Cogent Psychology

ISSN: 2331-1908 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/oaps20

Street vendors in Bogotá, Colombia, and their meanings of informal work

César A. Bernal-Torres, María C. Peralta-Gómez & Ulf Thoene |

To cite this article: César A. Bernal-Torres, María C. Peralta-Gómez & Ulf Thoene | (2020) Street vendors in Bogotá, Colombia, and their meanings of informal work, Cogent Psychology, 7:1, 1726095, DOI: 10.1080/23311908.2020.1726095

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2020.1726095

Published online: 09 Feb 2020.

Bernal-Torres et al., *Cogent Psychology* (2020), 7: 1726095
https://doi.org/10.1080/23311908.2020.1726095

cogent psychology

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Street vendors in Bogotá, Colombia, and their meanings of informal work

César A. Bernal-Torres[1], María C. Peralta-Gómez[2] and Ulf Thoene[1*]

Received: 08 October 2019
Accepted: 31 January 2020

*Corresponding author: Ulf Thoene, EICEA, Universidad de La Sabana, Bogotá, Colombia
E-mail: ulf.thoene@unisabana.edu.co

Reviewing editor:
Gabriela Topa, Social and Organizational Psychology, Universidad Nacional De Educacion a Distancia, Spain

Additional information is available at the end of the article

Abstract: This study analyses the meanings street vendors confer upon informal work. Episodic and semi-structured interviews were used to generate and analyze the meanings and vision constructed by 50 street vendors in Bogotá, Colombia. We organized the data through the analysis of thematic networks, starting with initial categories complemented with categories that emerged during the process. Findings show that street vendors confer meaning upon their work as a service, as the only chance to earn a living, and of their autonomy. They construct meanings of work as individualistic, responsible, and helpful workers. Thus, at the same time that they express satisfaction with what they do, they also express nonconformity and dissatisfaction with not having the opportunity to access other types of work. Despite the existence of stigmas and the negative effects thereof that Colombian society maintains about the work and the presence of street vending activities, street vendors carry out their work out as a dignified lifestyle and they see their activities as honorable and as contributing to the well-being of society. This study seeks to contribute to the debate about the meaning that society and academia form about street vendors, their activities and the workspaces they occupy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

César A. Bernal-Torres (DBA), María C. Peralta-Gómez (PhD in Psychology) and Ulf Thoene (PhD in Law) have worked on advancing interdisciplinary research on labour market and workplace relations related themes against the background of the Colombian peace process since 2015.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This study analyses the meanings street vendors confer upon informal work. Interviews were used to analyze the meanings and vision constructed by street vendors in Bogotá, Colombia. We organized the data through the analysis of thematic networks, starting with initial categories complemented with categories that emerged during the process. Findings show that street vendors confer meaning upon their work as a service, as the only chance to earn a living, and of their autonomy. They construct meanings of work as individualistic, responsible, and helpful workers. Thus, at the same time that they express satisfaction with what they do, they also express nonconformity and dissatisfaction with not having the opportunity to access other types of work. Despite the existence of stigmas and the negative effects thereof that Colombian society maintains about the work and the presence of street vending activities, street vendors carry out their work out as a dignified lifestyle and they see their activities as honorable and as contributing to the well-being of society.

Subjects: Third World Studies; Social Inequality; Poverty & Unemployment; Social Psychology; Prejudice; Personality and Identity at Work; Work Motivation; Latin America; Cities & the Developing World; Entrepreneurship

Keywords: Bogota; Colombia; Global South; informal employment; internally displaced people; meanings of work; networks; stigma; street vending; urban informality; urban spaces

1. Introduction

The discourse on informality discourse is lively, and it can be presumed that Hart's (1973) influential paper that coined the term informal sector marked the starting point of contemporary debates on informality in the labor market. In the current labor context, full-time jobs and security guarantees are disappearing and demands and requirements vis-à-vis the workforce are segmented (Williams, 2019; Williams & Nadin, 2012). This circumstance results in the expulsion of groups of workers and employees from the formal labor market, wasting knowledge and abilities, and affecting the quality of life of those who do not comply with the imposed demands. Numerous individuals face informal work, receive lower incomes, and are denied the opportunity to be part of the formal labor market (Novick & Benencia, 2001).

The International Labor Organization (ILO, 2013) defines labor informality as the type of work that originates in labor relationships that are not subject to national legislation. In such circumstances, taxes are not paid, there is no social security coverage, and there are no benefits associated with employment. For Campos (2008), informal work represents a high risk of economic and employment vulnerability that does not only affect workers and their families' life circumstances but also threatens their futures. Thus, studying meanings of work in informal street vendors is pertinent to understanding how these individuals modify their meanings according to changes in their context of the activities they perform (Kashima & Foddy, 2002).

One facet is the participants defining themselves. In other words, the vision the individuals have of who they are and who they would like to be, which could be considered an individual approach. The other facet is the definition given by others in relation to the different categories to which the street vendors belong. Put differently, it is a collective meaning that arises from social categories established to position individuals. Meanings conferred on work are also viewed as a discourse used to interpret one's own experiences and life events in discursive relationships (Galende, 2006). Meanings of work are, therefore, found to be mediated by language in their relationships with the world and with others.

According to Dejours (2006), these workers see their activities and livelihoods affected, as manifested by the way they confer meanings on their work. They deny their suffering and trivialize social injustices with defensive formations with which they try to protect their own psychic integrity in a labor system that is precarious, undignified, and uncertain. For Bauman (2005), it is precisely the workers, performing precarious and informal jobs, excluded from formal production processes and consumer society, who are instituted as vulnerable, victimized and excluded.

