

JUSTICE ON THE STREETS

THE PRODUCTION OF CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE IN BUDAPEST

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ABSTRACT

With knowledge and power so intimately tied together, research and documentation can easily turn into technologies of control and exclusion. While the modern state is extremely adept at counting, documenting and categorizing its residents, it is also able to enforce certain expectations towards its citizens through a request for proper documentation. In today's Hungary, the state has acquired a vast knowledge about people who are homeless through various forms of registration. At the same time, being properly documented is essential for homeless people in order to access necessary services and maintain their links to the body politic. By contrast, homeless people are rarely in a position either to get to know the state's operations in detail or set expectations towards the state and its representatives. *Justice on the Streets*, a participatory action research (PAR) project undertaken by the homeless and housed members of *The City is for All* (AVM), a homeless rights advocacy group in Budapest, represents an attempt at bridging this huge inequality in knowledge and power by documenting the behaviour of the state from the perspective of street homeless people. In this paper, I use the concept of deep participation to examine the collective process of critical reflection and knowledge production in PAR. More specifically, I analyse the unfolding of deep participation in *Justice on the Streets* from the perspective of: 1) the development of a critical consciousness; 2) the dynamics of participation in a cross-class context; and 3) the deconstruction of power and inequality at both the micro and macro levels.

KEYWORDS

Homelessness, discrimination, Participatory action research, Budapest, The City is for All

“The point is to change it” goes Marx’s famous tenet in his 1845 *Theses on Feuerbach* about the imperative for social scientists to move beyond the documentation of social life and directly contribute to efforts of social transformation. In practice, socially engaged research takes shape in many hybrid forms in between theory, practice, activism and scholarship. In the following, I explore how engaged social science can intervene into social processes through collaboration with social movements, and assess their transformative potential. First, I provide an overview of the right to research as a theoretical, ethical and political framework for engaged scholarship. Then, in order to understand how a democratic research practice takes shape on the ground, I examine the dynamics in *Justice on the Streets*, a participatory action research project with homeless people in Budapest. In the second part of the paper, I discuss the theoretical and political consequences of “deep participation” from three different perspectives: the development of critical consciousness; issues of power and control; and the possibilities of mitigating deeply engrained social inequalities.

1. THE RIGHT TO RESEARCH

The question of who has control over the production of social life is intimately tied to the ways in which social control and exclusion are negotiated and justified. This is why the production of knowledge, access to information and the power of interpretation all play a central role in struggles over citizenship. The concept of the right to research (Appadurai, 2006) is not only useful in understanding the relationship between power and knowledge but also helps to develop counter-hegemonic practices.

The right to research is based on the understanding that scientific practices are socially constructed and research is embedded in relations of power. As Latour and Woolgar (1979) observe, scientific facts are socially constructed through academic protocols, rituals, hierarchies, tenure and publications, among others. At the same time, educational institutions are structured to reproduce existing social inequalities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Today, many of the institutions that define knowledge and the appropriate ways to acquire it tend to be patronizing and hegemonic (Appadurai, 2000: 9–10).

One way to contest hegemony over the production of knowledge is to democratize research, and question the social processes that make it an exclusive privilege. To liberate research from the confines of official academic spaces, Appadurai (2006: 167) defines research as:

the capacity to make disciplined inquiries into those things we need to know, but do not know yet. All human beings are, in this sense, researchers, since all human beings make decisions that require them to make systematic forays beyond their current knowledge horizons.

Echoing Gramsci’s (1970) argument that every person is an intellectual in their own right, the right to research recognizes that both research in particular and intellectual activity in general belong to everybody and not only to a small and privileged portion of society.

In a political sense, the right to research includes the right to information and the right to experiment with new ways of knowing. From this perspective, conducting research is not a privilege but a kind of practice where the standards of rigour may be very different from those enforced in most spaces of academic knowledge production. If research can be carried out by

everyone, then anyone may be both a subject and object of inquiry. In this way, the conventional dichotomy between marginalized people who are studied, and academic researchers who study them, is seriously challenged.

2. PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

While the need to document, understand and expose oppressive social conditions is at the heart of all efforts to reclaim the right to research, it can be exercised in many different ways. One way to subvert conventional research practice and reclaim the right to research is participatory action research (PAR), which provides “a space for questioning exclusionary practices and social inequities” (Cahill, 2004: 273) and transforms research from “the gaze of the privileged” into a tool for social change. Born out of a combination of Marxist theory, critical pedagogy, action research and feminist critique, PAR radically changes the ways in which knowledge is produced and puts research at the service of social transformation.

PAR’s philosophy of social change is rooted in Paulo Freire’s ([1970] 2007) critical pedagogy, which poses a direct challenge to the reproduction of marginalization and privilege by mainstream education as well as the hierarchical relationships embedded in conventional academic (research) practice. Defining social transformation as a pedagogical process, Freire maintained that marginalized groups have to undertake a process of radical self-humanization by understanding and subverting the structural roots of oppression. Freire’s theory of social change is important because of its focus on process and methodology – how social transformation is achieved is just as important as its outcome – and the recognition that marginalized groups have to participate actively in changing the social conditions that oppress them.

