Training or social exclusion: competences for the social inclusion of groups at risk
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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report the results of ongoing research on the integration of groups at risk of exclusion, in order to facilitate decision-making processes that allow their consideration by social protection mechanisms. The main objectives of the research were to construct tools to explore and assess entry to the workforce based on skills training and risk factors. Study participants comprised groups using services in the area provided by Social Action, which included women at risk, people with disabilities, immigrants, ethnic minorities, present and former drug addicts, and other groups such as homeless people. The methodology is qualitative, through ethnographic fieldwork. We conclude that, unlike poverty and marginalisation, which manifest as an economic deficit and thus may be tackled by economic measures, social exclusion corresponds to a social deficit. Exclusion produces deficits in terms of social cohesion, in which factors related to training and the skills acquired play an essential role.

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1. Introduction

Poverty has traditionally been studied in terms of economic inequality and the associated low-income bracket of the population. Nowadays however, changes in our society have given rise to other mechanisms of marginalisation besides purely economic processes, and these act as triggers for social exclusion.

Various policies on preventing social exclusion, including the European directives, indicate that the best way to achieve this is through education and training. The objective of most of the policies and actions that have been proposed is for the subject to obtain employment. The wide range of strategies advocated to attain this goal encompass a diversity of approaches to this problem, and have met with varying degrees of success. To fulfil this
objective, interventions must take a comprehensive and open approach to addressing the needs that arise in specific contexts. The study discussed here, consisting of a case study on the employability of certain groups at risk of exclusion, was conducted in the province of Leon, Spain, throughout 2012 and in the first half of 2013 in order to gain a better understanding of the current status of these groups that would contribute to informing decisions on social protection mechanisms. The main objectives of the research were to construct tools to explore and assess entry to the workforce based on skills training and risk factors. Study participants comprised groups using services in the area provided by Social Action. These groups included women at risk, people with disabilities, immigrants, ethnic minorities, present and former drug addicts, and other groups such as homeless people, etc. The group consisting of women could be further sub-divided into single mothers, separated women, sometimes with family responsibilities, who were seeking a standard employment relationship for the first time, abused women, victims of intimate partner violence and women over 45 years. In some cases, a single individual presented more than one of these profiles concomitantly. The research team worked directly with these groups, and the study was primarily based on a qualitative methodological approach, as explained below.

2. Theoretical and conceptual background.

In a prior synthesis of the perspective from which we addressed the issue of marginalisation, it is first necessary to note that the two fairly closely related concepts of poverty and social exclusion rapidly emerge when speaking of vulnerable groups. In general, research on social exclusion has formed part of studies about poverty, since these are increasingly taking social rather than strictly economic considerations into account, and as Hilary Silver (2007) has indicated, social research has begun to focus more and more on indicators to measure social exclusion. For example, the indicators proposed by Barnes (2005) encompass seven dimensions of social exclusion: financial status, ownership of durable goods, housing quality and habitability, neighbourhood perceptions, personal social relationships, physical health and psychological well-being. In an earlier study, Barnes and others (2002) measured exclusion as multidimensional disadvantage in the areas of housing, health, education, social relations and participation. Meanwhile, Kronauer defined it as labour market, economic, cultural, spatial, social and institutional exclusion (cited in Littlewood and Herkommer 1999). Petra Böhnke (2006) used the Eurobarometer surveys to measure social exclusion in subjective terms, creating an index of belonging that is related to social support, family ties and trust in institutions. In Spain, the Observatory of Social Exclusion and Inclusion Processes created by the Sartu Federation in 2001 has attempted to bring together institutions, social organisations and businesses in order to address these issues. To this end, its work has focused on the construction of social indicators of social exclusion and inclusion and on the factors that influence this, conducting studies and forming specific working groups. Unlike poverty and marginalisation, as Fitoussi (1998) and Castel (1997) have also indicated, the phenomenon of exclusion is related not only to an economic deficit - which could be tackled through minimum wage policies - but also, above all, to weak social ties. In extreme cases, situations of exclusion can lead to the breakdown of relationships and the isolation of individuals, producing a deficit in terms of social cohesion. Importantly from a sociological perspective, exclusion is not the unique preserve of any one particular social stratum. On the contrary, one characteristic of advanced technological societies is the "risk of destabilisation of the previously stable" (Fitoussi, 1998) caused by accelerated processes of downward mobility.

3. Methodology.

We applied a qualitative methodological design to ethnographic fieldwork, using in-depth interviews and focus groups with the groups concerned to investigate a number of factors that render people belonging to groups at risk more vulnerable to exclusion. These factors related primarily to the personal, family, educational, training, social, cultural and experiential trajectories of the different individuals. Based on the analysis of the data, we propose a set of tools, strategies and skills to consider in order to achieve their social inclusion.