Furthermore, the literature on informal income earning activities has focused on the issue of personal and social networks, which are personal relationships that come about when people interact with each other in families, workplaces, neighborhoods and other venues of repeated social interactions, especially given the rather inadequate regulatory framework that finds application in the formal economy (Berrou & Combarnous, 2012; Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1985). Moreover, an issue that research on informality has addressed is stigma. Street vendors counter stigma through a redefining of their own work and presenting their efforts as a service to society.

Pertaining to the case of Colombia, society has faced socio-economic upheavals including industrialization, prolonged periods of economic recession, political violence, social exclusion, urbanization, and the concentration of capital. According to the latest available data from the

Colombian National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE, 2020), between September and November 2019 informal employment represented 47.2% of the total working population in the 23 biggest cities and metropolitan areas, which is an indication of constant societal inequality as regards accessing formal employment.

Against the background of the above, this research analyses the meanings street vendors confer upon informal work. Episodic and semi-structured interviews were used to generate and analyze the meanings and vision constructed by 50 (25 female and 25 male) street vendors in Bogotá, Colombia. With respect to research methodology, this research is qualitative, seeking to interpret the meanings constructed by the participants as singular experiences without intending to generalize.

This study seeks to contribute to the debate about the meaning that society and academia form about street vendors and their activities. Although this research does not seek to study the differences in attitudes of women and men about street vending separately, our observations suggest that women tend to prefer street vending partially because of childcare reasons and that men tend to see street vending as one of the ways to become independent from previous unfavorable employment conditions in the formal sector. Finally, this research provides insights into the issue of informal work, particularly related to street vending in urban areas that arise due to the problems of unemployment and internal displacement of families and individuals as a result of the Colombian armed conflict, and against the background of the ongoing peace process.

2. Literature review

Distinct forms of work have characterized the labor environment of a country such as Colombia, the influence of which differs according to the social group to which an individual belongs. In other words, there are differences between individuals from developed and peripheral countries, differences between ruling and middle classes, and between groups of wage earners and those who are marginalized from social life (Rodríguez, Agulló, & Agulló, 2006). Thus, inquiring into labor meanings in diverse contexts broadens the vision of psychosocial researchers (Stecher, 2012, 2013), which can be understood as "bringing together the personal and the political and the individual and the social in new ways" (Woodward, 2015: 4).

When environments such as street vending across the Global South are considered, one encounters social and labor realities and meaning construction processes that are very different to those studied in North Atlantic industrial societies, which have traditionally offered more stable and collective employment conditions (de la Garza, 2011; Gaete & Soto, 2012). This situation does not obtain in Colombia, a society where the condition of full employment has never been achieved (Castel, 2010; Polanyi, 2006).

Moreover, an issue that research on informality has addressed is stigma. Street vendors counter stigma through a redefining of their own work. In fact, in a recently published study Lamont et al. (2016, p. 1) found that "when asked about incidents where they were treated unfairly, these individuals (middle- and working-class men and women) described interactions where they felt underestimated, overscrutinized, misunderstood, feared, overlooked shunned, or discriminated against". The interviewees also "discussed their responses, including how they confronted stigmatizers, aimed to avoid confirming racial stereotypes, used humor, and chose to ignore the incident—often motivated by a desire to get respect" (Lamont et al., 2016, p. 1). A similar situation is put forward and analyzed by Dyrness (2001). In a similar vein, Estrada (2016, p. 1658; Estrada & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2011) also analyzed how the "stigma associated with street vending" places hardships on families of Mexican street vendors in Los Angeles. Nevertheless, Goldstein (2016) and Cross (2000) also highlight rather more positive aspects that somewhat counter and go beyond the notion of social stigma insofar as street vendors see their work as a service to society.

Colombian society has faced socio-economic upheavals including industrialization, prolonged periods of economic recession, political violence, social exclusion, urbanization, and the concentration of capital. Thus, faced with the expectations attendant upon the modernization of industry during the 1960s, and accompanied by great population displacement towards the cities, the country did not achieve the normal levels of workforce absorption as in North America and Europe. Consequently, employment issues became the dominant concern during that decade. In the large cities open unemployment reached 13% and underemployment 18% in 1967 (Mayor, 1998; Rueda, 1998).

According to Perry (1998), during the years of economic recovery between 1970 and 1980, the open unemployment rate in the large cities dropped to 8.3% in 1981. However, the economic crisis of the 1980s yet again affected workers. A large number of factories were shut down, numerous workers were laid off, and labor stability and wage growth, which was lower than during the previous decade, were seriously affected (Londoño, 1998). Similarly, unemployment rates rose rapidly, reaching a rate of 12.4% in March 1985 (Perry, 1998).

Given this scenario, informal employment increased to 55.5% of active city workers (Perry, 1998). According to Vitale (1998), informal workers are workers of a class misnamed *underclass* and made up of industry operators, artisanal workers, construction workers, commerce and service workers, independent workers, and street vendors who inhabit the outlying urban districts. High levels of informal employment are an indication of constant societal inequality as regards accessing formal employment and the cause of a large portion of the social conflict that Colombia experiences (Thoene, 2015, 2019; Thoene & Turriago-Hoyos, 2017; 2019).

