

EXISTENTIAL CONCERNS AND SUPPORTS. AN INVESTIGATION INTO VULNERABILITY¹

Inquietudes existenciales y soportes. Una investigación sobre vulnerabilidad

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Keywords

Existential concerns
Relationship to the world
Supports
Vulnerability

Palabras clave

Inquietudes existenciales
Relación con el mundo
Soportes
Vulnerabilidad

ABSTRACT: Within the framework of the defence of a sociology of the relationship to the world, this article seeks to analyse the existential discomforts and concerns experienced by individuals in situations of vulnerability, as well as the socio-existential supports that enable them to sustain themselves when the support of work is lost or weakened. To this end, the article mobilises empirical material from research carried out through in-depth interviews and discussion and feedback groups. Specifically, this research focuses on three groups: young people, unemployed people aged over 45, and family network women carers, all of them in a situation of vulnerability. We offer a differentiated analysis of the main existential discomforts and concerns experienced by each of these groups, as well as the main socio-existential supports that allow them to sustain themselves in their daily lives. This article thus aims to make a theoretical and empirical contribution to the development of both a sociology of the relationship to the world and a sociology of supports.

RESUMEN: En el marco de la defensa de una sociología de la relación con el mundo, este artículo busca analizar los malestares e inquietudes existenciales que experimentan los individuos que se encuentran en situación de vulnerabilidad, así como los soportes socio-existenciales que les permiten sostenerse cuando el soporte del trabajo se pierde o se debilita. Para ello, el artículo moviliza material empírico procedente de una investigación realizada mediante entrevistas en profundidad, grupos de discusión y grupos de restitución. En concreto, esta investigación se centra en tres colectivos: jóvenes, personas desempleadas mayores de 45 años y mujeres cuidadoras de la red familiar, todos ellos en situación de vulnerabilidad. Ofrecemos un análisis diferenciado de los principales malestares e inquietudes existenciales que experimenta cada uno de estos grupos, así como de los principales soportes socio-existenciales que les permiten sostenerse en sus vidas cotidianas. De este modo, con este artículo se persigue hacer una contribución teórica y empírica al desarrollo tanto de una sociología de la relación con el mundo como de una sociología de los soportes.

¹ We would like to thank the reviewers, their comments helped us improve the article. Research for this article was made possible by the publicly funded Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) project, "New forms of socio-existential vulnerability, supports and care in Spain" (VULSOCU) [CSO2016-76179-R] (AEI/FEDER, EU).

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How to cite: Santiago, Jose (2024). «Existential concerns and supports. An investigation into vulnerability». *Papeles del CEIC*, vol. 2024/1, papel 298, 1-17. (<http://doi.org/10.1387/pceic.25840>).

Received: 2023, december / Accepted: 2024, february.

ISSN 1695-6494 / © 2024 UPV/EHU



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1. INTRODUCTION

The analysis of existential questions has been neglected in the sociological tradition. Two types of causes may account for this. On the one hand, the intellectual construction of the *idea* of society, with which, as Martuccelli (2007) has pointed out, the hegemonic sociological tradition brought the characteristic of the modern social condition, the unbridgeable distance between the subjective and the objective, between the individual and the world, the source of existential concerns, back into a harmonious analytical totality. On the other hand, and in relation to this *idea* of society, the sociological focus of attention was centred on material interests and ideas, leaving out, or subordinating to them, the analysis of the existential sensibilities that are historically shaped (Rosa, 2019: 46). Rosa's proposals are particularly fruitful for a sociological analysis of these existential questions. Today, it is increasingly necessary to develop a sociology of the relationship to the world that accounts for these existential concerns and discomforts as a result of various processes of social change and the concatenation of crises.

Based on the hypothesis that contemporary situations of vulnerability cause a problematic relationship to the world, in this article we explore precisely this relationship between vulnerability and relationships to the world. We argue that it is necessary to develop a sociology of relationship to the world that addresses both situations of vulnerability and the supports that allow the individuals to sustain themselves in their daily lives. To this end, this article is structured as follows: firstly, we defend the need for the development of a sociology of the relationship to the world because late modern societies structurally produce experiences of vulnerability that generate existential concerns and discomforts. We will then focus on supports, exploring their relationship to vulnerability, and their material and socio-existential dimensions. The third part is devoted to presenting the methodology and the fieldwork carried out. Subsequently we will show the empirical research with two sections devoted to analysing the effects of vulnerability on problematic relationships to the world and the various socio-existential supports with which individuals sustain themselves in their daily lives. The article closes with a section of conclusions.

