Solidarity and Mutual Assistance in Low-income Communities: Everyday Practices to Overcome Scarcity and Improve Quality of Life, Recife, Brazil

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Abstract

This article discusses how poor people in Recife, in the northeast of Brazil, deal with everyday difficulties, using solidarity and the gift as resources to cope with needs which are extensive given the insufficiency and ineffectiveness of public policy, and how these practices and feelings are related to quality of life. Solidarity is structured according to the tripartite obligation to give, receive and reciprocate, on which the system of the gift is based. Knowledge of how such relations are established may help strengthen the organic and more sustainable forms that the excluded discover to achieve quality of life for themselves.

Keywords: Solidarity; the gift; quality of life

1. Introduction

This article discusses the results of research carried out between 2008 and 2010 on the emergence of solidarity and the gift in low-income communities in Recife, a city in the northeast of Brazil. The study seeks to discover how this pattern is manifested amongst residents and what its role is in maintaining
quality of life in low-income populations. The aim is to deepen understanding of the determinants of quality of life for these populations in order to support the development of more effective policies, programmes and housing projects in cities. To this end, the study followed the process of rehousing communities living in favelas, that is informal urban settlements.

The effectiveness of public and private initiatives aiming to increase quality of life may benefit from greater sensitivity and paying closer attention to coping strategies already developed by these groups. Discussion of urban sustainability has come to include the concept of quality of life as an intrinsic aspect of the process (Acselrad, 1999.) Indeed, many theorists see the city as a space for quality of life. Though the city is also seen in other terms, for instance as a space for development, planning for urban development is increasingly coming to be understood as a process seeking to increase the quality of life or the welfare of urban communities. Quality of life is a concept that implies an “ethical commitment on the part of a society that guarantees life, where human potential is not brutalised and nature is also not destroyed” (Herculano, 1998) thus combining the notions of urban sustainability and quality of life in the city.

Some authors understand quality of life as one of the guiding principles underlying the pursuit of development and welfare as a right arising from citizenship (Vitte, 2002). Such an approach may be considered inappropriate and insufficiently objective in societies where public policy has yet to attain universal provision for the basic needs of the population, as in Brazil; but the response to this is that the ineffectiveness of housing projects may derive precisely from their lack of full understanding of the wishes and hopes of the population and of the factors that structure their life in the city, with the result that they fail to grasp which aspects should actually be prioritised by urban, housing and social policy. In other words, there is little understanding of the forms of expression and the individual and collective strategies employed by these populations in pursuit of quality of life, and existing approaches to housing generally fail to offer a basis for maintaining and reproducing social conditions that are essential for survival in a healthy way.

We will discuss the role of solidarity and the gift in the social relations of low-income communities, how they are manifested, the aspects where they are most fully present, and their strategic importance for collective life, investigating their relevance to effectively increasing quality of life and the sustainability of urban development.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Quality of Urban Life, Solidarity and the Gift

The discourse of public urban policy can be seen to include the aim of improving people's quality of life, but this aspect is not always considered fully or in a balanced way. Some housing projects manage to achieve the objective in some respects: in particular, they generally improve housing itself, but nonetheless they fail to provide for security, leisure, employment, accessibility or even dwellings that are in keeping with low income residents' customs and culture.

Seeking higher levels of effectiveness and efficiency of public policies, urban planners are interested in learning with the poor how these practices and feelings are related to the concept of quality of life, since a knowledge of how such relations are established may help strengthen the localised, organic and more sustainable forms that the socially excluded discover as they conquer a space for themselves within the city. Above all, such knowledge can contribute to the optimal use of these resources to raise individual and community quality of life.

This discussion addresses three main issues: (i) the main aspects of quality of life and their nature; (ii) the everyday problems and difficulties that low-income communities tackle using strategies and tools
associated with solidarity and mutual assistance; (iii) the contexts and situations where solidarity and the gift can most frequently seen to be relevant as a community resource to improve quality of life.

According to Sen (2000), an adequate approach to the relationship between quality of life and development depends on considering peoples’ quality of life as the ultimate objective of public policies, and production and prosperity as means to improve it. Since solidarity and the gift are low-income communities’ resources to improve quality of life, policy-makers should better understand their potential contribution to making public policies more effective.

