
From Capacity to Participation, from Discourse to Practice: A Spanish Perspective

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› **Abstract_** *Participation has gone from being simply a fashionable concept, to reaching the point where it can be considered a well-established methodological strategy in policy formulation and implementation. However, practical application in the field of homelessness still suffers from a lack of systematic and improvised approaches; use is made instead of the trial and error method, with all its negative consequences. Fortunately, the opposite is true in some countries, where lines of intervention include specific legislative frameworks, and guidelines such as those observed in recent years in organisations like FEANTSA. This article outlines some factors that hinder the practical implementation of participation in the field of homelessness in Spain. The theoretical approach used here is based on Goffman's theory of stigma, which reveals the importance of fighting against ingrained prejudices. This is followed by a discussion of the author's ethnographic study on the issue of homelessness, carried out over the last two years in public and private Spanish institutions, through recording the speeches of social services technicians.*

› **Keywords_** *Participation, Empowerment, Homelessness, Micropolitical analysis, Structural analysis, Discourses.*

Introduction: Considerations of Concept and Context

Participation has gone from being simply a fashionable concept, to reaching the point where it can be considered a well-established methodological strategy in policy formulation and implementation. This emerges from the conclusions of a report on participation carried out by FEANTSA and OSW (2005). Almost all of those interviewed for this study positively assessed the impact of different types of participation on the quality of services, the relationship between staff and users in centres, and, most importantly, on the actual reinsertion process of these users. Despite the significant progress made and the differences between counties, this aspect can be said to be one of today's most relevant and pressing issues. In the context of recent debates in the *European Journal Of Homelessness* on the question of participation, on possibilities for political participation or mobilisation in networks (Paasche, 2010), the need for support from external actors in the new initiatives, like SAND in Denmark (Anker, 2009) and the problematic transit between individual and collective identities and representations (Allen, 2009). This debate is far from concluded, and this paper aim to draw attention to the persistence of stigma relating to homeless service users, and the limits of top-down type interventions

The Fight against Ingrained Stigmas: A First Step in Considering Intervention in Terms of Power Relations

Exploring the reasons behind the crisis of participation in practical terms inevitably yields various explanations. However, in attempting to highlight the extent to which those who hold least power contribute opinions and contribute to decision-making, it seems particularly useful to consider, first of all and using a holistic approach, the importance of the political dimension of social intervention. In short, this would involve discussing power relations, a subject that has been greatly explored in the social sciences, but that has not always been strictly applied to the analysis of social interventions. The necessary analysis of power relations leads to a transparency exercise, but it places us in a particularly complex context. Social interventions have a multidimensional nature, in which the political aspect becomes intertwined with many others (economic, institutional, technical, etc.) giving rise to a patchwork day-to-day reality. By examining the participation of homeless people within the systems designed for them, this paper proposes two alternatives: the micropolitical approach based on the theory of stigma, and the appreciation of context using a structural approach.

The lack of participation of homeless people is linked, to a large extent, to their lack of recognition in our societies: to the survival of stigma. Goffman (1963) believes that stigma devalues the identity of the person and disqualifies him or her from full

social acceptance. It is important to remember that the idea of stigma is socially created as contrasting with that of 'normality', but both meanings change over time, space and circumstance. As such, Goffman considers it important to remember that none of us fits the 'social ideal' entirely, and that we all find ourselves at times in situations in which we may be considered socially aberrant individuals.

The creation of stigma usually follows the use of labels and prejudices that are constructed by a defined body in the form of a culture. In other words, labelling arises as a simplification exercise by the person that stigmatises, and is aimed at the other socially aberrant person, who becomes isolated from conventional roles and groups. The 'poverty culture', the 'street culture', and even the 'homelessness culture' would be sub-products of this perspective, from a simplifying standpoint of cultures. In all cases they involve stereotypes that suggest a deeper truth, despite their obviously superficial and out-of-focus nature.

It is not easy to avoid stigmas completely. They are too present in the reality surrounding us, both in discourse and in practice. They are present in messages from the media, politics, daily life and everyday ways of speaking. The social services technician or politician who works with homeless people cannot shake off this influence given its historical, social and cultural significance, and contradictions thereof can compromise their own personal and professional interests; the hegemonic nature of the technique, and its relation to the management of knowledge and the exploitation of information, means that it involves exercising certain power.