2. FOR A SOCIOLOGY OF THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE WORLD

In his book *Resonance*, the German philosopher Rosa encourages us to renew the sociological imagination by shifting our gaze to a terrain little explored by this discipline: the ways in which one experiences and positions oneself with respect to the world, the quality of one's appropriation of the world (2019: 20). To this end, Rosa is encouraging the development of a *sociology of the relationship to the world* with which to answer a question that sociology is reluctant to ask as it considers that it is not part of its competence: what does a good life consist of and why don't we have one? With this approach, we are confronted with the quality of the relationship between individuals and the world: to what extent do people have a successful relationship to the world, in which it is kind and welcoming, or, on the contrary, do they have failed lives, experiencing the world as threatening, alienating and lacking in resonance? Rosa thus invites us to return sociologically to the approaches of the philosophy of existence, along the lines of Heidegger, who, in *Being and Time*, referred to the fact that human beings are thrown into the world. From there, Rosa contrasts two ways of relating to the world. In

one, the individual is *thrown* or *exposed* and the world is experienced as alienating and cold. In the other, on the contrary, the individual feels *carried*, *supported*, *sheltered* and *protected*, experiencing the world as a warm and resonant place. One of Rosa's theses in this regard is that late modernity has created the conditions of possibility for the world to be experienced in the former way due to the process of acceleration that produces alienating ways of relating to things, space, actions, time and others (Rosa, 2016). Beyond his diagnosis, what we are interested in rescuing from Rosa is his proposal to develop a sociology that is attentive to the existential questions and sensibilities that are historically shaped.

Like Rosa, Martuccelli is also an advocate of a sociology that looks into existential questions because (the) *ek-sistere*, the feeling of being outside, thrown, exposed, no longer refers only to the human condition and its anthropological invariants (anguish, death), but concerns a much larger number of social experiences, where indeed, and in a more or less central way, individuals experience, in different ways, existential concern (Martuccelli, 2011: 26). A sociology attentive to existential questions must therefore account for the various ways of experiencing these existential concerns, not only as the result of human nature as the philosophy of existence did, but also as the result of social relations at a given socio-historical moment. If the modern social condition could have been the spur to the development of a sociology of the relationship to the world, which the *idea* of society, however, put a stop to, today this enterprise is even more pressing because for some decades now society has been producing individuals differently, generating new forms of socio-existential vulnerability that give rise to socio-existential discomforts and concerns.

3. SUPPORTS THAT SUSTAIN EXISTENCE

In order to account for the quality of our relationship to the world, it is fundamental to pay attention to the socio-existential supports that allow the individual to feel carried, supported, sheltered and protected. This is particularly important in situations of vulnerability. In fact, to speak of vulnerability inexorably brings us back to the notion of supports. For Castel, the supports are the objective conditions of possibility for constituting oneself as an individual: There is no individual without supports. More specifically, he points out that to speak of support in this sense is to speak of 'resources' or 'capitals' in Bourdieu's sense; it is the capacity to have reserves that can be relational, cultural, economic, etc., and that are the foundations on which the possibility of developing individual strategies can rest (Castel & Haroche, 2001: 30). In this interpretative framework, Castel sees that the main support in wage societies is provided by work and the social protections associated with it.

What happens then when the work is lost or becomes fragile? Castel was aware that the crisis of the wage society leads to a greater number of individuals needing other supports than work and the protections linked to it (2010: 294-295). However, by his own admission, his focus on the wage society did not lead him to analyse other types of support. This is why it is becoming increasingly urgent for sociology to pay more attention to the diversity of supports and the way they operate. In this sense, the proposals of Martuccelli, whose perspective is linked to Castel's in maintaining that there is no individual without supports, are of enormous value: the individual is apprehensible only from (a) set of supports, material and symbolic, actively structured or passively suffered, always real in their effects and without which, prop-

erly speaking, the actor would not exist (2007: 77). But, for Martuccelli, these supports must be researched with both a sociological analysis and an existential analysis, hence the need to study not only the economic and political supports, but also the supports of socio-existential content. Supports which, unlike Castel, are not only capital or resources available to the individual and which confer protection, because, although they can be mobilised on certain occasions as capital, their mode of operation is different, as shown by the fact that they are not necessarily under the control of individuals, ready to be mobilised. As Martuccelli points out, the notion of supports thus aims at grasping (the) heterogeneous sets of real or imaginary elements, which entail different levels of implication depending on the situations and practices, that which enables individuals to be sustained because they are supported, and supported because they are sustained in the midst of social life (ibidem: 81).

The turn that Martuccelli proposes in order to account for the supports from a socio-existential analysis takes on its full relevance if we return to the social transformations of the last decades. The crisis of the *idea* of society means that individuals need to do more work on themselves, since social positions do not sustain them, nor do institutions provide them with substantive programmes of action as in the past. This is reflected in a new existential period, in which existential concerns and discomforts have a more vital, more energetic content, which refers us to how individuals sustain themselves in their daily lives, what do they rely on to act? (Martuccelli, 2014).