Prior to conducting the ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interpretation, we administered a semi-structured questionnaire to users of the social services in order to determine their profiles. A total of 79 users participated, of
whom 63 were women and 16 were men. A statistical analysis of the data obtained from the first part of the semi-structured questionnaire allowed us to validate the representativeness of the sample.

On the basis of the insights gained in the previous section, we attempted to focus on strictly social aspects, which we defined as the family and the household group. Furthermore, the field work was conducted taking into account the position of women within the family, the gender division of household labour, power relations within the household group, access to resources, decision-making, transmission of the values held within the subject's social context, family, school and education, the creation and coordination of family-based and non family-based networks of cooperation and support, access to information and its different forms of use, the situation of young people and personal, social and identity conflicts, among others.

The results of the field work allowed us to develop a set of parameters to assess the level of placeability, which included: value and valence given to employment, the perceived causes of unemployment, willingness to work, personal and professional self-image, job search style, work maturity, demonstrable job-seeking skills, social and family support and need to enter the workforce.

4. Results and Discussion.

An analysis of the data revealed that the groups were mainly composed of women who, regardless of age and marital status, presented an additional characteristic: thus, they were usually separated or divorced women who had been victims of intimate partner violence, separated or divorced women entering the labour market for the first time, or single women with dependents (elderly people or children). More specifically, separated or divorced women aged between 30 and 50 years old accounted for almost half of the women who participated in this study. The two other groups with similar levels of representation, and which comprised the remainder of this sample, were single women aged between 20 and 29 years old and married women aged between 30 and 39. As regards men, a considerable number were married men aged between 30 and 39 years old, followed by separated, single and married men aged between 40 and 49 years old.

Turning to educational level, the most numerous group consisted of women who had completed basic and primary education (previously, education up to 14 years of age in Spain), followed by those who had completed secondary or vocational education, mainly aged between 40 to 50 years old. The situation with regard to the male participants was similar in the sense that the most numerous group again consisted of men who had completed basic or primary education. Nevertheless, some of the male and female participants had also completed university education or training. The place of birth or origin of the individuals who participated in the study was varied; just over half (46) were from the study area, the province of Leon, while the remainder were mostly immigrants from outside the European Union.

The risk groups with which the different participants self-identified were also varied; for example, some identified themselves as being people with disabilities (13), some as belonging to ethnic minorities, mainly Roma (5), some as immigrants (11) and others as former drug addicts (3). Although there is a wide range of approaches from which one could address the study of these different groups, the objectives of the present study enabled us to conduct a global analysis.

Although each of the participants in this study was assessed individually, in the present paper we will summarise the most significant results obtained from the field work through the application of the defined parameters. As regards the value given to employment, work was not felt to be the most important aspect of life, since participants indicated other factors such as "health" or "family", etc., but it was considered "a form of personal fulfilment", besides being a means "to obtain enough money to live on". The majority also thought that "it is better to live by one's work than to be dependent on the family", "or on society", whether through a grant or social assistance.

On the perceived causes of unemployment, the majority of participants believed that in their different personal situations, unemployment could mainly attributed to the particular circumstances or characteristics of each. In other words, they reported that "lack of experience", "lack of training", "personal character" and even "because of not knowing where or how to look" figured among the reasons for their unemployment. Personal abilities was given as another of the most important factors.
Regarding willingness to work, individuals usually reported a high willingness to "perform work of any kind", usually within the context of low-skilled work. Some were willing to lower the level of their aspirations still further "as long as they found work" or even to work in marginal, illegal or undeclared situations. In terms of personal and professional self-image, the participants considered that they were sufficiently qualified to undertake the kind of employment they wished to obtain, which as mentioned above was generally of a low-skilled nature, and some even considered themselves to be very good in their occupations.

As regards their job search style, the majority responded that they "did not engage frequently" in attempts to find work. Often this was because they were simultaneously performing another series of activities or worked in casual employment by the hour, and thus could only devote themselves to job-seeking when time or circumstances permitted. Consistent with this aspect, their demonstrable work maturity was not high. In other words, they saw no need for further training or recycling for the jobs to which they aspired, or even for further training in the work that they could be doing. Training was seen as "something that might help you find employment, but not always", either because the jobs to which they aspired were low-skilled or because "you're looking for a job, nothing else". With reference to social and family support, most of the participants reported receiving support and encouragement for training and job-seeking from their families and people close to them, who were often the very people who informed participants about job vacancies. However, there were also many participants who responded that "it's my own family situation that prevents me from looking for work", and often, from working itself.

The workforce entry and social inclusion needs of the individuals surveyed were generally high, since in addition to having to work to support themselves, the majority had dependents, who paradoxically, as mentioned above, were sometimes the very people who prevented the participants from working. However, participants did not classify their situation as desperate because in most cases, "social assistance or casual work by the hour keeps the problem at bay".

