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ASSEMBLING MARKERS OF ETHNICISED POVERTY IN A HUNGARIAN VILLAGE: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF EVERYDAY SOCIAL SERVICES IN PROVISION

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VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Abstract

This article examines how certain moralised understandings of poverty and ethnicity come to acquire the appearance of certainty in the everyday routines of social service provision. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in a Hungarian village at a local 'Presence House' run by a social service charity entangled in both state and civic welfare strategies, I treat my growing uncertainty about where 'poverty' begins and ends, which emerged as my initial assumptions about its boundaries became unsettled through fieldwork, as an analytical starting point to examine how particular understandings of poverty and ethnicity are assembled through the quotidian discursive, affective, and practical engagements of social work. Following Fassin's (2018) call for paying attention to the 'politics of life' governing humanitarian interventions, I examine how human lives are valued and addressed through moral sentiments, social imaginaries, and everyday practices. By tracing moments of indignation, alertness, doubt, and praise, I show how moralised understandings of personal responsibility, violence, deservingness, and individual transformation gradually assemble a particular understanding of ethnicised poverty. These everyday registers do not produce a fixed or uncontested image of poverty: rather, through their repetition and accumulation, they contribute to the appearance that it is self-evident, while simultaneously revealing the ambiguity and contingency of the categories they invoke. The analysis therefore demonstrates how social inequalities are maintained, negotiated, and partially reconfigured within the intricate fabric of everyday social work despite its overarching goal of overcoming them.

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Introduction: Poverty and its (un)certainties

One blazing hot summer day in the Hungarian town where I was participating in a fieldwork course, my colleagues and I followed the main street towards the 'Presence House' run by the social service organisation on which we were conducting ethnographic research. The single-family houses we passed were well-kept, with their tidy gardens embellished by roses and other flowers. As we passed a grocery store, an old man who was leaning against the building reciprocated our friendly greetings by slightly raising his cane. His back was bent, and his worn-out black shoes peeked out from under baggy dark brown corduroy trousers that seemed too big for his rather small physique. His face was tanned and wrinkled, there was stubble on his shaved head, and one eye was swollen almost shut, suggesting disease or injury. His warm grin revealed an almost toothless mouth.

Behind the supermarket, the street became a gravel road and headed downhill into the neighbourhood we called the 'Roma Settlement',[2] As we continued, the deteriorating appearance of the surrounding dwellings made a strong impression on me as yellow- or blue-painted walls, high wooden fences, and gardens with rose bushes and fruit trees gave way to unplastered and unpainted concrete block walls, missing windows, and untended yards enclosed by battered metal fences. Here, the 'Presence House' run by the Hungarian branch of the Knights, a charitable organisation aimed at the development of impoverished communities, overlooked a valley filled with houses, their roofs sprawling in all directions.

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This scene, taken from my fieldnotes for my master's thesis research at the Presence House, illustrates an experience of transitioning from the middle-class environment of a small Hungarian town into a neighbourhood colloquially referred to as 'the Settlement', Our literal descent through the town's hilly topography materialised in the appearance of the surrounding buildings. As I walked along a street that had at first seemed middle-class, I found myself

[2] I here refer to a common local way of naming the neighborhood central to my research. Throughout the article, I use the term *Rom/nja* to reflect the gendered form of *Roma*, the masculine plural word for 'people' in Romani language(s). While *Roma* is most common in current academic and political discourse, which often emphasises that it is a self-appellation (e.g., Petrova 2003; Stewart and Rövid 2010), during my research I did not find it to be universally accepted among those who identified as part of that ethnic minority nor among members of the majority population. The question of how to speak about ethnic difference is complex and often contested. Some interlocutors, for example, expressed that exclusively using 'Roma' can feel like denying their *Hungarianness*. In order to acknowledge such concerns and out of a commitment to gender-inclusive language, I use expressions such as 'Rom/nja Hungarian' and 'non-Rom/nja Hungarian' to refer to the ethnicised registers operating in the social world I describe. Despite the complications of such umbrella terms, I retain these distinctions due to their prevalence in everyday discourse and the analytical need to make their social effects visible.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

becoming aware of the dilapidated and neglected state of the buildings further down. The old man added another layer to my perceptions of increasing deprivation, with his dishevelled appearance, oversized worn-out clothes, swollen eye and missing teeth serving as markers of the 'material and physical conditions and bodily costs of poverty' (Adair 2002: 452). My sense of transitioning along the lines of social stratification was accompanied by the semantic categorisations we learned and internalised both before and during our fieldwork at the Presence House. The grocery store was called 'Settlement Coop', and just before the paved street turned into a gravel road leading to the Presence House, it crossed another street that we would refer to as 'Border Street' in conversation throughout our stay. These semantic and experiential accentuations bifurcated the town into two distinct parts, 'the Town' and 'the Settlement', with the latter defined by the apparent poverty of its inhabitants. Indeed, throughout my fieldwork at that charitable institution offering social aid in contexts of marginalisation and poverty, we were regularly confronted with this sense of 'two worlds'.

However, the spatially distinct social stratification became less obvious as I familiarised myself with the town. I realised that further down the gravel road there were also houses with fenced gardens, roses and well-maintained exteriors. Thus, some places in what was considered 'the Settlement' physically resembled 'the Town', Moreover, the material and physical environment in 'the Town' was not uniformly characterised by affluence. Dilapidated houses could be found throughout and the boundaries between 'the poor' and 'the non-poor' were not as spatially clear-cut as they had seemed at first. In light of these observations that revealed the heterogenous distribution of such markers of 'poverty' and 'affluence', my initial feeling of transitioning between worlds faded into an uncertainty about the actual boundaries of 'the Settlement', poverty, and ethnicity that persisted throughout my field research on humanitarian care practices.[3] I began to question the categories that I myself had reproduced in, for example, the fieldnotes introduced above.

This Working Paper takes my uncertainties about where 'poverty' and 'the Settlement' begins and ends as an analytical starting point for interrogating how particular figures of 'ethnicised poverty' come to be in the discursive, affective and relational realm of everyday

[3] By evoking uncertainty about the (spatial) boundaries of poverty, I do not mean to deny that inhabitants of this impoverished neighborhood are subjected to discrimination, that local mechanisms of control and exclusion prohibit or impede them from building new houses or moving into other neighborhoods, or the precarious situation many find themselves in and the structural violence defining their everyday lives (cf. Szombati 2018), but rather to draw ethnographic attention to how poverty emerges as a relational and contested category in social service provision.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

social service provision. While the uncertainty surrounding my experience of boundaries of poverty differs profoundly from the uncertainty Stevenson (2014) describes as the mode of her ethnographic attention, I follow her suggestion of turning uncertainty into an epistemologically productive ethnographic object. However, I differ from her focus on where 'the facts falter' in following the discursive, affective, and practical moments through which particular understandings of poverty and ethnicity are articulated, negotiated, and gradually come to acquire an appearance of 'certainty', or of being self-evident, in the everyday provision of social services at the Presence House.

