

New and old forms of poverty in Spain: exploring food consumption during the crisis

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Abstract

Purpose

The economic crisis has renewed public debate in Europe about food poverty, drawing attention to the insecurity suffered by some social groups that are not apparent in official surveys. This paper examines how those affected deal with food poverty, along with their perceptions and assessments of being poor in the context of the economic crisis.

Design/methodology/approach

This paper is based on a qualitative study through twenty-four in-depth interviews with people seeking food aid from the Red Cross NGO. The special focus here is comparison of two types of households: those affected for the first time by the economic crisis and new to seeking food aid and those who have claimed food aid since before the crisis.

Findings

The results show that, despite similarities of situation, the two groups deal with food poverty differently. The “old” group rely on skills derived from experience and have more complex survival strategies. The “new” group react by adjusting how they obtain food, but limited knowledge of the environment and inexperience in dealing with the situation restricts their options. Their different ways of dealing with deprivation are related to how they interpret the crisis and their perception of themselves as receivers of food aid.

Social implications

These results underline the importance of food aid for both types of household presenting the State as a guarantee for cope successfully with crisis and rise from poverty.

Originality/value

This comparison offers a novel contribution to traditional studies of food poverty because it deepens knowledge of a practically unknown group and enables us to advance some explanations of how the passage of time impacts food poverty.

Keywords

Consumption, food poverty, social aid, crisis, resilience

Introduction

The economic crisis Spain has experienced in recent years has meant having to use new analytical perspectives on cases of poverty and deprivation, as extreme food

shortage has been relegated to a secondary level in research on poverty. The ways that poor households deal with situations of material hardship have been extensively studied (Edin, 1991; Edin and Lein, 1997; Caron, 2011; Heflin et al., 2011). But problems connected with food insecurity are not usually integrated into the research (O'Connor et al. 2016; Truninger and Díaz-Méndez, 2017). In general terms, the work on material deprivation that includes food takes one of two analytical approaches: either they describe and analyze how food needs are managed through social aid, whether public or private, formal or informal; or they examine how the poorest households obtain food, focusing particularly on the composition of the shopping basket (the economic route). Both approaches—food aid and the market—highlight the difficulties households face in fulfilling basic food needs and proper diet (Díaz-Méndez et al., 2018).

This approach involves considering certain key factors. First, these are societies that have no lack of food and where food needs are met almost exclusively through the market, with social aid confined to NGOs (Hemerijck, 2012; Guillen et al., 2016). Secondly, we face methodological limitations, as statistical data on poverty do not enable us to understand the experience of lacking the resources to meet basic food needs in any depth (INE, 2015).

First, therefore, we are confronting a new sense of what “consume” means (Alonso et al., 2011). Researchers who have examined the recent economic crisis in Spain confirm detecting new ways of approaching consumption in the context of recession and economic constraints. There is a “crisis discourse” characterized by the perception of the risk that unemployment brings, which affects not only those whose jobs are in danger but also those who have a stable job (Alonso et al., 2011).

Saving and austerity, traditional ways of limiting consumption, are apparent in some households able to adjust purchasing patterns (using the car less, buying supermarkets’ own-brand products, etc.), but the working classes hardly change their habits. Effectively, keeping up a certain level of consumption associated with well-being allows the lower classes to retain social self-image as middle class, despite the crisis (Alonso and Fernandez, 2009; Van der Horst et al., 2014).

Economic crisis affects the consumption of society as a whole, because the feeling of risk impacts all social levels. Yet we do not see a questioning of the model of consumption or major cutting back, but rather an attempt to retain previous status specifically by new forms of consumption. Therefore, food poverty is not part of a new cultural critique of consumption or of drastic curtailment of spending, but takes place within a context where keeping up consumption level and fear of being directly affected by unemployment means that people face the crisis by trying not to let their pre-recession level of well-being change significantly.

