Urbanities, Vol. 11 · No 2· November 2021
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Creating Community Feelings Among Impoverished People: An Ethnography of Civil Groups in Urban Australia[1]

Ritsuko Kurita
(Kanagawa University, Japan)
kurita@kanagawa-u.ac.jp

This article recognizes that in order to grasp the complex urban dynamics anthropological studies in Western industrial societies should pay attention to the relationship between micro-processes (at community level) and macro-processes (at regional and national level). The discussion examines the ways in which impoverished people in urban Australia cope with neoliberal forms of governance and negotiate their citizenship, identity and belonging at the grassroots level. The analysis focuses on the activities of two civic groups. Interviews were conducted among impoverished Anglo-Australians who, deprived of self-respect and dignity by a welfare system influenced by neoliberal policy, engage in community-based self-help activities in which the legitimacy of the welfare system and citizenship are questioned and challenged. By forming loose alliances in dealing with the shared problem of poverty, they attempt to restore a sense of belonging as citizens and strive to redefine 'mutual obligation' not as top-down imposition of duties on citizens, as promoted by the government, but as relatedness and mutual help among citizens of equal status.
Keywords: Impoverished Anglo-Australians, urban poverty, grassroots civic groups, self-help communities, sense of belonging.

Introduction

The study of cities, particularly in Western industrial societies, has long been undermined in anthropology due to academic division between sociology, intended as the study of 'complex' societies, and socio-cultural anthropology, regarded as specialising in the study of so-called 'primitive' societies. Even after the interest in Western industrial cities grew as a subject of anthropological study, urban research continued to apply the traditional functionalist paradigm to the study of allegedly 'isolated' and 'autonomous' communities. Offering only a fragmentary picture of urban reality, early works were mainly 'problem-centred', including poverty, minorities and urban adaptation. Instead, as Pardo and Prato argue (2018), in order to grasp complex and dynamic urban processes, attention should be paid to the relationship between micro-processes (at community level) and macro-processes (at regional and national level).

The legitimacy of governance is one of the key issues faced by urban citizens today (Pardo and Prato 2019). In urban settings marked by socio-economic, cultural and political forms of inequality, the failure of those in power to be 'co-cultural' with ordinary people leads to illegitimacy of governance (Pardo and Prato 2021). Some anthropological studies have examined the impact of illegitimate governance on the lives of ordinary people and the complex ways in which the latter cope with top-down economic and political agendas in their everyday lives. For instance, Pardo, who examined the impact of slanted policies and bad governance on local life in Naples, Italy, has argued that under the pressure of misgovernance and ruling by administrative double standards, ordinary citizens who are excluded both from the formal 'sector' of the economy and from important rights of citizenship negotiate their lives by engaging in grassroots entrepreneurialism based on relations of kinship and friendship (Pardo 2018).

[1] This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, Grant-in-Aid for Young Scientists), Grant Number 19K13460.

In a similar vein, Spyridakis (2018) has examined the impact of the decline of the shipbuilding industry in Greece on local people, showing that local workers who are exposed to employment insecurity struggle to cope with the asymmetrical framework of the old socio-spatial discriminations and inequalities. They rely on their direct knowledge of the exploitative labour system and on the social networks that they have built over the years. Spyridakis argues that there is a complex articulation of forces, projects and actors operating at different levels which should be taken into account when addressing global urbanism and urban dynamics.

These studies show that policy and political decisions have important effects on people's lives, but this does not necessarily mean that they will be accepted uncritically or unconditionally across society since what is legal is not always regarded in the broader society as moral and legitimate (Pardo and Prato 2019).

This article draws on the theoretical framework that I have outlined above to examine the way in which impoverished people in urban Australia cope with neoliberal forms of governance and negotiate their citizenship and, by extension, their identity and belonging (Pardo and Prato 2018: 6). Under neoliberalism, governance moved from a liberal progressive approach which conceptualised and responded to social ills structurally and collectively to one that highlights decentralized and individualized remedies for social problems. In the latter form, a person is reconfigured as an active entrepreneurial agent, an expert in making self-interested choices and mitigating risk (Kingfisher 2013).

