

BEING POOR: FIRST-PERSON EXPERIENCES

Assoc. Prof. Dra. Jacqueline Marques¹

Mariana Pires Duarte²

^{1,2} University Lusófona, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This research is the result of a qualitative study that aims to analyse how poor people experience their situation. This study has the following general objectives: i) To analyse the life course of the subjects interviewed and their perception of poverty; ii) To understand how the people experienced situations of poverty. The specific objectives were a) To understand the heterogeneity of those categorised as poor; b) To understand the life journeys of people living in poverty; c) To understand how the subjects view their social reality; d) To analyse common indicators in the responses obtained in the study. Semi-structured interviews were carried out to realise the objectives. By getting to know the condition of individuals living in poverty and the main problems involved, it is possible to (re)structure and adopt possible more efficient interventions/strategies, meeting the real needs of citizens.

***Keywords:** Poverty and exclusion, perspectives on poverty, life paths, poor people experience*

INTRODUCTION

This brief study sought to highlight and give a voice to people living in poverty through discourse, observation, and analysis. In this way, the aim was to i) analyse the life course of the subjects interviewed and their perception of poverty and ii) understand how situations of poverty are experienced in the first person. To this end, a set of specific objectives was drawn up, namely: a) to understand and demonstrate the heterogeneity of those who are categorised as poor; b) to understand the life journeys of people living in poverty; c) to understand how the subjects view their social reality; d) to analyse common indicators in the responses obtained in the study.

To study and understand the experiences, discourses and life trajectories of people living in poverty, qualitative research was used to value interpretation, meanings, and social contexts, offering a broader view of human experiences. The data collection instrument used was the semi-structured interviews, consisting of a set of open questions that were only asked if the individual's discourse did not refer to a dimension that we wanted to study. Analysing people's life journeys is essential to get to know, in the most in-depth way possible, the moments that marked their trajectory and to analyse some of the stages that could have led them to their current situation. In this context, all the interviewees were asked to share their life experiences and highlight the moments they considered significant.

We interviewed 4 individuals (E1, E2, E3, E4) who were supported by a social institution in the municipality of Seixal (Portugal) and who volunteered to take part in this study.

POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

A socio-economic approach associates poverty with a situation of deprivation resulting from the lack or insufficiency of economic resources and, consequently, the fulfilment of basic needs. However, questioning how poverty affects each person leads to a subjective dimension, without which there is a risk of ignoring relevant aspects of the problem (Fernandes, 2012, p.36)[1].

Bruto da Costa (1998)[2] highlights different perspectives on poverty, of which two stand out: i) absolute poverty, based on the notion of basic survival needs, with various dimensions inherent to the notion of resources such as food, housing, clothing, income, etc. being at stake. From this perspective, absolute poverty is an objective, measurable and universal condition, measured by indicators such as income, level of education, and access to health services, among others. In this concept of poverty, there is a lack of or almost total restriction of basic subsistence conditions. It is possible to say that this is a type of persistent poverty; ii) relative poverty, defined as a lack of resources compared to the average of the society in which one lives. This type of poverty is influenced by factors such as the social and cultural context in which people live, their expectations and aspirations, and comparison with other social groups.

The most common way of identifying a person in poverty or a socially excluded person is to assess their objective living conditions. This is the most visible aspect of the problem. Although it is not the "whole" of the problem, it is clear that material deprivation is a worrying problem and its effects affect the human being as a whole: feelings, affections, emotions, attitudes, habits and behaviours, interpersonal relationships, daily uncertainty (meals, income, etc.), the exercise of citizenship, fulfilling one's duties and enjoying one's rights (Perista and Baptista, 2012)[3]. Despite this, it is now imperative to consider the multidimensionality of the concept of poverty, as Bruto da Costa et al (2008)[4] point out: "It should be noted that defining the poverty line in terms of the income needed to meet basic human needs does not reduce poverty to a purely financial reality. The lack of income leads to a situation in which basic needs cannot be met, which in turn creates an existential situation that affects the most diverse and profound aspects of human life and personality" (cited in Fernandes, 2012, p.39).