Just as Sahlins (1972: 37) has argued that poverty is not a social fact but a relational category, ethnicity (intricately entangled with it here, since the Presence House serves an ethnicised minority) should be perceived as a 'relational variable' (Durst 2010: 14) that is created and re-created on the micro-level of social interactions (Eriksen 2002: 1). Hence, my uncertainty about the boundaries of poverty and thus of the ethnic category assigned to the beneficiaries of Presence House became a lens to see how particular understandings of these categories are relationally produced in the context of everyday humanitarian care practices. The uncertainty and certainty I experienced regarding the scope and constitution of (spatial) boundaries of poverty leads me to examine how certain categorisations of poverty emerge situationally and momentarily in discourses and practices.[4]

I gathered the ethnographic material presented here during three periods of fieldwork in 2022: two weeks in June, four days in August, and a week in October. My first visit was part of a fieldwork course organised by Professor Tatjana Thelen (University of Vienna) and Professor Margit Feischmidt (Hungarian Academy of Sciences). Both the choice of the field site and access to the Presence project were made possible through Professor Feischmidt's longstanding connections and engagement in the region. During the fieldwork course we conducted research at the Presence House in a small group of three. I continued to this participant observation, which included cooking and cleaning, helping with childcare, joining social workers and their clients during counselling sessions, and participating in a range of other events organised by the project, on my subsequent solo visits. The collective discussions that preceded and accompanied this data collection process in both the smaller group researching the Presence House and the larger group pursuing different themes within the town contributed

[4] My argument does not seek to claim that social workers are the sole actors who 'ethnicise' their clients. Ethnic categories are also mobilised by residents themselves in various ways, including as forms of identification and, at times, as strategic resources.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

to the sense of certainty around categorisations of people and places within the town. However, it also prompted me to question some of these very certainties and to pay attention to the intricate ways in which ethnicised poverty comes to be during everyday social service provision.

Finally, I must note that I do not speak Hungarian. While the social workers central to our research spoke English, we often relied on Sára Szabó, a member of our small student research group, for interpretation during conversations and interviews. In the collaborative process of contemplating our experiences, we then reconstructed conversations, and Sára explained phrases and the contextual significance of terms. Being unable to understand the entirety of conversations obliged me to look closely at how people talked, how they carried themselves, and their expressions and gestures. Hence, the language barrier sharpened my attention to practice and at once became both a limitation and a strength in this research.

The Knights and their social workers' ambiguous positionalities

The Presence programme's stated mission was to provide 'permanent and intensive social work in urban slums and impoverished small settlements', which it referred to as '*cigánytelepek*'.[5] This word refers specifically to impoverished neighbourhoods or villages inhabited primarily by people seen (and often seeing themselves) as Rom/nja Hungarians. Thus, the Presence House provided a myriad of social services and – as its name suggests – 'practice[d] presence' in situations of ethnicised poverty. Although the programme explicitly targeted socially disadvantaged localities primarily inhabited by Rom/nja Hungarians, it offered not only immediate direct aid, like emergency boxes containing food and toiletries, and social programmes intended to foster long-term improvements of living situations but also a wide array of educational, recreational, and community-based activities including childcare services like tutoring, playgroups, field trips, sports and musical activities.

The Presence House was an initiative of an international Roman Catholic aid organisation I will call the 'Knights'. Their Hungarian branch was originally established in the first half of the twentieth century, closed during the Soviet period, and reestablished as an autonomous civil society organisation in 1989. By 2020, they had become one of the main actors in the non-state welfare system and social safety net of Hungary. Despite the Knights's

[5] '*Cigánytelepek*' could be translated literally as 'Gypsy settlements'. Although scholars and activists have noted that it carries the same pejorative and stigmatising connotations (cf. Stewart and Rövid 2010) as the English word 'Gypsy', the Hungarian word *cigány* is common in everyday discourse, including among Rom/nja Hungarians.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

status as a nongovernmental organisation, the Presence House was officially responsible for carrying out the Hungarian government's *Felzárkózó települések* programme (Felzárkózó települések 2023). Loosely translated as 'Emerging Settlements', this social and economic development agenda was established by the Hungarian Ministry of Interior in 2019 to improve living situations in destitute and impoverished regions inhabited by Rom/nja Hungarians and thus implement the National Strategy for Inclusion 2030 and EU Roma Strategic Framework 2020-2030 (European Commission 2020; 2021; 2023; Magyar Közlöm 2019).

Rather than representing a straightforward withdrawal from welfare responsibilities as was characteristic of post-socialist regime change in Hungary (Thelen et al. 2011), the Presence House illustrates a restructuring of welfare governance through the delegation of development objectives to a nongovernmental charitable organisation. In practice, this positioned the organisation in an ambiguous institutional role: external to the state yet functionally integrated into governmental welfare administration. In fact, during the period of my research, the state officials responsible for the *Felzárkózó települések* participated in various events, organisational tasks, and decision-making processes there. At the same time, social workers at the Presence House became intermediaries through whom the developmental objectives of the state programme were locally enacted and negotiated in everyday practice. Moreover, as Jelinek and Virág (2019: 15) found in a similar setting, they acted as 'brokers', mediating between the different actors, institutions, and moral worlds involved in the developmental trajectory of the programme. Jelinek and Virág (2019: 16) even describe such organisations as functioning as a 'shadow municipality', reflecting the delegation of certain local welfare responsibilities from public institutions to charitable actors. While these broader institutional dynamics are not the primary focus of this article, they form an important backdrop against which the everyday practices analysed in the following sections take shape. This particular institutional arrangement positioned social workers in an intermediary role. Their work consisted not only of providing social services but also of mediating between the objectives of the development programme, the needs of their clients, and the realities of the locality in which they worked.

The latter aspect of this intermediary position became particularly evident during my fieldwork. In the weeks of my research, I came to understand that the social workers were concerned with maintaining the legitimacy of the project within this particular locality. During our very first interview with the director of the Presence House, we learned about the project's many efforts to ameliorate the livelihood of a marginalised population but were also told about recent vandalism and hostility directed at it. Equally, social workers repeatedly emphasised the

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

importance of maintaining good relations with residents who were not direct beneficiaries and stressed that the Presence House was 'for everyone'. As we came to learn, many residents regarded the project unfavourably because the town itself did not fit the typical image of the impoverished and heavily Rom/nja-populated localities usually associated with the Presence programme and *Felzárkózó települések.* The establishment of a Presence House in this particular locality was linked to earlier local political tensions and surges of local anti-Gypsyism' (Szombati 2018) rather than to a high rate of impoverishment. Many seemed to view the Presence House as symbolically associating the town with stigmatised forms of ethnicised poverty and marginalisation that many residents felt contradicted local self-perceptions of respectability. These sentiments of not wanting to be associated with a 'Rom/nja region' hints at the underlying anti-Rom/nja sentiments that we encountered in manifold ways throughout our stay.

