodology. Despite the valuable and numerous contributions of such an approach, this focus almost inevitably perpetuates the stereotype that homelessness includes a homogeneous group of people who share the same problems, which would then imply a uniform approach should be taken to addressing those issues. In the following sections, we will briefly examine only a small portion of the research that seems relevant to the assumptions that have somewhat directed our focus on this topic. This restriction is due to the scope of this paper and its specific focus as well as the nearly ungraspable production of work in this field (more precisely, fields, as it is a subject dealt with in the humanities, social sciences, medicine, and even technical fields).

Criticism of the approaches mentioned at the beginning of this section emerged as early as the 1990s and remains relevant today, albeit with somewhat different emphasis. For example, in an early critique by American scholars (Snow et al. 1994) of the approaches that dominated homelessness research until the 1990s, the key problems identified include: the insistence on “behavioral patterns,” the uncritical (and unethical) use of data that should remain confidential, a decontextualized analytical approach, and insisting on the language of dysfunctionality. This, in turn, has led to numerous prejudices (mental illness, alcohol and drug addiction, laziness, etc.), which people experiencing homelessness still face today. Of course, epistemological and methodological problems in homelessness research and their impact on the “image” projected through academic studies into public perceptions of homelessness are also present in more recent work. For example, in a brief review of homelessness research from the perspective of dominant methodological choices and with the intention to identify potential contributions (and shortcomings) of a part of contemporary research to understanding and solving homelessness, O'Sullivan, Pleace, Busch-Geertsema, and Filipovič Hrast (2020) note the importance of carefully designing the entire research strategy. Thus, according to them, the choice between qualitative (or quantitative) methods alone does not guarantee the quality of the research, which aligns with methodological approaches that argue that, instead of viewing methods as the key distinguishing factor between different research approaches, it is more useful to think about what each method can offer in a specific research context (cf. Morgan 2014:46). Regarding paradigms and critiques in homelessness research, as well as efforts to establish more effective ways of addressing “homelessness issues,” it is essential, as Michele Lancione (2016) points out, to ask: *Why do we do what we do?* With this seemingly simple but highly provocative question, this professor of economics and political geography encapsulates critique of homelessness research, strongly advocating for a shift in approach that would make homelessness research more “more relevant, more open and better equipped to engage with the challenges of the current times” (ibid.:167–168). He even questions, due to the rise of nationalism, the complexities of life on the margins, poverty, refugeehood, migration, etc. (ibid.:164), the very definition of homelessness. At the core of his call for change is the need for “developing” active reflection, based on the notion of a mutually constitutive relationship between researchers and the researched, revealing the fallacy of the objective viewpoint as a guiding principle and goal in research. Active reflection implies being open to activist approaches in research, and its goal is not merely the production of knowledge through the application of suitable methodological choices, but rather an epistemology that is inclined towards the field and its participants (ibid.:169). This approach is also recognizable in some other contemporary works focused on homelessness research.[8]

Although Lancione’s provocative question is primarily aimed at emphasizing the importance of “embracing” reflection in homelessness research as a way to achieve a stronger “impact” on broader social transformation, it is also important as an indicator of how specific, narrow topics in homelessness research and the approaches taken to examine them (from selecting appropriate methods and their application in research to the analysis) are entrenched in specific institutional or disciplinary, and often project-based, frameworks (and goals) within which the researcher operates.[9] This perspective

[8] For example, it can be recognized in the call for an “‘unruly’ research position,” which David Farrugia and Jessica Gerrard (2016) utilize by combining relevant insights from feminist and postcolonial critique to “unsettle the objectifying lens so often applied to those whom academics take as their research objects.” They emphasize the importance of recognizing structural inequalities in analyzing experiences of homelessness. One relatively early but insufficiently visible example of such an approach is found in the “alternative cartographies of homelessness” introduced by May, Cloke, and Johnsen (2007) in their research on overlooked aspects of homelessness, aimed at highlighting the diversity of women’s homelessness experiences (cf. also Greiner 2022; Šikić-Mićanović and Greiner 2024).

[9] The works of Croatian researchers can, of course, also be viewed with this in mind. By focusing on various issues related to homelessness (e.g., the quality of services, public attitudes toward homeless individuals, rights, support systems and social inclusion, employment, and overall improvement of their quality of life, etc.; cf. e.g., Družić Ljubotina 2012; Družić Ljubotina et al. 2022; Šikić Mićanović 2012; Šikić-Mićanović et al. 2020; a more detailed review of research is available at https://www.croris.hr/crosbi/searchByNameContext/4/0/GHFyPUW3XpY-NgEcb7pjpQbxBsdYGr9sOM5msliqSgDViJYB, accessed July 30, 2024), they seek to contribute to greater awareness and increased sensitivity toward this group of citizens, which would also imply

also somewhat influences the ways in which ethical issues are shaped and "resolved" in homelessness research. In the humanities and social sciences (and likely, with adaptations and specific additions, beyond them), this is often shaped, among other things, through questions about how participants' identities are included and protected, the assessment of potential harms that research may cause them, responsible researcher behavior in line with these risks, respect for their autonomy, responsible dissemination of research results, etc. (cf. Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:209–219). These questions are often integral parts of institutional and/or professional ethical codes or guidelines that researchers are expected to follow. It is clear that, at least in the humanities and social sciences, documents such as codes/guidelines cannot anticipate the specific challenges researchers face in the field. Thus, the "responses" to those challenges are largely shaped by an individual researcher's decision about whether to maintain distance and become/remain an objective observer, adhering to "procedural ethics," or to fully immerse themselves in the field, dealing with ethically problematic situations that are typically numerous and unpredictable[10] in research on sensitive topics such as homelessness. This approach also involves embracing situational solving dilemmas as a modus operandi (cf. e.g. Menih 2013; Garthwaite 2016). This "immersion" in the field (cf. Goffman 1989:125), as the examples presented later in this paper will demonstrate, means that, over time, fieldwork transforms into a "constant stew of emotions, ranging from doubt and acute homesickness to laughter and a kind of comradeship" (Thrift 2003:106), requiring significant research flexibility, especially in dealing with ethical dilemmas, some of which demand immediate responses ("the *ethics* of encounter", Thrift 2003:105).