Despite this multidimensionality, Serge Paugam (2006)[5] reminds us that similarities persist with the way of thinking about poverty from other centuries. On the one hand, "we have not completely freed ourselves from the tendency to categorise the poor into the deserving and the undeserving. On the other hand, we continue to see the problem centred on the excluded" (p.75).

The expression "social exclusion" can be understood, according to Luís Capucha (2005)[6], from two different connotations. one of French origin, which emphasises the nature of the social ties that give cohesion to society and another that is based on the rights to participate in different spheres of social life as citizenship rights. The first approach sees social exclusion as occurring when there is a set of ruptures in social ties with the current institutions of society, which can result in the deterioration of identities, the disorganisation of social relations and, ultimately, the social relationships and, ultimately, complete isolation. French sociologist Robert Castel represents social exclusion as the extreme state of a process of marginalisation in which ties are broken between the individual and social systems, the ties with the labour market and those that bind the individual to family and friends. In this conceptualisation, social exclusion is seen as a multidimensional, cumulative and structural process, i.e. social exclusion is the breaking of social ties (Vasconcelos, 2011)[7]. The second approach understands that social exclusion occurs when a person is deprived of their citizenship rights, "it is to be a "non-citizen", i.e. a member of society who has been deprived of citizenship rights (Vasconcelos, 2011, p12) and participation in the different spheres of social life. From this perspective, being integrated means sharing the condition of citizenship with the other members of society and participating in the normal processes of life in society.

According to Bruto da Costa et al (2008), "poverty is a form of social exclusion, but social exclusion may not necessarily imply forms of poverty" (p.15). In modern Western societies, poverty and social exclusion are mutually reinforcing. Poverty and social exclusion characterise Portuguese society. The high number of individuals in this situation over the years indicates this.

It is now known that "poverty is generated by society, it is generated by the configuration of society and, therefore, without social changes it is not possible to solve the problem (...) so anything that contributes to giving the idea that it is possible to solve poverty by keeping the rest of society as it is is pure illusion and would be a very serious irresponsibility of local intervention" (Reis, 2010, p. 21)[8]. In this way, "if we want to tackle the problem as a whole, we shouldn't only have actions aimed at people, only at people, leaving the whole environment with a lack of infrastructure at all levels, economic, cultural and social" (Bruto da Costa et al, 2018).

POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN THE FIRST PERSON

Of the four interviewees, two were male (E1 and E2) and two were female (E3 and E4).

When analysing the profile of the four people who were interviewed, it emerged that one had a 3rd-grade education, another had a 7th-grade education, another had finished secondary school (12th grade) and one had a degree. It should

be noted that interviewee 4, who has a 3rd-year degree, did not continue with her studies due to the lack of permission from the Roma community. It is important to emphasise that she said that she would not allow her children to face this same restriction because she knew the consequences. E2, who is in 7th grade, says that the extreme poverty he faced in São Tomé prevented him from dedicating himself to his studies and forced him, from a very young age, to work in the fields to help his family.

The main factors pointed out by the interviewees as the cause of their situation of poverty are unemployment (identified by 3 of the interviewees), precarious housing (identified by all the interviewees) and low educational qualifications (identified by 2 of the interviewees). It should be noted that one of the interviewees is working, although his income is insufficient to meet his family's basic needs. This interviewee (E1) says that he "used to live very well" but, despite having a degree, a series of unexpected events in his life have negatively affected his financial and emotional stability.

Regarding the number of people in the household, there was a wide variety: E1 lives with two children, E2 lives alone, E3 lives with her partner and eight children and E4 lives with her partner and four children. A study by Nuno Alves (2009)[9], entitled "Novos factos da Pobreza em Portugal", identifies the number of people in households as one of the explanatory factors for the existence of two million people living below the poverty line (including 300,000 children). This association between poverty and large families, along with individuals with lower levels of schooling, is evidenced in this study.