However, as Kingfisher (2013) argues, the reality of neoliberalism and neoliberal policy is not homogenous throughout the world, and it is important to look at how neoliberal policy is constructed in each specific local context. In Australia, where social governance based on a neoliberal ideology has prevailed since the late 1980s, questions have been raised on the legitimacy of governance, especially regarding the welfare programme (Shaver 2002, Stratton 2011). With the introduction of the notion of 'mutual obligation' between the state and citizens, welfare recipients are required to give something to society in return for welfare support. They are asked to seek work actively and engage in self-improvement in order to become employable. Welfare is no longer considered to be a right for the individual citizen; it is now conceived as support provided on certain conditions. Furthermore, the welfare claimants are denied equality of selfhood, because welfare assistance emphasises supervision instead of sovereignty (Shaver 2002).

Under this ideology of an individualised contractual relationship, the unemployed are generally cast as contractual malfeasants (Somers 2008: 3). The ideal type of 'normal citizen' has changed accordingly. In Australia, where citizenship and nationality are equated, 'Australianness' has long been associated with 'whiteness' (Hage 2000). However, as neoliberalism gained ascendance, the idea of Australianness became associated with a robust work ethic and the ability to make rational choices. In neoliberal societies, citizenship is generally determined by a person's economic autonomy and by that person's economic contribution to the nation (Stratton 2011). In such a context, welfare recipients face exclusion, irrespective of their race and ethnicity. For instance, Peel (2003), who examined the life experiences of impoverished Anglo-Australians residing in disadvantaged suburbs of major cities, showed that residents receiving welfare payment were viewed by the welfare office as incapable and as welfare frauds and, as a consequence, were treated disrespectfully.

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In spite of being white, unemployed Anglo-Australians, namely those of Anglo-Celtic descent mainly from England, Ireland and Scotland,[2] are deemed to have failed in their obligations as citizens and are categorised as 'undeserving members' both by the government and by middle-class Australians. Like non-white ethnic minorities, Anglo-Australians on welfare suffer not only from poverty but also from stigma, humiliation and loss of self-respect (Peel 2003, Marston and McDonald 2008). However, these perceived undesirable citizens do not necessarily or unconditionally accept the public stigma.

The discussion that follows aims to examine how impoverished Anglo-Australians cope with the illegitimacy of the welfare system and negotiate their citizenship, focusing on the activities of some spontaneous civic groups which they have established at the grassroots. It also illuminates the role played by self-help civic groups in creating varied forms of community that help to generate a sense of belonging among the urban marginalised.

In order to clarify such a context, the following sections first offer an outline of the welfare agenda for the unemployed as it is implemented in Australia under neoliberal governance, explaining how civic groups address their members' vulnerability and compensate for the deficiencies in the welfare programmes. Then, an account of the methods used in the research is followed by the descriptive analysis of two cases studies that focus on the activities of civic groups; specifically, an advisory group for the impoverished and a group that provides community meals. This ethnographic material helps us to examine the ways in which impoverished Anglo-Australians deal with the illegitimacy of neoliberal governance at the grassroots level. Finally, I offer tentative conclusions and bring out some implications for future research.

Welfare Services Under Neoliberalism in Australia and Their Problems

As in other Western countries, the neoliberal ideology affected the welfare reforms in Australia. Both welfare governance and public attitudes toward welfare changed accordingly. The notion of 'mutual obligation' mooted in 1996 demanded that income support recipients must fulfil the obligations of 'active job-seeking behaviour'. Consequently, Australia implemented a long-term version of workfare for the unemployed, labelled Work for Dole (henceforth WfD) Programme. Workfare requires the unemployed to work in order to gain access to welfare. In order to develop skills and experience for work, those who are targeted for WfD must engage in work-like activities at not-for-profit organisations and government agencies. This programme was later extended to include people with disabilities and single parents, despite the fact that access to welfare payments was supposed to be a right of all citizens (McDonald and Chenoweth 2006: 113-114).