Individuals in the informal sector consist mainly of workers having low educational levels and fewer income possibilities (Galiani & Meléndez, 2013). Nevertheless, McFarlane (2012, p. 105) argues that informality is not necessarily a situation that can be ascribed only to the poor and that is located merely in marginalized urban areas. According to McFarlane (2012, p. 105), understanding formality and informality as practice contributes to reaching beyond the concept of informality as geographically or socially conditioned, "and they both enable or restrict urban life".

The field of study on informality hence becomes an important challenge owing to the conditions faced by the individuals who are asked to provide private responses (Araujo & Martuccelli, 2012). At the same time, it allows for a subjective construction process arising from singular social environments that leads workers to develop a personal biography that is more diverse upon each rehearsal (Gaete & Soto, 2012).

Indeed, throughout the twentieth century and what has elapsed of the twenty-first century a significant number of individuals who carry out informal activities can be identified both in Colombia and in the Latin American region as a whole. Moreover, this type of research has not been sufficiently acknowledged by policymakers in Latin America, partially due to the predominance of studies oriented around analyzing wage earners in formal economic activities (Linares, 2018; Martínez, Short, & Estrada, 2018; Queralt, 2019; Sehnbruch, González, Apablaza, Méndez, & Arriagada, 2020). This paper contributes to a better understanding of informal work and in particular the lives of those who, for diverse reasons, perform an activity that is generally scorned and discriminated against.

Thus, studying the meanings conferred on work by informal workers regarding their labor activity turns out to be an essential aspect of inquiry (Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018, p. 1170). In fact, Crossa (2016, p. 300) urges us to pay closer attention to "how vendors themselves enact and reproduce government discourses as a way to remain on the streets of the city".

3. Research methodology

This research is qualitative, seeking to interpret the meanings constructed by the participants as singular experiences without intending to generalize. Among some of the advantages of

qualitative research is the recognition of diversity, a plurality of contexts and perspectives, and emphasis upon participants' experiences in relationships of respect and being vigilant with the expression of the meanings conferred upon work (van Dijk, 1996).

3.1. Participants

To accomplish the objective, the researchers interviewed 25 women and 25 men between the ages of 20 and 60, and different levels of income who had already spent at least two years as informal street vendors. Roughly three quarters of the participants had already attended some years of secondary education, others had not attended school beyond the primary school level, and a few had finished an undergraduate degree.

About 60% of participants migrated internally from different parts of Colombia to the nation's capital with about half of those leaving the rural areas due to internal displacement whose reasons lie in the armed conflict in Colombia. The majority of street vendors opted for this informal employment activity did not find formal employment opportunities, some withdrew from the formal labor market voluntarily due to low incomes, unfavorable work environments, low job satisfaction and to have more time to spend with their children, and others lost their formal jobs after a considerable number of service due to economic down-sizing of their former employers. The latter group tend to have an undergraduate degree. Some of the participants stated that they are continuing a family tradition of street vending.

About 68% of participants are married, and they have between 2 and 4 children under the age of 12 years each. The majority of those who are single also have children, mostly single mothers who not only dedicate themselves to vending in the streets, but who also need to look after their young children. About half of participants stated that they own their lodgings, whereas the others rent.

During their working hours, street vendors wear clothes bought at very low-cost outlets, and they tend to wear the same clothes over a period of various days. Many of the street vendors actually put on the work clothes (especially the male street vendors) they used to be provided with during previous spells of formal employment. Finally, the street vendors interviewed did not count with a vending permit to sell items such as stationery, toys, chewing gum, sweets, DVDs or sodas purchased elsewhere previously, which is similar to most other street vendors in Bogotá. The customers of the street vendors interviewed are passers-by.

The researchers selected the participants through the snowball method, which, according to Small (2009), consists of contacting individuals referred to by some participants and who fulfil the characteristics defined by the study, that is, workers in the denominated subsistence sector (Flórez, 2002), which consists of independent workers dedicated to informal commerce in the streets.

We collected the data in three different zones of Bogotá, Colombia, a city of about eight million inhabitants. Each of the three sites is an area of great flows of people and commerce and consequently, of a high density of street vendors. These three zones have the following key characteristics. The first area is the northern public transport interchange of Bogotá (Portal del Norte) where people from smaller towns arrive in large swaths every day. Moreover, the area is home to many small, medium and large stores that are frequented by many people from all over Bogotá. The second area, the center of the Chapinero neighborhood, is home to large flows of commerce, restaurants, bars, theatres, universities and notaries. Chapinero is also a neighborhood where many of the city's bus transit lines converge. The third zone is somewhat similar to Chapinero, but it is much closer to the historical center of Bogotá.

From the perspective of the demographic composition of street vendors, the area counts with the most individuals stemming from the traditional working-class neighborhoods of Bogotá. A typical street vendor occupies a space of no more than 2 square meters where they have a cart with their merchandise, which they need to bring with them every morning and take

home late at night from Monday to Saturday. Many of the street vendors tend to have their little children by their side, which means that they are performing a dual function of making a living and looking after their children. Street vendors tend to stick to the same place where they also take their meals during the day. Street vendors also are required to find themselves bathrooms and running water as they are out in the open and subject to sometimes adverse weather conditions such as tropical rainfalls or harsh sunshine, and noise as well as air pollution.

Only those individuals who agreed to be interviewed and stated that they have dedicated themselves to street vending for at least the two previous years and who answered all the interview questions were chosen to participate. Participants were interviewed in their sites of work; the objective of the research having been explained to them and had consented to be participants. All the names have been modified to protect the identity of the participants.