PAR aims to connect personal experiences with the broader context of structural inequalities through the co-construction of the research process and the development of critical consciousness. This:

refers to the process by which members of oppressed groups cultivate abilities to perceive and deconstruct the prevailing ideologies and practices that veil inequalities as legitimate and how they progressively work to change the conditions of their lives through action aimed at restructuring hierarchal power relations. (Guishard, 2009: 89)

In other words, critical consciousness is not a specific state of mind, but a deeply intellectual process of critical reflection and practice.

While Freire dismissed reflection for its own sake, Kurt Lewin advocated against research for purely academic purposes: “research that produces nothing but books will not suffice” (1946: 35). Looking specifically at intergroup relations between minority and majority populations, Lewin maintained that it is not enough to use research to understand social relations; it also has to contribute to improving them. For research to be an effective tool for social change, it should take place not only in the isolated setting of the university, but become embedded in the practice of social movements and organizations.

Based on these ethical and political considerations, PAR brings together the commitment of social movements, their members’ experience and expertise, and scholars skilled in the craft of research with access to the resources and privileges of academia and other dominant spaces such as the media. By establishing a democratic and critical process of knowledge production, PAR is able to produce results that are both theoretically significant and politically transformative.

Critical participatory research (see Torre et al., 2012) creates a space for theorizing by those who are dehumanized and silenced by hegemonic institutions, and plays a critical role in challenging dominant discourses of personal blame and failure. In this way, PAR can be instrumental in the creation of counter-publics, or “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, needs” (Fraser, 1990: 67). At the same time, critical PAR also has a role in bringing these counter-publics into communication with mainstream conceptions and practices. In all, with its commitment to “speaking back to power” and its focus on the process as much as the outcome, PAR is a tool to produce the cultural and discursive power necessary for the viable political representation of groups that are marginalized (see Gramsci, 1971).

3. JUSTICE ON THE STREETS: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH ABOUT DISCRIMINATION

A main feature of the modern state is to count, document and categorize its people, land and assets (Scott, 1998). In this way, research and documentation are important forms of state control that can also be turned into technologies of exclusion. In Hungary today, registering a permanent address or having a social security card and a tax number are not only ways for the state to document its population, but also essential links to the full exercise of citizenship. In Budapest, homeless people spend an average of almost four hours a day travelling, taking care of paperwork, or standing in line for various services (Győri, 2006: 14) in an effort to ensure their survival and keep up essential social links. Street social workers have to document each encounter they have with a homeless person, and a new regulation stipulates that every time a homeless individual uses a social service, their social security number has to be registered. Homeless people are documented not only through the registration of their personal data, but also through other means, including GIS maps compiled by the police and public space supervisors (*Rendőrök ellenőrzik*, 2011).

Through all these channels, the Hungarian state gathers a lot of information about homeless people. By contrast, the homeless know a lot less about the state. While users of social services often have an intricate knowledge about how to get things done, they rarely have a broader understanding of the state apparatus or the ways in which decisions can be officially questioned or appealed. This lack of a broader knowledge not only makes them vulnerable, but also creates a feeling of isolation as they navigate state bureaucracy and the social-services system. At the same time, the state – through its representatives such as municipal workers and police officers – sends a powerful message to homeless people about themselves, their own social position and the kinds of things they do or do not deserve.¹

Justice on the Streets, a participatory action research project undertaken by homeless and housed members of *The City is for All* (*A Város Mindenkié*, AVM), was an attempt to bridge this inequality in knowledge and power between homeless people and the state. The aim of the project was to examine the ways and extent to which street homeless people in Budapest are discriminated against by representatives of the state. Besides collecting data, the project sought to challenge the political and intellectual exclusion of homeless people from relevant public discussions by empowering them as key agents of change. Through systematic inquiry, the project aimed to: 1) raise critical consciousness; 2) produce strategic knowledge; and 3) build power for effective self-advocacy at the individual and collective levels.

¹ For more on the role of street-level bureaucrats in policy-making and interaction with citizens, see Lipsky 1980.

Justice on the Streets was coordinated by four AVM activists, two of whom are housed with training in the social sciences (the author was one of them)² and two long-time homeless members. By offering a small weekly stipend, we recruited a team of 18 homeless researchers.³ Starting out with an intensive training in research methodology, the team met every week for three hours from the fall of 2011 to the fall of 2012. Data collection took place between meetings, while the dissemination of results continued well into 2013.

Using a deductive process,⁴ the research team came to agree on the following research question: “Do roofless people in Budapest experience discrimination by representatives of the state and if yes, in what forms and to what extent?”⁵ To answer this, we drew upon four main sources of data. First, the personal experiences of homeless researchers regarding discrimination were documented and discussed throughout the project. Second, the team developed a questionnaire that included questions about stereotypes and personal experiences of direct and indirect discrimination as well as individual advocacy.⁶ Close to 400 homeless people responded to the questionnaire at various locations including drop-in centres, public spaces and food lines.⁷ Third, in order to support our statistics with qualitative data, we completed 18 interviews with professionals who work with homeless people or have an impact on their lives (including social workers, police officers, public-space supervisors, ticket inspectors on public transportation, health-care professionals, administrators in the social services and elected representatives).⁸ Finally, secondary data included official statistics about encounters between police officers and homeless people and about complaints filed against police officers and public-space supervisors.

² The author is one of the co-founders of the group and has been working there as a volunteer since 2009. The PAR project was also a part of her dissertation research for the City University of New York.

