

Comment CUHP Conference Martin Gruber

Thank you very much for inviting me to this very inspiring conference. I am honoured to give a comment on the remarkable paper “European perspectives on the use of qualitative methods in the study of homeless – methods, findings, theoretical understandings and policy interventions” we just heard. But let me briefly introduce myself in order to give you an idea about my background.

I studied Social Anthropology at the University of Hamburg and Visual Anthropology at Goldsmiths College, London. For the last four years I was working for a research project, studying a group of homeless people who were meeting on a square in the city centre of Hamburg. The group consisted of around 30 people; mostly single male alcohol consumers. The initial interest of our study was rather broad: one could call it the culture of homelessness. The following issues interested us especially:

- People’s narratives on how they became homeless
- Survival strategies, especially income strategies
- The factors which structured our informants’ lives
- The appropriation of public space
- The social structure of the group

Later, as more and more of our informants moved from the streets to different forms of housing, our focus shifted to the episodic nature of homelessness and to the role of social agencies in these processes. In the final stage of the research (which was also my MA thesis) I was most interested in the interplay of developments that took place on three different levels:

1. The lives of individual members of the group
2. The structure of the group itself and
3. The group’s economical and political environment, which was constituted by aid-agencies, politicians, the police and the powerful owners of the big department stores und offices in the city centre.

In other words: In which ways did the actions and strategies of care-givers as well as political and economic actors influence the homeless people and vice versa? Throughout our study we relied entirely on ethnographic methods like participant observation as well as informal- biographical- and semi-structured interviews. We had about 10 main informants, which we each interviewed several times over a 4-year period. Additionally we conducted in-depth interviews with another 10 to 15 homeless people and several professionals working in the field. Another very important aspect of our fieldwork is a collaborative film project, which resulted in a 45-minute documentary. For the analysis of our data we were working within traditions of interpretative analysis and Grounded Theory. The research is going on until today, with another shift in focus. We are currently researching tenants who are in danger of being evicted from their flats.

Let me now comment on the paper **European perspectives on the use of qualitative methods in the study of homeless – methods, findings, theoretical understandings and policy interventions.**

The aim of the paper is twofold:

First, the paper introduces 5 unique research projects on the social phenomenon of homelessness from three different countries and describes the most important outcome. Second, the paper argues for the use of qualitative methods in homelessness research. The authors believe that their studies on homelessness have led to findings, which would not have been achieved with the use of purely quantitative research.

Not surprisingly, as an anthropologist and social scientist, I strongly support this view and I would like to highlight some points of the studies, which I find especially interesting from a methodological perspective.

Lia van Doorn's ethnographic study is unique in the sense that it was carried out as a longitudinal research over a period of 7 years. This made it possible to trace her informants' developments over time. Only through the flexibility and openness of ethnographic methods like participant observation and biographical interviews, she could achieve an "insider's perspective" of her informants' lives. Some of her most interesting findings are about the culture of homelessness and its paradoxical implication that the increasing orientation towards this culture makes life on the streets more bearable and hampers social re-integration at the same time.

Megan Ravenhill explicitly states that many findings from her study were only possible through the use of ethnographic methods and a Grounded Theory approach. The life-story interviews she conducted revealed that homeless often originates in the family background of her informants with problems or triggers for homelessness building up over a very long time. Ravenhill also received valuable insight into the culture of homelessness and the negative impact of the help-system in regard to people's efforts to end their homelessness.

Interestingly but not astoundingly the research projects of Ravenhill and Doorn have many parallel and comparable findings - although they were carried out independently - and this is also very much true for Doorn's and my own research.

Svetlana Stephenson - who applied both qualitative and quantitative research methods - argues that qualitative approaches are much more suited to study hidden and marginalized groups like street children. Only through prolonged contact and participant observation could a sufficient level of trust be established. Another important point she makes is that through the use of qualitative methods it was possible to get access to collective self-representations without superimposing the researcher's own definitions and perceptions onto the informants.

Joan Smith, who is working on child homelessness since 1994 applied a unique set of initial research, follow-up-studies and policy-making. She applied a wide range of methods, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches. Her main focus was the family-background of these youth and the identification of risk factors that made children vulnerable to losing their paternal homes. Based on this research Smith

designed an early-intervention-programme, which was successfully implemented in several London boroughs.