Including service users in the decision-making processes that relate to and affect them can lead to discussions about the actual organisational structure of the institution in question, its work and, of course, the technical and decision-making capacity these 'new subjects' (the users) are being introduced to. Not only do conflicts of interest and uncertainty arise here, but a real fear of chaos also emerges. In other cases, when change is not seen as the renunciation of power, changes that focus on increasing the participation of users can lead to a healthy exercise in rethinking the nature of intervention itself. As we advance along the participation scale (which in its simplified version could cover three large areas: information, consultation and co-decision-making) interventions become increasingly complex. At the last stages, on a decisional scale, the changes can entail profound and complex transformations. Reviewing the term 'user' is one of these, in that it involves converting *objects* of intervention into *subjects* thereof.

It is clear that there are no easy ways to fight stigma, but the first step is to exercise honesty, primarily by recognising the paternalistic patterns inherent in our daily practices. As Estivil *et al.* (2006) rightly suggest, participation practices entail, among other things, patience and tenacity, always with the motivation of moving forward with firm and sure steps. An increase in the level of participation in the field

of homelessness does not involve a naïve exercising of will, or the simple exercise of professional altruism. Nor does it entail an easy transferral of the principles of participative democracy to the complex area of homelessness. Quite simply, as is becoming evident, it involves a necessary review of existing approaches, which are often anchored in our consciousness and which thus arise as a logical first step when demanding and applying legal regulations and principles. Without awareness-raising, regulations may end up being of little or no practical application.

The Structural Analysis: A Necessary Examination of Context

On a European level, the structural context demands a review of the real reach of the implementation of participation processes. Participation is, as we have outlined, an established principle among the organisations of the 25 EU member states that work with homeless people. However, the diversity of approaches, perspectives and realities of participation creates a veritable labyrinth of practices and policies, which become lost in an intricate network of institutions (Estivil *et al.*, 2006). In general, the course that participation takes is related to a varied combination of factors that necessitate a holistic interpretation (Estivil *et al.*, 2006, p.201): “The factors triggering the more expansive phases, the more restrictive phases, are very much related to an economic situation, with social structures, with a political evolution, with a cultural life, and also with predominant values in each country.”

In the more specific context of Mediterranean countries, the myth that Mediterranean societies (such as Italian, Greek and Spanish) are barely participative, permeable to despotism and therefore, to a certain degree, opaque to democratic ways of participation must now be questioned, particularly in light of the recent, important factors which have impacted on these societies and on the idea of user participation in institutions. The debate about the lack of citizen participation has acquired new spirit in the current context, where citizens perceive a certain lack of control over their expectations, needs and desires in relation to public matters. It is not surprising that guidelines for social interventions in general, and homelessness in particular, have not escaped this social development.

In the case of Spain, the legal regime is, in general, favourable to the participation of users in the interventions that affect them. This is expressed at the different levels of the legal system, from article 23 of the Constitution that refers to “the right to participate in public affairs”, to the law regulating the establishment of local government, which considers different essential aspects in this matter, such as: creating local bodies of participation (article 24), providing informative facilities for users (articles 69 and 70) and the obligation to consult these in particularly important cases (article 71). These regulations become even more precise in the Law on

Measures for the Modernisation of the Local Government, although they are limited by definitions of local government competence. This is the case, for example, with the creation of consultative bodies, the competences of which must be defined by said local corporations. With all of the above, it can be observed that legislative development in Spain has not yet reached the level of other European countries such as Denmark, France, Holland and Hungary, where the obligations of users to participate in different spheres is outlined with greater precision by the state.

In the three basic levels of participation mentioned (information, consultation and co-decision-making) the results of the practical application of this framework of measures are still considered to be quite limited in Spain (Ruano, 2010); measures are mainly aimed at the first level, and rarely at the consultation level, where, if they are put in place, they rarely involve a hugely formalised experience. For example, in an examination of the possibility of implementing participation in municipal social services, it was found that there were obvious barriers to the effective implementation of organisational methods that accommodate participation, such as the advice model for users, and it was found that participative models had a limited influence on social policies in general (Pastor, 2010).