These supports of socio-existential content are of vital importance for every individual, as they are their own condition of possibility, but they take on a specific profile, more visible and perhaps more dramatic, for people who have seen the support of work lost or weakened. How do they sustain themselves in their daily lives? What do they rely on to act? For the issue at hand, it is therefore necessary to pay attention to the instrumental and strategic character of the supports that can be of vital importance as a social buffer to prevent precariousness in times of crisis, as some works that have mobilised the category of works (Joubert, 2003) have done. However, following Martuccelli's critique of this type of work, it is also necessary to pay attention to the socio-existential component of the supports, which are not always mobilised strategically and often operate in zones of *chiaroscuro* to our consciousness (2007: 94-95).

Before proceeding, it is necessary to point out that the theoretical approach of this article is of an exploratory nature, as it seeks to combine Rosa's sociology of our relationship to the world with the sociology of supports developed by Martuccelli. Certainly, the depth of their respective theoretical frameworks cannot be addressed exhaustively in this article. There are, after all, important differences between their works. Nevertheless, we would argue that they are convergent, as both consider the existential implications overlooked by the sociological tradition. As we noted above, our aim in this paper is to explore in what ways, in order to account for the quality of our relationship to the world, it is fundamental to pay attention to the socio-existential supports that allow the individual to feel carried, supported, sheltered and protected.

4. METHODOLOGY

We have focused our attention on groups in situations of vulnerability derived from the social question (Santiago, 2021). In other words, we have focused on population strata with pre-

carious economic situations (unemployment, with exits and entrances to the labour market, low wages, low or non-existent social protection). In order to delimit the zone of vulnerability referred to by Castel (1995) as that between the protected sectors and those in poverty, we have used an income indicator, set at around 60% of the median, which marks the line of relative poverty. This income indicator was set taking into account the consumption unit of the selected person's household. We therefore use the equivalent household income, which allows us to standardise households according to the number of equivalent consumption units that compose it. The economies of scale that occur when household members share their income were thus considered. To operationalise it, we use the modified OECD scale, which assigns a weight of 1 to the first adult, a weight of 0.5 to other adults and a weight of 0.3 to children under 14.

The target populations were young people aged 25-35, persons aged over 45 (with a maximum of 59) and family network women caretakers aged 30-64. Our starting hypothesis was that, given their situations of vulnerability, they were developing existential concerns and discomforts that deserved to be analysed. In the case of young people, the yearning for independence and autonomy to build their own project becomes a future that never comes, making the transition to adulthood difficult. For the over-45s, job loss and/or job instability brings with it a consequent crisis of employment supports, which can translate into a feeling of subjective destruction. Finally, family women caretakers, who often become so as a result of a situation of economic precariousness that makes them take on the care of family members. The consequence is that they become more socio-existentially vulnerable.

In the selection of the populations to be studied, we have also taken into account the social class background. We thus aimed to analyse the effect of downward social mobility on experiences of vulnerability. For this purpose, we consider intergenerational mobility in the case of young people and intragenerational mobility for those aged 45 and over. To select people from upper-middle class backgrounds, we took into account various criteria from the literature on social class, which we finally redirected to occupation and income (of the parents in the case of young people, before being in a vulnerable situation in the case of the over 45s). The occupation required institutionalised cultural capital at university level to be able to be exercised. As far as income is concerned, in line with other studies, a range between 130% and 160% of the median was established.

Along with age and social class, the other socio-demographic variable that has occupied a central place in the design of the fieldwork is gender, given the differential it shows in the experiences of vulnerability, more so if it is put in relation to the supports. The representation of the self-made man has typically been for men sustained by a network of support and care, which, however, were made invisible. This enables the fiction of the self-made man, which still survives today, as we will see in the analysis of the empirical material.

The fieldwork was carried out between 2018 and 2021. In 2018 and 2019, discussion groups and interviews were conducted respectively in the cities of Madrid, Seville, Bilbao, Granada, Almeria and Carboneras (rural area in the province of Almeria). The discussion groups (DGs) comprising 7-8 people were as follows. Four groups of people over 45 (with a maximum age of 59): men from working class backgrounds (Bilbao); women from working class backgrounds (Madrid); men from upper-middle class backgrounds (Madrid); and women from upper-middle class backgrounds (Seville). Three groups were carried out with young people: mixed aged 30-35 from upper-middle class backgrounds and university graduates (Madrid);

women aged 25-30 (Bilbao) and men aged 25-30 (Seville), in both cases from working class backgrounds and without a university degree. Two groups were composed of family network women caretakers: aged 30-50 (Granada) and aged 51-64 (Madrid). The interviews were carried out in the municipalities mentioned above, except in Granada. Those that have been analysed for this article are distributed as follows: twenty-two to people over 45; nineteen to young people aged 25-35; and fifteen to caretakers aged 30-64.

