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## **Chronicity and pseudoinheritance of social exclusion. Differences according to the poverty of the family of origin among trash pickers in León (Nicaragua).**

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**Abstract.-** People in a situation of extreme poverty and/or social exclusion mainly come from poor families and their social difficulties tend to become chronic. This situation that appears to be especially pronounced in countries with lower levels of development. This paper analyzes different aspects of people (n = 99) who make their living collecting trash from dumps in León (Nicaragua), one of the countries with the lowest levels of development in Latin America. This group is difficult to access, heavily stigmatized, lives in chronic and extreme poverty and their families of origin were also poor. The results show that the pickers in León whose families of origin were poorest had the highest illiteracy rates, were in poorest health, had experienced more stressful life events and had poorer future expectations. Negative health and life circumstances, low levels of education and fatalism may lead to the pickers' situation of social exclusion becoming chronic.

**Keywords:** Poverty, Social exclusion, Trash pickers, Developing countries, Chronicity

## Introduction

People's persistence in extreme poverty and/or social exclusion is a problem that affects all societies, but is especially important in less developed countries, where the insecurity experienced by those in this situation is a particular concern. According to Kerbo (2003), the best predictor of a person's social class upon reaching adulthood is the social class of his/her family of origin. This argument seems to indicate a tendency towards chronification among those living in poverty, and a propensity for this situation to be passed on to subsequent generations, leading to a process of pseudoinheritance of poverty and social exclusion. This situation seems to be especially pronounced in less developed countries with low growth rates, where upward social mobility is particularly difficult.

People in poverty have higher rates of morbidity, mortality and disability, less access to health care and preventive services and higher exposure to environmental risks, as well as having less access to healthy foods and greater likelihood of being victims of violence (Levy & Sidel, 2013), all of which have a negative impact on health. Likewise, people with higher levels of poverty, especially if they live in countries with low levels of development, are forced to deal with more stressful life events – experiences that play a key role in one's life and that frequently cause significant changes for the person involved – both during childhood and throughout their adult life (Vázquez, Panadero, & Rincon, 2007). These stressful life events are also qualitatively more severe among the poorest individuals (Vázquez, Panadero, & Martín, 2015), and happen to them at younger ages than those who are not in poverty (Vázquez, Panadero, & Rincon, 2010).

In collectivistic cultural contexts with low levels of development, as in Central America, "fatalism" has been considered a fundamental framework in the study of psychological processes. Fatalism has been considered a cognitive schema defined by the passive and submissive acceptance of an unavoidable fate, behind which lies the power of nature or the will of a God (Martín-Baró, 1973). According to Martín-Baró (1998), fatalism highlights a peculiar relationship of meaning that people establish with themselves and the facts of their existence, which is the source of representations, beliefs and attitudes that the subjects build about themselves itself same and the events surrounding them. Fatalism is particularly pronounced in the so-called "culture of poverty" (Martín-Baró, 1987), where poor people adapt to their marginal position in a class-stratified, individualistic and capitalistic society. This allows them to cope with their feelings of helplessness and despair in the face of discovering that success is unlikely while maintaining the values and goals of society (Lewis, 1969).

Nicaragua, with an estimated population of 5.5 million inhabitants, is one of the countries in Latin America with the lowest levels of development (UNDP, 2013). 11.9% of Nicaragua's population lives on less than 1.25 dollars a day, and 46.2% live below the national poverty line (UNDP, 2013). León, the country's second most important city after the capital, has a population of approximately 185,000 inhabitants. Estimates suggest that more than half the city's inhabitants live below the poverty line, and that there are major pockets of population living in extreme poverty (Vazquez, Panadero, & Rivas, 2015).

The weakness of the Nicaraguan productive system and the increase in people living in extreme poverty in recent decades have forced relatively large groups of people to seek

their livelihood in landfill dumps, with the serious health problems and the heavy social stigmatization that this entails. While these people's main work consists of selecting and collecting items that can be sold for recycling - mainly plastic, metal, glass, cloth, paper and cardboard - they usually also collect basic goods from the rubbish for their own direct consumption (food, clothing, footwear, household goods, etc.) (Vazquez, 2013). People who collect items from the trash in León, among whom the presence of minors is commonplace, do so without any personal protection, only using a bag to carry what they have collected and a metal hook for poking.

