

Research Article

Emotions and the Social Bond in Situations of Poverty

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Abstract

Although the relationship between emotions and poverty has been recognized by social scientists, it received little attention as a lens through which to observe, interpret, and deal with this issue. To fill this gap, we conducted a qualitative, exploratory, and preliminary analysis of the content of forty interviews with parents living in economic poverty as part of the Research Project of National Interest (PRIN) "Constructions of Parenthood on Uncertain Ground. What Role for Social Work" sought to investigate whether and how the emotional dimension intervenes in poverty, as well as the role it may play in the processes of entering or departing this reality. It was revealed that impoverished individuals experience a wide spectrum of emotions, which contribute to a more complete and multifaceted picture of people in poverty, with more positive features than negative ones. Moreover, the study revealed that poor people experienced a wide range of happy emotions that are not typically associated with poverty. This article focuses on three of these positive feelings - gratitude, solidarity, and pride - and discusses how they grow in the interaction between individuals who live in poverty and those who do not, as well as how they contribute to the strengthening of social cohesion and bonds. This thought appears to be valuable in terms of the positive implications it may have for knowledge and the development of policies targeted at combating poverty. In fact, the analysis confirms that the sociology of emotions is a viable approach to understanding the conditions of individuals living in poverty and opening up new avenues for future research. Furthermore, it helps to overcome preconceptions and stereotypes that still surround poor people, as well as the ideological assumptions about poverty that underpin many contemporary European poverty policies, putting social cohesiveness at danger.

Keywords

Emotions, Poverty, Pride, Solidarity, Gratitude

1. Introduction

The article starts from the recognition of the contribution that the sociology of emotions can make to the study of the phenomenon of poverty [1] and proposes a reflection on the role assumed in the processes of impoverishment in particular by certain emotions such as gratitude, solidarity and pride. The relationship between emotions and poverty is not new in the sphere of sociological reflection, but it does not seem to have received particular attention as a perspective from which to observe, interpret and deal with this phenomenon from the

macro point of view of normative and institutional arrangements, from the meso point of view of the construction of local solidarities, and from the micro point of view of individual biographies and processes of interaction. The reflection developed in this regard has given much attention above all to shame, experienced both at an individual level by individuals directly involved in the processes of impoverishment and at a collective level by those observing these processes. Less explored with reference to poverty appear other emotions that,

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contrary to what one is led to think, are nonetheless present in the biographies of those living this condition, such as solidarity, gratitude, pride.

The article focuses on these emotions starting from the results of a qualitative, exploratory and preliminary analysis of the content carried out on forty interviews with parents in conditions of economic poverty conducted within the framework of the PRIN "Constructions of Parenthood on Uncertain Ground. What Role for Social Work" in order to outline the characteristics of their occurrence and the contribution they can make to the analysis of this phenomenon [1].

2. Background: Emotions and Poverty

That poverty arouses emotions both in those who experience it at first hand and in those who observe it from the outside has always been recognized in studies concerning it. In his historical reconstruction of the transformations undergone over the centuries by conceptions of poverty and collective reactions to it, Geremek [2] shows how the "stability of charitable attitudes", as well as those of contempt and fear, towards poverty is "surely linked to the fact that these are rooted in human feelings" (p. 265). Feelings that are also socially constructed. In fact, specific emotions are attributed to those living in poverty, such as shame, which leads to a distinction between the poor who are "ashamed and shamed" (Ibid., p. 16), and envy, which stems from "greed, jealousy and a refusal to accept one's condition" (Ibid., p. 19).

Studies on poverty have not failed to detect the presence of the emotional component. What has been noted above all is the shame caused by the lack of the goods considered indispensable in a given society [3], the dependence on the assistance and help of others [4] often caused by unemployment and the difficulty of adapting to the continuous changes in the production system [5-10]. However, the insecurity felt by both those who feel threatened by the growing masses of poor people [8-11] and those who live in a precarious condition that does not allow them to master the present or plan for the future and often leads them to frustration and depression [2, 3] has also been recognized. The pride of those who do not want to redeem themselves through their work has also been recognized and expresses resentment towards a system held responsible for their difficulties and indifferent towards their suffering [12, 7-9]. Envy has also been noted, i.e. that feeling of malice towards those who have something we would like to have and do not think we can have [13] which arises especially in times of economic difficulty when the perception of one's condition of deprivation can lead to a demand for social justice but also to anger, resentment and, in the most extreme cases, to the impulse to destroy the envied object [14].