An analysis of the information collected showed that despite their willingness to work, there were a number of factors that rendered it impossible for these people to find work. For example, almost half of the participants stated that they did not possess the work experience required of them to do a job. A similar proportion reported that they did not have the necessary training. In both cases, the people most frequently affected by these circumstances were those looking for their first standard employment relationship, with a contract and Social Security contributions, and were mainly women, regardless of age.

Similarly, they felt that they were prevented from finding work by personal problems that in most cases were related to their family situation, which in turn generally meant having to look after dependent children or elderly people.

There was another, less numerous group of respondents, accounting for 25%, who felt that they were prevented from finding work by a lack of information and guidance on job-seeking. These respondents generally corresponded to people with disabilities, especially those with an acquired disability who needed to change their occupation in order to continue working, and consequently faced new social and employment circumstances both as regards the form of seeking employment and the types of work they could do.

Another factor participants identified as impeding successful job-seeking was the existence of social and employment discrimination, an argument generally put forward by immigrants or women and particularly by ethnic minorities. Respondents also argued that "companies just want to exploit workers", or that "for what they pay, it's not worth working". In this respect, it should also be noted that as Guerrero Romera (2005) has indicated, the factors which determine access to employment are the product of a two-way interaction between individuals and their environment, an interaction influenced by individual and social variables such as personal and professional skills, attitudes, work environments, families, the labour market, etc. Similarly, as Martinez (2000) has suggested, the labour market should be analysed as the product of the interaction of a set of environmental and individual factors, since "training, by itself, does not automatically imply access to employment". There is a need for social and economic integration where the subject takes an active role in the process, and for initiatives which are aimed at the comprehensive integration of individuals into society, initiatives in other words that not only seek to achieve their entry into the workforce but also their social inclusion. Therefore, the two main features of this model consist of the relationship between the subjects and their setting and the active role subjects play in shaping that process. Gil (2003) has highlighted the difference between talking of "labour market and social" inclusion compared to
talking about "entry into the workforce" or "social inclusion" alone. The first refers to a collection of different policies, measures and actions that sometimes reflect disparate methods and approaches and involve different public and/or private actors. However, all these actors should be united by the ultimate goal, which is to "help unemployed people find jobs and lead a life comparable to that of their fellow citizens". Factors specific to individuals include determinants such as their sex, age, social circumstances, training, experience, ability to learn, attitudes towards workforce entry, work maturity and expertise in job-seeking, among others (Pérez and Blasco, 2001).

According to Gil (200), inclusion actions are defined by the profile of their target population and more specifically, by their target population's needs. These profiles and needs constitute an essential and specific scenario, in which the presence of deficiencies and unmet potentials of an employment, training, educational and economic nature, etc., form a complex web of risk or social exclusion that leads to a lack of integration into the community and society and which labour market and social inclusion actions must address. From this perspective, the target populations of these actions are unemployed people who present the characteristics common to social exclusion related to employment. As defined by Echeverría (1997), labour market and social inclusion means entry into active life, entailing a change in an individual's use of time and the concomitant implication of a life project, understood as a set of rational acts, completed and organised within a given timeframe. This life project encompasses the professional project, the profession to exercise that contributes to the full development of the individual and which is consistent with the needs, interests and characteristics of the person concerned. Therefore, it is necessary to link inclusion to the development of people's personal and professional identities, rendering it a continuous, dynamic, sometimes slow and uncertain, process which differs according to the personal, social and cultural characteristics of individuals and their setting. Inclusion involves a process of individual and social synthesis. It is, as Echeverría (1997) stated, a complex and diversified process due to the growing number of entrance and exit 'doors' that we all have to face, but most of all those who are 'disadvantaged' or 'excluded'.

5. Conclusions.

Most individuals in the various groups at risk who participated in this study presented a series of educational, employment, attitudinal and social deficits that prevented them from meeting the conditions necessary to obtain employment. Their chances of obtaining employment were also diminished by the fact that few possessed the minimum specific professional training required by most jobs. Some of these individuals were aware of their educational and professional deficiencies and thus sought precarious employment since they assumed that this would require little training or professionalisation; however, the evidence indicates that this belief is unfounded, because even precarious employment requires training.

Moreover, the current labour market governed by supply and demand is very strong and competitive, and thus the most disadvantaged groups are more vulnerable to comprising pockets of exclusion from this market. This precludes a number of groups from enjoying equal access to decent and well paid employment, and it is for this reason that intermediation mechanisms are created, with the primary purpose of providing employers and employees with the minimum conditions necessary for the two groups to find common ground. In counter to an attitude which one could classify as centrifugal on the part of each group, increasing their demands and conceding little flexibility to their requirements, stands the centripetal force of employment intermediaries, who seek to find a balance between the parties involved.

The indicators described here demonstrate that unlike poverty and marginalisation, which manifest as an economic deficit and thus may be tackled by economic measures, social exclusion corresponds to a social deficit. Exclusion produces deficits in terms of social cohesion, in which factors related to training and the skills acquired play an essential role.
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