From today's perspective, i.e. the time when this article is being completed, our fieldwork experience closely aligns with what Jonathan Darling describes in his work on researching asylum seekers and refugees: "For me, any time spent in 'the field' was of value. I would thus advocate approaching fieldwork not as a set of activities or methods to be performed, but as an outlook. Encountering 'the field' cannot be parcelled off into distinct chunks of time, but demands a constant attentiveness to context that requires skills of listening, observing, questioning and perseverance" (Darling 2014:210).

In this sense, the rest of the paper demonstrates how "giving in" to the fieldwork experience can be both a source and a guide in finding alternative methodological solutions, based on embracing the idea of a mutually constitutive relationship between "us" and "others" (Lancione 2016:168). In our case, as will be shown, this involved the

changes in the relevant parts of national and local social policies.

[10] And can ultimately lead to researchers finding themselves in a situation where they feel vulnerable and look for ways to protect themselves (cf. e.g. Sikic Micanovic et al. 2020).

gradual development of a “methodological network” adapted to specific experiences. Through the trial and error of using both classical and well-established ethnographic methods—starting from initially distant observation (cf. Parsell 2011), to participation (volunteer work), and interviewing—we came to recognize the importance of ethnography of unobtrusiveness (Jambrešić Kirin 2021). This, in some cause-and-effect sequence that is difficult to describe, brought forth the importance of listening (Forsey 2010), waiting (Palmer et al. 2017; Mannay and Morgan 2015; Vukušić 2024), and socialization (Rosenthal 1991) as key characteristics of our research. This methodological “maneuvering” had a transformative effect, not only in terms of data collection, but also on a deeply personal level, confronting us with prejudices we were unaware of when we first entered the field. Additionally, we believe that by applying these (slow) approaches and presenting them in the style of *thick description* (Geertz 1998), we have, at least to some extent, succeeded in portraying the people we interviewed as much like ourselves or, to paraphrase the conclusion from an earlier homelessness study, as normal (Snow and Anderson, cited in O'Sullivan et al. 2020:111; cf. also Rosenthal 1991).

The article, in other words, represents a reflection on the research process, specifically the process of establishing contact with people experiencing homelessness and other existentially vulnerable citizens at the mentioned location. It also reflects on the characteristics of our positioning within this process and the repercussions of the relationships we formed with them over the course of our research and its results. The ethical and methodological issues—central to our attention—are largely based on and stem from the understanding of ethnography as something that, among other things, requires patience in building relationships with those we study, practicing flexibility, adapting to field situations and experiences, and recognizing that even seemingly trivial situations or sentences can play a decisive role in our field insights, something we encountered countless times during this research. The following text also relies on the notion of the essential connection between ethnographic action (doing) and writing, and their mutually-shaped relationship, where ethnographic experience holds central importance (cf. Sharman 2007:119–128). Consequently, the text is rich in narrative sections through which we sought to convey our experience of immersion and presence in the field, including parts of the process that outline our research discomforts, even failures, and our efforts to devise ways to overcome them.

In the first part of the paper, we present our entry into the field, then we focus on our positioning, or more precisely, the overlap of our research, volunteer, and, to some extent, roles as friends in various contexts of our fieldwork, and the strategies we devised to overcome these overlaps in order to achieve “research effectiveness” and thus “calm” our methodological and ethical concerns.

## MUTUAL OBSERVATION AND WAITING

Our first visit to the mentioned location occurred in the spring of 2022, sparked by our engagement at the time with preparing an exhibition on hunger (cf. Kocković Zaborski 2023). We were interested in alternative methods of food supply, particularly in activities that provide basic necessities to those who cannot afford them through conventional means or cannot do so in an adequate manner. Although the contours of our interests were somewhat defined by this focus, our encounter with the locomotive crew was entirely different from any of our previous fieldwork experiences. This "deep" experience from our first meeting — where a world both familiar and distant revealed itself to us: familiar in its physical proximity and public visibility (city center, early evening), yet distant due to our lack of prior personal or professional connection with it — prompted us to continue visiting this location on the days when aid was distributed. These meetings quickly became a common occurrence in our lives. It is difficult, especially from today's perspective, to discern whether our decision to return was driven by research curiosity or a personal desire to participate in helping. However, this combination of private and professional motivations aligns with the widely accepted view that researchers' personal affinities play a significant role in the choice of their research topics (Davies 2001), a perspective particularly recognized in the context of research on areas of everyday life that require an engaged approach, such as homelessness (cf. Lancione 2016).

An excerpt from the field notes of our first encounter with the aid distribution:

> Today, we decided to simply observe and positioned ourselves about fifteen to twenty meters away from where the aid packages were being distributed. People were standing in an irregular line, gathered in small groups, casually chatting. There were no raised voices, things were calm. The atmosphere changed when the volunteers arrived. The small groups gradually "broke apart" to form a somewhat more orderly line, with a few arguments over who was standing where. […] Some volunteers were talking with the people in line, and after these interactions, the line became even more organized. A few volunteers climbed up next to the monument, and one of them led a prayer.[11] Some people in the line participated loudly in the prayer, others quietly, and some did not open their mouths at all. After the prayer, the distribution of aid packages began. People started pulling out food and eating, some dunking biscuits into tea and coffee that volunteers were serving from thermoses

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[11] Given that one of the initiatives operating at this location is a religious organization, prayer is an integral part of the "ritual" of aid distribution.