Some studies on poverty have delved into the emotional dynamics that accompany it. Again, they have focused mainly on shame. Some have highlighted how it is triggered by the competition of the capitalist economic system, which generates 'winners and losers', and is fueled by the 'dominant dis-

courses' produced by those not living in poverty and disseminated by political and cultural institutions [15]. Such discourses circulate certain 'truths' that poverty depends on people not working and living on benefits. They drive public opinion and lead those living in poverty to feel guilty and assert their otherness from the stereotype of the welfare recipient responsible for their poverty [16, 17]. Other studies [18, 19] have found that it is the activation measures adopted by welfare systems and the stigmatizing interactions that take place between the recipients of these measures and social workers in the course of their delivery that elicit shame.

Daly and Kelly [20] in their study on the everyday life of families in poverty show how shame arises when one's own poor economic condition becomes apparent to others who may judge it, and particularly in situations where parents fail to provide their children with the same things their peers enjoy. Alongside shame, Benjamin [21] also notes the presence of resentment. Analyzing the emotional reaction of ninety mothers who are denied or not recognized the right to receive financial support for their children, the author finds that when this right is not recognized, the mothers feel ashamed for having to ask for help from family members or acquaintances, making their condition of need evident, and resentment towards public officials who are perceived as indifferent and considered the cause of their dependence on others; when the right is recognized but not made enforceable due to administrative impediments, some mothers feel ashamed, feeling incomplete citizenship, while others resent the lack of enforceability of their right as a deliberate act of the state to make them feel ashamed and fall into poverty; when the right, recognized and made enforceable, does not allow for real participation, mothers feel ashamed, feeling in-between, and resentment at the irrationality, ambiguity and ambivalence of a social security system that purports to be universal but is not. Shiri Regev-Messalem [22] shows how the selectivity of the criteria for accessing benefits for families with children mainly arouses anger and resentment in mothers who, considering their children a common good that the state should take care of, react by hiding or denying the requirements that would exclude them from such benefits. The fear of being discovered, however, leads them to isolate themselves, so they remain trapped in the condition of poverty in which they find themselves and their protest does not take on a collective dimension capable of changing the system.

Piff and Moskowitz [23], exploring the relationship between social class and positive emotions such as pride, love and astonishment, find that upper-class individuals display mainly emotions directed at the self, such as pride, contentment and enjoyment, while lower-class individuals display mainly emotions directed at others, such as compassion, love and astonishment. The authors therefore hypothesise that the prevalence of love and compassion among members of the lower classes serves them to build bonds of interdependence and harmony with which to cope in difficult situations.

Longhurst and Hargreaves [24] investigate the role of

emotions in fuel poverty situations and show how they help shape the heating and energy consumption practices of vulnerable households, influencing their confidence in receiving support from the family and social network.

Finally, with reference to the Italian context, it is worth mentioning some research that, focusing on the experiences of people in poverty, has also highlighted the emotional component. Antonella Meo's in-depth study [24] on the experience of mothers of households that depend on their husband's sole source of income brings out, in particular, their constant worry about making ends meet and reaching the end of the month, their strong sense of responsibility towards their children, which is a source of encouragement to overcome difficulties, and the embarrassment of having to invent excuses to justify their children's non-participation in school trips. These feelings also emerge from the Maghrebi mothers in Turin involved in Morrone and Reynaudo's research [26] and are also present in the testimonies of immigrant single mothers and laid-off workers affected by the economic crisis that from North to South is still affecting our country [8-27].

