

Choose, buy, pay – Paradoxes of shame-relieving processes among impoverished Spaniards after 2008's great recession

Hugo Valenzuela-Garcia

*Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology,
Autonomous University of Barcelona, Bellaterra, Spain and
Centre for Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation Research (CREIS,
Autonomous University of Barcelona), Bellaterra, Spain, and*

Miranda Jessica Lubbers and Jose Luis Molina

*Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology,
Autonomous University of Barcelona, Bellaterra, Spain*

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of the paper is to ethnographically detail the poverty-shame nexus in contemporary Spain, and to highlight the contradictions of the newly adopted consumption-based models of inclusion led by charities.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on 39 cases out of a sample of 78 gathered through two long-term research projects, the paper employs a mixed-methods approach that mainly draws on a multi-sited ethnographic approach and interviews.

Findings – The paper ethnographically documents major contradictions that shed light on the complex relationships between poverty, shame, work and consumption in modern societies.

Research limitations/implications – This paper analyses the sources of shame in the experience of poverty and downward mobility, but also it opens new ground for understanding the complex poverty–shame nexus and lets some questions unanswered.

Practical implications – The contradictions highlighted shed light on the complex relationships between poverty, shame, work and consumption that may inform modern policies to fight poverty. Ethnography gives voice to these individuals that currently experience an increasingly precarious and unequal modern world.

Social implications – The paper contributes to a better understanding of the processes that underlie modern poverty and downward social mobility and points out the contradictions generated by consumption-based models of inclusion.

Originality/value – While the poverty-shame nexus has been already analyzed from the point of view of stigma and exclusion from the labor market, the links between a growing consumerism and the neo-liberal values that underlie our modern societies are largely unexplored. The ethnographic contribution and the detailed case studies are also original in the case of Spain.

Keywords Shame, Poverty, Ethnography, Work, Inclusion, Consumption, Spain

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

More than a decade after the financial crisis, one out of every six middle-class Spanish families has suffered downward mobility and remains in a situation of long-term poverty (OXFAM Intermon, 2019). Between 2015 and 2020, at the time this research was conducted, the number of citizens in social exclusion peaked at 8.5 million (1.2 million more than in 2007), 4.1 million people were suffering severe social exclusion, and more than 600,000 required “an urgent and intense intervention to guarantee access to a minimally dignified life” (FOESSA, 2019, p. 10). Between 2010 and 2015, Spain was the country in which precariousness grew the most of all EU members, ranking one of the highest in terms of unstable labor conditions (21.9%) and the in-work poverty rate (12.9%) and scoring one of the lowest in most work quality indicators (i.e. wages, occupational safety, labor conditions, work-life balance, career development, etc.) (Eurostat, 2020). Today these figures are worsening because of the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis: severe exclusion affects two million people more than in 2017 (FOESSA, 2021); delays in the payment of housing expenses affect 13.5% (compared to 8.3% in 2019) and 5.4% of the population (compared to 3.8% in 2019) is unable to afford a meal of meat, chicken or fish at least every other day (INE, 2020).

After long-term anthropological fieldwork among impoverished populations, a persistent sense of shame stands out beyond the apparent material scarcity. However, if poor people “are just individuals who *simply* do not have money or economic resources” (Walker, 2014, italics added), why is shame so disturbing?

Shame arises when there is a consciousness of an external negative judgment about a transgression of social standards or rules, leading to the fearful experience of either real or anticipated loss of status, affection, or self-regard (Scheff, 1988, p. 401; Shweder, 2003). Shame affects the way one thinks, speaks, or acts in relation to others. For that reason, it is probably the most self-conscious emotion of social control, pervasive in all aspects of interaction (Scheff, 2002a; Strongman, 2003, p. 147; Kaufman, 1996).

From a sociological point of view, in our modern societies shame relates to the sense of *failure* (Strongman, 2003, p. 147; Scheff, 2002b, p. 89) and the inability to fulfill given standards, values and expectations of the society of which one forms a part (see Scheff, 1988; Le Breton, 1999; Wong and Tsai, 2007, p. 211; Hochschild, 2012). In Spain, these standards respond to the ability to attain economic self-sufficiency and access to *socially valued needs* that are increasingly being commodified. Since high structural unemployment hinders these goals, some charities propose consumption-based inclusion models that raise unexpected contradictions.

This paper aims to unravel some of the contradictory processes underlying the poverty–shame nexus in contemporary Spain. Given that shame is a highly context dependent (Scheff, 1988) and relational emotion (i.e. it takes place in social interaction), ethnography is particularly suitable for its study.

We will theoretically ground our analysis by taking an ethnographic vignette as a starting point. Subsequently, we will present the results of our research, showing the primary causes of shame and the contradictions posed by the current dynamics of consumption, employment and values in modern Spain. Finally, a brief discussion will lead to the conclusions, where we will summarize our findings and link them with similar approaches in other countries.

