

Dr. Eberhard Raithelhuber, PhD
Assistant Professor
University of Salzburg (A),
Department of Educational Science
eberhard.raithelhuber@sbg.ac.at

Negotiating Social Protection for Transnationally Mobile Groups in Intermediary Spaces. Insights into a Multi-sited Open Case Study on ‘Roma Beggars’ from Southeastern Europe in Austria

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Abstract of paper proposal

In the last years, many “Western” EU countries have witnessed an increasing visibility of poverty-driven border crossing mobility of people, especially from highly marginalized groups from Southeastern Europe. This has induced institutional reactions towards these phenomena, including from social work. Many of these reactions and corresponding research are limited to a local/national and institutional level. The proposed paper starts from the assumption that in order to understand the underlying complexity it is adequate to take on a functional perspective on the social protection concerns and practices of people which partly lead to a high degree of transnational mobility and, likewise, at the same lean on such mobility. Thus taking on a relational agency- and mobility-oriented approach and deviating from the mainstream institutional and policy-oriented perspective on “social security” allows for asking how social protection is brought about, challenged, negated, negotiated, fostered, shaped etc. and how related social protection arrangements encompass different actors and relate to divers social spaces which partly span national borders.

The paper mainly focusses on two social protection issues which are related to the transnational mobility of Rumanian nationals who are commonly identified as “Roma”; firstly, the introduction of a zonal ban on begging on public property within a large Austrian town, and, secondly, the existence of minors, especially small children, who are part of these transnational social protection arrangements and who partly become mobile and immobile through corresponding processes. As an empirical lens, the paper focusses in parts on a fairly unique phenomenon, i.e. the local monthly meeting of “Roma beggars” from Rumania travelling between Austria, Sweden and Rumania. Within these meetings, “beggars”, members of solidarity groups/activists, informal supporters, and representatives of professional social work and even politicians/civil servants interact in a fairly notable manner. Hence, the paper focuses on the following main research question: “How are social protection issues of transnationally mobile “Roma beggars” negotiated in intermediary structures and practices by multiple actors and with regard to multiple social spaces?”

The preliminary findings are based on ongoing and multi-sited, transnational ethnographic fieldwork. Hence, participant observation and key informant interviews are used as main methods, especially in the current exploratory phase. The study is part of the broader and ambitious long-term research project “Agency across Borders. A Lifecourse Perspective on Social Protection, Citizenship and Mobility” (start 10/2014). Its main aim is to gain a nuanced understanding of how people achieve social agency under conditions which are shaped by mobility and migration, especially with regard to social protection and citizenship. The project focuses on the intersection of lifecourses, (trans-)locations, and (informal) intermediary structures and practices.