Petra van Leeuwen's action research proofed that only through a mix of qualitative methods it is possible to understand the complex processes going on between the different actors in a counselling situation. From the insights gained, she was able to develop a method that improved and structured the support of homeless clients. The so-called 8-step-model was in due course transferred to different settings and even different countries.

All of these examples make a strong case for the use of qualitative methods in the social sciences. The studies and related policy implementations demonstrate that qualitative research can make valuable contributions to understanding and helping homeless people as well as to the prevention of homelessness.

In the last section of their paper, the authors discuss the validity and reliability of quantitative research. The authors argue that allegations against qualitative methods - namely that their findings largely depend on the perspective of the researcher and cannot be independently validated - are not justified. This claim is backed up by pointing out the parallels between the findings of different researchers and the effectiveness of policy measures in different contexts and even different countries. Furthermore it is argued that whereas none of the projects relied on representative samples, all of them used theoretic sampling.

I strongly support the claim of validity and relevance of qualitative research. Unfortunately I do not have the capacity to evaluate the line of reasoning about validity and reliability properly, because there are some very complex philosophical and epistemological issues at stake. Personally, I find the discussion about the subjectivity or objectivity of different methodologies somewhat redundant, as I believe that quantitative research is as much biased as qualitative research. The main issue at stake here is to be very explicit about the position of the researcher and the methods applied. So maybe this discussion is not so much about quantity or quality but more about the epistemological framework of a research, namely if it is carried out in a more positivistic or interpretative tradition.

At the same time, I would like to argue that there is no social science, which is purely quantitative or purely qualitative. My own research was carried out amongst a very small group of homeless people and was based mostly on ethnographic methods. Nevertheless quantitative data was an important element of my research as it offered valuable information about the "big picture" - for example the structural reasons of homelessness. On the other hand I believe that only ethnographic, interpretative or qualitative approaches can offer deep insights into the way our informants perceive the world they live in, about the strategies and practices they develop and about the way that mainstream society deals with them. For me, the main argument for qualitative approaches is that it is relevant and yields different kinds of insights.

I perceive quantitative and qualitative data as complementary in many ways. In this regard I found the projects presented in this paper extremely insightful and at the same time very helpful for my own research. It would be great if this view would be shared by a greater number of researchers, policy makers and funding agencies.

Thank you very much for your attention.

My questions and comments regarding the paper:

1. I had the impression that most projects described in the paper were concentrating on individual factors. In my opinion it is extremely important to keep the structural reasons for homelessness in mind. In many European societies with growing poverty and long-term unemployment an ever-increasing number of persons are not relevant to the capitalistic mode of production any longer. While most policy-makers and social workers – at least in Hamburg - still aim at re-integrating the homeless into the first housing and labour markets, I believe that, for most of the long-term homeless this is no longer a realistic option. It is thus necessary that aid-agencies, researchers and society at large initiate a discussion on how to deal with these people who are at the bottom of the social ladder.

2. The CUHP network is unique since research on homelessness was carried out in different European countries. In which ways do you think it is possible to compare the findings from different countries more systematically and draw conclusions about the influence of cultural, political and socio-economical factors on the phenomenon of homelessness in our societies?

Information about the author:

MA in Social Anthropology at Hamburg University 2005

MA in Visual Anthropology at Goldsmiths College London 2002

Own research:

Gruber, Martin

2005 *Platzverweis. Ethnologische Langzeituntersuchung einer Gruppe von Obdachlosen in der Hamburger Innenstadt.* Hamburg. (unpublished MA dissertation),

Gruber, Martin & Jochen Becker

2001 *sleeping rough.* gruberfilm. 43 minutes.

2002 'Neues vom Platz. Eine Langzeitperspektive auf eine Gruppe von Obdachlosen in der Hamburger Innenstadt'. (unpublished research report).

Kokot, Waltraud, Felix Axster & Martin Gruber

2002 *Kultur der Obdachlosigkeit in der Hamburger Innenstadt. Eine ethnologische Felduntersuchung.* Hamburg: Universität Hamburg.

Downloadable publication (in German):

http://www.verwaltung.uni-hamburg.de/onTEAM/grafik/4_kultur.pdf

Documentary film *sleeping rough*:

Available as VHS or DVD copies with English subtitles

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