Theoretical background

Poverty, unemployment and shame

José is a man in his fifties, not very tall but corpulent. He smokes compulsively and shows the tenacious character of someone who managed to get ahead with hard work and perseverance. Today he is living in a squat on the outskirts of Barcelona with his wife, Maribel, a cheerful blue-eyed woman; his younger daughter, a 29-year-old single mother; and his grandchildren

(a boy of five and a baby girl), each from a different parent who very occasionally send them money. Before 2008, they were a conventional working family that managed to make ends meet. Fifteen years ago, when the country was at the peak of the real estate boom, José, like many other Spaniards, found a goldmine in the construction industry working as a builder. His wife also earned some undeclared money cleaning houses. They were doing well until he lost his job, and his wife was dismissed because the family she was working for was forced to cut its costs. After some months without an income, debts accrued, and their savings were exhausted. They had never incurred debts before, but they started to have trouble covering their mortgage, and eventually they were evicted. José then resorted to his family, and the couple moved in with his elderly retired father. However, after a quarrel with his brothers, they were thrown out. His wife did not have a good relationship with her siblings either. Without money or help, they had to sleep in their car for several months: “It was like being in a place where you never imagined being,” laments José. “You watch these things on TV, but you do not believe that is going to happen to you. Until it happens”, he remarks.

After a protracted struggle with red tape, they were granted a modest welfare benefit. For some months, he collected and informally sold scrap he found on the streets to complement the slight public aid until he decided to knock on charities’ doors. He was initially offered a shared flat, but he found such an alternative humiliating: “we have never shared our home with strangers! We need our privacy and to be close to our daughter and grandchildren.” With tearful eyes, Maribel confessed that the most challenging moments were when she was forced to sell her wedding ring to get food, or when the Red Cross offered her second-hand clothes. And she felt embarrassed for not even being able to buy a pair of pants in the local markets. The charity invited José to participate in a community orchard from which he was encouraged to take home some fresh vegetables as payment: carrots, lettuces, potatoes, onions, etc. However, with neither a fridge nor a decent house, they had to decline: “Then they reproach you if you have rejected this or that. But how can we accept if we cannot use it? [However], you must accept some things, and if you do not accept it you are put on a [black list]”.

After a while, they visited a civil anti-eviction platform that helps people in need by providing legal advice, social backup and moral support. They were encouraged to squat in an empty apartment belonging to a bank that had itself been seized from a private proprietor who had been unable to pay his mortgage on time. José connected the water and electricity, and they moved in. However, persistent feelings of fear, insecurity and shame were hard to avoid, given the contradiction between what they were being forced to do and what ethically ought to be. “We have never lived like this . . . I am ashamed! I owned two houses and settled two mortgages. We would like to pay a fair rent according to the law and our earnings.” Maribel suffers from painful osteoarthritis, and he had a heart attack a few years back, but they avoid going to the doctor: “I do not care. I will die anyway,” says José. At their age, they have no great hope of finding a proper job. They foresee a dark future for themselves.

José’s case is typical of tens of thousands of Spaniards who went through a similar chain of events after 2008: layoffs, unemployment, debts, evictions, illnesses and the uneasy need to ask acquaintances and charities for help. When narrating these experiences, most interviewees expressed persistent feelings of frustration, helplessness and shame. In the context of charity attention, we observed and documented three specific situations in which individuals felt shame: first, being labeled *poor*, since the term is loaded with negative connotations and stigma (Lister, 2005). Second, when one was forced to rely on third parties, either acquaintances or charities (Gubrium and Lødemel, 2014, p. 211; Walker and Chase, 2014, p. 146). And third, when access to labor and the daily activities of socialization were compromised. While the first two cases have been widely documented, the third remains under-researched and opens new ground for understanding poverty processes in modern societies.

Next, we will present the theoretical framework that supports our ethnographic findings, connecting poverty, shame, unemployment and consumerism.

Labor, the traditional route to social inclusion and citizenship

In Europe, throughout the welfare capitalism of the 20th century, full employment became the highest priority to fight poverty in most national economic policies. Keynesian welfare regimes were built around what the anthropologist James Ferguson (2013) called *labor membership*, which forms the basis of social belonging in industrial societies (Dickinson, 2016, p. 271). From then on, work has been the cornerstone “through which people re-evaluate their self-esteem as morally capable agents” (Corsín, 2003, p. 14), and it has become the most relevant marker of the individual’s positioning in the social fabric (Scase, 2002).

During Fordism’s golden ages, when labor secured acceptable material standards of well-being and made possible upward mobility, affluence tended to be linked to one’s merit, effort and thrift. Such perception was enhanced by neo-liberalism, assuming wealth was equally available to any free participant within the open and competitive market economy. Accordingly, those who were unable to take advantage of capitalism’s virtues were thought to suffer some moral defect, a vision that was further strengthened when poverty was equated to other social problems (substance abuse, illiteracy, delinquency, etc.) (see Jordan, 1996, p. 3). This line of thought favored the idea that the poor should be treated harshly and punished accordingly (Wacquant, 2009) to force them back into the labor market, as the most effective way to attain full social inclusion and self-sufficiency.