Liberalism as a form of governmentality regulates the conduct of individuals and oversees the performance of services in the absence of state sovereignty (Foucault 1991). In Australia, the concept of workfare is implemented through organisations such as Centrelink (an income security agency) and the Job Network (a quasi-market system offering employment services). These entities are subcontracted by the federal government. They assess individual clients in terms of the degree of employability within the framework of prevailing occupational systems (McDonald et al. 2003). The long-term unemployed and those assessed as posing significant difficulties in obtaining employment

[2] This, I note, is an arbitrary category (Stratton 2011).

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are monitored by case managers, who provide intensive guidance customized to their individual circumstances with the aim of improving their chances to achieve employment. Those who fail to participate in the activities designated for them face financial penalties: their benefits may be suspended, and their case managers may submit a negative report to Centrelink (McDonald and Chenoweth 2006, Marston and McDonald 2008).

As Kingfisher (2013) noted, disciplining and policing marginalised people in terms of gender, race and class (for instance, poor single mothers) through welfare reform becomes a mechanism for the construction and assertion of the normative. Here, the 'marginalised' are seen as opposed to the 'civicised', who are self-sufficient, autonomous and capable of managing their own risk.

Although Anglo-Australian welfare recipients are not racially marginalised, they are considered to be deviant from the norm. They are viewed as people who lack the ability to work because they are poor and need administrative intervention to change their behaviour. Social workers embody the workfare logic in their position as agents of both the state and the client. With some notable exceptions, they tend to identify the personality and psyche of the unemployed person as the cause of unemployment (McDonald and Chenoweth, 2006). Significantly, social workers are, in turn, subjected to performance management and performance goals. The ideals that informed the social service and the moral elements of welfare have, thus, been replaced by managerialism, with the consequence that welfare services blame the 'clients' for their condition, leading to welfare recipients' low self-esteem and self-denial (Shaver 2002, McDonald and Chenoweth 2006, Singh and Cowden 2009).

In 2008, the Australian Government launched a reform agenda to reduce and ultimately end homelessness. This agenda inherited its basic concept from the homeless programmes of the mid-1990s, which emphasised individual case management because, it was believed, the problem of homelessness could be resolved by helping people to address their individual problems, issues or circumstances, and to achieve increased self-reliance. Thus, recent policies to reduce homelessness place less emphasis on the structural factors that cause poverty and homelessness, focusing instead on the individual needs and problems of the homeless (Bullen and Reynolds 2014). Notably, the emphasis on self-reliance was criticised because it blamed individuals for social problems (Minnery and Greenhalgh 2007, Polakow and Guillean 2001). For example, by casting homeless as people who deserve homelessness as a result of their choices, this view neglects individuals' complex circumstances, such as mental illness or drug dependency, and their likely need of additional support and services in order to achieve self-reliance (Minnery and Greenhalgh 2007).

Therefore, citizens who engage in activities aimed at improving their lives have formed civic groups. These groups, including charity establishments, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and non-profit organisations (NPOs), play significant roles in supplementing the deficiencies of public welfare services, as they offer people living in poverty important services, such as food, everyday goods, health and housing. However, these services are vulnerable because they depend solely on the benevolent intentions of the volunteers and on donors' generosity. One notes, for instance, that, when philanthropists who support these groups are presented with negative portrayals of the homeless in the media, they may change their attitude towards homelessness and switch to viewing the issue as 'a matter of choice' and unworthy of help (Tually et al. 2013: 45-48).

We should consider that trust-based relationships between service providers and beneficiaries are pivotal for the development of a sense of acceptance and self-respect among welfare recipients. Voluntary groups and associations could encourage autonomy and motivate those on welfare to improve their circumstances and achieve their goals (Rowe and Wolch 1990, Thompson et al. 2006, Johnstone et al. 2015). Nonetheless, services based on philanthropy generate asymmetrical relationships between service providers and recipients, sometimes against the will of the benefactors (Goldberg 2009, Tually et al. 2013). Some studies have also demonstrated that welfare services do not necessarily produce fundamental solutions to the problems faced by the recipients; instead, they may distract attention away from the problems that cause and sustain poverty (Parsell and Watts 2017). In other words, the simple act of providing housing, food and everyday goods helps, but does not necessarily address the multidimensional problems of poverty (Johnstone et al. 2015, Parsell and Watts 2017). Existence in a state of poverty is associated with the lack of social ties and a diminished sense of connectedness and belonging (Vandemark 2007). In short, it is important for Anglo-Australians struggling with poverty also to gain a sense of place and social belonging.

