

Precariousness and food: social and support networks in social canteens

Precariedad y alimentación: las redes sociales y de apoyo en los comedores sociales

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Abstract

The current study was carried out in the economic crisis context that has been affecting Europe and, consequently, Spain since 2008. Based on the ethnographic approach, it analyzes the reconfiguration of social networks focused on supporting people who seek welfare services such as social canteens to get food in Barcelona City (Spain). We mainly analyzed the functions and responsibilities taken by social canteens after the old aid-reference bonds (family and friends) of people who use these centers as food resource weakened due to the impoverishment process they went through. The aim is to understand to what extent public policies focused on Right to Food can and should take into consideration the social (and affective) dimension in their approaches and actions, since, in many cases, welfare service centers, and people who work in them, become reference for that matter. Based on our analysis, although sometimes social canteens promote social relations among people using their services, they do not always value this matter in a comprehensive way, fact that opens room for issues that need to be discussed.

Keywords: Food Assistance. Poverty. Family Relationships. Spain.

Resumen

Este estudio se desarrolla en contexto de crisis económica que afecta a Europa, y consecuentemente, al Estado español, a partir del año 2008. Y analiza, a través de un enfoque etnográfico, las formas de reconfiguración de las redes sociales de apoyo de

personas que utilizan servicios asistenciales para alimentación, como comedores sociales, en la ciudad de Barcelona (España). Analizamos especialmente qué funciones y responsabilidades asumen los comedores sociales cuando los antiguos lazos de referencia de ayuda (familiares y amigos) de las personas que utilizan estos centros como recurso se han debilitado como consecuencia del proceso de empobrecimiento que atraviesan. Interesa entender hasta qué punto las políticas públicas para la alimentación pueden y deben considerar la dimensión social (y afectiva) en sus planteamientos y acciones, ya que, en muchos casos, los centros asistenciales y las personas que trabajan allí pasan a ser para sus usuarios los lugares e individuos de referencia en este sentido. Hemos identificado que los comedores sociales, aunque por veces manifiesten su función de promover relaciones sociales entre las personas que los utilizan, no siempre valoran con profundidad la cuestión, lo que plantea la necesidad de discutir las problemáticas que surgen a partir de la constatación de este dato.

Palabras clave: Asistencia alimentaria. Pobreza. Relaciones familiares. España.

Introduction

The current study was carried out in the economic crisis context that has been affecting Europe and, consequently, Spain since 2008. According to data provided by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics,¹ the risk of poverty increase and social exclusion in the Spanish population reached 24.7% in 2009, 26.1% in 2010 and 29.2% in 2014. The economic crisis has been worsening in Catalonia; according to the Statistical Institute of Catalonia¹ (Idescat - Institut d'Estadística de Catalunya), the risk of poverty increase among people in the age group 16-64 years jumped from 17% in 2009, to 18.4% in 2011, and to 20.6% in 2014.

The living condition-precarization process, which resulted from the socioeconomic crisis, and from social inequality in capitalist societies at local and global levels, changed consumer practices and lifestyles. In recent years, the way we consume, relate to each other, politically organize ourselves, build our affective relationships, among other transformations at individual and collective levels, has changed both at the public and private spheres.²⁻⁸

Thus, this article analyzes the reconfiguration of social networks focused on supporting people subjected to economic and social precarization processes in Barcelona City (Spain). The main analysis concerned transformations taking place in the relation between people who use welfare

services, such as social canteens, and their old aid networks (family and friends). According to the investigated individuals, their current economic-dependence has weakened, or extinguished, their affective ties with relatives and friends, who had always been their references of support and affection.

Therefore, we analyzed how these social networks have been reconfigured and, mainly, the role played by welfare services such as social canteens in providing food to people living under the aforementioned circumstances. The aim is to understand to what extent public policies can, and should, take into consideration the social (and affective) dimension in their approaches and actions, since welfare-service users - who participated in our fieldwork – have reported that, in many cases, welfare service centers, and people who work in them, became their reference for that matter.