In the USA and Europe alike, the view prevails that most poor are unemployed (Gautié and Ponthieux, 2016), despite the current deterioration of labor markets. Unemployment, in turn, engenders frustration and feelings of failure. Edmiston (2015), taking a broad sample of British jobless individuals, found that most considered their value as citizens compromised, and felt excluded not only from the financial benefits and the valorization of paid work in the United Kingdom, but also from the social network built around the individual in modern societies. In the USA, Silva (2013) observes that the lack of work is so negatively regarded that the unemployed often use a self-help language similar to that found at *Alcoholics Anonymous*. However, they rarely identify the structural forces that have led them to their current situation. Glasser (1988) similarly, in her ethnography of a soup kitchen in Connecticut, noted that most guests were not only jobless but victims of the illusion of advancement based solely on merit. Thus, although most never had the chance to compete in any sense within the wider society, they internalized a sense of failure regarding the competitive economic world around them. In the same vein, Newman (2000) describes how urban poor people in the USA persevere, despite their adverse conditions, in their belief in the dignity of labor and the American ideals of work. Although sometimes the only alternative to low-paid and insecure jobs is either charities or crime (see Bourgois, 1996; Venkatesh, 2006).

While the employability discourse aims to create engaged working subjects, it also contributes to generate anxiety and a feeling of failure among the unemployed (Foster, 2017). The internalization of failure is one of the major *hidden injuries of class* (Sennet and Cobb, 1972). During their research on poverty in United Kingdom, Reutter and collaborators found that participants used to assume they were a burden to the broader society (Reutter *et al.*, 2009). According to Wacquant, this feeling of failure is precisely what the *neoliberal state* intends people to experience to justify the increasingly punitive policies against the poor designed to manage social insecurity and disorders at the bottom of the class structure (Wacquant, 2015, p. 118). In this line, Maskovsky and Fox Piven (2020) denounce what they call the *humiliation regime*: four decades of constant “political violence that maltreats those classified popularly and politically as “the poor” by treating them as undeserving of

citizenship, rights, public goods or resources, and, importantly, that seeks to delegitimize them as political actors” (2020, p. 380, see [Singer, 2007](#)). [Dickinson \(2016\)](#) describes how New York City welfare office workers operationalize policies that provide access to food assistance for the needy by making them work for food stamps, combining protective work support for the employed with punitive welfare regimes for the unemployed. Thus, these policies reinforce the idea of labor inclusiveness as the only way to fight poverty and project an incriminating morality of *deservingness* [1] ([Lupton, 2011](#), p. 223).

The ever-growing necessities of life: consumerism and shame

Poverty is a complex phenomenon that transcends the individual’s ability to cover *basic needs*, which is a vague and problematic concept in itself. To suffer poverty implies restricted access to socially valuable items, a vast myriad of goods and services beyond what could be considered strictly *vital*. According to [Townsend \(1979, p. 31\)](#), poverty has to do with deprivation of the *necessities of life*, i.e. of those material resources and services that are customary and widely encouraged or approved by the societies to which the individual belongs (see [Sen, 1983](#); [Jo, 2013](#), p. 517; [Walker et al., 2013](#)). However, this idea is not novel. Adam Smith himself, in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), already mentions the need to own leather shoes in 18th-century England, because even “the poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them” (quoted in [Sen, 1983](#), p. 159).

However, since capitalism depends on the constant consumption of commodities, these contemporary *needs of life* are ever-expanding. Commodification spreads all spheres of life, from public spaces and daily socialization activities ([Wearing and Wearing, 1992](#); [Marquand, 2004](#); [Cook, 2006](#)) to private areas of intimacy ([Zelizer, 2005](#); [Constable, 2009](#)). Today’s most ordinary daily activities (e.g. transport, communication and eating) are subject to economic tolls, leisure being the most profitable industry in modern market societies ([Butsch, 1984](#)). Even to fulfill a citizen’s most fundamental obligations, it is necessary to count on some sort of economic resources ([Lister, 2005](#), p. 12). As Jordan states:

Below certain levels of resources, individuals are excluded from participation in mainstream social activities. The evidence of exclusion was thus that they did not possess, consume or do certain things (with efforts to show that this was because they could not afford them) that many or most others did. (1996, pp. 81–82)

In a context of labor scarcity and over-expanding commodification, poverty jeopardizes social inclusion and prevents full citizenship, understood as “the right to a minimum of security, economic well-being and possibility according to the standards that prevail in society” ([Marshall, 1950](#), pp. 10–11). The lowering of wages and the reduction of leisure time are, in fact, the two main elements of violence and conflict among US poor ([Susser, 1996](#)).

Methodology

This paper draws on data gathered in two consecutive and long-term anthropological research projects on poverty conducted between 2015 and 2020. The first project explored the livelihood strategies of impoverished families after 2008 and collected 52 case studies of local adults subsisting below the poverty line in Catalonia (Spain): half of them relied on charitable institutions, and the other half did not. The second project, developed in 2019–2020, explored the emotional dimension of the experience of poverty and its relational impact, and collected 26 cases in four different locations in Spain: Catalonia, Albacete, Madrid and Castellón.