While the social workers I came to know were acutely aware of the segregation and stigmatisation shaping the lives of their clients, they simultaneously had to work with local hegemonic anti-Rom/nja-Hungarian discourses and social distinctions. It is within the context discussed here and social workers' ambiguous position of navigating local hegemonies while working for and with understanding for their clients (see also Jelinek and Virág 2019: 19) that the everyday practices analysed in the following sections take shape. While the following analysis may seem unduly critical of the social workers' everyday practices, I view these not as individual shortcomings but as emerging from broader institutional arrangements and moral contexts that extend far beyond this particular setting and these individual social workers.

Politics of life

By tracing how particular figures of ethnicised poverty come into being during everyday social service provision at the Presence House, I examine the micro-dynamics of the above discussed entanglement of civic and state welfare and development strategies and the position of social workers within it. Because my analysis is concerned with the moral understandings through which lives become valued, classified, and acted upon in everyday welfare practices, my work builds on Fassin's (2012, 2018) work on humanitarian governance. Fassin (2012) argues that humanitarian interventions are increasingly operated through a mode of governance he calls 'humanitarian reason', meaning these interventions are organised and legitimised through moral sentiments and affective imperatives rather than social critique (Fassin 2012: 8).

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

In Ticktin's (2011) ethnographic work France's policies on migration and asylum exemplify this mode of governance as she examines them and demonstrates how they selectively offer institutionalised care to those individuals deemed most vulnerable while systematically excluding those who do not conform to criteria for extreme suffering. She describes how practices guided by moral imperatives defining suffering produce 'casualties of care' by unintentionally excluding people or obscuring the deeper forms of violence and injustice driving migration. Hence, studies on modes of humanitarian governance critique the moral underpinnings and practical rationales of humanitarian interventions by scrutinising how moral idioms and sentiments legitimise aid and delineate the boundaries of legitimate subjects of care.

Rather than foregrounding the 'casualties of care', I shift attention to the mundane practices interactions, and discourses through which particular moralising understandings of poverty and inequality come into being and are assembled in social service provision in the first place. I therefore examine what Fassin conceptualises as 'politics of life:' routine discourses and mundane actions within humanitarian interventions through which value is assigned to lives. This perspective shifts the focus from the large-scale regulatory mechanisms, technologies, or administrative infrastructures that are central to, for example, Foucault's biopolitics to the ways in which notions of 'life as supreme value' are enacted and negotiated in daily encounters (Fassin 2018: 91–92).

Each section of the following ethnographic study begins with a vignette from the field, followed by an analysis of how everyday social service provision at the Presence House assembles particular moralised understandings of ethnicised poverty. First, I examine discourses of poverty as self-inflicted and the affective register of indignation through which they are expressed. Second, I analyse worry and alertness as modes of inhabiting space and explore how stereotypical assumptions become embedded in everyday spatial practices. Third, I examine how doubt surrounding the distribution of services is articulated and how negotiations of neediness shape particular understandings of poverty. Fourth, I consider the ambivalent moral negotiations surrounding children's deservingness and show how innocence, learning, and praise produce specific understandings of ethnicised poverty.

Indignation and the moralisation of poverty

One hot August afternoon at the Presence House, the social worker Flóra urgently summoned me to the roof deck. 'You want to write about the situation here?' she asked. 'I will show you how things are over here'. One side of the garden shared a wall with the house of a family

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

whose children often attended the project's daycare centre. While the roof's dark red tiles were new, the walls were neither insulated nor plastered. In a small side-yard behind a sturdy-looking chain link fence, a grey pitbull crouched underneath a piece of cardboard, panting. There was no water, and it was obviously miserable in the oppressive heat. Flóra told me that the animal had been trying to find shade under the various debris left around the property all day. Her voice cracked with indignation as she began to recount her previous efforts to protect it. Sighing audibly, she described reporting the family to the municipality so they would be informed of the animal welfare laws and how angry they had been with her after that. As our eyes lingered on the heavily breathing dog, she lowered her voice and asked me in a tense and controlled way: 'How do you think the situation here can ever improve when the people do not even take care of their dog properly?'

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This scene reveals how ideas of poverty as self-inflicted circulate through judgements of moral failure. How can the Presence House project help improve the lives of people in this impoverished part of the town when they will not even care for a dog properly? The social worker's reaction to the situation is one example of a structure of feeling and narrative of poverty circulating in the discursive realm of the project that holds poor people responsible for their own predicament. Through the figure of the suffering and uncared-for dog, she reproduced a broader moral discourse of irresponsibility, that attributes a perpetual cycle of poverty to their behaviour. Here, the improvement of one's livelihood appears to be understood as rooted in one's responsibility, most poignantly when she wondered how the overall situation could ever improve if people would not *even* take responsibility for a dog. This word, 'even', and her indignant pronunciation of it expressed this common perception of poverty, and not taking care of their dog described a failure on the part of the family that was responsible for it. Furthermore, the social worker transferred its treatment to the general predicament of the people of the Settlement, crystalising the perception of poverty as resulting from irresponsibility and personal inadequacy.

Katz (2013) traces the historical construction of poverty in the United States and examines how the category of the 'undeserving poor' permeated popular perceptions of poverty. This category of the 'undeserving poor', he argues, describes a 'moral status' rendering poor people themselves responsible for their predicament through notions of their moral failing or pathology (Katz 2013: 2). Throughout this work, he describes how these continuously

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

changing yet persistent perceptions of poor people as (for instance) lazy or morally deficient influenced public attitudes and welfare policies in the United States. The scene of the suffering dog echoes this logic not because the social worker explicitly casts its owners as 'undeserving', but because the dog's condition became a moral proxy through which the owners' capacity to care, take responsibility, and improve their circumstances was evaluated. The neglected animal thus ceased to be merely an object of concern and instead became evidence of a broader moral assessment of its owners, representing poverty as a 'problem of persons' (Katz 2013: 3).

Flóra's response to the dog's predicament reveals a notion that people do not take responsibility for themselves (or their pets) that is given a particular moral force by her indignant tone and rather pessimistic view of the locality's future. Through this affective register, the predicament of the people subjected to conditions of poverty comes to be interpreted 'in terms of personal stake and individual accountability' (Chuengsatiansup 2001: 31). Rather than merely expressing pre-existing ideas of poverty, these everyday judgements become one of the ordinary discursive and affective registers through which particular moralised understandings of poverty come to acquire an appearance of certainty. In this sense, they reveal how the worth and recognition of life are negotiated through everyday moral reasoning and how Fassin's (2018) 'politics of life' unfold in the mundane routines of social service provision.