3.2. Instruments

We chose the semi-structured anecdotal interview method (Flick, 2000) as the most adequate to approach the topics associated with the meanings that street vendors confer upon their work according to their own experiences. This type of interview offers the possibility of reaching the point of data saturation through the construction of the subjects' points of view, focusing upon their experiences and knowledge (Flick, 2007). We formulated the questions in accordance with those found in the literature.

The development of the interview structure took into account the phases proposed by Flick (2000, p. 1): elaboration of the theme guide and pilot test, establish rapport between interviewer and interviewee, emphasis upon the work context of the participant's daily life, more detailed focus upon the interview's most important aspects in accordance with the proposed objective, structuring of situations that the participant vendors have experienced over time, evaluation of the interview with each of the participants, analysis of the interviewer's impressions throughout the interview, of the interviewee's data, and the interview context, and finally, interview transcriptions.

The interviews, which had a duration of approximately 40 minutes, were being recorded and later transcribed, and focused upon three topics related to this study: meanings of work, the perceptions of others, and the vision of self. We carried out the interviews with the assistance of two psychologists specifically trained to carry out this type of fieldwork. The process of recruiting respondents did indeed cause a challenge because we carried out the interviews in the street where the vendors were based and during their working hours. Thus, only about a third of the street vendors who were approached agreed to participate and to be interviewed. The street vendors who agreed to be interviewed quickly opened up and came across as being at ease or even glad being interviewed by researchers. It was relatively straightforward and easy establishing rapport with the vendors, even though some of the street vendors at first felt somewhat suspicious due to the fact that we were taping their voices. Most of the street vendors appeared friendly throughout the interviews. Native speakers carried out the interviews in Spanish language.

4. Findings

The data were structured on three levels, according to the analysis of thematic networks proposed by Attride-Stirling (2001), which facilitates organizing and interpreting the information. The analysis was based upon the number of referrals provided by the interviewees. Thus, the findings were divided into 23 basic themes, 10 organizing themes and three global themes. At the end, the main meanings of work as constructed and perceived by the participants are shown.

For a more rigorous and comprehensive analysis, data and researcher triangulation were carried out (Okuda & Gómez, 2005). The data triangulation focused upon the time component by inquiring about various incidents experienced by the participants. The researcher triangulation was conducted through a separate analysis of the researchers, which provided comparisons that enriched the interpretations.

The findings that stem from the interview data with street vendors in Bogotá in which they identified the meanings they give to informal work provided the following information, which is structured according to three sub-categories: meanings of work; vision of self; vision of the others. The authors translated the interview data from Spanish to English.

4.1. Meanings of work

4.1.1. Informal work as personal effort and struggle

Permanent effort confers meaning on the workers who perform their work responsibly, constantly, and diligently. For these individuals, it is due to their daily effort and their own experiences and abilities that they are able to survive in difficult day-to-day conditions such as police raids and the contempt of passers-by.

For this group of individuals making an effort is part of their daily life and an integral part of their working lives.

On the other hand, these individuals consider that the job is also seen as an everyday situation of difficulty, of constant struggle, of earning a permanent space, and of confronting the difficulties of working in a domain considered beyond the law. This is a domain which leads them to confront both public authorities and criminals, which at the same time gives this type of activity a negative image and often is the reason why street vendors are blamed for behaviors that are socially suboptimal. For street vendors in Bogotá there are constant threats and an increasing number of individuals struggling for space.

In this manner, the workers describe the value that they attach to their work, the service they provide, but also the difficulties they face on a daily basis. At the same time, they have a vision of themselves as collaborators and as obliging, which is a perspective that also leads them to differentiate themselves from all those who regard this type of work negatively.

4.1.2. Work as something decent but also as a space of rejection

Work is viewed as an opportunity that must be appreciated in spite of the difficulties that street vendors experience daily. Additionally, they highlight that this work is decent and that they have dedicated many years to it, despite on many occasions not being valued or recognized by passers-by in the street.

As a consequence of the immense difficulty of achieving stable and formal employment, many of the street vendors see their work as their only opportunity to make a living. From their perspective and given the circumstances, they perceive their job as decent.

Street vendors have a positive vision of their work as something decent. Nevertheless, these individuals indeed testify to being discriminated against, denied, and rejected in their condition as street vendors. Thus, they argue that society in general views them as “nobody” and “pest”. They are ignored, scorned, and disqualified as people. Several interviewees manifested this condition of discrimination and of indifference.

Although the street vendors see their labor as a decent activity, they feel discriminated against by society and suffer from rejection for working in the streets.

4.1.3. Work as an option of independence, and at the same time, of difficulty

For these street vendors, their work offers the possibility of performing an independent and autonomous activity. They value the work they do—without denying the difficult conditions in which they must work—because it enables them to have a means of subsistence. Also, for most of them, it is better than formal employment because of the abuse and the poor conditions they are offered by companies.

Given the mediocre or bad working conditions in formal jobs, street vendors see their activities in the streets as providing them with a higher income and more autonomy despite the negative circumstances they encounter on a daily basis.

However, for these individuals, independence and autonomy come with very demanding conditions associated with the everyday difficulties of being in the public space and not fulfilling sales goals.

One of the predicaments the street vendors are faced with is meeting their sales goals to manage their autonomy.