To capture the maximum diversity of situations, we followed an *intentional sample* consisting of 47 women and 31 men, with an average age of 47.9 years in the 19–80 range.

Most had been born in Spain ($N = 63$), 15 abroad. Among the informants, 44 were unemployed, 25 were working, five were retired and the rest had other statuses (pensioner, benefit dependent, etc.). Roughly one-third were single or divorced individuals without children, 13 were single parents with children, nine lived in three-generation households, and the rest presented different residential situations (rented room, temporarily living with relatives or friends, etc.).

Both projects adopted two forms of qualitative inquiry: ethnographic observation and face-to-face semi-structured and structured interviews.

After requesting formal permission from charities, we were granted full access to different charity dependencies. The main author of this paper traveled to different places in Spain for several months and made stays of varying duration (from days to several weeks) in different settings: soup kitchens, social shelters, food banks, etc. In some of these places, after openly exposing his role, he carried out participant observation, helping with tasks, interacting with users and volunteers, or engaging in long informal talks with social workers and other professionals. He also conducted in-depth interviews with 26 users. Moreover, over nine months, five trained researchers conducted multi-setting fieldwork in numerous institutional locations (i.e. charitable quarters and local institutions of social assistance, administrative offices, soup kitchens, social shelters, food pantries and the streets) and contexts (i.e. formal interviews, informal interactions and involvement in tasks such as serving meals, accompanying users to perform administrative tasks, or helping to store food) and conducted both social network analysis and deep interviews, under the supervision of the main researchers. The abundant ethnographic data consisted on photographs, descriptions of settings, information on user interaction, informal conversations (with users, workers and volunteers), and routines, and all these data were systematically collected in field diaries and it was later analyzed and arranged by themes using software of qualitative analysis (Atlas.ti).

Semi-structured (deep) interviews gathered data on life histories, emotions, feelings and social support. The duration of the interviews was between an hour and a half and three hours. Interviews were recorded and fully transcribed, and the data were codified.

For this paper, we have omitted chronic and severe forms of poverty and exclusion (a discussion of which can be found elsewhere: removed for blind review). For the sake of homogeneity, here we draw on 39 testimonies (19 male and 20 women) out of the whole sample ($N = 78$) that lost their jobs, suffered downward social mobility and turned temporarily to charities because of the crisis.

Ethics

Researchers followed ethical standards in collecting and using anonymized data, and participants were suitably informed about the aims and procedures of the study, which was approved by the university's IRB (#3327). Before making recordings with informants, we requested their informed consent, and pseudonyms replaced real names.

Working with vulnerable populations and dealing with sensitive and personal issues requires a good level of trust and rapport. This can only be achieved with full transparency on the part of the researchers (for example, by openly and clearly explaining the objectives of the research), ensuring the anonymity. In all cases, individuals (whether they were participants, workers, or volunteers) were openly told what our research objective (i.e. to analyze how poverty affected their social relations and mood) and our role were (i.e. to observe and, in some cases, participate in their daily routines).

The harshness of the different situations and the vulnerability of the individuals who suffered them made us take special precautions to preserve the emotional well-being of these people. In many cases, the interviews were conducted while having a snack or

breakfast with the informants, in their homes or in friendly spaces provided by the charitable institution. The participants were compensated with a small financial benefit for their inconvenience, but only after completing the interview and without serving as an incentive to recruit them.

Regarding the ethnographic practice in cases of vulnerable populations (as we have described elsewhere: removed for blind review) it is worth pointing out a tension or contradiction not always easy to solve: sometimes the demanding bureaucratic requirements for ethical compliance (e.g. to read and sign the informed consent, etc.) sometimes compromises or hinder the participation of informants.

Results

In our democratic and liberal societies, high expectations are placed on individual citizens and their ability to provide for themselves through work (Caldwell, 2004, p. 3). When a person is given financial aid or assistance it is expected to be temporary, and it is also assumed the individual will return to work as soon as possible. However, after 2008 Spanish charities experienced a sudden increase in demand from individuals who had started to suffer scarcity. According to the General Council of Social Work, in 2014 the number of families turning to social services grew by 74%.

Shame in the charity context

In Spain, charities have historically been institutions designed to cover the most excluded people's basic needs. Although more and more people turn to charity, to resort on them it is still considered a failure, as it indicates a loss of social status (Newman, 1999). Particularly in rural areas, where everyone knows each other, many interviewees told us that it was humiliating to queue in front of the charity to receive food because they were exposed for all to see. As social workers pointed out, the first reaction when one first attends the charity is usually disbelief: "I cannot believe this has happened to me" – says Daniel, a young unemployed – I felt ashamed. I asked myself, *what the hell am I doing here?* I had an awful time."