Secondly, we must consider new analytical approaches to poverty in welfare societies. In the specific case of food, traditional studies present a dynamic model of managing poverty to explain how poor households adopt strategies to deal with their situation, always viewing institutional and/or informal support as the main route to escape it (Edin, 1991; Edin and Lein, 1997). These studies confirm that structural factors in the household will condition the way in which they deal with food poverty and show how people affected by insecurity act to attempt to escape from deprivation and not to remain tied to social aid (Whiting and Ward, 2010;

Espeitx and Cáceres, 2011; Heflin et al., 2011). But new situations of poverty need fresh approaches focused on exploring the active role of the households and individuals affected in terms of capabilities, not simply courses of action. Resilience, an ability to respond to crisis and reconfigure life in response to new situations, presents those affected as agents who deal with difficulties by using their own resources and environments actively and strategically (Folke, 2006; Dagdeviren et al., 2016).

In the traditional approach, market strategies include reducing expenditure, changing shops, comparing prices (Alonso et al, 2016; Boost and Meier, 2017; Castilhos et al, 2017). The information is supplemented by analyzing a hierarchy of preferences, as one way of dealing with insecurity is taking steps to minimize the effect of the food shortage on children, or certain household members (usually women) taking cutbacks on themselves in favor of others (Carney, 2011; Charles and Kerr, 1995). In this approach, those affected by food poverty both work out strategies to manage institutional and relational resources and also explore how far to reorganise their consumption with non-traditional and non-commercial practices to give themselves room for manoeuvre in terms of the market and, therefore, of shortage (Reza & Bromfield, 2018). Collective consumption practices—the support of close social networks to share expenses and meals and using online platforms for consumers to deal directly with producers—are examples of the power of the consumer and new patterns of withstanding crisis (Berdysheva and Romanova, 2017).

Finally, with respect to methodological considerations, we must bear in mind a factor connected with the difficulty of obtaining data about food poverty in a country such as Spain, where there is no shortage of food. Official statistics on spending and consumption (Family Budget Survey/Encuesta de Presupuestos Familiares) are limited when it comes to detecting situations of deprivation. The lowest-income group (up to 499 euros) is represented by a small sample (3.10% in 2008 and 3.80% in 2017), and variations in food consumption are so slight and changes so slow that serious food shortages cannot be detected in a short time-period. Thus, for example, Spanish households with income of 499 euros or less spent 18.72% of their budget on food in 2008 and 18.01% in 2017, while households with more than 5,000 euros allocated 10.06% of their income to food in 2008 and 10.19% in 2017 (Family Budget Survey). The difference between the groups and the slight change during the crisis years are two aspects to be borne in mind when looking for the effect of the “economic crisis” on spending, which do not fully reveal the dire situation of those suffering extreme poverty.

The Survey on Living Conditions (ECV, previously PHOGUE), the survey most widely used to investigate poverty in Europe, shows an increase in households with basic food needs in Spain, but the measure of food poverty is also limited in this source. The only question on food is: “*Tell me if the household can afford a meal of meat, chicken, or fish (or vegetarian equivalent) at least every two days*”. In 2008, 2.2% of households replied positively, in 2013, 3.5% (ECV). The rest of the survey questions focus on the actual concept of poverty, without food insecurity: “*not having access to a car*”, “*falling behind with payments*”, “*ability to deal with unforeseen expenses*”, “*keeping the dwelling at a suitable temperature*”, and “*going on holiday at least one week a year*”.

Researchers and organisations in the third sector insist that the economic crisis has increased the number and changed the profile of Spaniards at risk of social exclusion, with sections of the population affected by unemployment that were untouched in previous periods (Antenas and Vivas, 2015; FOESSA, 2014; Consejo Económico y Social, 2016). However, detailed quantifying of food poverty through official surveys is not designed to study households and individuals who have insufficient food for subsistence.

In summary, understanding food poverty, like understanding poverty in modern consumer societies, requires new approaches and methodologies to capture behaviors that have not traditionally been examined as a response to poverty but that explain how those affected by economic constraint in a consumer society deal with poverty, especially those who are experiencing material shortage for the first time (Dagdeviren et al., 2017).

This is the context of the current study, which examines qualitatively how those affected by the crisis deal with food insecurity. The aim is to compare two groups: those affected for the first time and new to seeking social aid, dubbed “new” poor, and those who have sought social aid since before the economic crisis, the “old” poor.