Durkheim developed the concept of organic solidarity in association with the division of labour, where each individual in a society has their individual sphere of action and a specific role essential for the functioning of the whole; moreover, the greater the division of labour, the closer the individual’s dependence on society and the roles of others. The further individual consciousness is developed, the greater the degree of cohesion resulting from this: “[…] the individuality of the whole grows in proportion to that of the parts; society becomes more able to move as a whole, while each of its members undertakes more individual movements.” (Durkheim, 1999, pp. 69-70). Mechanical solidarity, in contrast, has its roots in similarities rather than differences between individuals, linking society directly to its members without intermediaries. (ibid., p. 106).

As pointed out by Assman and Sung (2000), Durkheim's classification has its limitations, in particular, mechanical solidarity is generally found in traditional societies while organic solidarity is more characteristic of complex societies. When Durkheim developed the concept of mechanical solidarity – between similar individuals – his intention was to show that it alone is not enough, indeed it may be socially harmful, as seen in corporativism, or when it is opposed to broader social cohesion. In low income communities, though, solidarity between similar individuals may help solve problems and meet people's needs, thus improving quality of life.

Alcântara's study of low-income communities (2011) found that mutual assistance, practices of solidarity and the gift are structured according to the system of the gift, as described by Marcel Mauss in his famous Essay on the Gift (1924; 1950; 2003). We use the term “gift” to refer to “the provision of any good or service with no guarantee of a return, with a view to creating, sustaining or recreating social links” and which “[…] thus characterised as a form of the circulation of goods in the service of social links, constitutes an element essential to the whole of society” (Godbout and Caillé 1999, p. 29).

On the basis of observations of social phenomena, particularly certain collective exchange rituals found in “primitive” societies, Mauss concluded that these social relations were constructed around the tripartite obligation to “give – receive – reciprocate”. “In the Scandinavian civilization and many others, exchanges and contracts occur in the form of presents that are in principle voluntary, but in reality there is an obligation to give them and to reciprocate” (Mauss, 1950, op. cit., p. 51). At the end of the essay, the author concludes that these phenomena are also the basis of social relations in complex societies such as ours. Re-readings of the gift within contemporary society emphasise its occurrence in the context of primary sociability (family, neighbours, friendship, associations etc.), where the essential social rule is the obligation of giving – receiving – reciprocating (Caillé, 2008). A re-reading of the gift as a basis for understanding manifestations of solidarity among the residents of favelas (spontaneous low-income settlements) appears to have strong relevance as a contribution to the resurgent academic debate around solidarity.

The earlier work of Lomnitz (1994) defends the view that networks of exchange and reciprocity among residents of the “barriadas” in México are effective mechanisms to overcome the lack of economic security, and are based on trust, equality of lack and the close physical proximity of homes. Santos (1993 apud Portugal, 2008) argues “In Portugal, a weak welfare state coexists with a strong welfare society”, made up of networks “of mutual recognition and help based on links of kinship and neighbourhood,
through which small social groups exchange goods and services on a non-mercantile basis and with a logic of reciprocity similar to the gift relationship studied by Marcel Mauss”.

This study focuses on the tripartite obligation of giving – receiving – reciprocating among inhabitants of these settlements and intends to understand how these relations work as a resource for dealing with the everyday difficulties of living in these locations.

2.2 Dimensions of Quality of Life

The literature review shows that the aspects essential to the quality of urban life may be organized in four groups. The attributes involved may be classified along the dimensions objective – subjective and individual – collective. Clearly, many of the attributes or categories could be placed in more than one aspect of quality of life.

The components related to quality of life (Camargo Mora, 1997 apud Vitte et al., 2002) which may be the object of public policies to improve welfare include: the physical environment, health, education, housing, basic services, socioeconomic participation (employment and income) and social and personal security (public safety and security). Amongst these aspects, residents see the physical environment, housing, socioeconomic participation and social and personal security as the most relevant factors in the housing projects.