4.1.4. Work as a link to social networks

Most interviewees mentioned that they were able to position themselves at the job post thanks to knowing someone who pointed out the place, left them the job, or put them in contact with other people. These can be relatives or friends, but contacts or inserting themselves in a network of relationships is required to access the world of informal work.

Even for individuals laboring in the streets of Bogotá social links and networks of contacts are of key importance to advance their activities and their lives.

These expressions testify that in informal work as street vendors, particular forms of association are required in order to access jobs, as well as need tactics to position oneself, avoid constant police persecution, and face the conditions of the work environment.

4.1.5. Informal work as the only option in the face of exclusion

For this group of workers, their labor activity is a reaction to the lack of options owing to companies refusing to give them work because of their diverse circumstances such as economic difficulties of the enterprise, high levels of unemployment, competition in the labor market, and the age of the individual. For these individuals, street vending is the only opportunity that society offers them, even though it causes them stress and anxiety.

The above situations are very typical in the population of street vendors due to pregnancies, severe illness, or due to having been displaced and thus forced to migrate from rural Colombia to major cities such as Bogotá for reasons of the violent internal conflict (Aysa-Lastra, 2011).

The foregoing expressions show that society excludes street vendors. By not offering them work opportunities, society makes them think that, because of their characteristics, they cannot aspire to decent work. Thus, at the same time that society excludes them, it makes them responsible for their own conditions, generating suffering, grief, and anxiety.

4.2. Vision of self

4.2.1. Vision of self as a service worker who faces difficulties

One aspect of the meanings these workers confer upon their work is associated with the significance they give to their work helping and serving others. For several of them, this aspect is very significant insofar as they assume that their job is a space of realization, of achievement and of enjoyment, but above all of service. It is interesting to find accounts of the satisfaction of doing a job well and of offering a service, as well as having a space for relationships. They especially value the possibility of caring for, listening to, and somewhat palliating the loneliness of many buyers who share their problems and concerns. The aforementioned is shown by the following expressions:

Street vendors sense that apart from serving others in terms of selling goods that are apparently in demand, they also interact on a personal level with their customers in the streets of Bogotá helping them to share personal issues.

4.2.2. Street vendors as autonomous and individualistic

According to these accounts, workers derive meaning from persistent and personal effort, getting ahead through sheer willpower, discipline, intelligence, and having a life project. Above all else, workers stress the fortitude with which they face the harsh conditions of their daily lives, and whereby they manage to get ahead as individuals and help their families. Here lies the individualistic and autonomous vision of the participants of this research.

Street vendors in Bogotá value the aspects of their work that grant them the space to define their own working times and to be their own bosses.

4.3. Vision of the others

4.3.1. Vision of how street workers perceive how others view them

An important aspect of the participants' meanings is associated with the image that others have of them. They consider that their relatives and friends view them as steadfast innovators, fighters, and entrepreneurs. Hence, they confer upon their work a meaning of entrepreneurship.

For them, being a street vendor has great worth for it signifies overcoming the difficulties, always being high-spirited, being creative, showing their best coordinating qualities, and being experienced. This kind of entrepreneurship materializes in that daily struggle for survival, to get ahead and show great fortitude in the face of hardships that they must deal with on a daily basis.

Street workers perceive two different antagonistic visions that others have of them. On the one hand, street workers sense that others have a positive view about them for their hard work, whereas on the other hand, others criticize and despise them for obstructing public spaces.

4.3.2. Informal work as a product of society

Accounts are found in which society is called into question due to its paradoxes. On the one hand, informal street vendors are scorned and discriminated against, denying them the right to work. On the other hand, and applying a double standard, informal workers are counted in the unemployment statistics as individuals with work. Such statistics benefit governments, but not the individuals who find themselves laboring in that activity. For these individuals, society closes its doors on people whose history, past, and the difficulties are unknown and denied. Street vendors need to ensure their survival in the streets is a direct and contradictory manifestation of the informality inherent in society.

Labor market informality in developing countries and especially in Colombia is an everyday phenomenon. In theory one gets the impression that society seeks to resolve that problem, but in reality, informal employment is often used by governments camouflage the failure of employment policies.

4.3.3. Hard-working and responsible

Another factor of meanings of work is how the others perceive the street vendors. The interviewees feel appreciated, an aspect that leads them to value and regard themselves positively.

In that way, this group of participants finds the value of the recognition, which is provided by the positive meanings of their work and of themselves.

5. Discussion

The analysis of meanings that the street vendors give to a work characterized by uncertainty, little social recognition, and hardship not only reveals hopelessness of these individuals, but also the vigor to resist the demands of daily life. Against this background, despite the existence of stigmas and the negative effects thereof (Lamont et al., 2016) that Colombian society maintains about the work and the presence of street vending activities, street vendors carry out their work out as

a dignified lifestyle and they see their activities as honorable and as contributing to the well-being of society as also found by Goldstein (2016) and Cross (2000).

Thus, at the same time that they express satisfaction with what they do, they also express nonconformity and dissatisfaction with not having the opportunity to access other types of work. As stated by the ILO (2013), most of the city street vendors do not pursue their activities based on their own desire, but rather as a consequence of great social inequalities and the need for survival. Hence, on the one hand they value their work and on the other hand, they view it as the only option society offers them.