Following the analysis of the empirical material from the discussion groups and interviews, we proceeded to conduct 7 feedback groups (FGs) with people who had participated in the discussion groups and interviews. With these groups, inspired by the sociological intervention groups of Alain Touraine's school, the aim was to return the first results of the analysis to the groups being researched, as well as to exchange the views of actors and researchers in order to help in carrying out a final analysis as a result of the co-production of knowledge (Cousin & Rui, 2010; Wieviorka, 2008: 147-152). The feedback groups were conducted online due to the coronavirus pandemic. They consisted of 3 to 4 participants and their composition was as follows. Three groups of older unemployed people over 45 years of age: two groups of men from working class backgrounds and a third group of women from upper-middle class backgrounds. Two groups were carried out with young people: one mixed group with young people aged 30-35 from upper-middle class backgrounds and university graduates, and the other with women aged 25-30 from working class backgrounds and without a university degree. Two groups were composed of family network women caretakers. All the people who participated in the fieldwork gave their informed consent.

5. VULNERABILITY AND PROBLEMATIC RELATIONS TO THE WORLD

Situations of vulnerability often give rise to a very problematic relationship to the world, in which the world is experienced as hostile and cold. Life can become a burden to bear and the individual can feel destroyed, *thrown away* as if he or she is worthless. This was expressed in one of the discussion groups with unemployed men over 45 years old:

If I am working, I feel fulfilled, I feel good, I have an activity, I have something to do. Doing nothing is overwhelming. All of us here know that. You're at home, you're in bed. But wherever you are, you start to do your head in, you're overwhelmed, you feel like a wreck, you feel in a nutshell like piece of shit. (DG. Men aged over 45. Working-class origin)

It is no coincidence that this man refers to his bed and his house, which are considered to be places where we feel more sheltered, less exposed, in short, less vulnerable. The loss of work gives rise to a problematic relationship to the world. No doubt in this case Castel's characterisation of individuals by default fits perfectly with these unemployed men, who have lost not only their economic support, but also their existential support of the first order: «Unemployment affects all people not only as an economic issue, but as a question of saying well, what do I do now with my life» (FG. Men aged over 45. Upper-middle class origin). For these men, work has allowed them to structure their daily lives in such a way that when they lose it, they also lose the routine of getting up in the morning to work... they don't know what to do with their lives, they don't know what to do (FG. Men aged over 45. Upper-middle class origin).

To fully understand the existential discomfort and subjective destruction of these unemployed people, it is necessary to look at the social norm of Fordist employment in which they were socialised and at the family model, in which the distribution of tasks and roles was defined in terms of gender. The loss of employment leads these unemployed people to face a post-Fordist and flexible labour market context at an advanced age, where age is seen as a handicap. Added to this is the loss of the role of the breadwinner. Losing one's job means not only the loss of protection and economic well-being, but also the loss of recognition and self-esteem. As pointed out by Paugam (2012), social bonds structure two dimensions: protection and recognition. If protection refers to economic and political supports, recognition refers to the gaze of the other, which provides proof of their existence. This is why the loss of work, which sometimes leads to the rupture of social ties, leads to a situation of vulnerability that affects protection and recognition: «The socially disqualified man is both vulnerable in the face of the future and crushed by the weight of the negative gaze that others project on him» (Paugam, 2012: 18).

The discomfort experienced by the young people who participated in our fieldwork is different. Many of them also experience their lives with great existential discomfort and refer to a feeling of subjective destruction: «I feel that today (my life) doesn't have a significant value or I can't find my way, and of course, that leaves you with a lot of uncertainty and you say, Damn, my life is shit» (Man, 31 years old. Upper-middle class origin). In the case of many young people, their existential discomfort is not the result of feeling that they have been thrown out of the world as a result of job loss, but rather the opposite, of not finding their place in the world:

My depressions and my lows had more to do with that pressure of: you're 26, you're 28 or you're 29 and you're in a place where you shouldn't be. That pressure from outside, you're kind of at a stage that you should have passed. (DG. Mixed young people aged 30-35. Upper-middle class origin)

The feeling of being exposed to being hurt, the feeling of vulnerability in short, is very present in many young people, who feel that their lives are subject to uncertainty and at the mercy of various dangers:

The thing is that I'm dreaming like I'm in a super quiet place, like in a park and so on, but always in a place near the water, and suddenly someone says tsunami!, and a tsunami comes, but a tsunami that you can't believe... take a look at what I dream; I'm living it. (DG. Young women aged 25-30. Working-class origin)

The feeling that the world is not protecting and sheltering us as it should takes on a unique character for young people from the middle classes and with a university degree. These are people who are experiencing downward social mobility in a socio-historical context that has changed from the one in which they were socialised in their student years. The ideal of meritocracy and vocational development begins to show its weaknesses, and, with this, the frustration of not being able to reach the expectations in which they were socialised grows. The reality check makes them not find their place in the world and feel that they are not going to get anywhere, that they are not going to make it:

I think I'm not going to make it... I mean, take on board that you're not going to be what you thought you were going to be (...) I say it and it seems that I agree with what I'm saying but in reality I don't, there are many times that this also generates a lot of anxiety for me. (DG. Mixed young people aged 30-35. Upper-middle class origin)

Existential concerns and discomforts take a different turn for women family network caretakers. Many of them have become caretakers as a consequence of a precarious situation, such as the loss of a job and because none of their family members took over the care, partly because they were already working. This is further evidence that care provision often falls on the less advantaged, while the privileged transfer their care workloads to the less advantaged (Tronto, 1993). These women caretakers face a somewhat bleak life scenario:

—I have been looking after my mother for six years and you see that (...) the wage isn't enough, that you are stuck (...) in a hole that you can't get out of, that time goes by, the few years that you have are going by (...) and you can be half all right and you see that there is no wage, that it's not enough (...) you don't have the time to say: well, I'm going to broaden my horizons a bit. A bit tedious.