³ By the end of the project, we had 11 homeless researchers, most of them from the original team. The original team members were János Balácsi, Anna Bende Géza Bene, Tamás Filder, Károly Gadányi, Krisztina Gyureskó, Mária Gadányiné Simon, János Jáger, Jenő Keresztes, Linda Kóházi Andrásné, Gergely Lőrincz, Gabriella Némedi Lászlóné, Csaba Oszvald István Petrák, Ferenc Sándor, Ferenc Sziráki, Zsuzsa Szűcs and Gábor Takács.

⁴ We started out with a very broad question: “Are street homeless people able to exercise their rights?” and listed all the possible aspects of this question. In the end, we tried to find common threads and mould all of our questions into a single one. Then we moved on to formulating the sub-questions based on what we previously listed.

⁵ We defined “roofless” as those who live in one-night shelters, on the street, in self-built shacks or other places not meant for human habitation such as empty buildings and caves. We included those who slept in one-night shelters because they are only allowed to enter in the evening and have to spend most of their day in public spaces or drop-in centres. In addition, as one-night shelters only offer a nightly contract, people are always at risk of not getting in because of limited capacities. Overall, our target group consisted of at least 5,000 people in Budapest, 2,000 of whom sleep in one-night shelters and 3,000 in other places. For the purposes of our study, we defined the “representatives of the state” as those who perform a public duty or get their salary from the central or local government, including uniformed officers, administrators and health-care professionals.

⁶ The questionnaire, which we developed collectively over a couple of months, included 40 questions grouped into the following categories: general descriptive questions; the social perception of homeless people; general opinions about discrimination; first-hand experiences of discrimination; the behaviour of uniformed authorities; and personal experiences and opinions regarding advocacy and civil rights.

⁷ The sample was established as being quasi-representative of the homeless population of Budapest if compared to the results of the February 2012 “homeless survey”. Respondents in our survey had been homeless for an average of seven years; half of them were homeless for less than five years, while 24% had lived on the street for more than 10 years at the time of the survey. Over half of the respondents slept in one-night shelters and one fifth of them on the street; 29% slept in abandoned building, shacks, tents and other places. In terms of income, 30% of respondents gained an income from some kind of recycling activity (e.g. paper, plastic, cans etc.); 18% from occasional or regular work; and 15% of the research subjects claimed to have no income.

⁸ We picked the interviewees using our personal and professional contacts as well as snowball sampling. We analysed the completed interviews using a collective technique of iterative content analysis. First, we selected those parts of the interviews that were relevant for the topic of discrimination and then organized them according to various themes such as “mistakes in the system,” “systemic discrimination,” “individual discrimination” and “solutions.” After all the parts were categorized in this way, we discussed each one, established trends and drew general conclusions.

Figure 1: The development of the research process in *Justice on the Streets*⁹

Preparation

Advocacy work by The City is for All → Selection of research topic (2009–2011)

Forming the research team

Development of recruitment plan → Recruitment of homeless researchers (August–October, 2011)

Information forum for interested homeless people → Training of homeless researchers (October–November, 2011)

Research question

Development of main research question → Development of sub-questions (November–December, 2011)

Research methodology

Selection of target groups → Selection of research methods for each target group (January, 2012)

Development of questionnaire → Practice of survey administration (February–March, 2012)

Administration of surveys → Statistical analysis of surveys (April–June, 2012)

Development of interview guide → Selection of interviewees (May–June, 2012)

Completion of interviews → Content analysis of interviews (June–August, 2012)

Final report

Group discussion of structure of final report → Write-up of final report (August–September, 2012)

Collective reading and feedback on final report → Finalization of final report (September–October, 2012)

Write-up of short research summary (October, 2012)

Dissemination (actions)

Development of dissemination plan → Dissemination of research results

(e.g. press conference, roundtable discussion, training sessions) (October, 2012 – ongoing)

The research produced important data about prejudices and stereotypes regarding homeless people, the formal and informal manifestations of discrimination, as well as civic consciousness, and individual advocacy among homeless people.¹⁰

⁹ In the summer of 2012, Barbara Erős, an anthropologist from the University of Miskolc, proposed conducting some interviews with homeless co-researchers about their experiences of participation in *Justice on the Streets*. This had not been originally planned as part of the research, but the group decided to integrate it to some extent because it seemed like a good opportunity for self-reflection and external evaluation. Barbara came to present her findings to the entire research team in the fall of 2012. Some excerpts from her interviews are also included in this article.

Regarding direct discrimination, the vast majority (83%) of survey respondents thought that homeless people experienced discrimination, and a similarly high proportion (75%) of respondents had first-hand experiences of direct discrimination. Non-homeless civilians such as passers-by, youth and passengers on mass transportation, as well as public-space supervisors and police officers were mentioned as being groups that discriminate against homeless people the most often. At the same time, in response to a more concrete question, a shocking 57% of respondents reported to have been treated in a humiliating manner, most often by public-space supervisors, police officers and non-homeless civilians.