In one of the areas studied, the Abençoada por Deus housing estate, the only improvement seen was in relation to the presence and physical robustness of the housing, because residents rejected apartments as a dwelling space. The fear they felt, the violence, the lack of security and the absence of collective, common spaces for leisure and socialising are all signs of the failure of such projects in spatial terms, because of their failure to meet the basic needs of residents while undermining their means of survival both individually and collectively. Reduced employment opportunities at the new site had a concrete impact on their ability to keep afloat. Nonetheless, the population seeks out creative alternatives to deal with everyday problems, and we sought to establish the basis of such initiatives and the extent to which they were successful when normal living conditions had been undermined.

These reflections are the result of field research in which the voices of 95 people were heard using exploratory and focused interviews, focus groups, and life histories in seven settlements, three in an exploratory way and four as case studies. We will now consider what light these findings can shed on the issue of quality of life.

3. Results and Discussions

In the informal settlements studied improvements in quality of life result from mutual help, which may take various forms such as the informal production of dwellings or dealing with daily life difficulties. The results found by Alcântara (2011) show diverse examples when solidarity and helping the other between neighbours resulted in: donation of food, furniture and objects; sheltering people who lost their houses; taking care of children; help in an accident, saving a life; taking someone to the doctor; taking care of old people; giving a person an opportunity for a job; lending money; building/improving houses; and keeping an eye on someone’s house, among others. Immaterial solidarity was seen too, with advice and emotional support in hard situations. These ways of expressing solidarity have a direct impact on the quality of people’s lives. Besides solving the immediate problem, such acts of solidarity strengthen social ties between the people involved, who then come to rely on each other at difficult moments in the future. The narratives of interviewees showed the important role of social relations established through solidarity and the gift in dealing with the challenges faced by their urban communities.
The gift arises as an actual and potential resource to cope with scarcity and the problems and difficulties of everyday life. The motivations encountered for giving to others may be associated with: i) the personal context, individual moral values, based on religiosity or upbringing, and the desire to reciprocate; ii) the context of the other: problematic socio-economic contexts (urgent situations, emergencies, situations of need), through the relationship with the other (family, friendship, etc.), or commitment to the collective (helping strangers); and iii) the spatial context, the provision of the home, or the relationship of identity and belonging to a place.

In the context of urgent needs of others in particular, there were various situations where the act of solidarity turned out to be very important. In some of these, the person was depressed, one tried to kill herself, some were suffering hunger, homelessness or the threat of spousal violence, and in each case someone helped them, whether by offering money, food, employment, giving shelter in their house, or showing spiritual and religious support. In these critical moments when there was not much hope, someone appeared (a neighbour, relative, employer or even a stranger) to help them. These situations are associated with precarious living conditions of the poor population which generate severe stress, thus reducing quality of life. Such demonstrations of solidarity involve providing some improvement in quality of life, even if it is only momentary and localised, because these acts also provide comfort and moral support, as well as the feeling of being able to count on someone. Alongside these subjective aspects, the help offered may increase actual security (in turn increasing the feeling of security) or involve material assistance. This interviewee spoke emotionally about the moment in her life when she received help from neighbours:

“Where I lived we were paying rent, [my husband] lost his job; I had a little boy who is 11 now [...] and at the time [...] his three daughters from his first marriage lived with us as well. It was really terrible because we didn't have decent food to give to the children, he went out to struggle, and I kept things going at home somehow; when I came to live here it was a terrible time too, we only ate when our neighbours gave us food. [A neighbour] really helped a lot. [...] Because both she and her husband were working, she used to give us rice, beans, meat. [becoming upset] [...] I'm an old cry-baby. Today, I'm rich” ... (Andrea, VI)

In low income communities, relationships with neighbours often take the form of friendships. Monteiro's study (1989) shows that for the majority of favela residents, relations with their neighbours were a source of satisfaction in relation to the place of residence.

The desire to reciprocate a gift, or the feeling of an obligation, means that the recipient comes to feel indebted to the giver. This mechanism creates a network of reciprocity and links between those involved within which residents come to rely on those they have helped when they need to, while those who received assistance consider that they owe something to the person who helped them. This creates concrete situations of mutual assistance within objective, subjective, individual and collective contexts, leading in turn to improvements in quality of life, even if these are sporadic.

At the same time, the links between people become closer; reciprocation is the structural mechanism underlying everyday solidarity, whether it is material in form or immaterial. This is one of the central aspects of the gift. Mauss's Essay on the Gift seeks to understand what makes people feel obliged to reciprocate.