All social canteen users^a interviewed during our fieldwork mentioned the reconfiguration of their social and support networks due to the precarization process in their living conditions. According to the interviewees, impoverishment, and its direct and indirect consequences (emotional affectations, inability to pay for leisure and social conviviality situations, desire to self-exclude from sociability situations, among others), affected the way they relate to people they once were emotionally and socially bound to. They mainly emphasized: a) the weakening of old family and friendship ties; b) new bonds to people experiencing similar economic vulnerability; c) that their usual aid and support networks were no longer family and friends, but social welfare institutions they have used as resource (social services, social canteens, hostels, among others).

It was consensus between institutions (according to people who work in them) and users that the weakening of old affective and support bonds have worsened the dependence of individuals subjected to precarization processes on welfare resources, given the low likelihood of having family and friends responding to their call for help in time. According to the interviewees, the erosion in, or loosening of, affective relationships often results from impoverishment processes, besides worsening the dependence and vulnerability condition these individuals lived in. Different studies (Cernadas⁹; Max-Neef¹⁰; Pomar and Tendero¹¹) have also associated poverty with the weakening of social relationships between individuals. According to analyses in these studies, the reduced, unstable or null aid networks resulting from impoverishment processes increase these individuals' risk of living in vulnerability and deprivation conditions due to the low likelihood of having family and friends ready to respond when they ask for help or shelter. According to Max Neef¹⁰, it is not possible talking about poverty, except in the plural (“poverties”). He understands that any fundamental human need, which is not properly met, reveals a form of deprivation or poverty:

subsistence (due to insufficient food and shelter), protection (due to inefficient health systems, violence, arms race, among others), affection (due to authoritarianism, oppression, exploitative relations

a The institution referred to people who use social canteen services as “users”. We adopted the same term.

with the natural environment, among others), knowledge (due to the deficient quality of education), participation (due to the marginalization and discrimination of women, children and minorities), identity (due to foreign values imposed to local and regional cultures, forced emigration, political exile, among others) poverties, among others (Max-Neef¹⁰, p. 43)

According to Max-Neef's opinion, social isolation resulting from precarization processes is a form of poverty. The protection, affection or understanding needs of social canteen users were no longer properly met after such individuals started experiencing precariousness. Based on the analysis of the aforementioned author, these human needs are not often seen as poverties by our society, which essentially addresses poverty as an essentially economic issue. According to him, it is necessary highlighting these shortcomings in order to make them visible. He also states that "every poverty generates pathologies". In other words, depending on the intensity and duration of a precarious condition experienced by individuals, its consequences in their lives will be expressed as pathological conditions; among them one finds fear, violence and marginalization, which stand out as "collective social pathologies" triggered by several socio-political systems that exercise the systematic blockage of the aforementioned human needs.

Agurto, Arteaga and Pérez¹² conducted a study about subjectivities in economically-vulnerable urban families and found that family groups undergoing precarization processes "take a set of actions to face socioeconomic bankruptcies, but, besides focusing on overcoming such events, they develop the ability to solve other types of crisis brought along with these situations" (p.109). Thus, the aforementioned authors refer to a set of individual and community (as network) emotional affectations based on the suffering caused by the perception of risk, which influences communities' "ability to react to changes in social capital", i.e., in their self-confidence and reciprocity networks:

Income decline not only generates an economic crisis, which is the most visible and easy to be identified by families, but also puts at risk other aspects these families intend to protect, maintain and/or restore. The income-decline crisis is known as socioeconomic, whereas the one resulting from the risk posed by other aspects is the psychosocial crisis.¹² (p. 109)

Agurto, Arteaga and Pérez¹² analyzed feelings and emotions resulting from the economic crisis, as well as their effects. Based on their analysis, individual "anguish, sadness and despair" were associated with such critical event. Consequently, they have concluded that "the crisis takes families affectively apart, since it often generates conflicts, arguments and ruptures in family dynamics"¹² (p. 109).