Methods

The present study is primarily grounded in my ongoing fieldwork among the interracial social networks of impoverished urban residents in Australia. The material that I discuss in this article was collected during a five-month of intermittent fieldwork carried out between 2017 and 2020 among two civic groups. They are, an advisory group for the impoverished in Adelaide and a community meal-providing group in Sydney. The ethnography includes information from these groups' newsletters and home pages. I interviewed 12 people who identified themselves as Anglo-Australians. They are five service providers and seven beneficiaries. The beneficiaries were regular recipients of the service and agreed to share with me their experience with the groups. Their age ranged from 20s to 50s. I initially contacted the service providers of each organisation and, having obtained their consent to participate in the research, recruited them as key informants. I also attended the regular meetings held by the groups at a local public library and conducted participant observation at a service site. The field study was done in full compliance with the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research. I use pseudonyms for all participants and civic groups.

Results

The following case studies are based on information from interviews and participant observation. When necessary, this material has been supplemented by the content of the newsletters issued by the groups.

Case 1: The Advisory Group for the Impoverished

In 2013, people who had been affected by poverty established in Adelaide a community-based advisory group for the impoverished. This association aims to 'advocate for the dignity, rights and well-being of people on low income and create community networks that provide emotional and practical support to those affected by poverty' (extract from their homepage). In 2018, the group included approximately 50 core members; most were Anglo-Australian, and some were Indigenous

Australian. Members included job seekers, low-income workers, single parents, age and disability pensioners, students, community and welfare workers and supporters. Their main activities include the provision of support and advice to those subjected to income management; assistance in dealing with the employment agency and with welfare office applications; campaigning for the abolishment of the cashless welfare card; and negotiating with local councils to increase unemployment benefits. The group also hosts fundraising events and organises lectures to promote awareness of poverty-related problems among non-recipients of welfare services for the unemployed.

Members with university degrees and individuals with work experience act as group coordinators offering fellow members support, advocacy and information related to welfare services. They also facilitate interactions among group members and organise meetings at community centres in several districts. In 2019, Cindy, an Anglo-Australian woman in her twenties who grew up in the northern suburb of Adelaide, one of the most disadvantaged places in South Australia, was chief coordinator of the advisory group. Like other residents in her neighbourhood, she had experienced socioeconomic difficulties: her father, a labourer, died from an injury when she was six years old. Her mother was long unemployed and suffered from psychiatric illness, which forced the family to subsist on scant welfare payments. In spite of her impoverished background, Cindy managed to study while working part-time. She received welfare payments from Australia's Youth Allowance programme and was admitted to a university in Adelaide, where her tuition was waived. She gives her fellow group members information about their entitlements, including the right to pursue legal action (Interview, 11 September 2019).

Dignity and respect are believed to convey a sense of full citizenship (Rosaldo 1994). The way in which Anglo-Australian welfare recipients who reside in disadvantaged urban settings are treated by the welfare office undermines their self-respect (Peel 2003). For instance, Paul, a founder of the advisory group, described how welfare recipients who are forced by circumstances to join the WfD programme experience daily harassment in the form of disrespectful treatment by the Job Network personnel. He said:

> 'More often than not, these organisations (welfare offices) are sources of stress and frustration for unemployed people. They exert force, quite stringent force on these people, forcing them to attend course-oriented jobs that might not be suitable for them, as they do not match up with their skills.' (Interview, 17 February 2017)

Welfare recipients who are targeted for inclusion in the WfD programme are placed under surveillance and are obliged to engage in regular interviews with welfare office personnel, report progress on their job-search and conduct for a defined period job hunting activities on the office computers. Welfare payments may be reduced or postponed if recipients fail to meet these obligations, regardless of whether they have legitimate reasons for doing so. Cindy and other coordinators of the community-based advisory group for the impoverished deal with members who complain of unfair treatment from the personnel of Job Network, giving them advice on how to deal with the harassment.