While the social worker's indignation foregrounded poverty as a matter of personal responsibility, these moral judgements unfolded against the backdrop of broader structural transformations that have shaped the material and social conditions of Rom/nja Hungarians. Szombati (2018) demonstrates how structural adjustments and regime change affected the relationship between Rom/nja and non-Rom/nja people following Hungary's accession to the EU and post-socialist transition. He identifies two segments of the population of the town where he conducted his ethnographic research – the 'post-peasantry' and the 'surplus population' – and demonstrates that both experienced respective crises of reproduction that stirred ethnically inflected tensions. The post-peasantry consists of small-scale agricultural and viticultural producers, who struggle with the decline of the profitability of their microenterprises after Hungary's accession to the EU (Szombati 2018: 67), while the surplus population comprises unskilled or low skilled workers who have faced continuous unemployment since the demise of the socialist industrial sector (Szombati 2018: 63). The post-peasantry made sense of their disenchantment and experience of decay by deploying a discursive imaginary of a threat from the surplus population that ethnically classified it as a 'problem population' living a 'Gypsy

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

life' on the margins of the town (Szombati 2018: 70). This trend of contrasting the allegedly self-inflicted woes of the stigmatised poor 'against the order, progress, and decency of 'deserving' citizens' (Adair 2002: 455) reveals how the moral dimension of poverty emerges against a backdrop of broader structural conditions. Hence, moralised assessments of poverty are not detached from the social origins and structural conditions shaping the lives of those on the margins of society but emerge within and must be understood in relation to this broader historical and social context.

While I argue that narratives of poverty and precarity reproduced through affective registers foreground moral failure, the social workers also considered the broader structural hardships their clients faced. In another conversation, this same social worker recognised her clients' limited opportunities in the labour market and thus moved beyond a narrative grounded solely in personal responsibility. Thus, multiple images of poverty circulate within the realm of everyday social service provision. Rather than constituting a contradiction, the coexistence of these different understandings of poverty is central to my analysis. Seen through the lens of uncertainty, it draws attention not to whether social workers ultimately understand poverty as structural or self-inflicted, but to how particular understandings come to appear more certain than others. While I see the commonly held notions of poverty as self-inflicted at the Presence House as creating and reinforcing poverty as a discursive construct, I recognise that they are neither rigid nor uncontested. Rather, it is through their repeated articulation, particularly in affective registers such as indignation, that understandings of poverty as self-inflicted and rooted in personal responsibility come to appear increasingly self-evident, even as structural understandings continue to circulate alongside them.

Alertness, moral arrangements of space and ethnicised poverty

One late afternoon in October, I was sitting in the kitchen of the Presence House. Bálint, a public worker assigned to the programme,[6] was cleaning the playroom across the hall and I

[6] Besides the director, the social workers, and the teachers, the Presence team is assisted by five 'public workers'. These are participants in Road to Work, a Hungarian government program launched in 2009 under a Socialist Party government and later expanded by Fidesz. The public work system ties receiving social aid in case of unemployment to the condition of participating in publicly organised communal work in the form of low-skilled, low-paid provisional jobs (Szőke 2015). While usually carried out by municipalities, the Knights also implement the Public Work program through positions at the Presence House. These positions comprise housekeeping tasks like cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes for people of the Settlement, collecting trash and cutting grass on the roads of the Settlement, and tending the garden of the Presence House. As Szöke (2015) demonstrates, public work in Hungary has a prevalent ethnic dimension, as most people participating in the programme are Rom/nja Hungarian.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

periodically heard him through the doorway as he pulled the mop bucket across the floor. After a while, silence replaced the sounds of his daily cleaning ritual and he seemed to have gone out on the porch. However, only a few moments later, he suddenly rushed into the kitchen. Glimpsing his facial expression, I saw he was distressed and in pain. In an agitated tone, he approached Flóra and they exchanged a few words. By now, she had risen from her chair and was standing in front of Bálint in her usual upright, confident posture. After hearing Bálint speak, her facial expressions mirrored his. She now looked at him sorrowfully and sympathetically and both seemed in shock. As if suddenly remembering my presence, the social worker turned to tell me that his cousin had died in an accident. The young man had been working on a construction site in Budapest and had fallen off the scaffolding. Through the open door of the building, I now heard a clamour of voices from the street and then a scream of pain. As Bálint, Flóra, and I slowly walked outside, she described what he had told her: the bereaved mother had just confronted the man who had arranged the job and accused him of endangering her child. Due to the agitated atmosphere, I was not sure whether the social worker was repeating what Bálint had told her or if she was inferring it from the noise outside. Since I was myself shocked by the news, I did not ask for clarification.

Outside, the three of us were looking out over the road leading down into the Settlement. A few houses below, a swarm of people had gathered and were entering a house, one after another. I saw that both Bálint and Flóra were watching with tears in their eyes. Bálint was leaning on his mop as if he could not stand without its support. Flóra appeared just as shocked but less vulnerable and firmly ordered me to leave. She could not predict whether tensions would rise and trouble erupt, she explained, but her urgent tone of voice when she told me to go home made me feel as if she was certain. She paused for a bit and then explained what she meant by tensions. Some person on drugs might seek revenge, and she did not know if anyone there had guns or knives. She just wanted me to be safe, she said in a strict tone. I felt irritated by her assumptions of violence. They felt misplaced to me, as someone had died and people had gathered in mourning. I responded that I was not scared of these things, meaning that I considered them unlikely. Still, I wanted to respect her and added in the same breath that I would get my things to leave. Once I had collected my bag and notebook and returned to the porch, the social worker accompanied me down the stairs to the wooden gate leading out of the project's yard. Opening it for me, she warmly said goodbye and I knew that she meant well. A few steps up the street, I looked back and saw Flóra waving at me from the gate. I reciprocated and calmly headed home.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

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This scene demonstrates that the moralisation of poverty at the Presence House extends beyond narratives of personal responsibility. It is also produced through stereotypical associations between the ethnicised poor and violence, whereby poverty becomes intertwined with imaginaries of danger and criminality. This observable alertness to violence draws on stereotypical portrayals of Rom/nja as inherently prone to violence and criminality and therefore is implicated within a moralising practice of 'othering'. In the region (and beyond), a popular and 'slightly demonized' imagery of Rom/nja has a longstanding history of marking ethnicity as linked to a tendency towards violence and criminality (Feischmidt, Szombati, and Szuhay 2014). In the above account, such ideas about violence prompted the social worker to sternly order me to leave for my own safety. As Hall (1997: 257) argues, practices of stereotyping ascribe fixed characteristics to individuals that are understood as fundamental to their being and restrict them to a generalisable image. He furthermore outlines that negatively or positively framed stereotypical representations do not merely describe difference but produce difference. I understand these assumptions about a proclivity to violence as contributing not only to the production of ethnic difference but also to the assembly of particular moralised understandings of ethnicised poverty. Because the beneficiaries of the Presence House are widely imagined through an ethnic lens, these stereotypes simultaneously shape understandings of poverty.