Homeless respondents identified public transportation as the arena where they experienced the most discrimination. Forty-three percent of respondents said that they had been forced to get off some form of public transport because they did not have a valid ticket, had broken the rules of conduct (e.g. travelling in dirty clothes or taking a larger bag), or simply for being homeless. The issue of public transportation highlights the relationship between the first-hand experience of discrimination and structural exclusion. Informal conversations with respondents and homeless people in other venues revealed that many homeless people regard the fact of being forced out of public transportation as a form of discrimination in itself. While they are aware that travelling without a valid ticket or a pass is in breach of official rules, from their point of view, the fact that they do not have a ticket is rooted in the same condition as their homelessness: extreme poverty. In this way, the moment that they are expelled from the bus or the tram for not having a valid ticket, their structural exclusion is translated into concrete terms. In this way, it is not only exclusion from public transportation in the absence of a valid ticket that qualifies as discrimination, but also the fact that homeless people cannot afford to use public transportation to satisfy their most basic needs.

After public transportation, discrimination from uniformed officers was reported to be the most frequent. Almost half of homeless respondents experienced discrimination from uniformed authorities and 50% of them had been spoken to in a demeaning way. This finding was also confirmed by an interview with public-space supervisors, who talked about “using a stronger tone” when a homeless person refuses to leave a place after repeated requests. Altogether, only 26% of homeless respondents felt that uniformed authorities treated them as equal citizens. As many as 13% of respondents reported having been physically abused by the authorities.

At the same time, many respondents also identified uniformed authorities as sources of help. Almost one quarter of the respondents had received support from public-space supervisors or police officers in the form of food, money or information, which was also confirmed by the official statistics provided by the Budapest police headquarters about the interaction between police officers and homeless people.¹¹ Interestingly, respondents identified leniency on the part of authorities as a specific form of help. For example, public-space supervisors often give homeless people a verbal warning instead of a formal punishment for an infraction, such as rummaging through garbage. This practice was also confirmed in an interview with a public-space supervisor: “How would I fine a homeless individual? Where would they get the money from? This makes no sense.”

¹⁰ Given the nature of participatory action research as a possible tool for advocacy, some of these findings may be biased due to the inadvertent selection of respondents by homeless researchers who are keen on voicing complaints or who are more ready to answer questions posed by someone associated with a well-known advocacy group. Throughout the research process, we placed great emphasis on reducing this bias by assigning researchers to various venues of data collection, and moving beyond personal acquaintances. In the training of homeless co-researchers, we also discussed different strategies to avoid the danger of obtaining guided or suggested responses. The nature of the questionnaire may have also played a role, as it focused on instances of discrimination and other negative experiences rather than inserting such a question in the middle of a variety of other topics. In this way, the attention of the respondents may have been called to instances that they would otherwise not have remembered or pointed out.

¹¹ These charts were provided to *The City is for All* under a freedom of information request in 2010.

Because of their dependence on specific social services, which are often spatially concentrated, as well as their heavy use of public spaces, homeless people are especially exposed to police harassment. In fact, being stopped for an ID check is the main source of tension between police officers and homeless people. While ethnic profiling in Hungary is relatively well-documented (see Kádár et al., 2008; Ivány & Pap, 2012), the targeting of homeless people has not previously been explored. In this way, the findings of *Justice on the Streets* provide a significant contribution to our understanding of profiling based on social status. Fifty-nine percent of homeless respondents were checked by the police over a one-month period, and more than one third had been stopped more than four times. These findings support the long-held perception of homeless researchers and activists, that despite formal equality before the law, the lack of housing leads to increased control, supervision and harassment for pursuing life-sustaining activities (e.g. standing in line for food, eating on a bench, urinating in public, etc.).

Universal health care is a very ambivalent area from the point of view of homeless people. Of all homeless respondents in the survey, 25% said they had experienced discrimination within social and health-care facilities. Fourteen percent of the respondents were not attended to in a hospital, and 10% were not taken by an ambulance when necessary. At the same time, homeless people also mentioned several positive experiences, especially when doctors and nurses made extra efforts to provide them with appropriate care. According to the head of a homeless health-care facility: “Some people are really sweet patients and nurses love them. When they find out that they are homeless, they give them all the left-over food and they find them nice pyjamas.”

While the *Justice on the Streets* questionnaire measured direct discrimination, the interviews conducted with professionals also revealed indirect discrimination and systemic issues. First of all, many interviewees identified homelessness as a state of social exclusion itself, a stigmatized condition that is almost impossible to leave behind. In addition to this general sense of exclusion, the interviews revealed four concrete areas where the social-services system discriminates against homeless people, including labour support, welfare, health care and social housing.

The segregation of homeless people in public services is the most concrete manifestation of indirect discrimination. There are two public agencies in Budapest that treat homeless people in a segregated manner, and these are often described as discriminatory by both professionals and homeless people: the unemployment centre for those “without an address” and the municipality’s homeless welfare office. In certain cases, the existence of an institution dealing with only one particular segment of the population could be justified by the special needs of its clients (see the need for special offices for veterans in the US). However, as noted by our interviewees, administrators working in the two homeless-specific offices in Budapest neither receive any special training, nor do they offer any extra services.

In addition, there also exists a parallel (and in many ways inferior) system of health care exclusively for homeless patients. The so-called homeless health-care centres have three main functions: first, to prepare homeless people for the regular health-care system through parasite removal, cleanup and nutrition; second, to take them in after a hospital discharges them and sends them “home”; and third, to provide basic medical services and referrals for those who do not have a proper address. While these institutions save lives by providing safe havens for homeless people, they also point out the inability and often reluctance of generally accessible health-care services to serve everyone’s needs equally.