On the other hand, and leaving considerations regarding the legal framework to one side, there are indicators of context that go into great detail about the distancing of citizens from institutions. We cannot forget that in the context of an economic crisis such as the current one, citizen dissatisfaction with involvement in political processes takes on new dimensions, with different consequences in different countries. In Spain, surveys carried out by the CIS (2011) reflect, month after month, increasingly negative evaluations of political leaders and institutions. In general terms, the situation reflected in these studies is characterised by the perception of a progressive distancing of citizens from those who represent them. These conclusions are in keeping with a context of the impoverishment of the middle and poorer classes, battered by unemployment that affects 4.5 million people, about 20% of the active population.

Researchers report that if this situation continues, there is a high chance that homelessness will increase in the medium term. At the moment, social programmes and policies, for which socioeconomic assistance from local, regional and state governments plays an important role, function as containment valves. In addition to this, associations and NGOs are carrying out important work, and in many cases there is a revival of voluntary work. Nor must we forget the important role of family networks so characteristic of Mediterranean countries, in which the family still holds an unquestionable social and cultural value.

One of the most important challenges to tackling homelessness is the substantial change in the profile of homeless people in recent years. This involves a still incipient feminisation of homelessness, as well as a greater presence of young people. However, the most relevant change experienced in recent years is the significant growth in the numbers of homeless foreigners, who, according to the latest census from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE, 2005), now account for almost half of all homeless people.

Among the obstacles to incorporating foreign homelessness people into participation processes are cultural and linguistic barriers. Furthermore, the temporal nature of the situation in which they find themselves may be a further obstacle. However, this temporality is usually more an issue of perception than reflective of their real or objective situation, as the migratory process is often perceived as 'unfinished': there is still a lot of money to send home; projects are still to be completed; debts are yet to be paid off. Additionally, the stigma of homelessness is even greater for immigrants; it has been observed in this project that they often hide the instability of their situation from relatives in their home country, and even from compatriots in the country of refuge. This deprives them of an essential link that has been recognised as having the potential to improve their situation: access to interpersonal networks of mutual support (Bosch, 2010).

Another fundamental factor related to context is the lack of coherence between housing policies and policies aimed at eradicating homelessness. The social and economic consequences of the evolving Spanish housing market in recent years are centred in the lack of affordable housing, and readjustment after the bursting of the 'housing bubble' is both slow and painful. Some experiences have been positive, though these seem to be the exception rather than the rule; they have been mainly in Catalonia, and include the role of some supportive institutions in finding rental houses, and the public housing companies that facilitate residential resources for homeless people. In any case, as Cabrera (2009) reports, these could be signs of a trend change, where the demand for the right to housing, encouraged by European and international experiences, may undergo a strong revival. It is clear that, in this context, there are no adequate structural conditions for implementing housing interventions for homeless people that situate possible assistance within the user's abilities and participation, as is the case with the 'Housing First' policy (see Pleace, this volume).

Lastly, and just as importantly, is the development of a context where the increasingly pressing economic needs of the population necessitate urgent action, mainly with regard to socioeconomic benefits. Although the benefits currently offered are not large, they are an important buffer for people who find themselves economically vulnerable. The magnitude of the problems for intervention in the context of home-

lessness is such that participation could be considered of lesser importance. Among these problems, Cabrera (2009) points to a structural framework that involves maintaining the levels of poverty and exclusion that exist in years of economic prosperity. We cannot, at present, discuss a neo-welfare development, but we can talk about urgent action to deal with pressing problems; what is certain is that focusing on emergency actions raises the risk that the importance of slow and continuous work will be overlooked, yet this is the fundamental basis of preparing spaces for participation; spaces that we think should not inhibit emergency action, but rather complement it.

Some Clues from a Qualitative Analysis: Discourses of Social Services Technicians on Participation

In addition to considerations of micropolitics and context, and to gain a better understanding of the situation in light of the argument set out thus far, the qualitative analysis of interviews carried out over the past two years with social services technicians and representatives of institutions that work with homeless people in Spain will now be discussed.¹

In the discourses of interviewees, the positive effects of participation are often referred to in general terms. Among these effects, increases in skills relating to decision-making, and the promotion of responsibility and proactivity are often mentioned.