The expectations of deviant, violent behaviour demonised images of Rom/nja conjure up are reflected not just in the social worker's narratives and acts to protect me that evening but also in the surveillance mechanisms present throughout the Presence House. Expectation of violence appears in the 'hard infrastructure' of the 'securityscape' of the Presence House (Low and Maguire 2019), including closed-circuit surveillance cameras and an alarm that sounded whenever someone entered the front door. These physical structures of surveillance and security are accompanied by the alertness with which the social workers respond to unexpected entries to the building. One evening, I returned to the Presence House without calling ahead. As I entered through the open front door, accompanied by the screeching alarm, Flóra was already rushing down the hall to check who had entered. Besides the alertness to someone entering or being present in the house exemplified in this moment, I generally observed great caution about keeping interior doors locked and allowing persons to enter. Caution and alertness describe modes in which the social workers inhabited the space of the Presence House: although neither

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

was ever directly communicated, both were observable in such practices of locking doors and always being aware of who entered the building.

In light of the expectation of violence and criminality exemplified in the first scene, these modes of inhabiting the space of the Presence House describe the ways an imaginary of possible violence or crime is enacted in the everyday routines of the Presence House. Heightened caution, locking doors and scrutinising who enters the space, as well the physical space itself, reflect assumptions that certain lives are potentially dangerous along the lines of stereotypical portrayals. Allahyari (2000: 104) argues that the two charitable organisations she studied used the built environment in ways that upheld particular visions of charity and therefore conveyed moral assessments regarding the beneficiaries of charitable care. She writes: '[w]orkers used the constructured [*sic*] environment to communicate symbolic messages about the moral worth of the poor, with very real consequences for the daily lives of charity recipients' (Allahyari 2000: 103). The consequences for the recipients of the social services are not the focus of my exploration of the social services at the Presence House. Nevertheless, the modes of inhabiting the space that I described and the presence of surveillance technologies can be read as conveying symbolic messages. These symbolic messages underlying the modes of alertness and caution do not so much hint at assessments of the moral worth of people experiencing poverty – like Allahyari's (2000) example – as express certain stereotypes, such as the likelihood of violent, deviant behaviour.

Affective modes such as alertness, together with the inscription of stereotypes into the built environment, are part of the ordinary affective and spatial registers through which particular moralised understandings of ethnicised poverty are negotiated and repeatedly come to acquire an appearance of certainty. Yet moralising descriptions of ethnicity or poverty were not necessarily invoked simultaneously, as the example of stereotyping of a criminal underclass above shows, but they coexisted in the everyday of social service provision and therefore gradually produce an image of ethnicised poverty. Rather than constituting separate discourses, stereotypes of violence and moralised understandings of poverty reinforce one another. Through repeated narratives, affective modes of alertness, and spatial practices of surveillance, poverty comes to be imagined not only as self-inflicted but also as inherently dangerous. Although these moralised understandings remain neither fixed nor uncontested, their repetition across discursive and spatial practices contributes to the appearance of a coherent figure of ethnicised poverty.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Doubt, hesitation and practices of distribution

Flóra appeared in the kitchen and began looking through two plastic bags placed on one of the kitchen chairs. With a serious expression, she carefully inspected their contents, including bread, milk, and other staple foods. These items were intended to be distributed through a service called the 'crisis box', which provides immediate help with food and toiletries for people unable to meet their basic needs. Curious, I inquired whether Flóra planned to distribute the items she was inspecting that same day. She explained that two different families had requested them, but she was not going to issue the boxes just yet. Holding the bread and milk from one bag, she explained the general procedure for distributing crisis boxes. Because the service was quite expensive to provide, the rule allowed a family to request it only once a year, and each case had to be conscientiously assessed. Having finished inspecting the plastic bags and standing in front of me with her hands resting on her hips, she thoughtfully continued that each of the two families who had requested crisis boxes had at least one member who was currently working. The first man who had asked for the service lived with his family, including his father who had a job. Therefore, she knew that there was someone in the family who earned money. The second person who had asked was one of the construction workers currently working on renovating the building outside, and in this case too she thought that, since he was being paid he should be able to provide for his family's most pressing needs.

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Throughout my fieldwork, when I posed the question of who was eligible for a service categorised as immediate aid the social workers always assured me that any local person in need could seek help. They explained that the prerequisite for receiving less formally defined kinds of aid was simply to show up when the programme was open and ask for what one needed. However, Flóra's lecture on the distribution of the crisis box suggests that it did not work this way in practice. While donations such as toothbrushes, soaps, or baby clothes happened on the spot, it seemed that the distribution of crisis boxes relied on two criteria. First, families could only request the service once a year, so the social workers documented each distribution and checked whether each applicant had already received one. Second, each applicant's need had to be carefully assessed. As Flóra's comments reveal, the social workers considered whether the people requesting a service that had been already prepared were 'truly in need'. This practice of questioning and negotiating need in the realm of the social service provision complicates the common discourse at the institution that anyone in need receives aid. The fact that the applicants

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

could provide for themselves possibly rendered them ineligible to receive the package intended to support people unable to meet their pressing daily need for food.

Thelen (2015: 509) argues that care is not simply given but addresses 'socially recognized needs'. In this example, crisis boxes were a care practice to address a need the project defined as a state of absolute poverty with no form of income. The social worker's deliberations implied that once an income existed families and individuals should spend their income properly – that is, on their immediate needs – rather than relying on or taking advantage of aid, which would render them undeserving of the service. In accordance with Tošić and Streinzer's (2022: 2) argument that 'deservingness acts as moral assessment of processes of distribution', I view this social worker's inquiry into neediness at the Presence House as putting moralising perceptions of poverty into practice.