> set on a foldable table. The atmosphere was quite lively; people gathered around the volunteers, who chatted warmly with them. A volunteer with a guitar started playing, and people formed a circle to sing along, with some even dancing. The overall mood was very positive. It's incredible how much happened before our eyes in just an hour or two, and how different everything was from what we had anticipated. (*Terenski dnevnik 1*, 2022)

This excerpt somewhat outlines events unknown to us (and likely to many other citizens of Zagreb) that unfold in public spaces in the city center. It also sheds light on our initial positioning, specifically the choice of observation as what seemed to be the only appropriate methodological tool for researching this simultaneously familiar yet distant setting. Our presumption was that through repeated visits and the method of observation, we would gradually gain at least a basic, superficial insight, and then, by applying other research methods, focus on specific questions related to the relationships between the members of the locomotive crew, their relationships with volunteers, the content of the aid packages, and potentially their attitudes towards that content, particularly in the context of reflecting on the concept of gifting within this process. Additionally, we intended to explore the relationships between informal (volunteer, humanitarian initiatives) and formal (institutional) care for this group of people. Our choice of observation was also driven not only by research concerns, but also by a personal discomfort, stemming from the perception that "fast" research in this context could be a form of "violence" against the subjects of the study. Consequently, we became aware of the need to develop an ethically acceptable research strategy that would, above all, involve "a non-violative, non-repressive relationship with the Other" (Gounis 1996:109), which will be discussed further.

As we contemplated how to approach these people in an ethically acceptable way, we resorted to waiting—waiting as both a physical and mental experience, but also as a key methodological practice. Waiting has marked, and continues to mark, our research journey, from our initial entry into the field and presence there, to the current moment in which, while writing about the beginnings of our research, we are still waiting for new field encounters and insights. Waiting is also an experience that, in some unusual way, connects us with the people involved in our research, whose lives, as we found out during the research, include waiting as one of its key features. However, it is important to emphasize that their waiting and ours differ significantly: While their waiting involves standing in line for food and other necessities (hygiene products, clothing, footwear, groceries, etc.), pensions, social assistance, or obtaining certain rights, and is marked by necessity, subjecting their time to the time of others—a "forced patience" (cf. Vukušić 2024)—our experience of waiting on the "waiting field" (Mannay and Morgan 2015) is a choice. This choice is grounded in the assumption that the process of waiting would provide us with the opportunity to build a non-intrusive and respectful relationship with those we are researching. In light of this, we did not approach waiting as “time to be endured” (which undoubtedly characterizes forced waiting), but rather as a valuable research and life experience (cf. Palmer et al. 2017:422).

Our first fieldwork consisted of waiting in the literal sense: We stood in place and watched people who were also waiting. While they waited for the arrival of humanitarian aid packages, we tried to grasp at least some outlines of the daily life of the locomotive crew gathered at this location through our waiting and observing. We were convinced that we went unnoticed due to the fact that a large number of people fluctuate in the area where the food is distributed, owing to the proximity of the train station. However, this assumption turned out to be unfounded. By the second or third visit, our waiting was “interrupted” by people with sandwiches in hand, slowly approaching us as if by coincidence. One of them came up to us, thinking we were journalists writing a piece about the homeless, and told us that we could take his photograph only if we offered him some form of compensation. Another thought we were new aid-recipients, unsure how to navigate the system, and began giving us advice on how the distribution of aid worked at this location. A third person assumed we were social workers monitoring how organizations were helping the homeless on the streets. While we explained why we were there, a volunteer from the organization distributing aid approached us with a clipboard and asked us to sign it as volunteers. When we explained that our presence was for research purposes, he listened with interest, but still insisted that we write our names in the volunteer log with an explanation: “Well, you talk to people. That’s what they need the most, so what you’re doing is volunteering.” This way of becoming a volunteer struck us as unusual, primarily because of the responsibility we assumed came with such a role, which we thought would require some form of “training.” We were also puzzled by the idea that volunteering could consist of simply talking.[12] This act, along with our incidental communication with volunteers during subsequent visits to this location, somewhat facilitated our access to the locomotive crew, as they began to perceive us as volunteers. This perception was undoubtedly reinforced by our later active involvement in another initiative that also operates at this location.[13]

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[12] At the time, we were unaware of the classification of volunteers commonly used in the operations of some humanitarian initiatives, including the Red Cross, which distinguishes between *specialist volunteers* and *spontaneous volunteers* (https://www.hck.hr/kako-pomoci/volontirajte/volonteri/185; accessed March 8, 2024). Based on the situation and the activities in which we were involved, it is likely that the volunteer who approached us had placed us in the category of spontaneous volunteers.

[13] In addition to conversation as a form of volunteering, as mentioned in the text above,

## VOLUNTEERS, RESEARCHERS, OR FRIENDS?

We were quickly convinced of the volunteer's claim that conversation is indeed one of their essential needs—sometimes even more important than the food that seems to be the only reason for their gathering. This was recorded in our field diaries:

> […] He said he no longer goes to the National and University Library, but comes here to talk to his two friends. However, his friends were not here today, nor did they seem to be here last time, as he spent a considerable amount of time with us. Now we find ourselves questioning whether those friends actually exist and, if they do, whether they come here at all. They neither found him nor did he look for them after starting a conversation with us; he did not even look for them by looking around… or perhaps he is just looking for someone to talk to… (*Terenski dnevnik 5*, 2022)