The existence of segregated facilities for the homeless is a good example of the politics of marginal space (see Larsen, 2004). On the one hand, the separate hospitals and segregated labour and welfare offices have all been developed to ensure that homeless people are able to minimally access services. However, while they ensure the survival of homeless people as physical bodies, these institutions also reproduce their status as second-class citizens. The fact that many homeless people choose to go to a “homeless doctor” instead of a general practitioner (even if they are eligible for regular health care) because they are afraid of discrimination illustrates the extent to which marginality has been internalized. In this way, these spaces do not undermine social inequality but, instead, reinforce it.

Finally, professionals interviewed in *Justice on the Streets* have also identified social housing as an area of discrimination. This is particularly paradoxical, as subsidized housing could be one of the few permanent exits out of homelessness. However, because of their extremely limited availability, applications for social housing units often set criteria of eligibility that are difficult or impossible for poor people to meet (e.g. a certain number of years of official residence in the district, the obligation to renovate the apartment or a large deposit). In this way, instead of addressing the structural inequalities of the housing market, the current system of social housing also tends to reinforce social inequalities.¹²

4. THE PRODUCTION OF RADICAL KNOWLEDGE IN *JUSTICE ON THE STREETS*

The concept of “deep participation” describes the collective process of reflection and knowledge production in PAR. For different authors, the concept means slightly different things. For Billies (2010), deep participation refers to the fact that all researchers are involved in all aspects of the research from conception through data collection to analysis and action, while critical consciousness is raised. For Francisco (2010), it is used to describe a situation where it is not only those who suffer directly from oppression who share their knowledge and experiences but everyone, including academically trained researchers. For Torre et al. (2008), the depth of participation refers to interactions and transformations across social status. In the following, I analyse the unfolding of deep participation in *Justice on the Streets* from the perspective of: (a) critical consciousness; (b) the dynamics of participation; and (c) the deconstruction of power and inequality.

a. Raising critical consciousness

PAR creates a space where participants can explore their personal experiences, connect them with those of others and uncover the roots of their oppressions. In this way, while valorising the personal experiences of co-researchers, PAR aims to connect these with the broader context of structural inequalities. Fine and Ruglis (2009) discuss the ways in which circuits of dispossession become embodied experiences of shame and failure in high school students of colour in the US. In fact, the same is true for homeless people who suffer from the consequences of neoliberal policies that slash social housing and welfare, but are expected to see themselves as the primary sources of failure and dysfunction.

Developing a critical understanding of social experiences in a structural context allows people to see themselves and their difficulties in a way that empowers rather than oppresses them. With the help of systematic inquiry at different scales (see Fine, 2006), disenfranchised groups are able to produce (self-)representations that go against dominant discourses, which not only

¹² For a more detailed description of results, see *A Város Mindenkié* (2013).

stigmatize, but often also paralyze them.¹³ By building strategic knowledge and politicizing participants, critical consciousness helps to build power to confront injustice at both the individual and collective levels.

As is clear from the findings of our research, homeless people's acute awareness of negative social attitudes towards them determines not only their relationship with mainstream society, but also their self-esteem and their relationships with each other. As one homeless respondent stated: "There is negative discrimination against homeless people by homeless people themselves." According to a longitudinal study from 1998 to 2000, homeless people disproportionately suffer from the insults of their homeless peers (Dávid et al., 2005: 99). The internalization of prejudices leads to a lot of suspicion, which is also one of the biggest obstacles in the way of organizing active solidarity.

Unhoused people often cope with these prejudices by distancing themselves as individuals from the socially constructed image of "the homeless." In fact, despite the lack of adequate housing, many "homeless researchers" did not identify as such. As Jenő Keresztes put it: "Homelessness does not mean sleeping on a bench in a park; it is a state of mind."¹⁴ By rejecting the label "homeless," many unhoused people reject exactly this state of mind and the lack of social perspectives it implies. While the rejection of homelessness as an identity is helpful to maintain self-esteem, this attitude tends to overlook the structural roots of poverty and focuses on its psychological aspects.

For people experiencing homelessness, the development of a critical consciousness has to start with gaining a positive identity that is not articulated against the deficiencies of others. On the one hand, the research project created an opportunity for homeless researchers to develop a positive sense of being in the world. Zsuzsa Kovács¹⁵ echoed these feelings when she said that:

I have always had self-confidence, but in certain cases the feedback I got diminished it. Being beaten at home destroys your self-confidence and you need time to get out of it. This research process was very useful for that: the group, the training, the fact that I was with people, I had things to do and I had a goal. I wasn't on the street to find out what I was going to do in the next five minutes but I was there with a goal. This was good.¹⁶

On the other hand, homeless co-researchers engaged in conversations with people in similar situations, which indicated that they are not alone in their predicament and that there is something systemic about their experiences. In this way, the research helped them recognize the humanity of both their own self and of other homeless people. As Jenő Keresztes reported about changes in his own attitudes:

I realized that when people open up, they have a lot of values. The research piqued my interest in people who I would never have talked to otherwise. I have always been a snob. I haven't stopped being one, but I realized that every person has something valuable in them.¹⁷

¹³ It is important to note that institutional forces and social stigma are not the only factors that determine the self-perception of homeless people. For an in-depth discussion of how unprocessed traumatic experiences shape homeless people's life and identity, see Fehér (2011).