For example, five years ago, Sue, an Anglo-Australian member in her fifties, lost her job and house because the company where she worked shut down. When she became a welfare recipient, she experienced constant harassment from a Job Network officer. Sue described her experience:

> ‘The lady I have to see is only 25 years old. My daughter is 31. Therefore, she is six years younger than my own daughter. She treats me like a naughty child. She yells at me. She is always telling me that I have to do things. One time, I had a meeting with her at a certain time. But I had a job interview at the same time. Before she first gave me the appointment I said to her straight away, “I’ve got a job interview at that time.” She said “it doesn’t matter, you have to come to this.” I said, “but the whole thing with the Job Network is that they are supposed to help you find work.” She said, “no, you can’t go to a job interview. You have to come to this meeting”.’ (Interview, 22 September 2018)

When she was ill-treated by the Job Network employee, Sue did not have any support, including from her family. When her welfare payment was postponed, she was driven to the point of having to scavenge for food from garbage cans. Yet, she managed to cope with the harassment thanks to the advice she received from group members who had undergone similar experiences. Joining the advisory group made her realise that others struggled with poverty, too, and that she had access to a community of people who could fight with her against impoverished circumstances. At the time of her interview with me, Sue shared her experience both at a public meeting and in the local and mainstream media. She related her ordeal as follows:

> ‘Before I found the group, I did not know some of the rules. Being yelled at like that would upset me terribly. Well, it still does, but now I know the rules and I know my rights. I feel more able to stand up for my rights because that’s the thing, if you do not know your rights, you cannot stand up for yourself. This is a big problem for many people. Many people do not know their rights. And the Job Network agency will not tell you.’ (Interview, 22 September 2018)

According to Cindy, participation in the WfD programme involves the unfair treatment meted out to claimants by Job Network personnel but does not generally lead to opportunities for employment. When job agencies introduce jobs to their clients, the experience and interests of the individual are hardly taken into consideration, and most of the jobs are menial and unlikely to assist clients with acquiring skills for their future careers. Cindy expressed her views on the WfD programme as follows:

> ‘Personally, I think it’s not a good experience, because people do things that do not give them much experience. A couple of examples we have from our members … they were going to the Work for the Dole site, but there would not actually be anything to do. Then, the supervisors would say “okay move those rocks over there.” It was at a railway station. Another one at a church site would say “pick the weeds from the garden.” If someone has theoretically been out of work for five years or something, they really need some experience that might better them, but a lot of the time we find that it’s not worth taking those programmes because many people cannot find good organisations to gain actual experience doing meaningful work. Working for the Dole is more of a punishment.’ (Interview, 17 September 2018)

Members of the advisory group share accounts of stigmatisation and offer each other advice about coping with the situation in a newsletter, as well as at regular meetings. For instance, Paul, who was unemployed at the time of the interview, explained how he helped his fellow members:

> ’ We are providing advice to people about their rights, when it comes to Centerlink; particularly when it comes to Job agencies or employment services providers. Sometimes we will like counsel people if they ask us to go with them, and sit next to them to make sure their rights are respected.’ (Interview, 17 February 2017)

In the newsletter, Paul pointed to the shortage of jobs and emphasised that poverty and unemployment are the product of structural and policy factors, rather than individuals’ flaws and weaknesses. He said:

> ‘The system would be an unfair and harsh one even if all the rules were followed. This is because ultimately, the role of job agencies is not to help unemployed people find work. After all, there are 19 jobseekers for every job — including the unemployed, the underemployed and the “hidden unemployed” […] The role of job agencies is to put unemployed people through plenty of frustration and stress, create as many hoops and hurdles as possible, which people must jump through and over. Hence, the demoralising, endless search for non-existent jobs, or for jobs one is not suited to, simply to make-up the numbers. Hence, the endless appointments and flimsy, demeaning courses. “Keep the unemployed busy” is the motto.’ (Quotes from the group’s newsletter, *Quarterly* 2017)