Someone who received something from somebody also feels gratitude to that person. Gratitude is seen as a form of reciprocation, even if it does not take more concrete form. One interviewee describes how “when [her husband] received money, I used to give a little present to each neighbour who had helped me. To one I gave a set of plates, to another some cups, and money to another.” She thanked them with a present, but she still relies on these people and they rely on her when she is able to help. Rather than coming to an end on reciprocation, such relationships endure beyond the situation that first gave rise to them, providing a resource for dealing with future difficulties.
There is another type of reciprocation motivated by respect, consideration and recognition shown to the other. Here, a hierarchy is established among the actors. One interviewee stated that he provides services to people how show him consideration and trust without charging them. For people who respect him, he works “for free”, out of gratitude for the respect with which he has been treated.

Principally among young people, the gift may be seen in the form of mutual support with their studies. “At school we always used to help each other. When I had trouble with geography and history, [...] the girls used to help me, too. [...] In our free periods [...] we used to go to the playground; [...] we taught each other [...]. There were 30 students in our class, and only two of us had to repeat the year. Everyone else passed. I was so pleased that almost everyone passed, and I was sad about the two that didn't. [...] They skipped a lot of classes, [...] and even tests. It wasn't because no-one helped, they would've passed if they'd wanted to”. (Olga, L, DH)

These links of friendship were so strong they endured, including a friend of the interviewee's who continued teaching her after she herself had left school:

“There was just one exam to go [...] she gave up because she was pregnant but [...] she kept on coming to my house [...] to teach me, at night [...] at weekends. [...] The geography teacher helped me a lot too [...] I had most problems in the third year, I was working and studying at the same time [...] I almost gave up half way through the year. My marks were really low but the teacher and the girls gave me the encouragement to finish. [...] Thank God, I finished secondary school”. (Olga, L, DH)

The importance of the support from friends and teachers in enabling her to complete her secondary education should be underlined. Such attitudes can be stimulated by educational programmes; not only do they strengthen friendship links, they contribute to improved educational performance.

These young people emphasise that they can count on their friends, a feeling based on comradeship and doing things together.

All these types of solidarity, whatever the age group and the need met, are facilitated by close relationships with others, whether family, friends, or neighbours. This statement shows the kind of gifts that people may receive from one another, even to the point of furnishing a home:

“One neighbour gave me a mattress. [...] I didn't buy this shack, I invaded the land; [...] Today, thank God, my house has got everything. [...] it's a luxury home! [...] It's a palace! [...] It was hard for my husband and me, it was a struggle, but in those days all there was to my house was two plates, two forks, two knives and two spoons. I didn't even have a drainer by the sink”. (laughter) (F, VI)

The help some people receive from their neighbours approaches the level of help within the family:

“Here, I don't have a mother, father or brothers, I have – my neighbours are my brothers and my parents. My neighbours are everything to me! [...] I don't have neighbours, I have a family.” (Vera, FM, AB).

The following account substantiates how the fact of having received something establishes links:

“My sister-in-law [...] I got her some shopping too, she was short at the time, she had two small children and no husband, she wasn't working, so I gave her things. I helped her several times [...] and thank God, I don't need it now, but she would come and help me when I was in trouble [...] If I need her to, she helps me, and if she needs me to, I help her”. [our emphasis] (Andrea, VI)

This is the gift of mutual assistance, where each party can rely on the other. Giving and reciprocating here have the same meaning: reciprocation occurs because something was received, and people give because they received something. Rather than there being a feeling of indebtedness because of a specific thing that was received, there is a general sense of owing the person something. The link is based on always being able to rely on the other.
Another interviewee mentions an important moment in her life when she was helped a great deal by a person whom she did not even know, in the form of a job; this act changed her life for ever:

“The most anyone ever helped me was when I was unemployed […] I didn't have enough to eat, I had a four-year-old daughter, hungry, staying with a friend of mine who didn't have anything to eat either. […] in a big city like this […] with no relatives, someone comes along and says: ‘You can wash my clothes.’ Then she gives me a job, I've still got it today! […] It was such a relief! She helped me and so did God, that was when I managed to buy my shack, I managed to change my life. First I thank God, second I thank her. I always tell her: in my life, all I've got was because you helped me”.