¹⁴ Excerpt from a series of unpublished interviews completed by Barbara Erős in July and August 2012.

¹⁵ This is a pseudonym, as the researcher did not give permission to use her real name.

¹⁶ Excerpt from a series of unpublished interviews completed by Barbara Erős in July and August 2012.

¹⁷ Excerpt from a series of unpublished interviews completed by Barbara Erős in July and August 2012.

Finally, the development of critical consciousness is not limited to a mental state but should also lead to a greater ability to act on one's own behalf – both individually and as a collective. By learning about their rights as equal citizens and gaining more experience to interact effectively as a team, co-researchers often became more assertive in their everyday communication. As János Jäger put it: “I have learned that I have a right to different things. ... I learned that through struggle and lobbying, you can achieve things.”¹⁸ For several co-researchers, this renewed confidence had very practical consequences, as they were able to assert their rights and needs vis-à-vis people in positions of authority such as social workers, administrators and public-space supervisors.

b. Participation

Creating a truly collaborative process was one of the main challenges in *Justice on the Streets*. The team worked hard on creating procedures that allowed as much participation as possible, did not marginalize anyone, and also helped us to proceed effectively with our work. To ensure procedural justice (see Deutsch, 2000), we followed many of the principles developed earlier in *The City is for All*. This included, among others, the broad distribution of information, the active facilitation of discussions and consensual decision-making. The research team also worked out ethical principles¹⁹ that would guide us throughout the research process, which provided a framework for our interactions. Such processes were especially crucial given the initial differences in knowledge and experience regarding both activism and research among homeless and housed researchers, as well as older members of AVM and newly recruited researchers.

In the vast majority of cases, this strategy of collaboration seemed to work well. While not everyone was able to participate in all aspects of the research, everyone participated in some aspects of it. One example is that of Krisztina Horváth,²⁰ the youngest of the group, who was very quiet during our group discussions, but turned out to be a superb survey administrator: she not only became very confident in approaching people with the questionnaire, but people were also much more willing to answer her than many other members of the group. She was also one of the most active researchers when it came to the content analysis of interviews – Krisztina had a very sensitive and acute eye for finding the quotes that were most relevant to us, and then analyse them according to our own pre-determined categories. By contrast, Gábor Tóth,²¹ one of the oldest members, was very good at brainstorming research questions and providing conceptual input, often posing challenging questions as we put together the questionnaire and the interview guides. On several occasions, he was also selected by the group to present our work in public. At the same time, he was not very successful at completing the questionnaires, as he was unsure about how to approach people on the street. Overall, the overwhelming feeling in the group was that the project has been a truly collective process. As Zsuzsa Kovács put it: “Everyone contributed in their own ways. It wasn't two or three people who said one thing and then we said yes, but everyone contributed.”²²

¹⁸ Excerpt from a series of unpublished interviews completed by Barbara Erős in July and August 2012.

¹⁹ This included, among others, the imperative to participate in the research process to everyone's best ability, to learn from our mistakes, to respect each other's opinions and to motivate each other.

²⁰ This is a pseudonym, as the researcher did not give permission to use her real name in publications.

²¹ This is a pseudonym, as the researcher did not give permission to use his real name in publications.

²² Excerpt from a series of unpublished interviews completed by Barbara Erős in July and August 2012.

In addition to the overall collaborative nature of the project, three instances stand out in which homeless co-researchers made an intervention that greatly impacted the course of the research, thus highlighting the significance of participation in defining both research goals and the research process itself. The first of these was the exact topic of the research. While AVM originally recruited co-researchers to study the harassment of street homeless people by uniformed authorities, newly recruited co-researchers insisted on expanding the question to include all forms of discrimination. In addition to a division between older and newer members, there was a clear class-based pattern in the focus of interest: homeless researchers were more interested in how they are treated in general, while housed researchers were interested specifically in the behaviour of uniformed officers as the agents of criminalization and oppression. It became clear that for many homeless people, harassment and criminalization are only two aspects of a more general condition of exclusion. As a result, the priority for homeless co-researchers was to challenge this dehumanization and re-establish their full personhood instead of challenging a few symptoms of their exclusion. In the end, as the findings above illustrate, it was this approach that prevailed, and the team addressed criminalization in the broader context of discrimination.

Second, while the original team of activists wanted the research to focus almost exclusively on abuses of power by the authorities, and highlight homeless people's negative experiences regarding the state, positive experiences came up very early on in the process. As homeless participants of the first recruitment session recounted positive impressions about the authorities along with negative ones, they challenged us to expand our combative activist stance and to include a much broader range of experiences. In fact, this is the reason why we included the question about the ways in which the authorities were of help to respondents in the final questionnaire (which, in the end, turned out to provide us with very valuable information).