Methodology

This study uses 24 in-depth semi-structured interviews with households seeking food aid during 2014: 14 interviews were with the person responsible for meals in a households seeking food aid for the first time, the “new” poor; 10 interviews were with the person responsible for meals in households which had received food aid prior to 2008, the “old” poor.

In both cases, the food aid was provided by the NGO Red Cross-Asturias. The first received cards for 50 euros’ worth of food purchases. The second received a package of non-perishable foods with a value of roughly 50 euros.

To select the samples, we used the sociodemographic characteristics of the population in receipt of both types of aid, as provided by the Red Cross-Asturias: sex, age, household structure, location. The interviews followed a protocol with open questions and eight areas of interest: the household’s sociodemographic situation, shopping, cooking, meals, preserving, saving, food-related illness, and food aid.

Each lasted between 45 and 80 minutes in total. They were treated confidentially, recorded, and transcribed literally to be analyzed afterwards with qualitative analysis software MAXQDA. A set of codes was established, with sub-codes based on the thematic areas of the protocol-script and on a preliminary analysis of the interviewees’ replies.

Results

Experiencing food poverty

Finding themselves in the situation of asking for food, lacking the most basic of human necessities, these individuals are undergoing extreme personal hardship. Whether habitually claiming social aid or asking for the first time, their personal situations bring them together: they lack the economic wherewithal to buy food.

“My sister-in-law had one of those cylinders of camping gas... I had to use it then because, well, I’m not going to go without cooking something for the children. But I was there twelve days and I went to Caritas to ask for help. I tell them... look, I don’t have electricity, there’s still I don’t know how many days till I’m paid... help me. They didn’t help me [...] I had to wait till I was paid. I was without electricity for twelve days.” (Int6-old)

“The boy goes [...] to school here, every day, there are days when we don’t have anything for petrol and he’s had to stay at home... but normally when I’m paid that’s for the rent, the petrol money to take him to school and then food.” (Int7-new)

Relying on external or official help is part of everyday life for the “old” poor, one more routine for coping with shortage they have learned to live with. The “old” poor have experience with the situation. Lack of food is one more shortage and tackled in the same way. The combination of shopping and social aid is part of how food for daily needs is obtained, but adjustments are made to prioritise expenses considered “more urgent”. Paying electricity or gas—to avoid supply being cut—or paying the rent—to avoid eviction—are urgent and take priority over food.

However, for the “new” poor, lack of resources and the new role of being dependent on official aid put the person in charge of feeding the household into a new situation as a consumer, taking decisions about how to deal with poverty: what to eat and feed their family.

“Well, look, we stopped shopping for... we’re really keen on cheese, [...] we’ve had to cut back and it wasn’t a problem. And my daughter is aware of what she used to have and what she has now [...] If you’ve lived a life where things have always gone badly and things are bad now, nothing’s changed for you, but otherwise you know what you’ve lost, [but] you’re not going to go hungry; rather than buying the most expensive, you buy the cheapest, it’s a matter of organizing yourself. (Int14-new)

The “new” poor are experiencing a more stressful situation where food takes second place to paying the electricity bill, the mortgage, or the rent, and they cut out superfluous things to allocate more money to everyday food.

“Of course, if you end up paying more for the electric, that’s less for food” (Int5-old)

“So we cut back on food, because you’ve got to pay the electric, water too, and the rent too, and, well, she doesn’t go out with her friends so much, doesn’t go out to eat, those things you did before and can’t do now.” (Int1-new)

Planning focuses on reaching the end of the month, without success, and not for lack of skill but because other necessities, less basic but more urgent, take priority in the hierarchy of needs. There is no substantial difference in how priorities are ranked by the “old” or “new” poor, but they differ in how they respond to the pressure this need places on them.

Institutional aid

“New” and “old” poor differ in their handling of and skills in seeking social aid, and the more seasoned show a high degree of sophistication in the strategies used.