Moralising assessments of need implemented by social workers or street-level bureaucrats often determine which people are deemed in legitimate need and therefore granted access to networks of care and which are excluded and marginalised (see i.e. Kay 2011; Grabmaier 2022). While in the examples given by Kay (2011) and Grabmaier (2022) moral underpinnings of need translated into actual practices of exclusion where certain individuals ended up not receiving social assistance, at the Presence House the crisis boxes were distributed despite the initial doubts about the supplicants' needs. The significance of this moment for my argument lies less in the fact that need was questioned than in the assumptions through which it became questionable. Rather than simply assessing whether a crisis box should be distributed, the social worker's hesitation drew on moral assumptions about what constitutes legitimate need. In the negotiation of the question of need unfolds a moralising assumption that people might fail to manage their finances responsibly (see also Zelizer 2017). The existence of an income was treated as indicating that potential beneficiaries should have been able to meet their basic needs through responsible financial practices. Their failure to do so seemed to potentially render them undeserving of the service of the crisis box. The practice of questioning and doubting neediness therefore reveals not only expectations about beneficiaries' behaviour but also the moral criteria through which poverty is rendered legible as deserving or undeserving of care. Although the crisis boxes were ultimately distributed, the hesitation preceding their distribution articulated an understanding of poverty in which legitimate need was tied to responsible consumption and self-sufficiency.

Approached through the lens of uncertainty, the social worker's hesitation draws attention to how particular understandings of poverty as self-inflicted and rooted in

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

irresponsible consumption emerge through negotiations of deservingness. Rather than simply determining whether care should be provided, such moments of doubt reveal how moralising understandings of poverty are articulated even where care is ultimately extended. The practice of doubting and questioning need along the lines of moralised ideas of deservingness thus exemplifies how perceptions of poverty as self-inflicted or a matter of (ir)responsible consumption sediment into the everyday practices of social service provision at the Presence House. While the social worker ultimately distributed the crisis boxes despite her concerns, her hesitation nevertheless functioned as a practical and affective register through which particular moral categorisations of poverty were negotiated. Approached through the lens of uncertainty, these ordinary negotiations reveal the 'politics of life' (Fassin 2018) not as a straightforward practice of inclusion or exclusion but as an everyday process through which the legitimacy of need is evaluated and particular understandings of poverty as self-inflicted or related to 'poor spending' come to be and acquire an appearance of certainty.

Praise and the ambivalent figure of the (conditionally) deserving child

One sunny afternoon in June, Flóra handed out imitation one-dollar bills to nine excited eleven- and twelve-year-old children gathered around her in a schoolyard. Ráchel, Emma, and József joked and waved this play money, which was neatly cut out of paper and the size of a business card, in each other's faces. Other groups of children passed us on their way into the school building, where a huge sign above the entrance read '*Szupermarket'.* Our own group was about to follow them into this secondary school that the Knights ran in a nearby town and had organised a 'Children's Day' to orient promising future students and provide them with a day of fun and play. After completing numbered stations of roleplaying activities during the day, the children received the play money that Flóra was now diligently distributing to each of the children of our excursion group. When she finished, she waved at me with the few remaining dollar bills, signalling that we should start moving towards the '*szupermarket'* in front of us. Once we managed to enter, the room was full of chattering people and we found ourselves in a land of plenty. Balloons and shiny tinsel lined the walls, while the tables were covered with games, books, and stuffed animals. Each item on display was labelled with a small number indicating its price, and behind the tables students from the secondary school that was hosting the event dutifully played the roles of friendly sales personnel, advising the children how to purchase the toys with the rewards they had earned by participating in the activities outside. I

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

observed the children eagerly counting and calculating to see which toys they could or couldn't afford.

After the mock-supermarket was closed, the children proudly displayed their purchases, trophies of their long day at the 'Children's Day'. While she only smiled at the stuffed animals and dinosaur figures some of the children had chosen, she enthusiastically complimented Ráchel for choosing to spend her 'money' on a pencil and exercise book and warmly endorsed her decision to buy school supplies. Observing their interaction, I was reminded of an earlier conversation between the social worker and myself. I had just picked up some signed paintings Ráchel had proudly given me, when Flóra expressed her admiration for the girl. This was a very special child, she told me, because she had repeatedly shown that she was not only eager to learn but also to ask for extra help during the tutoring hours at the Presence House which she attended almost every afternoon. On another occasion, the social worker told me that some other children participating in their daycare programme were full of curiosity and interest and that, most important of all, 'the seed' could still be planted within them. As an example, she evoked a moment during which she had taught two children about a kind of bird they had seen from the bus, after which they had solemnly declared that we had to take care of those birds and their environment.

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During one of our many conversations, I asked Flóra how the cycle of poverty the families coming to the Presence House are subjected to could end. She responded that help could only be provided in small ways, and that in her view people were often not even receptive but rather enraged about their attempts to improve or change something. Hence, it seemed unrealistic and out of reach to her to imagine that it would be possible to change the impoverished circumstances of the people she works with. Despite the despair she felt about achieving change, the children motivated her to continue with her job: 'With them, there are no shades of blue, yellow, green or red – children are all the same and equally vulnerable'. In this narrative, the organisation and she herself continued to work, despite their sense that the possibility of change was too utopian to consider, because children are 'all vulnerable' and deserving of care, making them the raison d'être for the project's social services. Furthermore, as her image of the 'colour-blindness' of children suggests, they are deserving regardless of their ethnicity (or upbringing), which evokes a notion of the unconditional deservingness of children based on a moral image of their innate vulnerability and innocence (Malkki 2010).

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

This exceptional deservingness of children is mirrored in their centrality within the Presence House's routines and structural arrangements. Childcare, tutoring sessions, and playtime were prominent parts of the programme's everyday routine and the building itself reflected the project's primary orientation toward providing social services for children, with two of the four main rooms specifically allocated to these programmes. The first, affectionately called the 'playroom', was filled with books, toys, and crafting and drawing materials and tutoring sessions and playtime took place there every afternoon. The second was known as the 'baby-rocking room' and although not fully in operation during my field research was repeatedly described as exclusively devoted to a nursery programme for young mothers and their toddlers. While the social services targeting children occupied separate physical spaces within the building, adult beneficiaries received counselling only in the hallway or kitchen. Allahyari's (2000) exploration of two charity organisations highlights how the use of physical space reflects certain charitable visions and moral assessments of the beneficiaries of charitable action. While in Allahyari's (2000: 104) example the creation of a pleasant, welcoming physical environment reveals the moral underpinnings of personalist hospitality – a 'vision of the poor as entitled, rights-bearing members of society' – at the Presence House the allocation of space and thus the use of the physical environment underscores the significant emphasis placed on caring for children.

Children's significance within the social service pursuits of the project simultaneously hinges on and creates the notion that they are deserving and innocent. However, my ethnographic observations suggest that while children's deservingness relied on a moralised construction of childhood as a state of purity, it was actually still conditional. At the Presence House, children were deemed deserving not only owing to their perceived vulnerability, innocence, and unequivocal entitlement to receive help, but also due to the perception that as a 'blank slate' they still had an opportunity to absorb the values and principles that would render them acceptable members of society. Children were hence perceived as worthy and deserving of being the primarily focus of the project's social service pursuits because they were willing and able to learn, improve, and adapt. Children's youth and, therefore, their 'pre-sociality' (Malkki 2010: 64) rendered them innocent, in the sense that they were perceived as still able to obtain values like understanding the necessity of caring for pets or birds.