Methodology

Our study adopted a qualitative approach to analyze the overall functioning of social canteens in the metropolitan area of Barcelona City (Spain). We described and analyzed users' perception about different aspects of the social canteen service they used to go to (for example, the quality

of the served food, their relationship with the institution, the relationship between users and conviviality situations).

The fieldwork was based on an ethnographic approach and carried out in three social canteens from 2012 to 2015. It was divided in three different stages: direct observation, and informal and formal interviews (open and in-depth) with social canteen managers, workers and users. Prior to the interviews, we prepared guiding scripts based on questions bond to the aims of our research.

All interviewees allowed the use of information provided by them during the interviews. They were informed that their real names would not be used in order to protect them from any inconvenience concerning the publication of information provided by them.

Results

During the fieldwork, interviewees pointed out economic dependence and specific care based on a given disease, among others, as the main reason for the distancing between care center beneficiaries and family members and friends they once asked for help at times of adversity. The separation process, in these cases, may happen in two different ways: persons living in vulnerable condition distance themselves from their previous affinity ties; or their family and friends stop responding when they ask for help. On the one hand, individuals living under vulnerability conditions voluntarily distance themselves from their networks because they feel “ashamed of depending on third parties”.

Among the reasons for such distancing process, interviewees emphasized the impact on their self-esteem, and the consequent limited will to attend social events, as well as their voluntary intention to lose themselves from people “from their past”, so that they can hide their current economic precariousness from them. On the other hand, people living under dependence conditions referred to lack of response from, and overall distancing of, their old ties, given the way these individuals “avoid having problems in their lives”. The “disappointment” triggered by lack of help from family members and friends was repeatedly mentioned during the interviews. Based on these data, it is possible stating that poverty hinders affective relationships, since it weakens ties that were “strong” or “solid” in the past. Francisco (an interviewee) said that his family members distanced themselves from him due to his impoverishment. According to him:

The family has behaved very badly towards me. I have two friends, a couple I met in the neighborhood; they were the ones who came to see me at the hospital. During the four months I was alone, they came over. And they told my cousins: “Hey, your cousin is at the hospital”. My cousins did not have time to come visiting me. In four months, they did not have a single day off. His son is retired so he could have come because it was summer time, vacation time. It happened because I am no longer the good cousin, the one who brings them gifts. There is too much selfishness in the family. [...] There is too much selfishness.

Josep (another interviewee) mentioned that he has not heard from his only daughter in four years. According to him, it happened because he was unable to keep on financially helping her after he lost his job. He understands that his impoverishment generated the current lack of interest on her part in relating to him. His speech directly indicates the money-giving condition necessary to maintain the bonds with his daughter.

I have not heard from her in four years. She does not want to know anything about me. I used to have a good job and a good wage, but my ex-wife encouraged her to ask me for money: “Dad, I do not have any money, I do not have any money”. When I lost my job, I told her I could not give her money anymore. Her reaction was to disappear [...] I do not know if she is married, if she has a job, if she has children. I wish her well. It hurts me. I suppose if someday things change, and I get 5 million euros, she will say: “Dad, are you alive?” This is my story.

Accordingly, Matulic⁴ (p. 9) argues that “the factors influencing the social unbonding process between people are based on the combination/association between individual and structural elements that require having, simultaneously, a micro and a macro social view of the phenomenon”. Thus, the aforementioned author corroborates social canteen users’ narrative that their loneliness is of multi-causal nature. According to some interviewees, their personal condition was the only responsible for such process. They often blamed themselves for their loneliness and vulnerability feelings. For example, one of the social canteen users who participated in the fieldwork referred to the fact that he had lost his support networks and that, for that reason, he could no longer resort to any family member. When he was asked about the cause of such situation, he blamed the “isolation process” he subjected himself to in recent years due to impoverishment: “Nowadays, I have no one because I have practically locked myself in a shell and it is hard for me to get support”.