There is also consensus on the idea that these initiatives are in a pre-embryonic state in Spain. The fact that it is a largely unexplored area has led to attempts not to complicate already complex interventions further, whether because there is insufficient involvement of the user, or because the user is not considered adequately prepared to organise even their own basic living conditions:

“People cannot be made deal with something they are not ready for, because they get frustrated. It is better to take steps towards preparing them so that they are able to participate, than to put people in places and situations that they are not going to know or that they will not be able to take on.”

“Participation depends on a person’s level of deterioration. Some people understand it and they direct the intervention toward you; they are really independent. But there are also people who you can see are very defenceless, very

¹ Some of these conclusions correspond to results from the author's research, carried out in collaboration with the European Project PEOPLE HOME04, entitled “Networking for Integrated Care Homeless”, in which other associations also participated: FEANTSA; FADAIS; the Seville and Granada City Councils; and associations in Venice and Stockholm.

affected by stressful events, people who don't know where to turn to... and of course, they're the people that you might have to guide a bit more... There's a bit of everything."

If there is a bit of everything, different ways of participating should be considered and applied diversely. However, this does not happen in reality; preparation for participation does not lead to praxis, and organisational structures and procedures do not open up enough to consider participation as another fundamental variable. The reasons, as we have already stated, are complex. From the users' perspective, the feeling of not belonging to a group often appears in the discourse as a powerful reason. Failing to identify with a group is a typical characteristic of stigmatised groups, and the greater the diversity of typologies and situations, the more evident this becomes.

Nevertheless, one of the most frequent types of participation is one that takes place in an informal manner, such as where homeless people identify people close to them that are in situations of need; this is an essential detection task that complements the work of formal institutions. A certain feeling of solidarity still reigns in the most precarious contexts, and social services technicians exploit this:

"We have become aware of many cases of homelessness through other people in the same situation. They tell you themselves... Because at times it is true that seeing someone else like that provokes rejection, but it is also true that they find support in other people and create strong ties with them"

From the perspective of social services technicians, the persistence of a certain professional jealousy, the fear of making a mistake, or even the presence of certain social stigmas that they cannot entirely avoid (and that label homeless people variously as cunning, delinquent or lazy), means that there may be a certain lack of trust in relation to the user. The fact that there are no good practice references to follow, or even mistakes to overcome, is both a cause and an effect; in other words, *"it is a field in which we have still not even started to make mistakes"*, but in which there is unquestionable potential from the viewpoint of users:

"Maybe it's a prejudice of ours; a fear that it will turn out badly... and also to a certain degree, undervaluing their (the users') concerns, because they are very concerned and they have a lot of courage."

As we have mentioned, few forms of participation in Spain, with some honourable exceptions, have gone beyond the subsidiary consultation or evaluation levels of the decision-making process. These levels of participation are commonly used as a consultation scale, involving the completion of questionnaires about activities to be carried out or the evaluation of processes and activities that have been completed. The incorporation of users into the staff of an organisation rarely goes beyond incidental operational tasks, such as messenger or photocopier, and never

involves such positions as high-ranking quasi social services technician, or voluntary consultation-level positions in coordination or on work committees. As such, there are no opportunities for incorporation into the institutions' decision-making positions, and any possibility of a practical reversal in the meaning of intervention – from object to subject, along the lines of empowerment described above – is a long way off.

As a result, prerequisites to starting the process are beginning to be weighed up, and some essential aspects come to light; one is a necessary review of rules that apply to the relationship between institution and user. The following statement positions us on a possible first step towards participation in this regard:

“Defining what people have to do is a common factor in the majority of care resources for people who are homeless. Rules regarding occupancy and access, for example. Few devices in all the fields of social intervention have so many rules. What time you have to get up, what time you have to go to bed, if you have to have a shower, if you can go in or go out... everything. They are life rules to the finest detail.”

Although some of the problems previously outlined are also mentioned here (fear of chaos, implicit paternalism, certain latent prejudices...), we must not forget a particularly relevant fact, linked to the nature of the institution; it is no coincidence that the regulatory system is most in tune with public resources, since they must report on what they do not only privately, but also publically (politically and socially, to citizens) to a much larger extent than private institutions. This explains, at least partially, the choice of an *appearance of normality* over an *appearance of disorder*, as the latter is generally undesirable for citizens, while the former is a necessary stamp of identity.