Solidarity may also be seen when it comes to building a house, as shown in the following statement. This person managed to overcome adversity by helping others:

“That was when he had the idea of solidarity too. His father was unemployed so he suggested his father work for me and for him to meet our quota [in the Dom Helder Câmara self-built community housing project] […] that was what made it work […]. So then I started helping other people. I mean, it's two sides of the same coin, helping and being helped. There's no other way, that's what I believe and that's how I won through. And the result is here: sometimes I wake up and just think, this is my house!” [our emphasis]

When she was 14, a young woman who was pregnant at the focus group session had taken care of a baby:

“The baby's mother was a drug addict. Her mother didn't want to give the baby to the father so she asked me if I wanted to take care of it, and I did until he was two years old. [The baby] lived with me. [...] He was going limp in my arms, in the hospital [...] he was already turning purple […] the doctor told me to check with her before I took him home; when I took him off the machine he looked like he was turning purple again. [...] I was fourteen. I got a boyfriend when I was fifteen, and he calls my boyfriend daddy”. (Karina, FJ, VI)

A community leader gave an emotional account of how she stopped a car in the street to take an unconscious baby to hospital, thus taking charge of the situation and saving the child's life. She became godmother to the child, making concrete a link derived from the gift:

“When the doctor turned to me and said: ‘Who put this baby in the car?’ It was me. ‘Did you know this girl only had five minutes to live?’ God, I cried so much on the hospital. Because I saved that baby's life. So that makes me pleased I live down here. Because if it hadn't been for me […] that baby would've died. [...] When I went round, the mother used to put out the red carpet. I became that girl's godmother”.

We have quoted from a range of accounts to give an impression of the diversity of situations where solidarity on the part of others led to a concrete, material improvement in quality of life as well as sustainably strengthening social networks.

However, the potential revealed in such acts needs to be stimulated. This is where public policy may come in to strengthen the potential that already exists for the gift and solidarity, rather than weakening and undoing what has been constructed by the community with great effort in order to cope with problems, as unfortunately tends to occur in vertical multi-family housing projects. This vertical housing typology is unsuitable and the inhabitants reject it, whereas a horizontal typology facilitates sociability, opportunities for people to meet, exchanging experiences and showing solidarity, thus strengthening the “community spirit”, in the words of many of those interviewed. This shows that if housing projects are actually to improve quality of life, they need to consider the desires, habits and culture of the beneficiaries and the particular qualities of the place where they will be situated. In this context, it should be noted that for low income communities, the sense of belonging to a place is especially important because the place where they live plays a central role in most of their activities and interactions.

The question of appropriate housing typology and the management of community resettlement in general is just one example of the practical, concrete implications for policy that result from a full
understanding of the role played by the gift as the mechanism which generates and sustains solidarity and strengthens social links in communities to improve their quality of life.

In general, this powerful resource may be weakened or even destroyed by inappropriate public policies that do not take these factors into account.

4. Final Considerations

Initiatives of mutual assistance and solidarity at individual and community level with the immediate objective of helping the other with an immediate problem or difficulty also end up contributing to improved quality of life for those involved. Some of these situations are directly related to the ineffectiveness of public policy or the lack of a welfare state. It was therefore surprising that several interviewees stated that if someone asked for their help, they always did so, and this occurred frequently; this reveals the potential and disposition to help others when needed. It demonstrates that better use can be made of solidarity as a resource, allowing synergies with local public projects and policy. These initiatives are the way found by the poor population to help one another when faced with the ineffectiveness of public policy in promoting social welfare.

On the basis of this study, it may be supposed that similar results could be found in other low-income localities in Brazil. Santos (1993 apud Portugal, 2008), in Portugal, and Lomnitz (1994), in Mexico, found similar results. Possibly similar results could be found in other parts of the world, despite the variations and cultural particularity of each place. The conditioning factors – poverty, scarcity and exclusion – can be found elsewhere: human beings anywhere need to find alternatives to improve their conditions of survival. Solidarity does occur, though the frequency and the conditions vary. Above all, such knowledge can contribute to the improvement of public policies aimed at these populations so that optimal use is made of such resources to raise individual and community quality of life. The knowledge of how such relations are established may help strengthen the organic and more sustainable forms that the excluded discover to achieve quality of life for themselves.

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