Both types of household have recourse to institutional organisations when facing difficulties in obtaining food. Even so, the “old” poor know a larger catalogue of options. They are also used both to being refused help and to new programmes appearing at set times. Their long experience of food poverty has forced them to try various organisations, public and private, even combining them at the same time, in the search for food.

“The Red Cross and then Caritas was also helping me for a while, many years ago now. And then [...] I was at Riquirraque, working in cutting and sewing, dressmaking... I was... I was getting food from [...], Alimerka, oh god, from Caritas and from them... That’s how I started.” (Int3-old)

The “new” poor householders are novices in food aid, unfamiliar with the procedure and various official routes available.

“I’ve done the Red Cross one with the coupons, and I don’t know any others, I think there’s another one where you have to make an application and they give you food, but I don’t know it.” (Int1-new)

They have never found themselves in this situation before and delays or refusal to help seem incomprehensible given their grave situation.

“I applied for the social wage [and] I don’t understand how they went a month without paying, if they’re just four hundred and a bit euros and you have to pay rent, gas, electricity. How do you cope with a month without income?” (Int9-new)

The “new” claimants of food aid are people accustomed to handling day-to-day expenses and paying their bills on time. Faced with the imperative of sorting out their daily life, they do not understand administrative delays. Food insecurity is dramatic experience they try to hide, particularly from their children.

“If you want to pay for the house, I can’t afford it, but I have to pay the rent because of the girl, paying the mortgage with that and I’d die of shame if I didn’t pay, so it comes in and goes out.” (Int7-new)

The skill the “old” poor gain from experience allows them to husband scarce resources so that food does not run short. They go to multiple institutions to reach the month’s end without a long-term plan—they cannot afford one. They know which organizations will not deny a food package at the end of the month, and accordingly budget their meagre disposable income to pay, first of all, what is difficult to fix afterwards (having electricity cut off). Once urgent payments like this are dealt with, they ration the money left and use every means possible to ensure they are not left foodless.

Mutual support networks

As well as seeking institutional aid, “old” poor households also use their environment to the full. They show a thorough knowledge of their surroundings, a result of years of hardship. Knowing that institutional aid is sometimes not enough, they skilfully combine other options. Though family is in a similar situation to their

own, some get together with close family to share a single pot meal, borrowing ingredients, etc. They know their neighbourhoods well, going to where they can get food on credit, or even unsold foods for free.

“My daughter, what she does is when she gets some money [...] we get together and we go and buy what we need to buy and make one big pot, and we all eat that so that we can stretch the... the money we can get.” (Int8-old)

Rural families grow food to save money, making the most of their abilities and available resources:

“I leave the house, [...] and I have garlic growing [...] We’re going to plant lettuces there later, so... though a lettuce is only one euro at Alimerka, it’s still shopping.” (Int3-old]

The “new” poor also use their environment for food, but focus mainly on those closest to them: family. Admitting their situation causes shame and, unable to maintain the same lifestyle as before, they lose contact with friends:

“There’s not much solidarity in the street—you know what happens? like how I stopped socializing there, you lose contact, you lose things...” (Int4-new)

Saving on shopping and cooking

Shopping reveals other ways of dealing with food insecurity for both groups, with observable differences between the “old” and “new” poor. The “old” plan their shopping strategically to manage limited budgets and satisfy hunger. Shopping follows a set routine and occupies considerable time: first, looking for offers, then visiting different shops for different foods by price, and, finally, shopping at the point in the month that fits between income and outgoings:

“We go to a lot of them, like, I’ll go to one supermarket where chicken is cheaper but milk is more expensive. Then I buy the chicken there but go to the other one for milk. I know the prices in all the supermarkets, because it’s... there’s no other way. If you have a lot of money... you don’t... it doesn’t matter and you’ll save yourself the journey, but for me it’s what I have to do.” (Int5-old)

All those interviewed save and plan their shopping, but the “new” poor are making adjustments the “old” have practised for years: reducing consumption of superfluous things, substituting brand-name products with supermarkets’ lines, or reducing quantities, planning within a shorter time frame. Such adjustments are hard, and their shopping habits remain the same, focused on healthy, cheap food, weighing long-term and medium-term needs. But they now act like experienced price-aware shoppers, adapting to the family’s needs.