—Day to day life is hard. And what demoralises and sinks you is that you don't see...

—Exactly, there is no solution.

—There is no light, there is no path.

—You feel hopeless.

(DG. Women Caretakers aged 50-64)

These women literally live to take care of their family members, with working days that have no set hours, no holidays and only a few free moments when they manage to leave their family members in the care of others, but always with the feeling that they have to be attentive and contactable. And with very little chance of re-entering the job market: «They don't want me anywhere». Caring for others puts their own care and even their health in second place. This situation gives rise to a kind of existential imprisonment that leads one of these women to verbalise it in this way: «Goodness me! I'm locked in here; I have no way out» (DG. Women Caretakers aged 50-64). It is an existential enclosure that corresponds to a certain physical enclosure insofar as the intensive care they have to provide leads them to spend most of the day in or near their homes. The existential imprisonment to which we refer is reflected in sadness, depression and in the vital anguish of seeing time pass (the future—they say—is not to be thought of) and with it the possibilities of rebuilding their lives. Only sometimes, not very often, does the centrality of the problems of the family members they care for give rise to their own existential concerns: «So, apart from my father's problem, I'm talking about my own. So I'm worrying about my things, to think about my things, what's going to happen to me. Of course, because you say: damn, if I'm okay I want to do this, I want to do the other, I want, I want and I want. And I'm going to die before my mother» (DG. Women Caretakers aged 50-64). The way in which these women face the family trial generates a strong existential discomfort that is difficult to verbalise:

—It's like you get angry and you say: damn, she's taking away my power to do that. And then you say: please, but what is she saying [- But she's my mother] she's my mother, the reality is that I don't want her to die.

—Of course.

—But at the same time you say: if she wasn't around, I could do anything I wanted to do.

(DG. Women Caretakers aged 50-64)

Their situation of vulnerability generates for these women caretakers, as they themselves point out, fear and uncertainty (...) because «I, for example, the day my mother is gone I always say: Well, gosh... what am I going to do... what am I going to do for a living... what am I going to find a job in... And I am already fifty-four years old» (DG. Women Carers). This fear is compounded by the devaluation they perceive due to the lack of visibility and recognition of care-giving and even, on occasions, the negative view of their closest family members:

my children (...) they don't think it's good that I am taking care of my mother because they say: We'll see, what happens with my life... they see that I'm sad...that I am not taking advantage of it... (...), my brothers and sisters don't appreciate what it means to be in a house all day and only having one or two hours a day to go out... (FG. Women Carers)

6. SOCIO-EXISTENTIAL SUPPORTS

6.1. From the self-supporting individual to the supports

The existential concerns and discomforts we have just seen lead us to ask ourselves how these people support themselves in their lives, what they rely on, how they endure their situation. In a context of individualisation and the transfer of responsibility from institutions to individuals, the first thing that is striking is how individuals refer to self-sufficiency for coping with their situations of vulnerability, thus rejecting the web of interdependencies in social life:

I want to be self-sufficient and not depend on anyone. (Man, 31 years old. Upper-middle class origin)

You have to be able to stand on your own two feet too, not depend on others. (DG. Young women aged 25-30. Working-class origin)

I consider myself quite intelligent on my own [...] I have many defects but I am a tough guy [...] I consider myself a strong guy, I have no problems in that sense, strong in my mind, in my spirit, I have no problems, I know that in the end it will take time, but everything will work out. (DG. Men aged over 45. Upper-middle class origin)

These discourses show the extent to which the modern conception of the self-made individual still permeates many people's representations. Although this representation has undergone major transformations, even today the ideal of the independent subject is still very influential in late modern societies (Álvarez-Benavides & Turnbough, 2021). In fact, in recent decades this representation has been fuelled by the growing popularity of work on resilience, which, in its more psychologistic versions, places success in dealing with situations of vulnerability on individual traits. And yet, in line with what the authors who mobilise the category of supports defend, we argue here that it is in them, in the work that is done on them, and not in mysterious subjective capacities where the capacity for resilience resides (Stettinger, 2004). It is therefore necessary to go deeper into the development of a sociology of supports that allows us to grasp their socio-existential mode of operation. To do so in all its depth would require the singularisation of analyses with personalised existential ecologies (Martuccelli, 2007: 95-98). In what follows, we will limit ourselves to showing the relevance of some of these supports in the light of the fieldwork carried out.