> […] We noticed that A. did not have a bag with food like the other aid recipients, so we asked him where his food was. He said it did not matter; he would take some if any was left over. This is interesting because we had noticed A. even before we talked to him, while we were walking around the food distribution area. We saw him at one point in line with the others, but since he did not take any food, it seemed that his waiting in line was actually about socializing with some people who were waiting. He also seemed to circle around a lot; perhaps he was looking for a specific person, or maybe he was just looking for someone to talk to. His comment about taking food, as if it were secondary ("I'll see, if there's any left, I'll take some"), suggests that the social aspect, communication, is the most important. (*Terenski dnevnik 2*, 2022)

Most often, these conversations take the form of a monologue, so our volunteering has mostly involved listening. This volunteer role undoubtedly influenced our initial insights. We were not searching for "interlocutors," as we typically had in all our previous research. Rather, the so-called "interlocutors" were finding us, as suggested by the excerpts from our field notes above. Consequently, our initial insights were limited to their

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involvement in this initiative included participating in meal preparation, organizing and distributing aid packages, collecting financial and other donations, discussing specific needs, and recording details such as clothing and shoe sizes that the initiative would need to procure for individuals by the next meeting, and so on.

life experiences. Throughout the research, our understanding remained defined by the individual experiences of the people we communicated with. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that we are unlikely ever to provide a generalized picture of how socially vulnerable citizens of Zagreb cope with the challenges of everyday life, as securing a "statistically representative sample" (Rosenthal 1991) was not part of our plan.

During the initial weeks of volunteer work, we tried to emphasize to all the people with whom we communicated our second purpose for being at that location, our research. We presented our interest in their social and economic backgrounds, daily routines, and short- and long-term survival plans and/or plans to exit their current situation, employment status, income, etc., in "everyday language" and descriptively to ensure better understanding of our interests. Their reactions usually came in the form of a very general overview of the situation they found themselves in, often including some kind of criticism of the system that does not provide enough help to break the cycle of their dependence on this type of humanitarian aid. However, as we continuously spent time in the field, a certain number of people began to appear more frequently near us; they would comment on the contents of the recently received package and express their gratitude, inquire whether we could help them obtain a clothing item or shoes, and then politely ask a few questions about the progress of our research.

In addition to the fact that participating in the work of one of the initiatives operating in this location facilitated our approach to the locomotive crew, it is important to emphasize that crucial in this familiarization was the circumstance that we entered the volunteer community, by chance, together with a few members of the locomotive crew ("aid recipients"). This is significant because, no matter how much our "positions" — which are, especially in research on sensitive topics such as homelessness, highly relevant in terms of understanding "power" and "hierarchy" and devising ways to overcome the problems of distance between researchers and subjects, taking into account the misleading common opinion that researchers are necessarily in power (cf. Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004) — may have seemed distant in that context, that distance was overcome by the fact that we were "equals" given the reason for the meeting. Our encounters and communication (at first) were almost exclusively based on a shared goal (to complete what was expected of us within the expected timeframe), accompanied by a common spontaneous "learning" to be a volunteer, confronting initial mistakes, and eventually making jokes at our own expense.

We spontaneously grew more close, and as the spectrum of topics we discussed expanded, the world of their life trajectories opened up to us, along with a series of problems faced by other members of the locomotive crew.[14] The shared process of

[14] Although this article does not focus on that particular topic, we would like to mention that

"becoming" volunteers with a few members of the locomotive crew and establishing a friendly relationship with them[15] also influenced us being accepted by other members of the group, as conversations and jokes initiated during the process of preparing the aid packages often continued in the field, during and after the distribution. This happened in a slightly larger group, so through informal communication not necessarily marked by our volunteer role, this familiarization occurred spontaneously. Over time, our position evolved into one that is "in-between" (cf. Garthwaite 2016:67–68) a *true* volunteer, whose role is largely determined by the distribution of aid packages and recording items that specific members of the locomotive crew need (clothing, shoes, blankets, medication, etc.), and that of an acquaintance/friend to whom one can, for example, complain about the contents of the package without the risk of criticism, request a specific brand or color for an item, or even ask for a favor that greatly exceeds the volunteer/"aid recipient" relationship.[16] In light of the above, our process of "immersing" into the field through

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one of the themes that emerged through these conversations with great analytical potential is the relationship of the aid recipients not only towards the contents of the aid packages they receive, but also towards the overall system of humanitarian (non-institutional) assistance, as well as their relationship with the volunteers. Their comments on these issues, along with subsequent conversations with other members of the locomotive crew, undoubtedly influenced us, at least partially, to start critically reflecting on certain aspects of volunteer work. From today's perspective, because of the way we reached it, this realization seems more challenging and burdensome (primarily because we, as volunteers, enjoyed the warmth and sense of belonging provided by the volunteer group we joined; cf. Garthwaite 2016), more so than the sense of division arising from the opposition, so to speak, between the roles of volunteer and researcher within the context of researching the locomotive crew. This has been recognized as a problem of *conflicting loyaltie*s (Williams 2016), which arises from the gap between what is expected of a researcher in the role of a volunteer and their personal ethics.

[15] We are, of course, aware of the contextual conditions that shape and maintain such acquaintanceships/friendships, as well as the fact that our perception of the relationships established in the field may not necessarily align with the views of the people we met there (cf. Darling 2014:211).