At various meetings with the people who collect rubbish in the city of Leon, we discussed the question of what they wanted to be called, given the stigmatizing connotations of most of the names used to refer to them. The term saying in the most positive light by these people was "collectors," as they felt that it lacked negative connotations. For this reason, in this paper we use the term **collectors** to refer to people seeking to make a living from rubbish in the city of León (Nicaragua).

Despite being the object of social scorn, the work done by the collectors is important in societies with less developed states, as it prevents many tons of solid waste from increasing the size of landfills and enables raw materials to be delivered at low cost to various industries. Nonetheless, although the collectors do work that is socially useful, economically productive and environmentally beneficial (Lozano *et al.*, 2009), they usually suffer from strong stigmatization, and their work is related to marginalization and social exclusion.

## Method

The participants in the research were 99 collectors who obtained their living from the rubbish dumps in Leon (Nicaragua). This group is difficult to access, heavily stigmatized, and lived in extreme poverty. When the study was undertaken, the number of people making a living from rubbish in Leon was well defined, meaning that it was possible to interview all the collectors: 92 worked mainly in the metropolitan landfill dump and seven worked in the old city dump, which has become an illegal landfill.

The information was collected using a heteroapplied structured interview, which enabled the problems associated with the collectors' difficulties with reading and understanding to be circumvented. The structured interview collected information on related to various individuals making their living from trash in the city of León. After locating each picker, the interviewer initiated the contact, briefly explained the objectives of the research and requested their consent to conduct the interview. All the individuals approached agreed to cooperate with the research study.

The main characteristics of the collectors in Leon are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Main characteristics of collectors in Leon (Nicaragua).

	<b>n</b>	<b>Percentage / Mean (SD)</b>
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	72	72.7%
Female	27	27.3%
<b>Age in years</b>	99	32.4 (11.56)
14 to 19 years	10	10.1%
20 to 29 years	34	34.3%
30 to 39 years	30	30.3%
≥ 40 years	25	25.3%
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	27	27.3%
Married	20	20.2%
Common-law union	49	49.5%
Separated	2	2.0%
Widow/er	1	1.0%
<b>Number of children</b>	99	2.8 (2.26)
No children	13	13.1%
One child	23	23.2%
Two children	14	14.1%
Three children	17	17.2%
Four children	13	13.1%
Five children	9	9.1%
More than five children	10	10.1%
<b>Number of people living in the home</b>	99	7.5 (4.52)
<b>Age - in years - when the first child was born</b>	86	18.6 (4.96)
<b>Age - in years - when he/she began to live as part of a couple</b>	91	20 (3.60)
<b>Monthly income</b>		
Less than 25 dollars a month	11	12.5%
25 to 40 dollars a month	34	38.6%
40 to 65 dollars a month	14	15.9%
More than 65 dollars a month	29	33.0%
<b>Economic level of the individual or family with whom they lived longest before 18 years old.</b>		
Slightly rich	1	1.0%
Neither rich nor poor	5	5.1%
Slightly poor	3	3.0%
Poor	67	67.7%
Extremely poor	23	23.2%

As shown in Table 1, 73% of the collectors in the city of León were men, with a mean age of 32 years. The mean age of the women was 36.5 years old (SD = 12.37), which was significantly higher than that of the men (M = 30.8; SD = 10.94) ( $t = -2.215$ ,  $p = .029$ ). 63% of the women and 52.8% of the men were over 29 years old. Ten collectors (eight men and two women) were aged between 14 and 19 years old, and three of them were under 16. A quarter of the respondents were over 40 years old.

69.7% of the collectors were in a relationship, which are mostly in common-law union. Only three collectors - all of whom were women - who had lost their partners did not have a new partner when interviewed. The vast majority of the collectors (86.9%) had children. While the respondents had a mean of three children, 13% did not have any children, while 20% had five or more. The women had on average more children than the men: A mean of 4.1 children for the women ( $SD = 2.70$ ) compared to a mean of 2.3 children for the men ( $SD = 1.87$ ) ( $t = -3.745$ ,  $p = .000$ ).