6.2. Relational supports

In the case of societies in southern Europe, *relational supports*, especially *family ones*, play a very important role. To the extent that the family plays a key role in these societies both culturally and economically, these supports have a high visibility and legitimacy to be mobilised:

—I believe that the family network is fundamental and in this case I have been fortunate since I was born... they supported my business project

—For me, my parents have always been there for me... and they support me in everything...

—My parents and my siblings... support, well (...), understanding, emotional support, accompaniment...

(DG. Women aged over 45. Upper-middle class origin)

Along with the family network, friendship networks are also of utmost importance, as they provide economic, emotional and relational support. It is significant to show how these supports have become more visible and have reached a higher level of awareness due to the pandemic, which has, to some extent, challenged the ideal of the self-sufficient individual:

when we first talked about this, it's possible that I was thinking in those terms, as in: Either I can or I am weak... but after the pandemic (...) I feel much stronger precisely because I know that I have a team, which is my circle of friends, of support (...) that is where my strength lies in having a network of support. (FG. Mixed young people. Upper-middle class origin)

Neighbourhood networks can also be an important relational support (Barañano & Santiago, 2023; Barañano, Santiago & Domínguez, 2023). This seems to be especially true for women caretakers, who sometimes find in their neighbours an important support that allows them to break out of their existential confinement, as they can even leave their sick relatives in their care from time to time in order to go out and do small chores. The role of neighbourhood and community networks as socio-existential supports for young people during the pandemic should also be highlighted (Dueñas-Rello & Santiago, 2023). This was expressed in one of the discussion groups: «not (only) because of a question of food survival, but also because there is a lot of affective precariousness, (...) I have felt very supported (...) knowing that you have (...) where to turn to and knowing that you can collaborate» (FG. Mixed young people. Upper-middle class origin).

However, relational supports are often compromised as a consequence of the situation of vulnerability itself. The fact that social relations are mediated by consumption practices —going out for dinner, drinks, etc.— prevents the maintenance of friendships, especially among unemployed people aged over 45 (Briales & Maira, 2021). These extracts give a good account of this:

I try to have some social life, to keep meeting people, although it is becoming more and more difficult (...) because I can't spend money on drinks in bars and so on, strangely enough it limits my social life a lot. (Woman, 48 years old. Upper-middle class origin)

A separate chapter within the set of relational supports is that of animals. It is a support that is particularly important for some women caretakers. As we saw earlier, in their daily lives they do not feel that their activities are acknowledged and they feel that they cannot rely on others. In other cases, their conception of care means that they do not want to tell their relatives about their concerns so that they do not have to bear the burden. Hence the importance of animals as daily supports:

And then I have a kitten too, who doesn't look like one, but he calms me down and, well, at least he's a refuge, sometimes I talk to him; I'm crazy. When I'm alone, well, I don't know, it seems to help me too. (DG. Women Caretakers aged 51-64)

Doctors, psychologists and psychiatrists are also a support that relieves the burden on the family, not exhausting the support of the family:

It's really the doctor that I tell my sorrows to... The other day he sent me to the psychologist [...] you know, as I have ups and downs of crying and then of happiness, well [...]. I go to the doctor (...) and you tell them because I've started to cry, look how silly it is, telling him things about my mother like that. (Woman Caretaker aged 49)

In the framework of a reflective and therapeutic society, many people find in professional help an important support that enjoys a growing legitimacy compared with a few decades ago when turning to psychology and psychiatry professionals was seen as something for crazy or weak-minded people. This change is evidenced by the fact that young people report that they attend consultations with these professionals without any prejudice. This is also true for middle-aged women, as in the case of women caretakers. The use of this type of professional support also allows access to another type of support, tranquillisers and antidepressants, with which many people support themselves in their daily lives. The mobilisation of therapeutic supports is viewed differently by unemployed men aged over 45, who still stigmatise them and when they turn to them they do so with great mistrust:

I'm one of those who think that depression has a high percentage of illness and a high percentage of bullshit (...) I'm going to start seeing a psychologist, yes, a psychiatrist (...) although I don't think they can help me (...). (FG. Men aged over 45. Working class origin)

Failure to recognise their vulnerability and interdependencies makes it impossible for these unemployed over 45s to ask for help, thus fuelling the conditions of their own vulnerability (Briaies & Maira, 2021).