Hence, while children's deservingness does relate to a particular moral idea of childhood, it is nevertheless conditional upon their ability to obtain an education and values – and, moreover, to their ability to demonstrate eagerness to do so. This notion of children's will

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

to learn reappeared quite often, such as when I was told particular children 'really try hard' or 'really want to learn'. Children are not just perceived as innocent but also as inherently 'good' based on their willingness to learn. While moral imaginations of children as vulnerable, innocent, and 'good' render them exceptionally deserving in the discourses and practices at the Presence House, the notions that their goodness has to be performed (Thelen et al. 2011) and that they still have the potential to learn reflect the conditionality of their deservingness (Willen and Cook 2016: 72). The children at the Presence House were not imagined as deserving simply because they were children, but because they were children whose futures were perceived as still open to moral transformation.

This conditionality of children's deservingness becomes particularly evident when comparing perceptions of them to those of adult beneficiaries of the programme, as the latter are often seen as lacking the inherent potential associated with childhood and failing to embody the values children are still eager to incorporate. Adults were often spoken of in ways that implied that they were too entrenched in their circumstances to be helped and thus constructed poverty as a kind of moral and behavioural condition that hardens over time. In this framing, poverty was not merely an economic or structural condition, but a moral deficit with the potential to be corrected (Katz 2013). The idea that children could, in contrast to their parents, still 'learn', 'change', or 'be saved' cast poverty as reversible - but only if the individual showed the right affective and behavioural disposition. The idea that poverty is a personal problem (Katz 2013) was particularly evoked by the notion that children have the potential to internalise the 'right' values early enough. Children's conditional deservingness therefore simultaneously produces a particular understanding of poverty in which it is imagined as reversible only insofar as individuals remain capable of moral transformation.

The supermarket roleplay offers an example of how the conditionality of children's deservingness, expressed through the notion of their ability to learn, was put into practice. It shows how moral reasoning about poverty takes shape through seemingly mundane practices of praise, evaluation, and encouragement. Initially, while observing the 'cashiers', 'counters', and 'money' I wondered whether this setting was part of a 'civilizing mission' (Gilliam and Gulløv 2017), that echoed common moralising conceptions of poverty as self-inflicted tied to the idea that poor people are profligate spenders (Zelizer 2017). Yet this mission was not straightforward or unambiguous. After all, the children were free to buy toys simply for the joy of it. My sense of 'certainty' returned, however, when Ráchel received warm affirmation for purchasing school supplies and the social worker emphasised the child's eagerness to learn. It

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

is precisely in such moments, when a child is singled out and praised for making a 'competent' choice, that praise becomes an ordinary affective register through which poverty comes to be imagined as a condition that can be overcome through learning and individual moral transformation. In the well-meaning gesture lies a judgement about what counts as responsible behaviour that cast children as exemplars of the ability to 'learn' and thereby mark the moral boundaries of their conditional deservingness. Praise therefore functions not merely as encouragement but as an affective register through which particular understandings of poverty are assembled. In affirming some choices as responsible and desirable, it simultaneously renders poverty legible as something that can be overcome through individual transformation.

Describing such moments of praise or encouragement as solely reproducing dominant moral ideals, however, risks overlooking the genuine, albeit limited, possibilities for educational and social mobility that some children do pursue. During my fieldwork, stories of individual success were frequently invoked by social workers and formed an important source of hope and commitment to the project despite their pessimism regarding broader structural change. Yet these possibilities do not stand outside the moral reasoning discussed here. Rather, because they are predominantly framed as the outcome of individual learning, effort, and responsible conduct, they become part of the very understanding of poverty assembled through everyday practices of praise and encouragement, reinforcing the expectation that escaping poverty depends primarily on personal transformation rather than structural change. The analytical significance of these moments for this Working Paper therefore lies not in denying the possibility of social mobility but in showing how exceptional trajectories become intertwined with moral understandings of poverty. In fact, they reinforce the notion that poverty can be overcome through moral and individual transformation, which hinges on an underlying assumption that poverty is a question of personal responsibility.

The moral reasoning surrounding children's deservingness not only assembles a particular understanding of poverty but also becomes entangled with ethnicised understandings of difference. While practices of praise and encouragement imagine poverty as a condition that may be overcome through learning and moral transformation, everyday encounters simultaneously attribute enduring ethnic characteristics to these same children. One afternoon in the overheated and noisy playroom of the Presence House, some children were engaged in a competitive round of foosball while others focused intently on drawing mandalas assigned by their teachers. I was impressed by their unwavering focus after a long day, but one social worker

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

replied that these children were 'so expressive with colours' and urged me to explore Rom/nja Hungarian artists, noting that 'They see the world differently.'

As previously mentioned, for Malkki (2010: 63) the figure of the child in humanitarian conventions often carries a built-in 'temporal progression' that also describes a 'moral progression'. A 'pure' and 'innocent pre-sociality' is hence attributed to children due to their young age (Malkki 2010: 64). However, in view of the discursive making of 'Otherness' in the everyday routines of the Presence House discussed above, ambivalence about such pre-sociality of children becomes evident. Children who are described as 'seeing the world differently' are not pre-social figures but are rather made into an ontological 'Other' simply by being seen as having inherent characteristics of an ascribed ethnicity. Hence, there is an additional ambivalence to the imagination of children as innocent blank slates and as mostly being 'all the same' and tension between a universalist ethos of children's 'sameness' and a perception of their inherent cultural difference. Interpreted through the analytical lens of uncertainty, the moments of praise and encouragement, together with the attribution of particular ethnic characteristics, demonstrate particularly clearly how moralised understandings of poverty become intertwined with ethnic attributions. Through their repetition in the everyday routines of the Presence House, these affective and discursive registers surrounding the specific figure of the child contribute to the gradual assembly of a particular moralised understanding of ethnicised poverty.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have examined how everyday social service provision at the Presence House assembles particular moralised understandings of ethnicised poverty through affective, discursive, and practical registers. The ethnographic material discussed sheds light on the intricate ways in which moralised notions of poverty and ethnicity are circulated on the micro-level of social service provision aimed at the development of impoverished and marginalised communities.