Of the respondents who had had children, 52.3% had their first child before they were 18 years old, and 8.1% did so before they were 15 years old. Statistically significant differences according to sex are observed with regard to the age at which the collectors had their first child. Among men the mean age was 19.6 years old ( $SD = 5.53$ ) and among women the mean age was 16.3 years ( $SD = 1.76$ ) ( $t = 4.242$ ,  $p = .000$ ). The vast majority of the respondents (92%) said they live or had lived as part of a couple at some point, and on average, they began their life within the couple before they were 17 years old. All the women interviewed had lived as a part of a couple, and only 8 men had never lived in this situation. The women began living with their partner at a mean age of 14.7 years old ( $SD = 1.71$ ), while the men did so at a mean age of 17.9 years old ( $SD = 3.77$ ) ( $t = 5.581$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Despite the small size of the collectors' homes (two thirds of which have only one or two rooms), the respondents live with a mean of over seven people. One third of the collectors were unable to read or write, and only 16% have completed primary education.

Most of the collectors said their family of origin (the person or family who they lived with for the most years before they were 18 years old) was poor or extremely poor. At the time of the interview, more than half of the collectors earned a monthly income of less than 40 dollars, i.e. less than 1.5 dollars a day.

The database was developed and processed using the SPSS statistical analysis and data management system (version 19.0 for Windows.) Given the limited number of people who lived off trash in León (99 people), the variable "What was the economic level of the person or family who you lived with for most years before you were 18 years old?" was trichotomized to facilitate the data analysis, with a distinction made between "Not poor" ("Slightly rich", "neither rich nor poor", "slightly poor"), "poor" and "extremely poor". The variables on the general state of health were also dichotomized – with a distinction made between those who said they had “a good state of health” (“good” or “very good”) and “fair or poor health” (“fair”, “poor” or “very poor” state of health) -, and their expectations for the future – between those whose expectations were “better than in the present” (“better than in the present”) and those whose expectations were "the same or worse as in the present" ("the same as in the present", “worse than in the present”) -. The data obtained were used to perform a descriptive analysis that included the information about the collectors. When making comparisons, the  $\chi^2$  "Chi square" statistic was used for nominal variables, and the "Student t test for independent samples" and the "Single-Factor ANOVA" was used for continuous variables.

## Results

The relationship between the level of education of those interviewed and the economic level or their families of origin is shown in Table 2:

Table 2. Differences in the educational level of collectors in the city of León (Nicaragua) depending on the economic status of their family of origin.

	Economic level of the family of origin			$\chi^2$
	Not poor (n = 9)	Poor (n = 67)	Extremely poor (n = 23)	
<b>Level of education</b>				9.380*
Unable to read or write	44.4% (4)	30.3% (20)	43.5% (10)	
Able to read and write without having completed primary education	11.1% (1)	56.1% (37)	43.5% (10)	
Primary or secondary education	44.4% (4)	13.6% (9)	13.0% (3)	

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

As shown in Table 2, among the collectors of León, those who lived in "extremely poor" families during their childhood had the highest percentages of illiteracy, while those who said their family of origin was "not poor" had received primary or secondary education to a greater extent. Meanwhile, those who came from "poor" families were those with the highest percentages of literacy without having received education.

Tables 3 and 4 show the differences in suffering from certain stressful life events and the differences in the mean ages at which certain events happened to them for the first time, according to the economic level of the family of origin.

Table 3. Differences in future expectations depending on the economic status of the family of origin among collectors in the city of León (Nicaragua).

Stressful life events suffered	Economic level of the family of origin			$\chi^2$
	Not poor (n = 9)	Poor (n = 67)	Extremely poor (n = 23)	
Problems of violence in the family of origin	22.2% (2)	22.7% (15)	60.9% (14)	11.880**
Death of spouse or partner	11.1% (1)	1.6% (1)	20% (4)	8.478*
Has lost his/her home	0% (0)	1.6% (1)	20% (4)	10.265**

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

Table 3 shows that a higher percentage of the interviewees whose families of origin were "extremely poor" had suffered violence in their family of origin, death of a spouse and loss of housing.