6.3. Activity as a support

One type of support that is of great relevance to people who have lost their jobs is *activity*. This support does not always reach a certain level of awareness, but when it does, the aim of it is to not to let go or fall, sustaining oneself in daily life by carrying out activities of various types. As Ehrenberg has shown, the normative model of our societies no longer rests on discipline and guilt, but on responsibility and initiative. Individuals, as sovereign subjects in de-institutionalised societies, must show constant initiative. It is impossible not to act, which

translates into constant performance (1995, 2000). More so, we might say, in performance and fast-paced societies where individuals must give constant evidence of can-do and time efficiency (Han, 2012; Rosa, 2016). Activity, therefore, is one of the most legitimate supports in our societies and, although in some cases it may operate at a less conscious level, in others, individuals are fully aware of its importance in sustaining their lives:

I've always been busy, I've also got into the routine of saying well, I'm going to get up every day at eight o'clock because of fear, because I've seen people around me who have fallen into idleness, that is to say, into the idleness of getting up, going to the bar... and that scared me (...) I was doing a lot of things, at the same time as looking for work, at the same time as... well, languages... yoga... I was involved in a thousand things and (...) I think that helps you. (DG. Men aged over 45. Upper-middle class origin)

In many cases, the activities carried out are supports that allow an escape from the world, an escape to make everyday existence more bearable:

(...) I press a button and it's the radio and I listen, I don't know, you try, you try to escape a little bit inside, you try to be in this world, inside because otherwise what is my life? The bathroom and my mother, the market and so on. (DG. Women Caretakers aged 51-64)

(...) a tool of escape or help for those existential crises (...) tools that save me (...) that's why I get so mixed up with job insecurity, I think that if I didn't spend a few hours a day (...) painting... I would go crazy (...) that very specific condition of my life helps me (...) not to have chronic anxiety. (FG. Mixed young people. Upper-middle class origin)

Gambling and the hope of a successful life

In the fieldwork, gambling has appeared on many occasions. These are shown to us as supports with which to overcome the situation of vulnerability insofar as they allow us to believe in a successful future life. Certainly, gambling has always been very present in society, but, as Álvarez-Benavides & Turnbough (2021) point out, in recent decades there seems to be a significant change in this respect. If winning the lottery used to be a sign of getting rich, more and more people are looking to gambling as a chance to have a normal, dignified existence:

My friend and I always say the same thing: Oh mate, I bought the euromillions yesterday, I say if we win... I don't want a yacht, or a private jet, please, I do want the euromillions to live normally, how do you build your life? it's the money... I haven't lost hope... we must wait until Saturday for the euromillions. (DG. Young women aged 25-30. Working-class origin)

I play the lottery, the *primitiva*, everything I can [...]. It would make everything easier (...) I'd take on a woman for my mother, I'd pay her, she would take care of her day and night... That would be great... imagine... with my son I would go here, I'd go there, I wouldn't have to work... I could take of everything... (Woman Caretaker, 49 years old)

The spread of precariousness and the impossibility that many people experience of changing their vulnerable situation because they cannot find stable and well-paid employment or

because they do not have public benefits leads many people to look to gambling as a hope of being able to achieve a successful relationship to the world.

6.4. The representations about oneself that underpin existence

A separate chapter should be devoted to the supports with which people are sustained in their daily lives by various *representations of themselves*. Precariousness, the experience of vulnerability, takes on a more bearable character thanks to these representations. We have encountered several such cases in the field. Thus, as Castrillo and Vicente (2021) have shown, for many young people, vocation becomes a support of enormous significance:

—I am very happy now, I think I am in the best working moment of my life, but I work more hours than ever in my life and I don't get paid as much, but I work in something I like.

—I do a lot of self-exploitation myself.

—Sure, I got paid better and worked less hours but I came back totally lobotomised, moving money around, taking coins and giving change. Unhinged.

(DG. Mixed young people aged 30-35. Upper-middle class origin)

Vocation as a support with which to cope with everyday life is more present in young people from the upper-middle classes, for whom the ideal of «working in my field», in what they have been trained in, is a vital purpose. Vocation leads to suspending the financial cost-benefit calculation and enduring vulnerability in favour of personal fulfilment. It is, however, an ambivalent support, as it is not free of discomforts reflected in strong feelings of guilt:

In my case I am one hundred percent self-exploited (...) with mental short-circuits, (...) hating myself because you have to hate your boss (...) and I experience it with many contradictions too because (...) I am not satisfied, but sometimes it is worth it.

(DG. Mixed young people aged 30-35. Upper-middle class origin)

The consideration of oneself no longer as a vocational subject, but as a moral subject also plays a very important role as a support with which to cope with the situation of vulnerability. This is the case of family network women caretakers, which shows the extent to which the moral orientation of existence calls into question any cost/benefit calculation for these women. Despite all their discomforts, the feeling that they are doing their duty gives these women support to cope with their daily lives:

What I take away from it is that it is a personal satisfaction [...]. Beyond the fact that, well, you feel obliged to do it because they have done it for you and so on... it also has moral and emotional benefits. (Woman Carer, 50 years)

This moral duty rests on a kind of implicit contract in which these women have been socialised, whereby the care of the elderly corresponds to the children, especially the daughters, hence it is unthinkable to place the parents in a nursing home, except in situations where there is no other choice, otherwise they would be branded as «bad daughters», as they themselves point out.