3. Research Aims and Methods

The reflections presented in this essay are the outcome of an in-depth study carried out as part of the Research Project of Relevant National Interest "Parenting Constructs on Uncertain Grounds. What role for Social Work" on the analysis of the factors hindering and facilitating the exercise of parenting when fathers and mothers are confronted with conditions of uncertainty caused by economic problems [28, 29].

The in-depth study aimed to explore the emotional dimension that, although not the subject of direct survey, emerged from the analysis of the interviews in order to outline, in an exploratory way and preliminary to further investigation, the characteristics of its manifestation and the contribution it can bring to the analysis of poverty. Specifically, we set out to understand whether emotions can be considered an 'analytical category' useful for interpreting certain sociological phenomena and for shedding light on the link between affective dynamics that play out at the micro level and broader implications that are solidified at the macro level [30]. A textual analysis of the forty interviews collected was then carried out. The texts were first analyzed line by line in order to detect words, expressions and images revealing emotions, feelings and moods experienced by the interviewees in the course of the situations described. In analogy with other research on shame, which shows that it is often not named [31, 32] and codified [33], as it is considered 'taboo' [34], but is replaced with words and terms considered synonymous, in the course of the analysis emotions were understood as a general category comprising a wide range of expressions - moods, emotions, feelings and passions - which manifest themselves with different forms of intensity, duration and structuring [35-37]. The first step in the analysis was to identify for each interview the segments relating to the experiences [38] and the emotions

present in each. The emotions recorded in this way were traced back to the triggering factors and/or circumstances emerging from the interviewee's narrative in order to re-compose their intended meaning. The individual emotions detected were then analyzed transversally with reference to all the interviews, in order to identify similarities and differences in the profile of the interviewees and the triggering factors and/or circumstances. The next step was to identify any link between the emotions felt and the strategies activated by the interviewees to overcome difficult situations.

4. Results

Analysis of the interviews revealed the wide range of emotions aroused by living in poverty. Love, gratitude, solidarity, hope, despair, worry, anger, pride, shame, fear, sorrow, suffering, resentment emerged [1]. This variety certainly reflects the specificity of the sample and of the questions proposed to it. This constitutes a limitation that must be taken into account but which is not considered to invalidate the considerations presented below. As illustrated above, some of the emotions detected are generally associated with poverty conditions, while others are not. The latter seem to include gratitude, solidarity and pride, on which we have chosen to focus in this essay.

Among our interviewees, solidarity has a marked gender connotation, emerging above all among mothers. In some cases, it manifests itself in concrete behavior of altruism and generosity, such as sharing one's own food with other mothers who have little or offering snacks to all children, even those from wealthy families, who play with their children.

I have been thinking that I have friends who are in need; let's go to the supermarkets and then let's shop and share [...] I believe in God, and I pray for those I know that God will help them get through this moment. I want to start an organization for women [...], particularly for single mothers. That is my life-long dream. (G2).

Since my house is open, everyone is here, families with children included; I care for everyone's children. Without any cash, but [...] I frequently argue with my husband because he says, "You do not make it to the end of the month, can you imagine if you can give a snack every day to 18 children?" But rather than leaving them down here (referring to the inner courtyard between the flat complex) to dispute, I would take all of the youngsters and provide food for everyone, [...]. (G7).

In other cases, however, it remains at an inner level, presenting itself in the form of empathy towards mothers who, in order to provide the necessities for their children, prostitute themselves or do not turn to the social services for fear that the latter, not considering them capable of adequately caring for their children, will turn them away from them.

Transversal to fathers and mothers, on the other hand, is gratitude, i.e. the gratitude that in several cases they express towards both social workers and volunteers, neighbours and

acquaintances who have helped them in different ways.

I have to say thank you, [...] thank you to the people who have been with me and have also given me the strength to get back on my feet, [...] if I did not have them [...] I would feel shattered, if I did not have them. I would be lost indeed, [...] they have given me great support, I will never thank them enough [...] (G37).

Widespread is also the pride felt by both fathers and mothers who are able to recognize the external causes, economic and political, of the condition of poverty in which they find themselves, but also their own and the rest of the family's efforts, including their children, to overcome it.