Table 4. Differences in the average age at which collectors in the city of León (Nicaragua) experienced specific stressful life events depending on the economic status of their family of origin

Age when first experiencing stressful life events	Economic level of the family of origin			F
	Not poor (n = 9) M (SD)	Poor (n = 67) M (SD)	Extremely poor (n = 23) M (SD)	
Problems of violence in the family of origin	10.0 (5.657)	5.7 (4.713)	2.5 (3.540)	3.819*
Has had significant financial problems	25.5 (4.933)	19.9 (13.588)	9.6 (11.155)	3.949*
Has drunk excessively	18.0 (---)	30.1 (12.328)	13.0 (12.383)	4.510*
Has been physically assaulted (after 18 years of age)	27.5 (3.356)	19.6 (1.140)	23.2 (2.217)	11.599**

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$

The data in Table 4 show that people whose family of origin was "extremely poor" first suffered problems of family violence, major economic problems and excessive alcohol consumption at younger ages than those whose family of origin was "poor" or "not poor".

The relationship between the different aspects of health of those interviewed and the economic level of the family of origin is shown in Table 5:

Table 5. Differences in health depending on the economic level of the family of origin among collectors in the city of León (Nicaragua).

	Economic level of the family of origin			$\chi^2$
	Not poor (n = 9)	Poor (n = 67)	Extremely poor (n = 23)	
<b>General state of health</b>				10.117**
Good or very good health	77.8% (7)	59.7% (40)	26.1% (6)	
Fair or poor health	22.2% (2)	40.3% (27)	73.9% (17)	
<b>General state of health</b>				18.787**
Very good	22.2% (2)	4.5% (3)	4.3% (1)	
Good	55.6% (5)	55.2% (37)	21.7% (5)	
OK	11.1% (1)	35.8% (24)	47.8% (11)	
Poor	11.1% (1)	4.5% (3)	26.1% (6)	
<b>Suffers from serious illness</b>				9.655**
Yes	0% (0)	10.4% (7)	34.8% (8)	
No	100.0% (9)	89.6% (60)	65.2% (15)	

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\* $p \leq .001$



Table 5 shows that the poorer the family of origin of those interviewed, the worse their general state of health. The highest percentages of people in poor health are observed among those who lived in "extremely poor" family situations. They are also those with the highest percentage reporting suffering from serious illness.

Table 6 shows information on the expectations for the future of those interviewed according to the economic level of their families of origin.

Table 6. Differences in future expectations depending on the economic status of the family of origin among collectors in the city of León (Nicaragua).

	Economic level of the family of origin			$\chi^2$
	Not poor (n = 9)	Poor (n = 67)	Extremely poor (n = 23)	
<b>He/she believes that his/her outlook for the future is ...</b>				7.573*
Better than in the present	77.8% (7)	77.6% (52)	47.8% (11)	
The same or worse than in the present	22.2% (2)	22.4% (15)	52.2% (12)	

\*p ≤ .05; \*\*p ≤ .01; \*\*\*p ≤ .001

As can be seen in Table 6, a lower percentage of people with a family of origin that was "extremely poor" had positive expectations for the future.

## Conclusions and discussion

The collectors in León are a group that is heavily stigmatized, and lives in extreme poverty (over half live on less than 1.5 dollars a day), in makeshift homes without any basic services, with only one or two rooms, which accommodate an average of over seven people. These people work in landfills without any protection, selecting and collecting items that could be offered for sale for recycling, and removing waste items for direct consumption (food, clothing, household goods, etc.) (Vázquez, 2013). Considering the working conditions of the collectors and their life circumstances in precarious conditions, with overcrowding and a lack of basic services, the fact that they suffer from major health problems and numerous stressful life events and have great difficulty in gaining access to basic education is to a certain extent understandable. These factors appear to contribute to a chronification in the extreme poverty of these people, with this situation being passed down from parents to children, resulting in a process of pseudo-inheritance of social exclusion. Over 90% of the collectors said they came from "poor" or "very poor" families, which reinforces the point made by Kerbo (2003) regarding the fact that the best predictor of a person's social class in the adult life is the social class of their family of origin. Almost all the collectors were born into poor families, and have remained in poverty throughout their entire lives.