About their journeys, when reflecting on the defining moments of their lives, it became clear that these journeys were characterised by not being linear. Some events and episodes seem to have influenced, at least in part, the trajectory marked by the experience of poverty. However, applying the concept of a pattern to the various stages and episodes of life seems incoherent, as the way each interviewee views their perspective on life is subjective and unique.

E3 and E4 reported that the most memorable moment was the birth of their first child and the vitality of their lives, marked by hope for a better future. While E1 and E2 consider the most significant moment to be the feeling of stigmatisation and the breaking of emotional ties with their families. However, leaving school early was also mentioned, as well as living in the Jamaica neighbourhood (mentioned by three interviewees), being sentenced to prison and the (ineffective) intervention of social institutions throughout their lives. As Bruto da Costa et al (2008) point out, in addition to deprivation and lack of resources, the life context of people living in poverty also affects their life context and aspects of their personality. Thus, "habits change, new behaviours emerge, values change, culture transforms, survival strategies are rehearsed, the initial revolt gives way to conformism, self-confidence weakens, the network of relationships changes, social identity is lost, and eventually personal identity" (Reis, 2010, p.20).

When asked how they spend their day, the three interviewees who were unemployed said that they spend their days doing domestic tasks, resulting in a daily life that is practically limited to the home. The experience of poverty cannot be separated from social life as a whole. However, when there is a break in the labour market, the consequences go beyond the immediate loss of income. There are indirect impacts, including those of an emotional nature, which affect social relationships and, in many cases, these people experience a significant decrease in their participation in the collective activities of the communities in which they live. In addition to being confined to domestic chores, the interviewees have a routine that includes travelling to social institutions, along with tasks such as taking their children to school and, in the case of E1, reading and writing.

The relationship between structural unemployment and human rights lies in the fact that decent, paid work is considered a fundamental human right. Prolonged unemployment can jeopardise people's ability to enjoy other human rights, such as the right to adequate food, housing, education and health.

The sociability networks of the people interviewed are mainly interpersonal relationships centred on the family, who generally share the same household, as is the case with E1, E3 and E4. "It is therefore pertinent to state that the inequalities of today's society seem to strengthen informal solidarity networks, with a focus on the family nucleus, which is assumed to be protective factors in adversity such as illness, unemployment or financial difficulties." (Fernandes, 2012, p.323).

For the interviewees, the situation of poverty was the reason that led them to seek help from social institutions, namely insufficient financial resources, a reason that is related to the failure to fulfil basic human needs such as food or clothing. The interviewees also pointed to situations of indebtedness and requests for social housing as reasons for seeking out social institutions. In addition, one of the interviewees (E2) mentioned support in legalising their documentation and E3 early pregnancy.

When asked about the changes they felt after resorting to social support institutions, people who experience poverty say they haven't experienced any kind of change. They mention that the support they receive from the institution is, in fact, an important way of meeting their monthly expenses, but it doesn't lead to structural changes in their lives so that they can overcome the condition/cycle of poverty.

The perspective of ways to combat poverty, on the part of the people who experience it, centres on solidarity and equitable distribution of resources among those living in poverty, greater involvement by the state, the appropriate use of resources in creative and productive ways, the promotion of equal opportunities and the valorisation of the family and family cohesion in the fight against poverty also featured prominently in the interviewees' discourse.

Based on the interviewees' future expectations, they want to achieve independence from care services, have sufficient financial resources to live without worries and prioritise their children's education. In addition, there is a desire for better housing conditions and reintegration into the labour market.

Despite these expectations, we must emphasise that all the interviewees showed a sense of discouragement at the lack of prospects.

Faced with the question "What does being poor mean to you?" The interviewees considered that:

"[...] Being poor means being in a situation of inability to survive [...]" (E1). E1 considers that nowadays there is more support for people in situations of poverty: "[...] I think that the poor today have more horizons than in the past and I think that explains everything [...] and in the past they didn't have that possibility." This interviewee states that the face of poverty is "[...] the mercy of circumstances". It also mentions that incomes do not keep up with the increase in the prices of rent, and food, among others, and that policies are highly insufficient to combat the current situation. "The poor in the past perhaps had more survival skills than those of today also because today people have a different level of choice of demands, they mainly complain about what they didn't build".