It has not been easy for me, and it never will be, but I can say that right now I am happy and satisfied [...] I have done everything on my own. Economically speaking, I have always been busy. Moreover, I am happy of how I am raising my son, [...] And I am moving forward always smiling [...] because even if you suffer, you do not show it; you show hard you worked to get to this point, for which I have shed a lot of tears, (G37).

You see, it is not a shame to have nothing, I am a decent mother; I try to make ends meet, [...] I am not ashamed to be poor! [...] This is something that could happen to anyone! Even the rich can become impoverished once in their lives; you do not know how life turns; today you have something and tomorrow you do not (G1).

Recognition of the external causes of one's condition of poverty sometimes arouses a sense of deep injustice and anger against a political system that instead of eliminating them, fuels them. In most cases, however, they are taken over by a tenacious desire to redeem themselves through their work and to assert their dignity. Pride, in fact, leads these parents to prove that they are able to ensure, on their own and without outside help, that their children have the same standard of living as their peers, to prevent them from being excluded or marginalized, or from feeling embarrassed when they are with their peers, but also so that their children can in turn be proud of them. In most cases, pride retains an individual connotation and rarely extends to the collective dimension, manifesting itself as a public assertion of one's rights.

Being poor is not something to be proud of. There is some shame. Instead, one should take delight in saying, "It is not my fault [...]". One must come to feel proud to be a part of people who suffer from power. [...] We are the new working class; let us unify; let us not demoralize ourselves; let us not beat ourselves up; it is not our fault that we are being crushed. Today, there is a sense of responsibility for a culture of failure. But have I failed, or have globalization and those who control us?... (G27).

5. Discussion

As anticipated, the choice to focus on the three emotions described above is due not only to the fact that they are not usually attributed to those living in poverty, but also to the fact

that they allow us to highlight the sense of belonging and responsibility that, contrary to what many believe, they express towards society. Indeed, stereotypes and prejudices that consider those living in poverty as opportunists and cynical manipulators of the support measures activated to combat poverty are still widespread [39, 40]. Instead, the three emotions considered return an opposite image in which the ability to grasp the needs of others and take charge of them prevails over individual interest.

Gratitude, in fact, expresses that desire to give for the pleasure of doing so that underlies relationships devoid of instrumental interest. It represents a sort of "counter-giving, not in the sense of opposition to the act of giving, but as an action that arises from the gift and lives in its memory" [35] (p. 58). It is a feeling that for Simmel derives from the awareness of not being able to reciprocate the gift received and therefore predisposes one to enter into a permanent relationship with the donor in the perennial effort to express gratitude. Through this feeling released from any instrumental or utilitarian purpose, people enter into interaction in their totality: "the most refined and strongest relationships are often connected to this feeling independent of any single receiving, which offers to the other, as if by an obligation of gratitude, our entire personality and which likewise addresses the entirety of his" [4] (p. 95). By tapping into the deepest inwardness of individuals, gratitude becomes a powerful factor of social cohesion. "Although gratitude constitutes a purely personal or, if you like, lyrical affective state, as a result of its interweaving into thousands of actions and reactions within society, it becomes one of its strongest glues; it is the fertile breeding ground of feelings, from which not only individual actions of someone towards someone else are born, but thanks to its fundamental presence, [...], our actions increase in variation and intensity, gain a link with what has preceded us, a participation of personality, a continuity of mutual life. If at a stroke all reactions of gratitude to previous actions that persist in the soul were cancelled, society, [...], would fall apart" [4] (pp. 93-4).