“With food, yes, we’ve cut back, more, but it’s not... okay, so... we don’t drink wine like we used to there, that’s a cut-back we’ve made, because there we had an expensive life, drank wines... and other things that we don’t here, but they’re not essential.” (Int14-new)

Constraints are also present in the kitchen and food preparation; as culinary skills allow. Both groups use freezing to store for future lean periods. Buying and preparing more food when they can, they freeze for when food is short:

“I’m very much one for buying, cooking, and freezing, [...] because God knows what will happen, like what I’m going through now... until they gave me the help here, I was managing on what I had in the freezer... so...” (Int9-new)

“Old” poor households have more developed preparation strategies. Cooking skills enable more ingenious adjustments, always with an eye to satisfying hunger, with a better return on each meal.

“If you buy some chicken breast or something like that—you know how I do them? In a green sauce. [...] I batter and fry them... then do them in green sauce... and that fills the girls up far better and with one piece for me more than enough ... with one piece of breast, so... so I eat.” (Int10-old)

They also make the most of food.

“[...] A chicken, us with a chicken, with that I’ll make you [...] we mix rice with the chicken [...] or we take the carcass and we cut it up small and make a soup [...] and that’s a soup. Then the mix... we make some white rice and eat with that.” (Int8-old)

Assessment and perception of the situation of poverty in the context of crisis

Different people’s different ways of dealing with poverty are clearly conditioned by how they analyze the origin and causes of their situation and the economic crisis affecting them.

The “old” poor are not suffering such a major impact on their lives, having been in a marginal situation for years, but have seen their already difficult circumstances worsen and describe changes in how they tackled food shortage before and now. Consumption has not altered, although some of their strategies have been affected by this new economic context. Their past experience offers no indication that circumstances will improve in the future and they have no confidence about coming out of a new crisis successfully. They have coped using resources that complement social aid and, with irregular, undeclared work, they have survived and dealt with shortage in previous years. They do not, therefore, think that a regular job would lift them out of poverty.

“I worked in scrap before... My father was always a scrap merchant... He also worked a lot for the council, as a butcher, as I don’t know what [...] he always worked. Well obviously, now with wages, so not any more... that, they don’t give jobs like there were before [...] to the snails too... [...], what happens now, they don’t let you... [...] Everything’s got harder, more difficult... harder and harder. So that..., like I tell the kids, I say, “if you don’t study and get something” [...] well... not this life...” (Int6-old)

To this is added the new reality of their environment, the evidence that nowadays others are better prepared than they are to find work, so that the competition will make it impossible to get a job.

“If he said [...] that he’d get a good job, that they’ll pay him well... but as what? [...] The work’s very bad... There are people with qualifications, studying all their life and they’re out of work... from what I see on the TV and they go abroad because there’s nothing for what they’ve been studying for... and they leave and they succeed. [...] Now look at us who don’t know anything... [...] When it comes

to dealing with a job knowing about numbers, knowing about... [short silence] dealing with things.” (Int6-old)

Faced with the impossibility of any other way, institutional aid is viewed as the only way to cope with the crisis. Social aid, therefore, is seen as an acquired right, justified by their long experience of poverty and unsuccessful attempts to rise out of it.

“Ahh! [sigh], everything’s just so bad for everybody, that.. hey!... with a little bit of help... if they’d only give me the social wage, which is mine by rights..., yes, with two hundred and ninety euros, I’d work miracles..., with what they should give me, with what I’m due. It’d pay the house, I’d have money for the electric, I’d have something for the shopping without having to look at every last offer [...] That’s how I think I could live better.” (Int5-old)

The “new” poor, who have not experienced such hardship before, view the crisis as an unforeseen circumstance that has touched people like them, previously beyond the reach of poverty. They perceive themselves as caught by an economic rough patch beyond their control, unfairly, even randomly, and that it could have affected anyone else.