[16] For example, one member of the locomotive crew mentioned a specific model of a sneaker brand that she needed (which, as she said, she heard about in a commercial and believed would help with her back problems) and asked us if we could try to get them for her. Another man came to complain about the light-colored jacket he had just received from a volunteer and asked us if we could find him one in a darker color, saying: "I don't want to seem ungrateful, but this isn't for me. It'll be dirty by tomorrow. I'll spend one night in it and it will be ruined." These statements are significant from the perspective of the stigmatization faced by people experiencing homelessness. This stigmatization is, among other things, perpetuated through the media, popular culture, research, campaigns, etc., and shapes the discourse about the "culture" of poverty and homelessness (Gerrard and Farrugia 2015). Part of this is the assumption that, due to their position, they should be satisfied with whatever they receive. Perhaps the example that best illustrates how the mentioned relationship with certain members of the locomotive crew is established was the situation where one of them decided to walk us home, and at one point, as we recorded immediately after the event, said: "Listen, I have

volunteering is somewhat akin[17] to Goffman's idea of the importance of the researcher subjecting themselves, their own personality and their own social situation, to a set of social contingencies and uncertainties to better understand the "position" of those they are studying (cf. Goffman 1989:125). Of course, in such an experience, permeated by processes of creating closeness with the "subjects of research," it is inevitable to reflect on the impact of our dual role (volunteer/researcher) on both the research process and its potential outcomes, as well as our relationship with the locomotive crew and other volunteers with whom we continuously and intensively collaborated. However, unlike researchers who preemptively plan volunteering as one of their research strategies (Menih 2013; Garthwaite 2016; cf. also Catela 2019) and, consequently, devise appropriate ways to achieve a balance between different roles — such as attempting to separate the personal from the professional, the research work from the volunteer work, the subjective from the objective, etc., to preserve the physical and emotional energy that is highly relevant in sensitive topic research (cf., e.g., Menih 2013; Tinney 2008) — us adopting a volunteer role was much more characterized by chance and spontaneity. This often implied some form of "navigation through methodologically unpredictable situations, fluid, slippery, layered positioning, identity gray zones, disciplinary and normative liminality" (Mucko 2023:163), which allowed for role balancing processes and the making of numerous decisions to be realized in a unique "here and now" (Darling 2014:211).

## Space

A significant role in building relationships with the locomotive crew was played not only by the mentioned characteristics of joining the volunteer community, but also by the fact that our meetings took place in an open space, and the group (both volunteers and aid recipients) was more or less constant. Despite being in a highly frequented part of the city, the group was somewhat separated from random passersby. This thesis is supported by research on homelessness, which shows that open spaces are places where the differences between researchers and subjects are least apparent (Ecker 2017).

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a request for you. I always have to look for a place to sleep in the evening, and I also need to find some food… so I was thinking, instead of running all over the place, maybe you two could charm the guy working in the hot food section at [the supermarket] and arrange with him that when they close, he doesn't throw the unsold meals into trash bags and into the dumpster, but leaves them somewhere else, so I don't have to search, so I know where it is."

[17] Although in a broader sense, the insights we gained from the field are limited by the fact that our research was conducted at only one location.

This is particularly relevant when compared to studies conducted within institutional settings (shelters and similar facilities), where fixed roles ("homeless" and "researcher," but also generally "homeless" and "non-homeless") are based, among other things, on discourses that continually emphasize dichotomies (true-false, normal-abnormal, etc.). These dichotomies are so predetermined that, despite considerable effort, they are difficult to avoid. Such conditions, as Panos Bourlessas (2019) points out, often prevent researchers from freely choosing research participants (as institutions select "representative" individuals), which not only impacts the research results but, in the end, can lead researchers to recognize, with a sense of frustration, elements of reinforcing the power of institutions to reproduce stereotypes about homeless people within their own research (ibid.). From the perspective of a (critical) approach to researching homelessness in institutional settings, Kostas Gounis' contribution (1996) is also relevant. Drawing on Foucault's understanding of power systems, Gounis discusses institutional marginalization and control (prohibitions, discipline, surveillance), which are based on the perception of the homeless person as someone "suspect" (due to addiction, criminality, laziness, etc.). This gradually leads to the individuals themselves, being continuously exposed to stereotypes about their otherness — since they are *the subjects* of help, studies, and so on — and often having no other option but to accept institutional expectations, eventually beginning to think about themselves and behave in line with these stereotypes. In such a context, how should (and can) a researcher position themself with regards to basic ethical principles (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007:209–219), especially those dealing with informed consent and the assessment of risk and benefit? Gounis (1996) emphasizes that in such research settings — which, it should be noted, involve a certain level of captivity and dependence on institutions — the idea of informed consent becomes absurd. As mentioned earlier, researchers are often suggested an appropriate/representative interlocutor, which, like accepting such suggestions, may be driven by positive intentions — cooperation with gatekeepers is valuable in such research. However, the question arises as to how we, as researchers, perceive the freedom of subjects to express their consent to participate in the research, as well as their ability to step away from the role that is expected of them during the conversation. In light of this, the question of what constitutes "risk" and what constitutes "benefit" for them is highly relevant, both in the context of participation in research and the content they share with the researcher. Some researchers, therefore, choose alternative approaches that range from occasional socializing on the street, to sharing meals, and sleeping alongside people experiencing homelessness (Bourlessas 2019; Bourgois 2012; Marcus 2006), emphasizing, among other things, the advantages of such methodological choices. These approaches involve research in locations that are closely related to the people being studied, and their advantages lie in their functioning as a departure from studies that explicitly or implicitly support stereotypes about homelessness, as well as coming from the perspective of the potential impact of spending time with these individuals and getting to know them as people on the "truthfulness" of the research results, which is sometimes questioned in homelessness research (cf. Rosenthal 1991).

The application of such research strategies can contribute to reducing power differences, as spending time together shifts the criterion of "prestige" from social hierarchy to knowledge about homelessness. In this way, a person with lived experience of homelessness becomes the "teacher" (cf. Rosenthal 1991), providing researchers with opportunities for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of various aspects of the daily lives of these individuals, as well as the diversity of experiences related to homelessness. Although our immersion into the everyday life of the locomotive crew was significantly limited compared to the endeavors of the mentioned researchers, we aimed to conduct our study by focusing, particularly at the beginning, on developing and fostering a patient, open, and respectful form of communication. Over time, this approach led to insights that were relevant from a research perspective. Through continuous observation (involving waiting and socializing as a means of connecting with the locomotive crew) a group of people gradually formed with whom we communicated during every encounter.[18]

## Listening: Silence and Voices

With each new visit to the location, new lives and worlds unfolded before us through conversations with certain individuals. Sometimes, our time there would pass in conversation with just one or possibly two people waiting for a meal, or like us, wandering, walking around in search of a familiar face, a greeting, or a chat. Those we started talking to gradually became acquaintances, and we would continue our conversations at our next encounter.