Through these actions, the advisory group raises awareness among the members that unfair treatment by the welfare staff is caused by structural flaws and should not be seen as a consequence of one’s own faults. Notably, this helps members to become aware that they do not have to succumb to such treatment, and that it is important to resist such disrespect by consulting with each other about how they can claim what they are entitled to. For instance, Byron, a member of the advisory group, shared his experience of succeeding in claiming his rights when his new case manager at Job Network agency wanted to increase his unemployment obligations from three to four days a week. He said:

> ‘I said that if the new activities were mandatory, I would need to get that statement in writing from her before I would sign to anything new. On hearing this, she said that I must do “whatever they tell me to do or I would not get paid”, and that “welfare is not just free money anymore” […] I swallowed my guts and said “you know that the not free money anymore comment you just made doesn’t mean that organisations like yours can just milk job-seekers for all they are worth. We both have rules to follow.” […] She didn’t pursue the matter any further and the appointment was ended immediately after that exchange.’ (Quotes from the group’s newsletter, *Quarterly* 2016)

Interacting in the meetings and exchanging opinions on poverty in the newsletters fosters among the group members both a sense of coalition to fight against the illegitimacy of the welfare system and a temporary sense of togetherness which encourages them to claim what is legitimate in the welfare system and to reflect on how it should be reformed. It may thus be said that the advisory group does not just advocate for welfare recipients; it also helps to restore their self-respect and

dignity, teaching them how to deal with the welfare system, how to claim their rights and how to insist on being treated as equal members of Australian society.

Case 2: The Community Meal Providing Group

The second civic group that I studied runs a community meals programme to meet the needs of the urban impoverished. This programme was founded in Sydney in 2017 by a faction of the Communist Party. It aims to 'build a sustainable community where no one is left out, by serving food for people who are homeless in addition to enlightening working-class people about the importance of social power and social equality' (extract from the homepage of the organisation). Every Saturday evening, volunteer members of the group cook and serve food and provide everyday commodities for homeless people. They do so from a site in Sydney's central business district (CBD). John, a founder of the meal programme originally from Syria in his twenties, explained why they chose this site:

> 'We set up in the street. This site is close to the Reserve Bank of Australia. It's a bit iconic to show that here is the reserve bank and parliament is just there. We can do more than them blokes. It's a political lesson as well. We want to show people where a sort of attack on capitalism in Marx's. We know the weaknesses of those institutions. We are attacking those weaknesses.' (Interview, 1 September 2019)

A volunteer lady, who has also participated in the activities of other volunteer groups, explained what she saw as the distinctiveness of this group. She said:

> 'They operate like at a street level. I like the fact that they set up for quite a few hours. A lot of the organisations are more limited in their time. They come, set up, serve, then pack up and leave quite relatively quickly. But here it's more rather than one big feed, it's like tea and coffee, snacks and food for quite a few hours. It just creates really lovely community. It's just a friendly community. Nutritious food, they always cook beautiful food.' (Interview, 23 February 2020)

According to John, approximately seven or eight volunteers serve around 400 or 500 meals every week. Most group members are in their twenties and hail from diverse ethnicities, such as Middle Eastern, Asian, Anglo-Australian and Indigenous Australian. John described the homeless who regularly visit the group's weekly food service as follows:

> 'A lot of these people were just average working-class people until they had a divorce and ended up on the streets, or lost their job, or were injured at work and could not get compensation. That's what happens. Insurance companies drag out the issue, so you get your pay out six months later. However, six months later, you are on the street. Most are likely to be people who are sleeping on a friend's couch rather than on the streets.' (Interview, 1 September 2019)

John differentiates the community meal programme from other groups providing similar services by saying, 'We are doing the same work and being more effective than they are by providing warm food and creating a community' (Interview, 1 September 2019). He was also aware of the similarities and differences between other organisations, especially church groups, and his association. He said:

> 'Similar to the way we do things, they go out and feed people who are homeless, but they also hand [out] Bibles and say prayers. They tell them "You need to be Christians," whereas we tell them to read Lenin and Stalin. We need to join forces.' (Interview, 1 September 2019)

John has personally experienced homelessness. He used to work at a construction site but became temporarily homeless after he was injured at work and did not receive compensation. Moreover, the recipients of the community meal programme include not only people who are homeless but also people who were once homeless but now live in public housing.