For E2, "[...] poverty in the world is hunger and injustice [...]". For this interviewee, one of the ways to combat poverty is through solidarity, help and the sharing of resources among people who live in precarious situations: "[...] if you have many sheets of paper and just give me one, I will make more sheets of paper with the one you gave me [...]".

E3 states that poverty only has to do with financial issues. "[...] we are poor, but we are happy. With the little we have; we learn to manage and we learn to be happy that way. [...]" Throughout the conversation, there is a resignation on the part of this interviewee to her situation of poverty, which has lasted as long as she can remember.

E4 states that "[...] I don't know, I think it's the lack of work, people want to work and there is a lack of opportunity. [...] I think that people want to work to change their lives, if they don't spend their entire lives receiving social insertion income, they shouldn't look at colour, race, or ethnicity [...]".

It was possible to verify that for all interviewees, poverty is a lack of resources. This lack of resources associated with the increase in the cost of living is mentioned by E1. E2 associates the lack of resources with hunger and injustice. E4 focuses on the problem of the lack of work with the consequent lack of income. It is worth highlighting E3's response, which despite mentioning that poverty is the lack of resources, goes on to say that being poor means "being happy", highlighting that she is content with little and that little makes her happy,

demonstrating resignation to her state. of poverty, which can be explained by having already been born into a poor family and community.

CONCLUSION

The perception of the interviewed subjects about their situation of poverty and being poor focuses on the material dimension. This situation can be explained by the lack of difficulties in meeting their (and their family's) basic needs. Concern about this level of survival can lead them to focus on this material aspect.

Despite this, one of the interviewees talks about injustice, making the connection between poverty and the structural conditions existing in society that lead to poverty. Another interviewee highlights one of the most visible manifestations of poverty: disconnection from the job market. When this rupture occurs in this important structuring element of people's lives, the immediate consequence is the loss of income. However, this loss represents only the beginning of several deprivations, including emotional aspects, such as impacts on interpersonal relationships, self-esteem, and social isolation.

The concept of poverty has a direct relationship with the concept of deprivation. Poor people are those who are faced with a situation of deprivation, in which a lack of resources is at stake. The definition of deprivation refers to the non-satisfaction of basic human needs. This is perhaps the most apparent aspect of deprivation and poverty itself. Generally, it is a deprivation in several areas of basic needs: food, clothing, housing, transportation, communication, working conditions, opportunities for choice, health and medical care, education, vocational training, culture, participation in social life and politics, among others. In other words, deprivation is characterized by a lack in multiple domains that encompass the essential needs for a dignified life, affecting various aspects of well-being and participation in society (Bruto da Costa et al, 2008).

However, to resolve a situation of poverty, it is not enough to resolve deprivation. This means that, in addition to resolving the situation of deprivation, it is necessary for the poor to also become self-sufficient in terms of resources. It should be noted that except for one interviewee, all others consider that the fight against poverty must be carried out with support and social policy measures of a more individualized nature. When you experience the situation of poverty in the first person, it is understandable that the response you seek is appropriate to your condition. However, we know that it is essential that responses to combating poverty are multidimensional, do not focus solely on the economic aspect, or people, but seek to alter and change factors and structural conditioning that lead to situations of poverty and create the conditions to persist in it.

This relationship with structural and social reproduction factors is visible in the life stories of the interviewees. Three of them were born into a family already in poverty and, for this reason, there were few or no opportunities they had

throughout their lives. This situation leads them to find themselves in a disadvantageous situation, for example in the job market, which allows the cycle of poverty to repeat and perpetuate. As Bruto da Costa (2018) states, "If we want to tackle the problem as a whole, we must not only have actions aimed at people, just for people, leaving the entire environment lacking infrastructure at all levels, economic, cultural and social".

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