I started the article with a sense of uncertainty. I illustrated how I grappled with ambivalent social realities in my research field and how the deeper I immersed myself, the more elusive any clear answer to the question of what defined poverty and ethnicity became. I found myself pondering the categories I encountered: the Rom/nja neighbourhood, poverty, and by extension, ethnicity. I summoned a sense of uncertainty to achieve an epistemologically productive starting point of inquiry, but it is crucial to say that these categories were undeniably

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

present in linguistic markers as well as an impression of spatial segregation related to these semantic categorisations. Furthermore, they were inevitably present in the reality of structural violence and marginalisation affecting impoverished persons and Rom/nja Hungarians. Nevertheless, the ubiquity and visibility of these categories that had seemed to clearly define social positions faltered throughout my experience. I realised that just as the spatial definition of the Settlement was vague, the criteria categorising persons as Rom/nja were manifold, diverse, and at times inconsistent. Furthermore, poverty, if defined as a state of lack in terms of a certain standard of living, was visibly pervasive among households both within and beyond the Settlement's margins. While the town cannot be characterised as deprived, decay and by extension a sense of impoverishment affected persons and households that were not labelled as 'poor others', demonstrating that matters were not as clear-cut as semantic categorisations and local sentiments of social division along the lines of poverty and ethnicity might suggest.

The instability of these categories, which I experienced through a recurring sense of uncertainty during fieldwork, prompted an analytical question. Inspired by Stevenson (2014), I decided to treat my sense of uncertainty as a productive epistemological object of ethnographic inquiry. Rather than asking where poverty and ethnicity begin or end, I examined how particular understandings of them come to be, are engaged with, and come to be seen as self-evident in the realm of charitable social service provision. Throughout the article, I have shown how different ordinary registers contribute to this process. Discursive moments of indignation framed poverty as a matter of personal responsibility; affective and spatial modes of alertness intertwined poverty with imaginaries of danger and ethnic difference moments; doubt, hesitation and negotiations of deservingness assembled poverty through moral expectations of (financial) responsibility; and practices of praise and encouragement assembled poverty as a condition imagined to be overcome through learning and moral transformation.

While these moments did not necessarily invoke poverty and ethnicity simultaneously, their repetition and accumulation throughout the everyday routines of the Presence House gradually assembled a particular moralised understanding of ethnicised poverty. These understandings are neither fixed nor uncontested. Yet it is through their repeated articulation in everyday interactions that they come to acquire the appearance of self-evidence. The certainty I sensed regarding 'what makes poverty' therefore does not refer to stable social categories or shared convictions, but to the temporary stabilisation of particular moralised understandings of ethnicised poverty through the ordinary discursive, affective, and practical routines of social service provision. The latter unfold within the institutional context of the entanglement of civic

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

and state-led development objectives, in which social workers navigate local hegemonic understandings of poverty and ethnicity while operating from critical insight about marginalisation and stigmatisation. Rather than analysing this intermediary position itself, I have examined the ordinary interactions taking place throughout everyday social service provision within such setting.

The Presence House's official mission emphasises the provision of ongoing social assistance and the transformation of impoverished and marginalised communities. By examining how poverty is imagined and discursively or affectively enacted in everyday practice, I followed Fassin's (2018) proposal for pursuing the 'politics of life' ethnographically by attending to the moral sentiments and social imaginaries through which human lives are valued. The analysis has shown that understanding the reproduction of social inequalities requires attention not only to institutional arrangements but also to the ordinary discursive, affective, and practical work through which particular moralised understandings of ethnicised poverty are assembled and gradually come to acquire the appearance of self-evidence, even as they remain contingent, negotiated, and open to alternative understandings. It is through these ordinary practices of social service provision that the 'politics of life' unfolds.

VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

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VIENNA WORKING PAPERS IN ETHNOGRAPHY

Zusammenfassung

Auf Grundlage ethnografischer Feldforschung in einem ungarischen „Presence House" untersucht dieses Working Paper, wie bestimmte moralische Vorstellungen von Armut und Ethnizität in den alltäglichen Routinen Sozialer Arbeit zunehmend selbstverständlich erscheinen. Meine im Verlauf der Feldforschung entstandene Unsicherheit über die Grenzen und Verknüpfungen von Armut und Ethnizität bildet den Ausgangspunkt für die Untersuchung der alltäglichen diskursiven, affektiven und praktischen Prozesse, durch die selbstverständlich erscheinende Vorstellungen von Armut und Ethnizität hervorgebracht werden. Fassins (2018) Plädoyer folgend, die Aufmerksamkeit auf jene „politics of life" zu richten, welche humanitären Interventionen unterliegen, untersuche ich, wie Klient*innen durch moralische Empfindungen, soziale Vorstellungen und alltägliche Praktiken von Sozialarbeiter*innen bewertet und adressiert werden. Das Working Paper nimmt subtile Momente der Empörung, der Wachsamkeit, des Zweifels und des Lobes in den Blick und zeigt, wie sich darin Vorstellungen von persönlicher Verantwortung, Gewalt, Anspruchsberechtigung und individueller Transformation mit stereotypisierenden Vorstellungen von Ethnizität verbinden und zu einem spezifischen Verständnis von Armut verdichten. Diese alltäglichen Deutungsmuster erzeugen kein feststehendes oder unumstrittenes Bild von Armut in Verbindung mit Ethnizität. Durch ihre Wiederholung und Verdichtung tragen sie vielmehr dazu bei, dass bestimmte Vorstellungen dieser Kategorien als selbstverständlich und eindeutig erscheinen, während zugleich deren Ambiguität und Kontingenz sichtbar wird. Die Analyse zeigt damit, wie soziale Ungleichheiten im Alltag Sozialer Arbeit aufrechterhalten, ausgehandelt und teilweise angepasst werden – trotz des übergeordneten Ziels, diese zu überwinden.

Biographical Note

Amélie Renz studied Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Leipzig and the University of Vienna. She is currently a PhD researcher at Wageningen University and works as part of the ERC-funded project *Politics of the Periphery in Urban Latin America: Reconceptualising Politics from the Margins* (POPULAR). For her doctoral research, she conducted 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Recife, Brazil, and was also a visiting student at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE). For her master's thesis, she conducted several weeks of ethnographic research in a social support project in a village in Hungary.

Biographische Notiz

Amélie Renz hat Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie an der Universität Leipzig und der Universität Wien studiert. Derzeit ist sie Doktorandin an der Universität Wageningen und forscht im Rahmen des ERC-geförderten Projekts *Politics of the Periphery in Urban Latin America: Reconceptualising Politics from the Margins* (POPULAR). Für ihre Promotion führte sie 12 Monate ethnografische Feldforschung in Recife, Brasilien, durch und war zudem Gaststudentin an der Universidade Federal de Pernambuco. Für ihre Masterarbeit forschte sie mehrere Wochen ethnografisch in einem sozialen Hilfsprojekt in einem ungarischen Dorf.

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Amélie Renz
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Vienna Working Papers in Ethnography, No. 16, Vienna, 2026
Wiener Arbeitspapiere zur Ethnographie, Nr. 16, Wien, 2026
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Vienna Working Papers in Ethnography
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