Some homeless people are reluctant to become too involved with the group once they become aware that the meal programme organisers are members of a Communist faction. Others, however, continue to visit the location every week for the meals and for social interactions with the members of the group and other homeless people.

Some regular members are acquainted with each other and when they meet at the weekly communal event they discuss their daily problems and possible solutions to these problems. As they eat a hot meal, they also exchange information on the public or voluntary services available to them. For instance, on a day I visited the site, a few homeless men were discussing the inefficiency and punitive aspect of the housing system for the homeless in Sydney. It is meaningless, they said, to be housed in temporary accommodation where one can stay only for 28 days; then, after that, one is back on the street and has to wait several years for permanent housing. A man pointed out that, while in temporary accommodation, he was obliged to apply for 10-week housing and had to provide details of his application, regardless of whether he could afford such accommodation. He continued, saying, 'The worst part is that you are on the streets through life circumstances or no faults of your own; whatever reasons you are on the streets, you don't need to be punished any further.' Then, the conversation expanded into how much money the government is paying to the private companies that provide such temporary accommodation. Another man in his thirties said:

> 'You know, when you talk about welfare state, welfare gets paid so much more money for welfare cooperation than the money that goes to poor people. The money spent on welfare is fraction of all government spending. And this is about human beings, it's about human lives that are part of our society. That's not important for the government.' (Interview, 23 February 2020)

Although these conversations do not lead directly to the solution of problems, by analysing the situation in which they objectively are placed, the people involved can at least realize that they are not to blame for such situation, as it is instead claimed by both the welfare agency and mainstream society. The service thus serves as a place where the urban impoverished can share their doubts and frustrations about the government and its welfare system and discuss the difficulties they face in their lives without being judged. This weekly association meeting helps them acquire a sense of being members of a social network, albeit a temporary one.

The meal programme helps to initiate the creation of a community also by encouraging interactions among the visitors. Among other things, a small birthday party was organised for a regular visitor called Matt, an Anglo-Australian man in his forties who used to be a baker but lost his

job due to alcohol problems and became temporarily homeless. A volunteer who was not a formal member of the group but visited the site every week brought a birthday cake. At the time, Matt no longer had an alcohol problem and lived in public housing on a disability pension. Yet, he continued to visit the service site to benefit from the food and the everyday provisions, and to remain connected with the service providers and the homeless. He explained that the volunteer who brought the cake was a good listener and had helped him overcome his alcohol problem. He described her as follows:

> 'I have known her for about two years. She volunteers at two places. She is a good person with a good heart. She used to have a drinking problem. She does not drink anymore. We can relate to each other. It's individual, but you still can kind of relate.' (Interview, 1 September 2019)

Matt needed someone he could relate to on a daily basis because he did not have a close relationship with his family. His case demonstrates that the mere provision of accommodation was not enough to overcome poverty-related problems and readjust to society. Associating with his friends at the food service location gave Matt a sense of belonging, which helped him 'get by' day by day and eventually overcome his alcohol-related difficulties.

These findings suggest that the meaning of community is reinterpreted by the service recipients in a way that does not necessarily meet the initiator of the programme's aim to instil them with the Communist ideology.