The discourse also highlights the effects of the financial crisis on intervention. Inherent in the statement that “people living on the street have to be removed from this situation as soon as possible”, which is commonly used by social service technicians across the sector, is both evidence of weakness in the socio-professional opportunity processes, and an enormous obstacle to it. The implications for individual capacities, meaning a step backwards in the empowerment process, are evident:

“For those people who find themselves unemployed now with the recession, especially foreigners, we do not have a quick response mechanism that prevents them from getting used to street life. I tell them (the users): ‘You’re getting used to not having responsibilities, to abandoning hygiene habits, all types of habits...’ That person who is on the street, who is new now, should be a priority in intervention work now.”

Lastly, if the participative tools and methodologies have experienced significant development in other areas of intervention (local development, mental health, addictions, etc.), much work remains to be done in fields such as homelessness, and even more so at the last levels of participation – those that come close to the idea of involvement. As one of the social services technicians stated in an interview:

“On a plate of fried eggs and bacon, the hen takes part, the pig gets involved. We have to have a lot of serenity, a lot of planning and a lot of wisdom to think that people who are homeless can become involved on equal terms as a social services technician, or a politician.”

The discourses of the social services technicians speak clearly to this; when “being a part of something” is not enough, obstacles, requirements and impediments multiply in relation to how users move directly to decision-making. Not only can they come out harmed, but other users can too, and even the *essence* of the intervention itself can be damaged when this is set out in a top-down manner. Fears, insecurities and phobias multiply whether they have a basis or not. On the other hand, however, involvement also means being part of an institution, the *essence* of which is temporality, and the arrival onto the scene of ex-users, common in other types of interventions such as drug addiction, can be quite relevant.

Final Considerations: The Need to Rethink the Limits of Participation

In this contribution to the debate on participation of homeless people in service provision and delivery, it is argued that despite the unfavourable socio-economic framework, the systematised application of proposals that promote intervention with people affected by homelessness should be explored by acknowledging the capacities of individuals and groups in situations of homelessness. Such acknowledgement must be aimed at considering homeless people as subjects and not objects of interventions, emphasising their empowerment on a micropolitical level. A responsible and carefully thought-out implementation of these principles of empowerment should aim to improve the text and application of laws relating to the participation of users in interventions, demanding compliance with such regulations, as well as an increase in the supply of adequate technical, human, material and organisational resources. This does not have to involve minimising the importance of the informal channels by means of which participation is often established. Nor should it involve giving up creativity in intervention, but instead implementing ways that stamp out latent or evident prejudices.

The establishment of participation levels appropriate to each case, context and demand, appears to be one of the most effective ways of applying this line of action at a specific policy and practice level. We acknowledge the importance of the participative level in the context of preventing homelessness; as the promotion of user capacity and resources for self-management gains greater importance, this promotion becomes even more relevant in the case of people who find themselves in this situation for the first time, or people have not been in this situation for very long, as occurs with the immigrant population. This is one of the most sensitive sectors for future intervention.

Although this paper has emphasised the position of users, a necessary overall vision leads us to consider participation as a fundamental principle that must be incorporated into political decisions, into the commitment of technicians, into citizen participation, and in short, into the democratic commitment of society in general. However, participation is only part of a complex process. One of the risks of participation is that it becomes, itself, the optimal intervention standard as summarised in the phrase: “there is full user participation, and therefore, we have so much legitimacy that there is little to discuss/review about the work we do.”

An open-door scenario for participation involves, firstly, thinking about offering resources, possibilities and opportunities. Among these resources, information should be considered, as it is the resource users most often see as having been ‘taken from him or her’ in the form of data. At this level, many formalised experiences are found in the Spanish case. Fortunately, an increasing number of social services technicians and representatives of institutions confirm that we should not be satisfied with modest levels of participation. A step further can always be taken; without the barrier of prejudice, people in decision-making or at representative levels of participation can be seen when they were not there before. In short, although micropolitical constrictions and the obstacles of context must not be avoided, the benefits of a commitment to responsible, flexible, continuous and well thought-out participation must continue to be highlighted – benefits that must carry weight when discourses become real and effective practices.

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