In the charity context, shame may be intensified through various forms of *structural violence* (Farmer *et al.*, 2006; Bourgois, 2012), i.e. those practices, ideologies and daily bureaucratic routines that can be demeaning (Gubrium and Lødemel, 2014, p. 211; Walker and Chase, 2014, p. 146) and increase the feeling of failure (in Zucker and Weiner, 1993, p. 12) and distrust (Bartley, 2006, p. 22; Walker and Chase, 2014, p. 146). "Every time I get transferred to another social worker," one single mother explained, "I have to explain the same shit [her life story, struggles and problems] over and over again." As Rosa, a volunteer, remarks, the procedures to apply for aid involve tedious processes, and users have a hard time and get frustrated. When the support is conditional on participation in charity programs, this violence becomes more manifest: "since you are poor, you have no other option than to participate," reflected another interviewee.

Structural violence and stigma are often projected in subtle ways. Thus, one of the social shelters, where fieldwork was carried out, was placed in an industrial estate, in an old hangar: upon entering its furniture, structure, rules and sobriety of the spaces resembled that of a prison. Likewise, being away from the urban center was not fortuitous: it responded to a deliberate political will to hide poverty away from the city center (see Figure 1).

All these aspects contributed to increasing the feeling of shame in people who used the charity's services.



Figure 1.
Reception of the social
hostel

Unemployment and social consumption

Despite the gloomy prospects of the Spanish labor market, most interviewees and charity administrators still put all their hopes in labor to get out of poverty. Montserrat, a 43-year-old long-term unemployed woman, lost her work as a full-time caretaker for 20 years and was forced to resort to charities. A flashy fridge magnet exhibited this mantra in her kitchen: “to achieve your dreams, you have to work hard.” As she told us:

[I remember once] I was tired and fed up, and Roberto [a social worker] asked me: *What is your goal?* And I replied: *What is my goal? I have two plans: to have my own home and a stable job.* That is the only thing I ask for and the only thing I want in this life . . . I worked 20 years in one place. I earned very little, but I was happy . . . So, if I work, I feel like a person, and if I do not . . . I feel nothing at all.

Another charity user introduced herself this way: “My name is Loli, and I am a cleaning lady.” When asked to explain what she missed most, she replied: “Well, the lack of work. I am the kind of person that likes to work (. . .) I do not like being a housewife, staying at home all day, cleaning in the morning and sewing or knitting in the afternoon. You know, I like people . . .” Likewise, Marisa, an 80-year-old retired seamstress forced to keep working informally to survive, stated that she liked to work anyway: “otherwise this [touches her head with the hand] spins around,” she added. The same applied to Juanjo, now forced to rent one room of his house because he lost his job. Beyond the economic blow, unemployment gave him a feeling of purposelessness because “I like to work, I need to keep busy.” Work also offers people momentary psychological relief from their harsh daily realities. Carmen, a single mother with four children, felt thankful for being selected to participate in an intensive training course on webpage design because “[being active] has helped me, like therapy, forget about my problems.” Thus, for most interviewees, work implied more than a means to attain

self-sufficiency: it gave them meaning and dignity, and its absence produced frustration and shame.

Research also reveals gender differences when dealing with the work-related experience of shame. Men experience unemployment more dramatically, feeling that their role as breadwinners is at stake. Armando, a 53-year-old factory worker who lost his job after 30 years in the same company, put it this way: “And suddenly, one seems useless. I get up early in the morning, have breakfast, and then I keep looking at the wall, and then I think, *And what now? Who is going to pull the family forward?*”. Joan pointed out a similar concern, highlighting his responsibility “to take my family forward. [In fact] I do not care about the type of work, whatever it is—cleaning, caring, factory work—as long as there is a salary coming in. I do not need anything else. We do not want anything else.”

Beyond the restricted provision of vital necessities (housing, food, health services, etc.) and subjectivization of unemployment, poverty also prevents access to *social needs*, that is, to a wide array of increasingly commodified activities and services.

In Spain, as in most post-industrial, fully-fledged market societies, ordinary forms of socialization are increasingly taking place within contexts of consumerism, either in the form of social hangouts (meetings at home, dinners at restaurants, weddings, etc.), in modern urban consumer complexes (malls, shops, cinemas, restaurants, cafes, etc.) or through a wide array of leisure activities (gym subscriptions, workshops, equipment, etc.) that imply considerable economic costs in the form of enrollments, tuition, materials, transport (public transport, car and petrol), communication (smartphones, Internet access) and another sporadic spending. For instance, celebrating children’s birthday parties has become a profit-oriented business in the form of party-room rentals, franchises, gifts, pastries and professional advisors. Parents are often involved in competitive reciprocity of gifts and celebrations that ultimately leave aside those who cannot afford them.

The impossibility to access these contemporary social consumption spaces (i.e. commodified spaces where a great deal of social interaction and sociability occur) entails frustration. Although well-intentioned friends may initially cover these expenses (e.g. drinks, meals, cinema tickets . . .), this alternative soon comes to an end, either because the person helping cannot do it indefinitely or because the individual in need cannot stand the shame of being economically dependent. “I cannot bear to be a burden on anyone,” said Raúl, whose friends used to pay him for drinks or food when they went out.