“This could happen to anyone, what’s happening to us, it could even happen to the richest person.” (Int5-new)

Living off charity, depending on others for help, is part of a world that they never expected. They have come to this pass by losing employment and consider themselves able to make their own living. They perceive themselves as part of a society where personal effort is the way to deal with daily necessities. Working is how to improve, not only for the associated income, but also to participate in society, a public demonstration of being useful and controlling one’s own life (Dagdeviren et al., 2017).

“At first [I felt] so much shame, well, going to ask for help made me... I saw it as something else, something I wouldn’t... that wasn’t for me.” (Int3-new)

The Red Cross aid they receive is viewed as an emergency measure in an unforeseen and urgent situation; what is helping them today could help others in future. They see their current situation—both experiencing poverty and claiming social aid— as temporary. This provisionality is precisely the hope they cling to, the faith that everything will improve, that they can return to the life they lost and leave the aid for others who need it.

“I don’t want to live like this, the only solution I see in my case is a job for everyone. This isn’t a solution—I’m grateful for it, I’m very grateful, but for me this is not a short-term solution.” (Int7-new)

While recognizing their extreme situation, their assessments show confidence that their life will change when the country’s economic circumstances, which brought them here, pick up. Most, therefore, expect to come out of the crisis by the same means that previously kept them safe from insecurity: getting a job.

“Look, I see it [the future] good, I want to see it good. A job, a job and a salary of a eleven hundred, twelve hundred euros, and that would be the lottery, see, and with a job, we’d be doing wonderfully.” (Int8-new)

Conclusions

The comments of those responsible for feeding households seriously affected by food insecurity put into relief how the consumer environment, where they are coping with shortage, conditions how they do so. They are poor in a society where food is no longer a basic commodity essential for sustaining life, but a consumer good integrated into the logic of the consumer society (Alonso, 1986). The crisis takes place in this scenario, forcing Spanish households to deal with shortage and, in some cases, lack of food. But the consumption model is unchanged by the crisis, with priority given to payments that have serious repercussions or that make the poverty apparent to others in a society where everyone is a consumer. Food becomes an urgent necessity, but not essential.

It is within this context of economic crisis in a modern consumer society that the “old” and “new” poor households are looking for solutions. Both groups are aware of the difficulties of feeding a household on a daily basis with the scant resources at their disposal, and they put into action a set of strategies in order to deal with the situation: some are focused on provision of food (institutional aid and help from the environment) and others on saving or more efficient management of the food available (shopping and cooking). Some of these strategies and especially how they are combined have already been observed by other researchers, such as Edin and Lein (1997), in connection with material deprivation, although not applied to food.

The “old” poor have recourse to various organisations in the search for food, prioritising paying rent and electricity, as seen in other contexts (Dowler, 2001; Hoisington; 2002). They have skills derived from experience, know their environment well and their own social capabilities. They know which local shops do not require immediate payment and where food or leftovers are available free. Family ties facilitate successful choices and the family, although possibly in a situation of similar economic hardship, will help: for example, ingredients are lent and they cook together. Such collective strategies for dealing with shortage are also observed in contexts of extreme poverty, where street children face their insecurity through mutual support (Reza and Blomfield, 2018).

The “new” poor afflicted by shortage try to save on their shopping and cooking to reach the end of the month, after also deciding to prioritise rent and electricity. They make use of their environment, but in a more limited way than other groups, unwilling for their situation to be public knowledge, so they go to immediate family only. They limit expenses by cutting back on the superfluous and cutting out more expensive foods or reducing visits to bars or restaurants. Saving behaviours seen in households that habitually receive food vouchers in other countries (Hoisington et al., 2002) are reproduced in the households of the “new” poor in Spain. Despite adapting their shopping, however, their model of consumption is not modified substantially, so has little significant impact on their insecurity.

In light of these strategies for coping with food poverty, we observe different levels of resilience, associated with the social networks relied on. The “old” poor’s decisions aim to increase their network of formal and informal contacts. In contrast, the “new” poor restrict social relations, limiting the aid organisations they use and reducing their contacts in order not to make their situation visible.