In this regard, these individuals become tireless constructors of the meanings they confer upon their work (Daskalaki & Simosi, 2018; Martínez, 2012). They form their meanings of work while facing a context of permanent uncertainty and in the face of constant demands to confront their individuality (Crossa, 2016; McFarlane, 2012). This in turn is shaped by the specific conditions of Colombia, a country which for many years has failed to create a sufficient amount of employment for all. By contrast, in Colombia we have also seen the exacerbation of conditions in the informal sector which typify globalization.

According to Bauman (2005), it can be asserted that, for these individuals, work is the focus of life and the guarantee of survival for themselves and their families. Their work is the contribution they can make to society, but also the space to which society has relegated them. For that reason, this work is not only the means to satisfy their basic needs, but also offers space for their emotional strengthening (Sacipa, 2003) and to also form and maintain social and personal networks with family members and other street vendors as found by Burt (1992) and Greve and Salaff (2003).

The helplessness of these individuals, the uncertainty and the insecurity, as well as the desire to resist being discriminated against and stigmatized, are complemented with a sense of service and a desire to positively contribute to society (Cross, 2000; Goldstein, 2016). At the same time, informal street vendors seek to differentiate themselves from those who do not perform the job honestly, hence harm the image of this collective. As pointed out by Dubar (2002) and Martínez (2012), these workers somehow define themselves and are defined by others as fighters, warriors, and entrepreneurs in such a way that they feel recognized and valued for performing decent work, which they must appreciate in spite of the hardships that it imposes on them. On the other hand, they rebel when they feel rejected, ignored, and scorned in a counter-meaning dissenting against that attributed by society.

In general, street vendors are faced with strengthening themselves individually in their daily efforts to survive and in the demand for individuality, neoliberal ideas, ironically, that attribute their achievements as that of having their own personal, individualized life project. It is a prototypical vision in which the notions of collaboration, cooperation, and solidarity rarely feature (Lundberg & Karlsson, 2011). Thus, in the case of this study on street vendors in Bogotá the structural limitations predominate over and stand in opposition to the agency or choice that street workers might have in a different setting (Muñoz, 2016).

Studying the meanings individuals confer upon work such as street vending in the informal sector enables us to understand that, whilst uniformities in the construction of meanings do not exist, since each one corresponds to their own experiences, there are some aspects to which these street vendors adhere, i.e. aspects around which they construct shared meanings about what their work in the streets of a city such as Bogotá signifies.

In this manner, street vendors see themselves as possessing great strength that allows them to face the harsh and precarious conditions in their day-to-day lives to guarantee their personal and their families' survival, the desire for independence, and the hope for a better future for their children. The foregoing is accompanied by feelings of sadness, frustration, stress, and the

hopelessness of not having opportunities for decent work free of discrimination. Interviewees also manifest that they are aware of being part of a society in which they are forced to live, one that does not offer them opportunities, and at the same time frequently rejects them.

In this regard, the social attitude towards individuals in the informal sector should undoubtedly be reviewed, especially taking into account how the participants define themselves so that respect rather than intolerance prevails, and that they are included rather than excluded. Hence these studies on meanings of work in the informal sector must be a point of reference to reflect not only upon who informal workers are, but also—and probably more importantly—to reflect upon what they do not want to be (Pulido, 2012).

Under conditions of uncertainty inherent to the current work environment, workers are asked to guarantee social security coverage, to live their lives pro-actively, autonomously, to abandon their old roles and to be open to change. Workers are expected to be the protagonists of their own governance, set their goals and define what they want to be. However, the conditions of the actual context in which street vendors carry out their activities do not offer options to that effect, but rather restrict them. This situation is one of the many paradoxes of the current business and socioeconomic model (Pulido, 2012).

6. Conclusions

The meanings of work that the informal street vendors constructed show the diversity of these individuals' labor activities and contexts. In some cases, these meanings consist of contradictory visions and are anchored in both the street vendors' own experiences and in the ways in which people who interact with the street vendors (families, friends, passers-by, and society in general) view them, showing both negative and positive aspects. The social stigma that society attaches to street vendors' activities is not seen as a defining factor in the construction of the meanings of work, whereas the construction and maintenance of social and personal networks is of great importance.

Moreover, another part of the meanings of work is to be clear about the methods of resistance as workers that face the only option that contemporary society offers them with courage and joy, i.e. a society characterized by inequality, injustice, change, uncertainty and competition. In this sense, the street vendors carry out their work out as a dignified lifestyle and they see their activities as honorable and as contributing to the well-being of society. Thus, at the same time that they express satisfaction with what they do, they also express nonconformity and dissatisfaction with not having the opportunity to access other types of work.

This study contributes to appreciating one type of socio-labor reality and meanings construction process that differs from those traditionally studied. This in turn enables us to understand the conditions of workers traditionally less studied by psychosocial researchers. This is a topic that requires an interdisciplinary approach going beyond considerations rooted in economics and sociology. Psychology can contribute to an understanding of these complex situations by scholars and policymakers alike.

Hence this research recognizes the past and present of informal work in Colombia and throughout Latin America, realizing that these forms of self-subsistence and precarious work have existed all through the twentieth century and beyond into the twenty-first century in Latin America. However, their characteristics (precariousness, helplessness, insecurity) provide varied elements for street vendors' meanings construction of their work.

This research provides empirical evidence for a more profound understanding of informal work by scholars, policymakers and overall society, particularly related to street vending in urban areas, which arise due to the problems of unemployment and internal displacement of families and individuals as a result of the Colombian armed conflict, and against the background of the ongoing peace process.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that among the present study's limitations are the fact that the results are not generalizable to all street vendors, and that this present research focuses upon the vision that interviewees themselves have of how others perceive them, and not upon the first-hand accounts of the perception of other actors—passers-by, the police, shopkeepers—and about how those actors view informal street vendors. Such a line of research could be recommended in order to gain further insights into this aspect in future studies.