On the other hand, some people mentioned social issues external to their personal lives as the factors responsible for the social individualization process that somehow reflected on their self-perception about being unprotected, “lonely” and “vulnerable” people. According to José (an interviewee), he perceives the consequences of the individualization process in his private life nowadays in comparison to the past as a social phenomenon. For example, he mentioned that the special dates he used to celebrate with his family were long gone and he believed it happened due to “natural” social changes from generation to generation:

It’s not what I say. It’s what I see. In the old days, we would gather the family at home and have a great party to dance and laugh at the end of the year. The classic stuff. I believe that life changes as time goes by. Generations changed, it is a whole new world.

According to Ángela (another interviewee), Matulic's statement about the relation between micro and macro social aspects explains the overall isolation of individuals in our society. She initially acknowledged the increased individualism at present times in comparison to the past and justified her claim through a series of examples, among them: how people meet to chat on a daily basis, how people used to greet each other and how they do it nowadays, how people used to buy food in the past and how they do it now, among others. Subsequently, she pointed out how such individualization process influenced our self-perception and individual identity to the extent that we nowadays believe that we live a "more private" life and have "the need to protect ourselves" from others. Finally, she concluded that the overall social isolation process has influenced how we love ourselves:

Yes, people were closer than they are now. I remember that mothers used to sit on the street knitting socks, doing crochet and talking to each other, while children were playing around. It no longer happens. We used to greet each other by letter and now we use mobiles and the internet. We used to go to grocery stores and to little shops where owners already knew what we wanted and what we did not want: "hey, save me such thing ..." And now we go to large shops and sellers look like they have cramps, their faces even make us have second thoughts about saying good morning. In other words, people locked themselves in their own shells and became individualists. Consequently, we end up showing similar behavior in order to protect ourselves because if we open ourselves too much, or if we are too nice, they take advantage of us. I lost my job because I defended my colleagues. Thus, it is a general process, it is everywhere, in the family and at work, and I think we don't even love ourselves, because if we did, we would behave differently, we would want to be with people, to share and to be supportive. However, there comes a time when we do not love ourselves anymore, things do not matter, and we close ourselves.

Some authors (Bourdieu¹³; Bauman²) have identified the increasing reconfiguration of the social network phenomenon in our society. Castel¹⁴ addressed the direct consequences of social isolation on different life aspects when he analyzed the meaning of "disaffiliation". According to him, this process takes place "when the set of close relationships individuals maintain based on their territorial inscription, which is also their family and social inscription, collapses". Thus, "disaffiliation" is responsible for "preventing the existence of", as well as for compromising people's overall "protection" mechanisms.

According to the interviewees, their parents were their help and fostering references in case of vulnerability. However, family networks weakened after the death of their parents and in-laws, fact that led to visibly-reduced responses to calls for help. Siblings and children were often mentioned as kin who "failed" or "disappointed" people living in precariousness conditions because they did not correspond to their fostering expectations. Based on elderly participants, there was prevalence of "abandonment" by their children. José (an interviewee) reported that his father was the person

who took him in after he was evicted from his home. His Mother and mother-in-law were also people who had shown him affection; however, after they died, José felt like he had lost his main references of care and attention.

I got married, I had my house. Then, there was the eviction and my father took me in. My father died, I'm living in a small bedroom. [...] My mother-in-law was like my second mother. Sometimes my mother and my mother-in-law got mad at each other because I was going to eat at my mother-in-law's house, they were both jealous. My mother-in-law took loving care of me. I sat down in the kitchen and she served me my beer and olives with garlic. She also made me some stew ... You see ... I just remembered a very good thing now. When she made stew, she called me: "Come, I made some stew". She used to make scrumptious stews. They were delicious.

Lourdes, an 81-year-old woman, reported that although she devoted part of her life to raise her children and grandchildren, they do not visit her nowadays. She said that, there were times when she got sick and needed help, but a neighbor was the only person who gave her support, since her relatives did not come. She explained the absence of her relatives as "lack of interest", since they all live a few kilometers from her home. According to her, old age, besides her economic vulnerability, influenced the isolation and distancing of people who were previously close to her.