The ability to respond, therefore, appears to increase with experience and make the “old” poor more resilient. Using all the resources available in the environment, sharing the situation with those who can help to overcome it, adapting to shortage with skill in order not to suffer from hunger, makes them better able to deal with crisis. This is confirmed in other studies showing greater resilience in households with long histories of poverty (Whiting and Ward, 2010; Dagdeviden et al., 2017). However, lack of experience in using formal aid, fear of others’ knowing their situation, and difficulties adjusting everyday spending to their new insecurity, mean that the “new” poor take decisions that hinder their ability to adapt.

The “old” poor do not see themselves as poor, but as regular claimants of social aid. Their strategies are directed towards dealing with continued insecurity. They perceive their situation as a permanent state and the crisis as just one more of the many already weathered. Repeated failure in jobs offering the minimum well-being necessary to do without social aid makes them view the future with little expectation of success. Seeing new groups of better-qualified people in poverty makes them even more sceptical. Given this perception of the future, institutional aid is unsurprisingly seen as a primary resource; the State should take charge of the situation, guaranteeing the welfare that they have been and will be unable to achieve through employment (Alonso and Fernández-Rodríguez, 2016). From this perspective, they possibly see the new social-aid claimants as competitors for State resources they believe they deserve.

The “new” poor perceive their situation as circumstantial, associated with an economic crisis affecting the whole population. They view, therefore, their current situation as temporary, to be resolved as soon as national economic conditions improve. They feel prepared and ready to work, as they have done until now. Viewing social aid as a valuable but temporary resource, designed for those who lack their working skills, they are grateful for it in emergency and perplexed that they are not better equipped to cope with the effects of the economic crisis. But their situation is viewed as provisional and will be put behind them in the short or medium term. Therefore, they intend and desire to do without social support as soon as possible so that others in need can have access to it.

In summary, the “new” and “old” poor are united by experiencing the effects of an economic crisis in a context where the welfare model counts on people having the resources to integrate into the consumer society. Their path through poverty, the social networks accompanying their experience of insecurity, their interpretation of how the crisis affects Spanish society, and their self-perception as social-aid claimants, are the axes determining their different ways of coping with deprivation.

Policy implications

The households studied here do not view hunger as an effect of the economic crisis and choose to prioritise other spending considered more urgent. This response is natural for citizens within a consumer society where providing food does not meet a need. Food is one more consumer good, not a basic necessity. It is into this framework that food aid must be fitted, and also the way that lack of food is treated as a social emergency, as a right, the right to food, which is not seen as part of government aid in Spain but is handled by NGOs.

We must also consider the effects of prolonged lack of food as glimpsed in cases here. Studies carried out in other contexts have confirmed the relationship between obesity and food aid (DeBono et al., 2012). However, the connection between a healthy diet and poverty has hardly been examined. This hampers the creation of policy initiatives to improve diet specifically focused on the population in serious poverty in developed countries, such as Spain.

In a capitalist society food needs are obviously met by buying food. It seems inappropriate, therefore, for studies of food poverty to approach the subject solely through social aid and to seek solutions only by offering food. As we have confirmed here, poor households have difficulties as consumers during austerity and in adapting to limited income. Their approaches are modern responses to old food needs and do not just involve spending less. Incorporating their responses about their own consumption and as a group into the framework of saving gives a clearer sense of how these groups cope with scarcity. But, as seen here, using vouchers instead of actual food, as implemented by some NGOs and institutions, not only gives households autonomy in managing resources, but also works on the basis that deprivation is dealt with by shopping.

The comparison here may suggest that the “old” poor’s experience today is what lies in the future for the “new”. Having experienced insecurity will clearly give the “new” poor more adaptability but lead to lower confidence about their options for leaving their current situation. Getting out by means of work is evidently the route that both groups look to. But it is worth stopping to reflect on the idea that they deserve the social aid they receive, viewing it therefore as a civil right: the “old” poor because of their involuntarily but steadily worsening skills and ability to rise out of poverty, the “new” because they view their circumstances as out of their control. Faced with a situation where it is beyond citizens’ ability to influence their own fate—today, the economic crisis—the State presents itself as the only guarantee for them to cope successfully with crisis and rise from poverty.

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