Funding
The authors received no direct funding for this research.

Author details
César A. Bernal-Torres[1]
E-mail: cesar.bernal@unisabana.edu.co
María C. Peralta-Gómez[2]
E-mail: claudia.peralta@unisabana.edu.co
Ulf Thoene[1]
E-mail: ulf.thoene@unisabana.edu.co
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2243-1752
[1] EICEA, Universidad de La Sabana, Bogotá, Colombia.
[2] Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de La Sabana, Bogotá, Colombia.

Citation information
Cite this article as: Street vendors in Bogotá, Colombia, and their meanings of informal work, César A. Bernal-Torres, María C. Peralta-Gómez & Ulf Thoene, *Cogent Psychology* (2020), 7: 1726095.

References

Araujo, K., & Martuccelli, D. (2012). *Desafíos comunes – Retrato de la sociedad chilena y sus individuos*. Santiago de Chile: LOM Ediciones.

Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks – An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, *1*(3), 385–405. doi:10.1177/146879410100100307

Aysa-Lastra, M. (2011). Integration of internally displaced persons in urban labour markets – A case study of the IDP population in Soacha, Colombia. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, *24*(2), 277–303. doi:10.1093/jrs/feq054

Bauman, Z. (2005). *Vidas desperdiciadas, la modernidad y sus parias*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Paidos.

Berrou, J. F., & Combarnous, F. (2012). The personal networks of entrepreneurs in an informal African urban economy – Does the 'strength of ties' matter? *Review of Social Economy*, *70*(1), 1–30. doi:10.1080/00346764.2011.577347

Burt, R. S. (1992). *Structural holes – The social structure of competition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Campos, M. (2008). La heterogeneidad del trabajo informal – Los resultados de un estudio cualitativo sobre los sectores del comercio textil, la construcción y el transporte. In *Aportes a una nueva visión de la informalidad laboral en la Argentina*, Buenos Aires: Banco Mundial, Ministerio de Trabajo, Empleo y Seguridad Social. 231–258 Retrieved from http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTARGENTINAINSPANISH/Resources/Libroaportesaunavisiondelainformalidadlaboral1.pdf

Castel, R. (2010). *El ascenso de las incertidumbres – Trabajo, protecciones, estatuto del individuo*. Buenos Aires: FCE.

Cross, J. (2000). Street vendors, and postmodernity – Conflict and compromise in the global economy. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *20*(1/2), 29–51. doi:10.1108/01443330010789061

Crossa, V. (2016). Reading for difference on the street – De-homogenising street vending in Mexico City. *Urban Studies*, *53*(2), 287–301. doi:10.1177/0042098014563471

DANE - Departamento Administrativo Nacional de Estadística de Colombia. (2020). Medición del empleo informal y seguridad social. Trimestre móvil mayo de 2019 – Julio de 2019. Retrieved from https://www.dane.gov.co/files/investigaciones/boletines/ech/ech_informalidad/bol_ech_informalidad_sep19_nov19.pdf

Daskalaki, M., & Simosi, M. (2018). Unemployment as a liminoid phenomenon – Identity trajectories in times of crisis. *Human Relations*, *71*(9), 1153–1178. doi:10.1177/0018726717737824

de la Garza, E. (2011). Más allá de la fábrica – Los desafíos teóricos del trabajo no clásico y la producción inmaterial. *Nueva Sociedad*, *232*, 50–70.

Dejours, C. (2006). *La banalización de la injusticia social*. Buenos Aires: Topía Editores.

Dubar, C. (2002). *La crisis de las identidades*. Barcelona: Bellaterra.

Dyrness, G. R. (2001). *Policy on the streets – A handbook for the establishment of sidewalk-vending programs*. Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California.

Estrada, E. (2016). Economic empathy in family entrepreneurship – Mexican-origin street vendor children and their parents. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *39*(9), 1657–1675. doi:10.1080/01419870.2016.1159709

Estrada, E., & Hondagneu-Sotelo, P. (2011). Intersectional dignities – Latino immigrant street vendor youth in Los Angeles. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *40*(1), 102–131. doi:10.1177/0891241610387926

Flick, U. (2000). Episodic interviewing. In M. W. Bauer & G. D. Gaskell (Eds.), *Qualitative researching with text, image and sound – A practical handbook* (pp. 75–92). London: Sage.

Flick, U. (2007). Triangulation revisited – Strategy of validation or alternative? *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, *22*(2), 175–197. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.1992.tb00215.x

Flórez, C. (2002). The function of the urban informal sector in employment – Evidence from Colombia, 1984–2000. *Documento CEDE*, *2002*(04), 1–61.

Gaete, T., & Soto, A. (2012). Ésta es mi trayectoria, éste es mi trabajo – Narrativas e identidad en el trabajo en Chile. *Psykhe*, *21*(2), 47–59. doi:10.7764/psykhe.21.2.544

Galende, E. (2006). Identidad y resiliencia – Del azar y la complejidad. In A. Melillo, E. N. Suarez, & D. Rodriguez (Eds.), *Resiliencia y identidad – Los ciclos de la vida* (pp. 23–61). Buenos Aires: Paidós.