Over time, the range of topics expanded, and through small talk and discussions on seemingly trivial subjects such as the weather, food, clothing, daily routines, etc.,

[18] Given the fact that we were present in the field together from the very first day and that our initial research interests largely overlapped, most of our visits to this location were made jointly. This is important to note because the locomotive crew also perceived us as a team from the very beginning, and in that early phase of research, we largely built our relationship with them together. Later, as our individual interests gradually became more refined, each of us independently arranged interviews with specific individuals based on separate research focuses, which are not addressed in this paper.

we slowly began to understand the trajectories of their lives — tracing the contours of the social, economic, and even cultural backgrounds of their experiences. These factors included those that had led them to stand in line for humanitarian aid, reaffirming Martin Gerard Forsey's (2010) thesis that engaged, participatory listening to "what people say" in ethnographic research is at least as important as participatory observation. Through frequent conversations with individuals, our relationship with them gradually developed.

These conversations unfolded at various rhythms and intervals. Our interlocutors almost always talked in the form of summary — usually a recounting of the events from the past week or their future plans. It seemed as though they wanted to share everything they had to say with us then and there, as if there would be no more opportunities to talk.

Yet, while there was this urge to summarize a wealth of information, on the other hand, we also noticed a careful guarding of certain aspects of their personal lives. It was as if their talkativeness, interest in our lives in detail, and the abundance of information about other things were meant to compensate for what they did not want—or did not feel comfortable—sharing with us. We would encounter "silence" when painful or uncomfortable aspects of their lives emerged in conversation.[19] For example, some would respond briefly and cautiously to what seemed to us like simple questions about their past, or they would quickly change the subject by asking counter-questions about details from our own lives.

Although we talked with the locomotive crew during the distribution of aid packages in an informal setting, the conversations still represented an emotional experience for both them and us, given the delicate nature of the subject matter. Based on their reactions — both verbal and non-verbal (silence, averting gaze, etc.) — we were able to detect their emotions and attitudes toward the topics discussed. This, of course, had an impact on our own emotions.[20] Emotional involvement on the part of researchers is not unusual, particularly in research involving "vulnerable" social groups, and it is impossible to avoid (Mitchell and Irvine 2008). Managing emotions throughout the research process, especially during conversations, requires great care, caution, and intense focus from researchers.[21] At times, we felt uncertain, and sometimes helpless, which was coming from frustration, as we were not experts capable of providing concrete and adequate

[19] The silence we encountered seemed to be more about the omission of certain answers, or at least that is what we could infer. This silence manifested in avoiding direct responses, answering with a question on a related topic concerning our lives, or responding to a question with a flood of unrelated information, bordering on logorrhea. For more on the various types of silence, see Marković (2020), Kurzon (2007), and Berger (2004).

[20] The experiences of exposure and vulnerability that researchers encounter while studying homelessness can be seen, for instance, in the work of Sikic Micanovic et al. (2020).

[21] Some authors point out that qualitative interviews are similar to psychotherapy (Dickson-Swift et al. 2006), as both are based on empathy and listening skills, offering research participants

assistance to resolve the problems people were facing and sharing with us.[22]

We became aware of these feelings only after leaving the field, as the volunteer work — both physically (preparing and distributing aid packages) and mentally — occupied so much of our focus that we typically reflected on our research role only upon returning from the field, while writing field notes, *translating* the information they provided us into "our" findings.[23] The line between our volunteer and research roles became more and more blurred with the frequency of our participation in these activities, as we became more adept at volunteer work, including conversation. The conversations with the locomotive crew grew more spontaneous, and our confidence in our own research position grew more fragile (Menih 2013), particularly due to the concern about whether we were exploiting their hunger for conversation for research purposes. We questioned how to treat the knowledge we gained about their everyday lives through informal conversations, even though we did not hide our research identity and regularly reminded them of the purpose of our presence in the field. However, we were aware that many of them, due to our continuous presence as volunteers, may have, over time, forgotten or overlooked our research role (cf. Darling 2014:207).

One way we addressed the challenges stemming from our dual role as both researchers and volunteers was by deciding to conduct interviews with the people we had grown close to. Below, we briefly provide a few examples of interactions with "interlocutors" in order to highlight not only how context influences interviews (formal vs. informal, in the first example), but also how the relationship between the researcher and the "interlocutor" shaped the responses (second example), which we believe is particularly relevant in research on homelessness and poverty.

For our first "interlocutor," we chose Mateo,[24] the person we had gotten to know best

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the opportunity to discuss personal problems with someone who wants to listen (Mitchell and Irvine 2008:35). However, as Mitchell and Irvine further note, a therapist listens with the intention of providing help to the participant. While simply listening may have a therapeutic effect, it is not equivalent to actual therapeutic interventions aimed at helping the conversation partner or patient in concrete terms (ibid.:35).

[22] An example of this could be a conversation with an individual about whether they can be photographed in a public space, if they are entitled to compensation if photographed without permission, or inquiries about the rules for accessing food throughout the day. Other discussions touched on problems such as the theft of personal identification cards or social welfare benefits, reasons for being denied access to the homeless shelter at Velika Kosnica, and similar topics.