The third example is when Ferenc Sándor suggested that we get involved in the annual Homeless Survey conducted by sociologists and homeless service providers. He proposed that we volunteer to administer their questionnaires and in order to help out and also use it as a training ground. In the end, we did get involved, received training about how to administer and analyse questionnaires, and gained important hands-on experience of completing a survey. These experiences were very useful for the development and completion of our own questionnaires. In addition to gaining some valuable experiences, Ferenc also suggested that we integrate our questions in the Homeless Survey, which would have a much broader scope than our own. After some lobbying, one of our questions regarding harassment was included, which was only the second time that the survey addressed this issue over a long period of time.²³

The active engagement of homeless researchers was not confined to *Justice on the Streets*, but provided a segue into broader democratic participation. While the intensity of their involvement varied, all co-researchers participated in some of the demonstrations and actions of *The City is for All*, most often as participants but at times also as organizers. Some of them also engaged in the broader public sphere by publishing articles on AVM's blog²⁴ and writing an open letter to the European Union about social rights, for example. The dissemination of research results (the "action" component of PAR) was also an important form of engagement with the broader public sphere: homeless researchers not only educated fellow activists in AVM about our

²³ The question included in the February 3 survey was the following: "Have you ever experienced negative discrimination by the authorities (officials, police officers, public-space supervisors) because you were homeless?"

²⁴ The address of the blog is: www.avarosmindentek.blog.hu

findings, but also held a press conference, appeared on the media several times, and presented our findings to various audiences including homeless people, social scientists, law students and law-enforcement officials.²⁵

Following in the footsteps of Guishard (2009), I find it important to point out moments of failure and messiness in the research process. In *Justice on the Streets*, one incident in particular pointed out the ways in which social inequality may limit the depth of participation. Through a grant, homeless co-researchers got a small weekly stipend (the equivalent of 10 dollars/week). In this way, homeless members of the research team were the only members of AVM who received any financial compensation for their work.²⁶ It had not been an easy decision for AVM to introduce the stipend, but it seemed necessary to ensure a steady level of participation in the research. Throughout the process, the research team handled money issues with relative ease, and most disagreements were quickly resolved. However, at the end of the project, the team had to decide what to do with the money that was left over. It took quite a lot of bickering and frustration to make the decision as we took up the issue at three consecutive meetings. The basic tension revolved around the question of whether co-researchers should split the money among themselves or let AVM as a whole spend it on its other activities. In the end, some co-researchers implied that the presence of non-homeless members prevented an honest discussion from taking place, so the two ally researchers left the room and let the homeless co-researchers decide about the money on their own. In the end, they voted on the issue and decided to have *The City is for All* as a whole decide about the fate of the money.

Overall, the escalation of this conflict had as much to do with money as with the underlying dynamics of authority and social status. This instance made it clear that homeless co-researchers were sometimes reluctant to openly contradict the position of allies, even though they had a clear opinion on a particular issue. While in general, AVM does not always consider voting a fair way of making collective decisions, the fact that homeless researchers decided to break this rule and use it to settle such a crucial issue was an important sign of autonomy. Even if the decision was the same as before, the fact that homeless researchers were completely on their own with an important decision was a difficult but significant moment of empowerment. Unfortunately, this incident was not processed thoroughly by the group and left some scars on most people involved. At the same time, it was an important reminder of the ways in which inequality and oppression are reproduced through the terms of a discussion, language use and social roles, among others.

c. Bridging inequality

Participatory action research represents a contact zone where people consciously work together across and against power inequalities (Torre et al., 2008). While such contact zones are infused with implicit tensions and make inequalities both visible and tangible, they are also an opportunity to recognize, deconstruct and transform hierarchies. However, the question inevitably arises as to whether it is possible to co-construct the entire research process when there are such extreme differences in knowledge, access to resources and experience. One of the most important features of critical PAR is to address these dilemmas by actively engaging with them. Acknowledging and interrogating differences in power, knowledge and experience is

²⁵ As a more far-reaching action, the findings of this research will be the basis of a joint project by the Hungarian Helsinki Committee and *The City is for All*, where the discriminatory practices of the police regarding identity checks will be tested and brought to the Equal Treatment Authority (*Egyenlő Bánásmód Hatóság*), if the evidence confirms the discriminatory treatment suggested by *Justice on the Streets*.

²⁶ Other members of *The City is for All* – both homeless and non-homeless – do their work on a purely voluntary basis without any remuneration.

part of the process of developing critical consciousness. *Justice on the Streets* has revealed many forms and dimensions of inequality at both the micro and macro levels, which we attempted to challenge in a number of ways with varying degrees of success.

At the macro level, *Justice on the Streets* is a response to the silence in academic and public discourses of those most affected by homelessness. In academic or professional publications, homeless people almost always appear as the object of help or scrutiny, but rarely, if ever, as active citizens and intellectual subjects. This project created a space for a group of homeless people to develop a public voice and challenge systematic exclusion and marginalization at the discursive level by asking their own questions, collecting data and producing and disseminating their own interpretation of it. At the beginning, most co-researchers were not sure about their own role in research. As Gábor Tóth said, “At the beginning, there were a lot of doubts about whether this was feasible. It was hard to believe that we would have results that could be used as a reference, and that it could be done in a professional way.”²⁷ However, towards the end of the project, homeless researchers became more confident in their research skills, as well as in the relevance of what they had to say. When they presented our findings to various audiences, they managed to turn the research gaze around and held up a mirror to those who play an important role in shaping the lives of homeless people, either directly or indirectly.