The collectors in León are a group with very poor education, in which a large percentage of people are unable to read or write, and a very low percentage have received primary education. Social conditions (uneducated or illiterate parents, starting work at an

early age, etc.), insecure and overcrowded housing and difficulties in meeting essential expenses arising from children's education are some of the aspects that help to explain academic failure in this group. In a country like Nicaragua, where access to reasonably paid employment is very difficult, the lack of basic education among the collectors can have a major impact on the chronification of their poverty. Low levels of education and illiteracy among the collectors particularly affect those from the poorest families, of whom half cannot read or write. According to Buchmann and Hannum (2001), the expansion of education in less developed states has resulted, *inter alia*, in the development of behaviour and practices for raising healthy children, as well as providing a wide variety of economic and non-economic mechanisms that influence health and wellness. Unfortunately, the collectors of the city of León seem to have been largely remained excluded from access to education.

Levy and Sidel (2013) state that people in poverty have higher rates of morbidity, mortality and disability, have less access to healthcare and preventive services, and greater exposure to environmental hazards, as well as being less likely to have access to healthy foods and more likely to be victims of violence. According to the results reported by these authors, the collectors in León had worse general states of health the poorer their families of origin were, with the highest percentages of people with poor health and severe illnesses among those who came from "extremely poor" family environments. This stigmatized group, with very low levels of education, has limited access to medical care, and is exposed to significant environmental risks in both their work in landfills and in their housing, which is unstable and lacks basic services. They also consume foods that are largely obtained from the trash and live in social environments that are prone to violence. All these factors lead to poorer health, which in a context with few employment opportunities and very poor basic social services can have a negative effect on their chronification in the situation of social exclusion.

Extreme poverty and overcrowding also create other living conditions with a potential impact on the chronification of collectors in a situation of social exclusion. Thus, for example, the greater the poverty in the family of origin of those interviewed, the higher the percentage of suffering from domestic violence observed, and its earlier appearance. In addition, a higher percentage of collectors from "extremely poor" families had suffered throughout their lives from high impact events, such as the death of a spouse or loss of housing, in addition to having consumed alcohol to excess at younger ages - mainly in early adolescence. As seen in other studies conducted in Nicaragua with different population groups (Vázquez, Panadero, & Martín, 2015; Vázquez, Panadero, & Rincon, 2007, 2010), poorer people suffer from more stressful life events, and these happen to them at younger ages, and because this affects other circumstances it may hinder the processes of overcoming their poverty and make the chronification of these people experiencing social exclusion more probable.

Within the "culture of poverty" (Martin-Baro, 1987) typical of collectivistic cultural environments with low levels of development, as in the case of Nicaragua, "fatalism" - the passive and submissive acceptance of an inevitable fate - has been considered a fundamental framework for the study of psychological processes. However, the data obtained from collectors in León, one of the poorest and most socially excluded groups in the region, provide food for thought in this aspect, since the majority of those interviewed (71%) believe that their future prospects are better than the present. This socially excluded group does not appear to be influenced by fatalism, and retains some degree of optimism about the future

improvement of their situation, although this does not necessarily mean that they believe that they will overcome their poverty, but only that they will experience a future improvement in their difficult situation. However, differences in their future expectations can be observed according to the level of poverty of their family of origin, so that among collectors whose families of origin were "extremely poor," more than half did not express positive expectations for the future. Perhaps, in line with the results reported by Lewis (1969), fatalism allows these people from poorer families to cope with the feelings of helplessness and despair which they develop when they discover that they are unlikely to be successful in their social context.

The collectors in the city of León grew up in poor families, and have been poor throughout their lives. However, the challenge lies in giving these heavily stigmatized people the opportunity to improve their quality of life, preventing their children from being doomed to the process of pseudoinheritance of the extreme poverty and social exclusion suffered by their parents. In this regard, the support of institutions, governments and other organizations for these people is decisive. They have shown themselves to be able to overcome many serious circumstances of difficulty and a large percentage of them nevertheless remain optimistic about their future.

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