[23] Given the nature of our (joint) entry into the field, after our first encounter with the locomotive crew, we immediately created a shared folder. Each of us accessed it from our own computers, where we recorded our notes and reflections on the field experience. We continuously reviewed these entries, discussing and analyzing them together in a collaborative manner.

[24] All of the names of the people we talked to are pseudonyms.

and with whom we had developed the closest bond during our time with the locomotive crew. Mateo is open, articulate, has years of experience living in homelessness, and understood what we were doing. He agreed to a recorded interview on the condition that it remains anonymous. We carefully prepared questions related to homelessness, guided by the knowledge he had shared with us during informal gatherings. Our expectations were high; this was supposed to be the first "official" result of our months of research, and it seemed valuable. To ensure uninterrupted communication, we chose a nearby office in the facilities of the initiative we were involved with as the location for the interview. Mateo came dressed differently than we usually saw him, he was quiet, not joking as he typically did. He sat across from us, responding to questions with short sentences, carefully considering what he said and trying to speak in standard language. The content of the interview did not even come close to revealing the nuances of his experience living in homelessness compared to what we had learned from informal conversations.

It became clear that the more formal context of the interview — sitting in an office instead of standing casually on the street, with a desk and a recorder between us, the awkward silence between questions and answers — highlighted the divide between us and influenced the content of the interview. This example clearly brings up an issue of research ethics, specifically the problem of disseminating research results. It can be simplified into the question: In such situations, what should we use as "data" in our future writings — what we learned during our volunteer work, which in our case overlapped with participant observation, or what was recorded during the arranged interview? These dilemmas do not come only from the classical ethical principles of research, such as assessing risk and benefit,[25] protecting identities, and so on, but also from the deeply personal discomfort that could be categorized under "private" ethical principles. This includes reflecting on whether we are using the content of private conversations for academic purposes. In resolving these dilemmas, some of the interview participants themselves played a crucial role. We selected them according to the principle of respecting "'non-violent' communication" in conducting interviews (Sherman Heyl 2001:378), choosing them based on the closeness we had developed over time. We occasionally met with some of them outside of the organized humanitarian aid distribution activities, and during these informal meetings, they often referred to our research role and tried to give

[25] Of course, this does not mean that we did not adhere to fundamental ethical principles in our research. We explained to all potential participants that we would protect their identity to the maximum extent (using pseudonyms, not combining details such as their age, origin, the places where they reside/sleep, specific issues in their interactions with certain institutions, or activities that could be defined as "offenses," etc.). We also told them that the information they shared with us, including the recorded conversations, would be used solely for the purpose of

us more insight into their everyday lives, which was relevant from a research perspective. Moreover, in these informal situations, they sometimes directly referred to the content of what they had "officially said," as some of them put it, further explaining situations or decisions they had briefly mentioned before, while also revealing certain aspects of their lives that were invaluable for understanding their individual life trajectories.

In such situations, we became aware of the iterative nature of the process of obtaining informed consent, as it was continuously built upon through subsequent communication with the research participants. This, of course, influenced our approach to the dilemmas regarding what to use as field data. Not only does this iterative process allow participants to clarify or change their opinions about some aspects of the knowledge they previously shared with the researcher, but it is also important for the researcher, as it provides the opportunity (and responsibility) to accurately present their research and its intentions through ongoing (informal) communication with the participants (cf. Darling 2014:207). For instance, at a public gathering of various stakeholders within the public system dedicated to the issue of homelessness, we met Mladen. We spent time with Mladen during breaks between presentations filled with statistical data and the idea of the need for greater efforts to help this group of people. During one of these breaks, as we were standing together on the sunny side of the courtyard of the building where the event was being held, Mladen asked us to move to the shaded side because, as he said, "I can't stand here anymore because it stinks." We moved, and when we asked what the problem was, as we did not notice any smell, Mladen explained that we would not be able to smell it because it was not a physical odor. He went on to explain that standing near a social worker with whom he had a particularly unpleasant experience during part of his "homelessness stint" made him anxious. This detailed account of his experience, which he had not mentioned during the earlier interview, can be important for understanding certain "turning points" in the life of a person with homelessness experience, but can also serve as an example of the relationship between these individuals and the system that supposedly "cares" for them. It also highlights the hypocrisy evident in the disconnect between what certain services publicly emphasize as their full commitment to "improving the situation of the homeless" and the individual experiences of some of them. Reflecting on the context of this situation, both socializing (Rosenthal 1991) and waiting (Palmer et al. 2017) as strategies to approach those we are researching — which are situated on the borderline between private and professional — function not only as mechanisms

our academic work. Additionally, we clarified that they could always refuse to answer a question, highlight something they personally considered important even if it was not included in the interview questions, that they could withdraw from the research at any point, etc.

ensuring "non-violence," but also as means for achieving a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of homelessness (and poverty) where, in this specific case, the relationship between the relevant institutions and people living in homelessness plays a significant role.

The positive consequences of months of waiting and socializing became particularly evident when, after repeatedly asking Zorica for a (recorded) interview and receiving her responses that she would think about it and let us know, we finally received a positive reply, along with her suggestion to conduct the interview in a café relatively far from the place where we usually met during the distribution of aid packages. The experience with Mateo's interview prompted us to accept her suggestion but also to approach the interview with only a few very general questions as a guide, leaving it up to her to decide what she wanted to share with us, putting ourselves "in the position of student" (Rosenthal 1991). In other words, we tried to follow the principles of "reflective interviewing" (Nardon et al. 2021:8–9), respecting the topics she considered relevant and her way of discussing them, tolerating digressions, and so on. In situations where she wanted to hear our opinion on some of her own decisions and choices, we worked from the assumption that she was the best "expert in her own life" (ibid.). After the interview, our relationship — more than with anyone else — took on the contours of a friendship. This manifested, among other things, when she sent us a cheerful message one day, inviting us to celebrate her birthday with ice cream. That invitation confronted us with a heavy burden: on one hand, we felt satisfaction that our research approach and approach as human beings had helped us bridge the gap between us, as housed and paid researchers, and her, a retiree with a very precarious life.[26] On the other hand, we were uncomfortable knowing that for her, this celebration — where she had decided to treat us to ice cream — represented a significant financial expense. We spent days devising a strategy to cover the cost of the celebration without hurting Zorica's feelings. In these reflections, we also re-examined our own attitudes and values, and even the biases we brought into the field without realizing it. We tried to understand the complexity of our roles in relation to the locomotive crew (Bolton 2010:3, as cited in Nardon et al. 2021:2). Thus, we recognized that "interpersonal exchanges [...] may be positively transformative for participants" who are often publicly referred to as "marginalized," and it can contribute to fostering reciprocity between both sides; in this sense, accepting a gift can be seen