Alterio and his wife, a middle-aged couple with children, used to have a comfortable lifestyle before being fired and starting to suffer several chronic illnesses. After months without an income, they decided to stop hanging out and meeting their old friends. Esther, an educated young mother who had also lost her job, was forced to decline invitations to attend the birthday parties of their six-year-old daughter’s friends. As she explains: “We used to go to everyone’s party, but we quit. At first, I felt embarrassed to recognize I could not afford to buy gifts”.

Catharsis, or the paradoxes of consumption-based inclusion models

In Spain, in recent decades, leading charities have been making titanic efforts to dignify the poor through their reintegration into the labor market. Social organizations strongly foster basic professional training and skills capabilities (e.g. gardening, Internet courses) and promote positive attitudes and routines (punctuality, effort, etc.) adapted to a fading industrial world of work. However, for those without formal education or technical experience, these alternatives do not guarantee worthy job opportunities beyond marginal niches (e.g. manual and unskilled work, caring and cleaning). Even if they ever succeed in finding a job, they will probably be pushed into the growing reservoir of the new working poor (15% of employees in Spain), because reinsertion-oriented programs show meager rates

of success (16% in the best prospects, according to Caritas, 2011). As Newman puts it, the poor do not need their values reengineered, nor lessons about the dignity of work, because hard work does not pay off, nor will it solve their situation in a context of global precarity and labor scarcity (2000, p. 297) (see Figure 2).

Due to the deterioration of labor conditions and the ubiquity of market forces, charities are innovating by finding alternative ways to restore the dignity of the poor – which is a contemporary trend observed elsewhere (see McNaughton *et al.*, 2021). As a result, inclusion by way of consumption is gaining momentum: access to limited credit cards, vouchers, coupons, or special discounts are among the formulas that are being adopted. Among these initiatives, the case of the recently created “social supermarket” stands out, namely a store offering essential goods (usually donated by companies or collected) to be purchased through tiny monthly allowances. Instead of the shameful act of receiving a bag of food after queuing outside the charity center (see Kolavalli, 2019 for racial and class considerations), charities propose shopping in a supermarket as a more dignifying option (see Figure 3).

According to one of the promoters, a retired bank clerk,

unlike the degrading distribution of food that involves queuing and getting a bag of traditional staple foods, this option brings more dignity to the people in need (. . .). We make it possible to choose, buy and pay. A higher stage would be desirable, that is, making poverty invisible, thus providing the person with a limited balance on a credit card with which he could go to any supermarket and buy without anyone knowing that he is poor or what he buys.

Thus, compared to more traditional forms of poverty alleviation, this “new” perspective implies a step forward in the conceptualization of poverty, assuming that the restoration of poor people’s dignity lies in their being able to “choose, buy and pay” in a free market society.

These models, however, are received in contradictory ways on the part of their users. On the one hand, there are those who uncritically embrace the donation and try to maintain their



Figure 2. These advertisements were photographed on the walls of a public university. A mobile application that allows immediate payments on the left, “The hero. Purchasing superpower. He does not have a cape but a payroll. Your last Bizum is always for him. Best Bizum Friend. I pay again, but you give me a Bizum. Whatever your friends are, they all have Bizum”; New Year’s Eve Party entry is on the right, from €35 per person

Figure 3.
Food bags with
individual names to be
delivered to soup
kitchen users (own
source)



status quo. According to social workers, “resistance to accept the reality is often accompanied by a protectionist educational model,” by which parents mask or hide the actual situation from their children to protect them from suffering and shame. In these cases, families maintain their living standards with a sense of normality, pretending that nothing is happening. Walker (2014), in his transcultural study of poverty, was struck by the fact that many mothers from low-income families tried to protect their children from feeling shame, providing them with what could be considered *unnecessary* and expensive gifts (toys, sneakers and branded clothes). During our fieldwork, we observed a family going to have dinner together at McDonald’s after receiving a social allowance to pay their domestic bills. After a long period of deprivation, they felt the need to celebrate good news, and the way to do that was by going to a fast-food restaurant. Similarly, after receiving her social allowance, a mother of four told the social worker: “The first thing I am going to do is to recover my son’s game console from the pawnshop.”

In these cases, not only the existing situation of economic instability is aggravated (since the poor often borrow more through loans), but they are sometimes harshly criticized by volunteers that interpret them as irresponsible, making these individuals feel miserable and embarrassed. However, as Miller argued in an earlier study of shopping in London, while our rhetoric of commodity purchase is about individualism, hedonism and materialism, the reality is that most shopping is by self-sacrificing housewives provisioning for their families (Miller, 2012). In other words, this behavior often represents a desperate attempt to remain included in the system, unlike what is generally assumed. As another social worker stated:

Being deprived of participating in leisure and consumerism [means] being outside society, and that is a challenging experience that crushes and humiliates you (. . .) Strong social pressure that it is more important to own a smartphone or a game console than to pay monthly bills or even eat more healthily.

On the other hand, we found a critical sector that firmly believes they have fulfilled their obligations as citizens, having “followed the rules” (e.g. worked hard, repaid debts, paid taxes and maintained modest habits of consumption), but society did not repay them as expected. Charo, a businesswoman in her 50s and the mother of four children who suffered bankruptcy, exemplifies this spirit: “I am not a woman who spends much on

myself. Like many other women, I do not spend money on hairdressers, manicures, or pedicures.”