In addition to challenging dominant discourses and representations, macro-level empowerment involved three interrelated processes of political emancipation (see Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). First, regarding the systematic examination of state discrimination against homeless people, the project produced knowledge with the intention of informing public decisions and measures in law enforcement, health care and housing policy. In this sense, it was a source of empowerment for homeless people in Hungary in general. Second, by embedding the research in the work of *The City is for All*, a group with a strategic agenda to fight against criminalization and for the right to housing, the research enabled individual and collective action against injustice, and brought significant resources to a grassroots movement. Third, the project set out to change the consciousness of those on the margins of society – homeless researchers – about themselves, as well as about the social, political and economic world. The research process contributed to the construction of a different kind of subjectivity (that of the researcher and of the activist) and to the empowerment of homeless researchers to advocate for themselves more effectively, both individually and collectively.²⁸

At the micro level, the existential gap between housed and homeless researchers seemed almost impossible to bridge. A good illustration of this was provided by the simulated map of Budapest, which the research team created at the beginning of the training. On the imagined map of the city, everyone had to stand in the place where they lived and explain their circumstances. For homeless researchers, home included a bench, an ATM machine, an entrance hall and a squat, among others. Engaging in research from these material circumstances cannot be compared with the stable homes equipped with a bathroom, heating and internet where the two housed researchers live.

²⁷ Excerpt from a series of unpublished interviews completed by Barbara Erős in July and August 2012.

²⁸ For some researchers, this empowerment was more temporary than for others. While some felt they became more assertive vis-à-vis figures of official authority, others became very active in *The City is for All* and – not independently from this fact – also managed to improve on their own life situations, especially in terms of finding more stable sources of income and overcoming substance abuse issues.

However, it would be a simplification to reduce inequality among research team members to a dichotomy between being “housed” or “homeless.” Some divisions were created along more general lines of education and socialization. Ally researchers were not only better off materially, but also tended to be more educated, have better social connections and greater self-confidence. Jenő Keresztes made some poignant (and painful) observations about the limits of consensus-based democracy and collaboration in this context.

Those who are more cultured and more intelligent can articulate their opinions better, raise more questions. They present their arguments to the others, who reflect on them, but the intellect of those 4–5 people has the most influence.²⁹

In fact, despite all the efforts to the contrary, homeless activists who possess good verbal skills and present more conventional intellectual rigour tend to command more respect in AVM as a whole. While this is an important resource, it can also create hierarchies. As Jenő Keresztes, a homeless researcher with a law degree, suggested:

I know many people who sleep on Gellért hill, and if I went there and told them let’s carry out research together, they would say yes, let’s do it! I would give them ideas, then they would give me their opinions. But in this process, knowledge and intellect will come out sooner or later.³⁰

In a research project, the significance of these skills is even more pronounced than organizing skills and access to material resources.

Undoubtedly, the structural reasons behind such extreme inequalities cannot be alleviated through a single project. However, once we decide to conduct research together, efforts have to be made to level the playing field as much as possible. Some of the ways we tried to reduce this asymmetry have included the provision of a weekly stipend and public transport tickets to homeless researchers for research-related trips, as well as snacks and drinks during meetings. Printed copies of all the notes, minutes and readings were widely distributed, and we projected texts on the wall in large letters to facilitate collective analysis and help those who did not have strong enough glasses.

To bridge differences in access to information and communication skills, we organized a short IT training session, where each researcher created an email address and learned the basics of using a computer. In order to ensure everyone’s participation, many different tasks were identified, which were more or less equally distributed among team members. We also did a lot of preparation and analysis in small groups. While the two housed researchers were part of the discussions in the big group, they did not participate in the small-group discussions. As such, small groups served as the arena for more quiet people to speak up and not have to cope with the dominating and, at times, intimidating presence of others.

In terms of analysis, the research was developed in an iterative way: we always summarized what had been said before and revisited the same issues on several occasions. We devoted a lot of time to planning and preparing for various tasks, such as learning to use a digital recorder, taking notes, conducting an interview, etc. While some of these are rather technical adjustments, they were important in equalizing relations and creating the conditions for serious individual and collective

²⁹ Excerpt from a series of unpublished interviews completed by Barbara Erős in July and August 2012.

³⁰ Excerpt from a series of unpublished interviews completed by Barbara Erős in July and August 2012.

engagement. In fact, the success of this approach was attested to by János Jáger when he made a modest, but far-reaching statement: “When I came here, I didn’t know this language. Now, I can even contribute to the discussions.”

4. CONCLUSION

With a few notable exceptions (see Intézet a Demokratikus Alternatíváért, 2011; Missetics, 2010), critical research about homelessness has been virtually absent in Hungary. As the majority of contemporary homelessness-related research is produced by professionals who are involved in the social-services system, they do not engage in a radical critique of existing systems and practices, but aim to improve them as they are. While these studies offer important insights, they continue to operate within the dominant paradigm that manages, rather than prevents, homelessness and treats homeless people as clients rather than citizens.

Because of the lack of radical discourses and systemic critique, social movements have started to engage in their own research and theorizing to provide a conceptual basis for their work. The work of *Justice on the Streets* is best understood in this light. Besides responding to the lack of critical inquiry and political disempowerment, this intervention illustrates how people outside of social services and mainstream academic institutions can produce valid knowledge that contributes to a better understanding of homelessness and the development of more effective social responses to it.

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