[26] At the time of our meeting, she was searching for affordable accommodation because, due to family disputes, she had been evicted from the house where she had been living. For more on the experiences of women facing homelessness in Zagreb, cf. Greiner 2022 and Šikić-Mićanović and Greiner 2024.

as a way to show respect for that person and to honor their desire to, in this particular case — by treating someone to ice cream — place themselves among the "normal" people who know how to manage their money and plan expenses in a way that allows them to occasionally afford something non-essential (cf. Bourlessas 2019:6).[27] Zorica, along with several other members of the locomotive crew, including those with whom we first entered the "world of volunteers," as well as Mateo and Mladen, played a key role in gradually expanding the circle of people who were willing to share their experiences of extreme existential insecurity or homelessness with us. Consequently, the snowball sampling method spontaneously became one of the methodological features of our research, which proved crucial for its continuation.

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The article details our experience of entering the field and working in it — including, among other things, the research discomfort that was partly manifested through the postponement of the "real" research, based on the assumption that "intruding" into the lives of the people we met in the field in the manner typical of research on groups not considered "vulnerable" or "marginalized" would be a form of attack on their already fragile dignity, and then presenting examples of (un)successful interviewing and the gathering of data outside classical ethnographic methods. We sought to emphasize, through "waiting" and "socializing" as alternative research approaches, the importance of time, i.e., the duration and frequency of contact, for establishing quality relationships between the researcher and the people they engage with during research (cf. Sherman Hely 2001:368). These "quality relationships," which in our research were built gradually and spontaneously, first and foremost implies nurturing an ethically acceptable approach toward those we study and what we learn from them. This often goes beyond the situations foreseen by institutional ethical codes, regulations, and similar "official" documents, especially in the case of researching "sensitive" topics like homelessness

[27] Although this goes beyond the scope of this paper, we should mention that mutual exchange and gift-giving are an integral part of the lives of many members of the locomotive crew. Food is exchanged based on preferences, men give sweets to women when they are included in aid packages, and clothing and household items are exchanged. We, too, spontaneously became part of the network of giving: After deciding to give small Christmas gifts (chocolates, cream, deodorant, etc.) to the people we had grown close to, they occasionally gifted us items such as pieces of jewelry, scarves, painted eggs, flowers, chocolates, holy water, and similar things, often with the comment, "this seemed just right for you."

(cf. Menih 2013). Thus, resolving ethically challenging situations sometimes inevitably requires the researcher to rely on their "small private ethical system" (Vukušić, in Belaj et al. 2009:149), guided by the knowledge and the relationship they have established with the specific individual from the researched group. Through examples of how we gathered "data," we also wanted to show that for forming "quality" and thus ethical relationships with the participants, it is important to seek "one-to-one encounters" (Gounis 1996).[28] This approach simultaneously aligns with those aspects of homelessness research that use innovative methodological solutions, among other things, to resist the possibility of producing or reinforcing existing stereotypes about people experiencing homelessness as a homogeneous group with identical problems and a presumed identical approach to solving those problems. Although such research is sometimes criticized for lacking a "statistically representative sample" (Rosenthal 1991) — which in researching topics such as homelessness could be relevant when considering the initiation of some, currently only utopian, measure for rapidly addressing their basic problems (e.g., ID cards, housing, jobs) — we opted for "ethnography of the particular" as one way of researching and writing that strives to "constitute others as less other" (Abu-Lughod 1991).

The choice of such an approach is important not only for us, the researchers, in terms of research results and the potential of new theoretical contributions to studying "marginalized" groups such as people experiencing homelessness, but perhaps even more so for the participants' potential perception of their involvement in the research. As mentioned in the article, this involvement is sometimes (implicitly) imposed on them by institutional frameworks. In this context, the impact of such an "intrusion" on their already severely limited efforts, constrained by numerous "control" mechanisms, to at least minimally preserve their privacy and dignity is rarely considered. We, as researchers, can take that from them as well, often without even realizing it, almost assuming their "fusion" with the roles commonly assigned to them in public discourse, as Gounis (1996) has pointed out. We experienced this situation by chance, during a visit to a homeless shelter in Zagreb, organized in late 2023 for those "users" who could not or did not want to go to the central homeless shelter in Velika Kosnica during the winter months and colder weather and needed a place to sleep. On one occasion, while casually chatting with people waiting for the shelter to open, along with the distribution of food and clothing, we learned that more people had gathered than the shelter could accommodate. A few of them were arranging to share a single bed. After the shelter doors opened and it seemed that everyone had settled in, we asked the manager if we could briefly enter just to see

[28] In our case it was somewhat modified, but as we were almost always together in the field, the people from the locomotive crew saw us as a team from the beginning.

the space. We entered, but upon seeing us in the small hallway leading to the sleeping area, an unknown man blocked our path to the dormitory and loudly said: *What are you looking at? Are we like guinea pigs to you or something*?

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