Many adopted a self-reflective stance, expressing particular resentment against what they described as a past life of rampant consumerism. Francesc exemplifies this point clearly: “I have wasted a lot on leisure (. . .), and it was a mistake, it was a mistake! However, this shitty system transforms you into a consumer, so if you do not spend with your friends, you are not cool”. Feeling resentment against consumerism means they were aware that their poverty was partly a result of a faulty system. Instead of hiding their situation, many opted to share it, socialize the problem and involve their loved ones, particularly their children. As another social worker put it:

When children are made part of the problem and the solution, it is when they get involved. Many, when they are told (by their parents) *hey, you have to do something*, you have to help out, go and look for work, or join the military, or deliver pizzas . . ., the children respond.

Claudina, a single mother who enjoyed a comfortable standard of living until she lost her job, sat down with her six-year-old daughter and told her:

Look, honey, from now on we always will go shopping together; the three of us, having eaten before and with a list of exactly what we are going to buy. And we ask you, please, that if you see [sweets and pastries], do not ask us for them. And she accepted it! We were surprised! She witnessed everything, and, of course, it was a huge shock for her. She has assimilated it very well; she is a strong girl, very mature for her age.

Adolfo, a Brazilian accountant in his 40s who decided to move to Spain with his wife to start a new business that went awry, describes the process in detail. He suffered a progressive process of falling that led him to homelessness until he entered a social housing program. After losing everything (his wife also divorced him), he explained, “I had a strong sense of frustration and the feeling that I had failed. I felt guilty”, adding, “but you realize that when you get to the bottom, you have nothing else to lose.” However, he reflects:

I was completely isolated from the world around me, you know? I had a good job, a good salary . . . I enjoyed life . . . I had everything I needed, and I could never imagine a situation like this. So, I first wondered, what did I do wrong? Now I think that is not the point; this is the wrong question (. . .). This experience has changed my life. I have met people I never imagined I could meet, I have been in places I did not even know existed [social centers] . . . I felt in a deep depression because of all my failures (my marriage, my business . . .), I had no strength at all. I was lost. I was so overwhelmed by the lack of money, food, home . . . And the day someone stole my computer and my iPhone, I thought, well, my life is over, this is the end. But I started reading a lot, trying to understand the situation, and becoming aware. And now it is like a challenge. And although it sounds like a cliché, you realize that the best things in life are not material things (. . .) [I still remember] when I passed by the cinema and had no money to watch a movie or no money to buy a soda, I felt miserable. However, today I feel a different person (. . .) Society puts much pressure on the way people should look: people think they have to travel, wear a particular brand, or go to a refined restaurant to be included. Moreover, they do not realize that this leaves out many people. And in the end, that is all nonsense.

Likewise, Laura, who lost her job during the crisis, remarked at the end of her interview:

I should not say this . . ., but it is kind of cool that this happened to me. Do you know why? I was living in an unreal world. Now I am living in the real world. Now I understand my parents, who suffered a war, and they bought their house little by little, paying a mortgage. I have two hands, beautiful hands, and I can do many things, and my husband, too. I met better people. My social life is complete, and I have helped many people too.

Charo also pointed out that “the good thing [she draws a pair of brackets in the air with her hands] about the crisis is that it opens your eyes. You must move; no regrets!” Javier, a divorced man with a child, puts it this way:

Today, if you do not have anything, you are not valued. [When I was a child], we cherished affection more than material things. In our society, the material is more valued than affection (. . .) [But now, through the experience of poverty], I have recovered my true self. Before, I was a fraud. When I was married to my ex-wife, I was leading a false life (. . .), and I have returned to my roots. And I like it.

According to these cases, sharing the experience of poverty with others seems to relieve the emotional burden and alleviate shame substantially. Therefore, the apparent personal failure is partially exonerated because the consumerist system is also considered part of the problem. Moreover, this process resembles what psychologists usually refer to as a *trauma recovery* or a *catharsis process*. As Rimé puts it, people affected by internal stress use social exchange and seek social outlets as a cathartic release of their emotions: “the more individuals are socially integrated, the greater will be their capacity to assimilate raw experiences and, therefore, to reduce sources of internal stress” (2018, p. 70).

The catharsis-like process was eventually accompanied by the need to return the help received. This fact offers clues about the relevance of *reciprocity* to processes of social inclusion (see Parsell and Clark, 2020). As economic anthropology would put it, reciprocity entails a moral principle by which debts are constantly reconstituted, implying an exchange of gifts and counter-gifts that weaves together social relationships and strengthens them. Alicia, an educated migrant woman who suffered long-term unemployment and illness, felt an “inner pressure to respond as expected” after receiving charitable help. “I could not fail now,” expresses Kike, a man who was also strongly supported by the institution, “so I try to give that gratitude back, return it.” Joan, Carmen, Adolfo, Rodrigo and Joaquín explicitly manifested their willingness to make future donations to the charity or to be involved with it through voluntary work. According to Rodrigo, a 64-year-old IT worker who had been fired just before his retirement, “if I had the financial means, I would use them to help people in need, especially those with children.” Joaquín and Alterio made substantial donations to charities after their situation improved, and both Gabino and Julio volunteered at a charity when their economic situation improved.