I have had the misfortune of being diagnosed with breast cancer. I was subjected to total stereotomy, knee prosthesis and now I have this problem in my back. I broke my pelvis, several vertebrae and now I feel very bad. I myself had to arrange all the necessary documents in order to have a person to help me in my house. I have issues with my children. Children grow up and live their lives, although they know what we are going through and that we do not have much time left in this world. I have a daughter who [...] this daughter is the one who kills me inside. It really hurts me. I would never resort to her for anything. Nobody came to my house when I had my pelvis broken for falling off a ladder and had to be in bed for a month and a half. I was taken care of by a neighbor lady and my relationship with my relatives got very cold because they did not come, not even a single person ...

Interviewees said they had to set new bonds in order to protect themselves and to maintain sociability due to the weakening or dissolution of old social networks such as family and friends. They often stated that their new support networks had been reconfigured after they became aware that their old ties had distanced themselves from them. Such reconfiguration happened through the following approaches: a) people going through similar social and economic precarization processes; b) social assistance institutions and their workers, who became support and help references in different situations such as economic or personal issues, problems associated with relational ability, among others.

With respect to the approach of people in the new social circle, Josep said:

I met a woman here [in the social canteen]. We have been together as a couple for two months and 12 days. In addition, together with several friends we made here, we are trying to find an apartment for four or five people. There is strength in numbers and this is another step we take towards a certain degree of freedom.

However, some references to bonds established in social canteens tended to indicate the superficiality of these new relationships. María (an interviewee), for example, said that “it’s one thing to empathize with these people, another thing is to tell them about my life, no way. Never tell your secrets to others because they get you by the balls. Keep your shortcomings and paranoias to yourself”.

With respect to the importance of institutions being the reference centers to help people, Castel¹⁴ argues that the strengthening of social structures that play the role of supporting and assistance (“social-welfare”) networks can be formally characterized as opposite to collective organization modes that do not depend on these resource types. Thus, this assistance is formalized, specialized and technified in urbanized capitalist societies, in which the weakening of group actions, as well as of the spontaneous and autonomous formation of help networks among people, prevails. According to the aforementioned author, the assistance given to people becomes the object of “*specialized practices*”^b when non-institutionalized collective bonds (“primary sociability”) weaken. Thus, hospitals, orphanages and the organized distribution of handouts become ‘social’ institutions that collaborate to the “special treatment (special and specialized) applied to issues that used to be addressed without community mediation in less differentiated societies”.

According to Castel, specialized assistance services have formal features because they are projects prepared by institutions. Therefore, the aim of the institutional assistance is to mitigate, in an organized manner, the effects of reduced or non-existent “primary sociability” based on a previous action project. During the interviews, some users corroborated Castel’s perspective about welfare aid specialization and technification. These participants stated that they resorted to welfare centers whenever they needed assistance and totally disregarded the possibility of asking their acquaintances to help them. In this specific case, people working in welfare centers (used as resources) were mainly cited as individuals to whom interviewees resorted in different circumstances. The user of one of the social canteens said that whenever he had a problem he called “his” social worker, who knew him by his first name, fact that indicated a certain degree of proximity. He mentioned that the social worker always responded rapidly to his demands, whether it was a material or personal matter. Víctor (an interviewee), who was also a social canteen user,

b format in italics by the author

stated that whatever he needed, he:

Resorted to the social canteen or called the social worker. I mean, she is a good social worker, her name is Carmen. It's hard for me to open up to someone else, although they are good people, but having to tell people about my life is hard for me. When I need some help, I call her [the social worker] on the phone, she answers it right away. I say: "I have this little problem and I need your advice". And if she sees that I cannot solve it, she says: "If they tell you that they cannot help you, come to me and I will take care of you". She always responds, she's always ... Good.