Discussion

These two case studies show that the impoverished Anglo-Australian who are exposed to the neoliberal forms of governance do not accept the situation passively; they question, and challenge, the legitimacy of welfare programme and citizenship. The civic groups that I have described object to the legitimacy of neoliberal forms of governance. The advisory group for the impoverished emphasise that the current welfare programme undermines the dignity and rights of welfare recipients. This group not only reaches out to people who are on the Work for the Dole programme to make them aware of the rights as citizens, but also analyses and exposes the structural flaws that cause job shortage and economic inequalities. On the other hand, the group providing the community meal challenges the deficiencies both of the capitalist society and of a government that denies any responsibility for people's unemployment. We have seen how this group attempts to negotiate the citizenship of those who are socially excluded by creating a temporary community in which people on welfare can share their experiences, frustrations and sufferings and gain a temporary sense of belonging to a social network.

The activities of these two civic groups point to the development of an alternative kind of citizenship and sense of belonging among the impoverished and socially excluded Anglo-Australians; specifically, one which is not based on a notion of 'mutual obligation' among self-sufficient individuals who are expected to draw on self-responsibility in addressing these issues. Through their daily activities, these groups show that the notion of citizenship modelled on neoliberal ideology fails to confer to each member of society the right to be treated with fairness and respect, as well as a sense of full social belonging. The official notion of 'mutual obligation' prevents the impoverished from

gaining their dignity. On the contrary, the relationships that are built over time among the members of these civic groups give the urban impoverished practical support and help to restore their sense of belonging as citizens. Most service providers, especially the initiators of these groups, have personally experienced unemployment, poverty and feelings of alienation. Thus, in line with earlier accounts (Curtis 1997), they interact with service recipients as equals; they do not draw boundaries between them based on asymmetric power relations.

The grassroots civic groups that that I have described offer the impoverished a space where they can congregate and discuss poverty-related problems with each other both formally and informally. Sharing a common experience of suffering does not necessarily create solidarity among the impoverished or lead to a collective social movement. However, it does make people aware of the importance of not surrendering to the system and teaches them to handle their problems without blaming themselves for their circumstances. Thus, we have seen, the urban impoverished learn that their poverty is not attributable to some failure of their own. They become aware of the structural flaws in neoliberal society that cause poverty and understand that they can cope with their problems by confronting, if not changing, the existing welfare system.

These civic groups view people not as isolated individuals but as persons who are embedded in a relationship with others. Through their activities, they show that it is such a connection with others that makes it possible for individuals to face and deal with their problems. The study of these groups and their members shows that 'mutual obligation' in a real sense should not be intended as a top-down imposition of duties of citizens; it should, instead, be based on mutual help and relatedness among equals, who can relate to each other's suffering and can help each another by sharing their similar experiences.

Conclusion

This Australian ethnography suggests that, while the notion of 'mutual obligation' is officially presented as a legitimate form of neoliberal governance, impoverished Anglo-Australians who are viewed as deviant from this notion bring out the failure of the current welfare system to achieve its original goal of assisting people to be self-reliant, become reintegrated in the society and gain a sense of full social membership. We have seen how impoverished people negotiate the failings of governance and citizenship by engaging in community-based self-help activities and interacting with peers who remind them of their rights as citizens and help them to recover to some extent, their dignity and respect.

We have found that the self-hep community assists impoverished individuals to cope with the poverty not through some kind of 'personal responsibility' but through their relationship with others who are in a similar situation. Thus, the legitimacy of neoliberal governance is challenged and power relations between those in power and ordinary people become open to redefinition. This shows that, as Pardo and Prato (2019) argue, neither inequalities nor the relationship between norms and interest are fixed; instead, they can be negotiated in the complexity of ordinary people's life.

The self-help community could be viewed as contributing to address social problems with which the government can no longer deal. It could, therefore, be instituted as a section of the government and thereby used as a contemporary form of governance under neoliberalism (Rose 1999). In this

line, a future study will need to focus on what form should a community that is meaningful to the urban impoverished take in order for it to counter the failings of neoliberal governance. Attention should also be paid to the potential alliance between Anglo and non-Anglo Australian impoverished in urban settings who, despite their different backgrounds, share the experience of social exclusion; such a potential alliance would constitute a strong challenge to the illegitimacy of neoliberal governance in this field.

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