Discussion

Our paper offers empirical support to the idea that the link between shame and poverty is intimately related to the sense of *failure* (Strongman, 2003, p. 147; Scheff, 2002b, p. 89) by not being able to meet certain standards, values and expectations. These standards, in Spain, respond to economic self-sufficiency and meeting increasingly commodified needs. Structural unemployment in Spain makes it even more difficult to achieve these standards.

The alternative model of consumption increasingly proposed by charitable organizations to dignify poor people, however, presents several contradictions. Offering a bag of food, consumer products of choice, or even money so that the persons acquire what they want, responds to the same welfare logic. Our ethnographic examples reveal *new* ways to confront poverty. The quasi-cathartic experience alleviates the feeling of shame through *sharing* (i.e. socializing their situation with their loved ones) and *reciprocity* (i.e. feeling compelled to return the help they have received). *Reciprocity*, rather than consumption, seems to create greater meaning for the alienated worker/consumer in a context of very contradictory neoliberal transformations, and it could be a fruitful way worth to explore to alleviate shame in the charitable context. At the emotional level, providing the individual with a purpose, a meaning, a function or a value seems much more relevant than the fact of covering a specific material need.

At the same time, the way to deal with poverty and shame for every individual suggests different degrees of self-awareness and reflexivity. Factors such as the amount of cultural capital (e.g. educational training, professional careers, skills and capabilities)

(see Bourdieu, 1986), the characteristics of social capital and embedding (e.g. social class affiliation, degree of homophily, having children) along with the personal traits (e.g. degree of aspirations, ambition and resilience) or the life experience (childhood, migratory process) probably influence these forms of behavior. In this sense, more data are needed to determine the triggering factors.

Finally, we would like to highlight the need of the ethnographic approach to poverty as a fundamental complement of more quantitative-oriented perspectives (economic, statistical), since it has the potential to reveal and make understandable the complex contradictions and cultural values underlying the experience of poverty.

Conclusions

This paper has analyzed the sources of shame in the experience of poverty and downward mobility in the Spanish charity context. Although the stigma of the labels of poverty and expulsion from the labor market has been widely analyzed, the links between poverty, work and consumption open new ground for understanding the complex poverty–shame nexus.

While some impoverished individuals experience a cathartic-like process that may ultimately restore their self-esteem by rejecting consumption as a means of inclusion, the centripetal force of society keeps pushing forward a consumerist model that reproduces inequality. In other words, inclusion through consumption and consumerism, although a growing trend, leads the individual to abandon hope of self-sufficiency and risk treating the poor as *failed consumers* (Baumann, 2005). While some individuals are aware of this contradiction, most impoverished people may not be.

One of the most striking features of the past two decades is the deterioration in the living standards of the middle classes and worst-off members of all societies. Most of the US population will suffer, at some point in their lives, a situation of poverty (Iceland, 2013, pp. 3–5), while in Europe, roughly 25% of the population may be already be considered poor (Eurostat, 2020), as other ethnographers have documented (Molé, 2010; Allison, 2013; Muhelebach, 2013). Today, the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic are pushing more significant numbers of people into precariousness and poverty, even those with jobs. Therefore, further research into the contradictions of current inclusion models is urgently needed. We hope that this paper will inspire future anti-poverty policies and ethnographically inspired research in our contemporary societies.

Note

1. *Deservingness* is a trope referring to the criteria generally used by government officials, the media, and the wider public to classify poor people and to determine whether they are worthy of assistance (Watkins-Hayes *et al.*, 2017).

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About the authors

Hugo Valenzuela-Garcia is an associate professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology and a member of the Research Center in Entrepreneurship and Social Innovation (CREIS) of the UAB, Spain. As an anthropologist, he has conducted fieldwork on fishermen in Malaysia, peasants in Mexico and Asian entrepreneurship in Barcelona. His main fields of interest are poverty, precariousness and work, consumption and other classical issues in cultural ecology and economic

anthropology. Hugo Valenzuela-Garcia is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: hugo.valenzuela@uab.cat

Miranda Jessica Lubbers is an associate professor in social and cultural anthropology at the Autonomous University of Barcelona, Spain, and the director of the Research Group of Fundamentally Oriented Anthropology (GRAFO). In 2021, she was granted a European Research Council Advanced Grant and the ICREA Acadèmia Award. Her research addresses social cohesion and social inclusion. In particular, she analyzes the role that formal and informal social relationships and settings have in the production, mitigation, or exacerbation of exclusion and segregation.

Jose Luis Molina is a full professor at the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology (UAB). He is an economic anthropologist interested in livelihood practices in a globalized, digitalized and unequal world. His approach is through mixed methods with an emphasis on ethnography and personal network analysis. Southeast Europe and Romania, in particular, are his main areas of interest.

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