Cernadas⁹ draws the attention to issues deriving from functions and conditions people working in welfare centers are exposed to. According to the aforementioned author, elements such as "pressure, lack of adequate facilities, the particular ethical code of each professional and the greater or lesser sensitivity to collectiveness" may be responsible for actions that do not assure the access, and the adequate and egalitarian permanence of all users. Cernadas also emphasized that the external aspect of users sets the type of assistance professionals give them:

Paramedics, healthcare center keepers, doctors, nurses, among others, overall declared to be influenced by the external aspect of users. If users wear dirty or torn clothes, if they are dirty, smell badly, are drunk and smell like alcohol, or if they do not express themselves clearly enough – just to mention some of the most important aspects – these professionals show some resistance and these users can end up not getting any attention [...]. (Cernadas⁹, p.16).

He also pointed out that users' difficulties worsen because people who use welfare services often tend to feel vulnerable and rejected by institutions and society in general. In addition, based on their perception, "health authorities and professionals are among the ones who marginalize them and who keep them in this abandonment condition" (Cernadas⁹, 18).

Some interviewees also mentioned that the effectiveness in developing or deepening the affective bonds built in welfare centers would lie on reducing or eliminating the stigma associated with poverty and with the use of these services. Thus, based on these interviewees' testimonies, welfare policies should promote and assure their autonomy and decision-making power over several aspects of the overall functioning of the welfare services used by them. Users pointed out the importance of being able to actively participate in different planning stages and activities in the services they use, besides emphasizing that welfare-oriented actions should be taken to assure their right to act as political subjects in the welfare centers they attend. According to the aforementioned users, these actions would also help reducing their mental distress ("depressions", "discomfort", "embarrassment for being depend on third parties", "sadness") because they would create another type of involvement and relationship between users and welfare centers. Therefore, they believe

that these active and non-hierarchical participation models between users and institutions would enable the establishment and consolidation of affective bonds that public welfare policies try to promote, although not always in an effective way.

Conclusion

Spain and, consequently, Catalonia have been affected by the global economic crisis that started in 2008. Since then, the overall population has experienced a precarization process that changed consumer practices, forms of social interaction and political organization, besides other changes at public and private levels. Thus, we herein investigated how these changes in social and affective networks of people subjected to impoverishment processes affected the way they ask for help and support. Based on our fieldwork, aid networks underwent reconfigurations due to the crisis faced by these individuals.

Based on social canteen users interviewed in our study, their economic dependence on others weakened, or extinguished, affective bonds they believed to be strong and solid before they experienced precariousness. Thus, relatives and friends who had been their help and affection references until then, ceased to be so. Therefore, these interviewees concluded that the impoverishment process, and its direct and indirect consequences, were the fundamental cause for the reconfiguration of their social networks. According to them, elements such as emotional distress, reduced purchase power and the will to self-exclude from sociability contexts were responsible for changes in the way they related to people with whom they had maintained affective and sociability bonds until then. Many of them also reported that they had built new bonds with people living in similar economic vulnerability and dependence conditions, as well as that their current support and aid networks were social aid institutions used by them as welfare resources (social services, social canteens, hostels, among others).

Therefore, based on these data, public welfare policies, in general, and food policies, specifically, can and should take into consideration the promotion and consolidation of social and affective dimensions of individuals who use these services based on their approaches and actions. As we understood (Verthein¹⁵), welfare services do not always sufficiently value the importance of promoting or deepening social and affective relationships, however, even when they value it, they do not achieve effective results.

Accordingly, welfare service users indicated that these institutions should prioritize the reduction or elimination of the stigma often associated with poverty and with the use of these services, as well as users' autonomy and decision-making power over several aspects of the overall functioning of welfare services used by them, and the establishment of a dialogical and non-

hierarchical relationship between users and institutions. Thus, they understand that these active and non-hierarchical participation models between users and institutions would help promoting, consolidating and deepening social and affective relationships that, sometimes, are promoted through public welfare policies (as in the case of social canteens), although they are not always successful.

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