6.5. From supports to resonance

To conclude, we will refer to the fact that in our fieldwork we have unexpectedly found that some people experience vulnerability with certain existential satisfaction. This is especially the case for the unemployed aged over 45 from the upper-middle classes, for whom unemployment has led to a reactivation and a change of direction in their lives (García Selgas, 2021). This would therefore challenge interpretations according to which the experience of vulnerability of unemployed people prevents them from shaping themselves as individuals, robs them of agency and corrodes their character (Castel & Haroche, 2001; Sennett, 1998). How can we explain, then, that in our work we have found people who somehow celebrate their vulnerability? Various interpretations are possible, such as the one that would lead us to consider that these individuals have fallen into the trap of positive thinking (Ehrenreich, 2018), but other interpretations are also possible. One of them, not necessarily incompatible with the above, shows us that positive thinking can be a socio-existential support of enormous value for sustaining oneself in daily life. Undoubtedly, this positive assessment of the experience of vulnerability must also be inscribed in the framework of the current semantics of vulnerability, which shows how, in the face of the misfortunes of their lives, many people claim to have gained humanity and existential depth (Martuccelli, 2017). In line with the aim of advocating the development of a sociology of the relationship to the world, we want to show how the change in the biographical itinerary as a consequence of job loss can lead to a more successful relationship to the world:

At first we miss it very much when we lose it, don't we? but then maybe (...) we see that (...) you earn money but at the cost of what... of health, of stress, of not sleeping at night, of objectives, of troubles, of having the boss on top of you all day long... I think that, that's not a life (...) I think that what you... you appreciate the little things more, the things that maybe don't cost you financially but that do bring you a lot of well-being, family, spending more time with your children... (DG. Men aged over 45. Upper-middle class origin)

The loss of employment leads some people to take a kind of existential stock-taking of their lives, leading them to point out that they used to have a failed relationship to the world: that's not a life. Intense work rhythms, work by objectives, the demands of the performance society lead many workers to experience their work as alienating, with all kinds of consequences: stress, insomnia, etc. In spite of good salaries, these jobs can lead to an unhappy relationship to the world, so that the loss of the job can even be seen as liberation. This opens up a change in the relationship to the world, in which the world is more resonant:

I am a person who has been in a permanent job all my life, I had (...) very good financial conditions (...) (but) the work I was doing didn't fulfil me, spending ten or twelve hours in the office, (...) but I have become more aware of... things that are important and before I didn't give any importance to them (...) I know how to listen to people more (...) I have more empathy (...) and more positive (...) I feel like a liberation in that sense (...) like I have a more intense, fuller life... (DG. Men aged over 45. Upper-middle class origin)

7. CONCLUSION

A broad horizon of sociological study opens up if we look at the relationships that individuals establish to the world as a consequence of social life, particularly in situations of vulnerability. Sociology needs to make socio-existential questions an object of study that avoids their psychologistic reduction. This is what has been done in this article, which has given an account of the existential discomforts and concerns that originate in situations of social vulnerability. In addition, the different socio-existential supports with which individuals sustain themselves in these situations have been shown.

After our analysis, we can conclude that the situation of vulnerability is reflected in most cases, in the three groups investigated, in a problematic relationship to the world, in the feeling of not having a good life, of not occupying the place one deserves, experiencing the world as hostile and cool, feeling exposed to the misfortunes of existence. This, however, is not true in all cases, as the loss of work leads some unemployed people to have a more fulfilling life, a more resonant life.

The role of supports is crucial for seeing how individuals in situations of vulnerability are sustained, understood in a broad sense, i.e. not only as supports ready for strategic mobilisation as shock absorbers in the event of precariousness, but also in their socio-existential dimension. In this article, we have had the opportunity to look at some of the most important supports we have found in the field, although in order to analyse in all their depth their mode of action it would be necessary to carry out personalised existential ecologies.

In this vein, we will conclude this article by pointing to other possible research agendas that contribute to the development of both a sociology of the relationship to the world and a sociology of the supports advocated in this article. We will point out only four of the possible lines of research to be developed. Firstly, it would be of great interest to investigate how the pandemic has changed individuals' relationship to the world, and whether this has led to a greater awareness of the socio-existential supports. Secondly, we believe that an in-depth study of the supports of those who conceive of themselves as self-sufficient and independent individuals is necessary to show their multiple interdependencies and thus unveil the myth of the self-made individual. That is, we seek to advance a sociology that investigates the relationship and interpenetration between the individual and the world, thinking of the subject in 'relation-with' and not prior to or independent of the human and non-human world. In this sense, despite the obvious differences between actor-network theory and Rosa's sociology of our relationship to the world, both distance themselves from actor-centred approaches such as rational choice theories (Rosa, 2019: 50). Thirdly, we believe that it is necessary to investigate the latest developments in dispositionalist sociology (Lahire, 2005; Martuccelli y Santiago, 2017: 48-62) in order to analyse how our society produces growing misalignments between the individual and the world, a source of existential unease and discomfort. Finally we consider of great interest the development of a line of research that analyses the existential discomforts of individuals who develop their dispositions and find the objective conditions to update them, but who nevertheless, as Rosa (2019) has pointed out, have lives that are not very resonant and experience the world as cold and hostile.

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