Even solidarity, one of the most relevant concepts of all sociological reflection that has never ceased to question those particular forms of relationship in which at least one of the subjects involved takes on what he considers to be the desires or needs of the other and takes action to satisfy them, putting them before or making them coincide with his own [41], originates from and is nurtured by an affective-motivational dimension. At the basis of solidaristic behavior, in fact, different types of emotional reaction are recognized: empathy in the strict sense, i.e. the vicarious emotional response identical or very similar to that of the person being observed; sympathy, i.e. the emotional reaction oriented towards the other in which feelings of understanding, pity or compassion for his or her state of need prevail; personal discomfort for the other's state of need; outrage at the injustice suffered by the other [42]. It is based on three elements: common recognition, which generates a sense of belonging; reciprocity, nourished by trust,

which develops the aptitude for social relations; responsibility, that is, the concrete assumption of commitment towards the other [43]. These three dimensions express that 'surplus of "conditional unconditionality"', that is, that element capable of "founding" the very observance of the contract on which the social order is based' [44] (p. 20). There are various forms it can take: the primary one of family, friendship and neighborhood networks, and the secondary one, of associative, cooperative and voluntary forms [45-47]. The solidarity found among our interviewees seems to refer to 'vital world' solidarity, i.e. to that 'objective bond constituted, within a small group, by a network of relationships (full of meaning) of an everyday type, within which relationships of friendship, affection, sympathy, common goals and converging interests prevail' [48] (p. 7).

Pride, finally, is the feeling aroused by the desire to be esteemed. Contrary to shame, it derives from the positive judgement of some specific action one has performed [36]. It is a feeling that can favor but also hinder the relationship with the other. Lynd [37], in fact, distinguishes good pride, based on confidence in human possibilities, from bad pride, generated by insecurity and the desire for self-assertion. Also Turnaturi [49], focusing on self-love and self-esteem, argues that two different paths can start from them: one, aimed at affirming only oneself and one's own circle, which leads to particularism and selfishness; the other that "combines one's own interests and desires with the recognition of the other as a subject bearer of rights and passions" and "leads [...] to new forms of solidarity" (p. 100). Self-esteem developed through involvement in solidaristic actions, therefore, can also arouse forms of solidarity that extend beyond one's own reference group. For this to happen, however, it is necessary that pride in the private sphere and self-esteem are "encouraged by the public sphere, precisely because they were born and developed through relational processes", and are helped to become "criteria of judgement, values, and behavior in which the other is recognized and in which even the public sphere is taken on not as an abstract and hostile entity, but rather as the set of concrete others" [49] (pp. 112-113). The fact that among our interviewees pride retains an individual connotation could be seen as a consequence of the ideological and stereotypical view of poverty that still accompanies the public discourse and the definition of policies aimed at combating it.

6. Conclusions

The purpose of this essay was to contribute to the development of poverty research by using a less common research perspective, namely the sociology of emotion. Although sociology acknowledged the close relationship that ties poverty and emotions, it does not seem to deepen it except in the dimension of shame and the stigma associated with it.

Instead, examining the phenomenon of poverty through the lens of sociology of emotions and exploring the wide range of emotions that people living in poverty can experience appears

to be extremely beneficial in gaining a complete and more complex picture of people in poverty, in which we can see more positive aspects than negative ones, resources rather than scarcity. Starting with this concept, we intended to focus on three positive emotions that people in poverty express: gratitude, solidarity, and pride.

This decision was prompted by the understanding that these feelings are not typically associated with persons living in poverty, as well as the lack of scientific research on their occurrence in such conditions.

The research outlined in the paper revealed how these three emotions evolved in the interactions between those who live in poverty and those who do not directly experience it, contributing to the strength of their tie. As a result, they play an important role in strengthening social cohesiveness and solidarity, which are frequently jeopardized by poverty.

These findings appear to be highly valuable in combating the large number of prejudices and preconceptions that continue to accompany individuals living in poverty, as well as the many ideological interpretations that underpin many of the most recent European measures addressing this situation.

As a result, the paper contributes to the discussion of poverty by proposing a new research viewpoint that looks to be useful for a more in-depth understanding of the issue as well as the development of more effective solutions to address it.

Among the many research pathways paved by this perspective, the one referred to as positive emotions could be implemented because of its usefulness in spreading a positive image of people living in poverty, thereby assisting individuals in their efforts to overcome poverty and reinforcing social relationships.

Abbreviations

PRIN Research Project of National Interest

Author Contributions

Anna Zenarolla is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data supporting reported results is available from the author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography

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