Galiani, S., & Meléndez, M. (2013). *Lecciones a partir de experimentos de formalización empresarial*. Bogotá: Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo.

Goldstein, D. (2016). *Owners of the sidewalk – Security and survival in the informal city*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Granovetter, M. S. (1985). Economic action and social structure – The problem of embeddedness. *American Journal of Sociology*, *91*(3), 481–510. doi:10.1086/228311

Greve, A., & Salaff, J. W. (2003). Social networks and entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *28*(1), 1–22. doi:10.1111/etap.2003.28.issue-1

Hart, K. (1973). Informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, *11*(1), 61–89. doi:10.1017/S0022278X00008089

ILO – International Labour Organization. (2013). *Policies and regulations to combat precarious employment*. Retrieved from http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/—ed_dialogue/—actrav/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_164286.pdf

Kashima, Y., & Foddy, M. (2002). Time and self – The historical construction of the self. In Y. Kashima, M. Foddy, & M. Platow (Eds.), *Self and identity: Personal, social and symbolic* (pp. 181–206). London: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Lamont, M., Moraes, G., Welburn, J., Guetzkow, J., Mizrachi, N., Herzog, H., & Reis, E. (2016). *Getting respect – Responding to stigma and discrimination in the United States, Brazil, and Israel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Linares, L. A. (2018). The paradoxes of informalizing street trade in the Latin American city. *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *38*(7/8), 651–672. doi:10.1108/IJSSP-09-2017-0119

Londoño, R. (1998). Crisis y recomposición del sindicalismo colombiano, 1946–1980. In A. Tirado (Ed.), *Nueva historia de Colombia* (pp. 20–30). Barcelona: Planeta.

Lundberg, H., & Karlsson, J. (2011). Under the clean surface – Working as a hotel attendant. *Work, Employment and Society*, *25*(1), 141–148. doi:10.1177/0950017010389246

Martínez, I. (2012). El fin de las identidades unívocas – Cosmopolitización e hibridación de la identidad a través de un caso histórico, los judíos centroeuropeos de la primera mitad del siglo XX. *Revista Española de Sociología*, *18*, 9–30.

Martínez, L., Short, J. R., & Estrada, D. (2018). The diversity of the street vending – A case study of street vending in Cali. *Cities*, *79*, 18–25. doi:10.1016/j.cities.2018.02.018

Mayor, A. (1998). Historia de la industria colombiana, 1886–1930. In A. Tirado (Ed.), *Nueva historia de Colombia* (pp. 313–332). Barcelona: Planeta.

McFarlane, C. (2012). Rethinking informality – Politics, crisis, and the city. *Planning Theory & Practice*, *13*(1), 89–108. doi:10.1080/14649357.2012.649951

Muñoz, L. (2016). Agency, choice and restrictions in producing Latina/o street-vending landscapes in Los Angeles. *Area*, *48*(3), 339–345. doi:10.1111/area.2016.48.issue-3

Novick, M., & Benencia, R. (2001). Trayectorias ocupacionales y mercado de trabajo – Nota de los editores. *Revista Latinoamericana de Estudios de Trabajo*, *7*(13), 3–4.

Okuda, M., & Gómez, C. (2005). Métodos de investigación cualitativa: Triangulación. *Revista Colombiana de Psiquiatría*, *34*(1), 118–134.

Perry, G. (1998). La economía colombiana desde 1970 hasta nuestros días. In A. Tirado (Ed.), *Nueva historia de Colombia* (Vol. V, pp. 182–212). Barcelona: Planeta.

Polanyi, K. (2006). *La gran transformación – Los orígenes políticos y económicos de nuestro tiempo*. Ciudad de México: FCE.

Pulido, H. (2012). La investigación sobre la identidad en, para y por el trabajo en América Latina, como ejercicio crítico acerca del mundo laboral. *Psykhe*, *21*(2), 77–85. doi:10.7764/psykhe.21.2.546

Queralt, J. (2019). Protecting the entrepreneurial poor – A human rights approach. *Politics, Philosophy and Economics*, *18*(4), 336–357. doi:10.1177/1470594X19860235

Rodríguez, J., Agulló, E., & Agulló, M. S. (2006). Trabajo, capacitación y formación profesional en la sociedad de la información. In A. Garrido-Luque (Ed.), *Psicosociología del trabajo* (pp. 177–218). Barcelona: UOC.

Rueda, J. O. (1998). Historia de la población colombiana, 1880–2000. In A. Tirado (Ed.), *Nueva historia de Colombia* (pp. 364–383). Barcelona: Planeta.

Sacipa, S. (2003). Lectura de los significados en historias del desplazamiento y de una organización comunitaria por la paz. *Universitas Psychologica*, *2*(1), 49–56.

Sehnbruch, K., González, P., Apablaza, M., Méndez, R., & Arriagada, V. (2020). The Quality of Employment (QoE) in nine Latin American countries – Multidimensional perspective. *World Development*, *127*, 104738. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2019.104738

Small, M. L. (2009). 'How many cases do I need?' On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. *Ethnography*, *10*, 5–38. doi:10.1177/1466138108099586

Stecher, A. (2012). Perfiles identitarios de trabajadores de grandes empresas del retail en Santiago de Chile – Aportes psicosociales a la comprensión de las identidades laborales. *Psykhe*, *21*(2), 9–20. doi:10.7764/psykhe.21.2.538

Stecher, A. (2013). Un modelo crítico-interpretativo para el estudio de las identidades laborales. Contribuciones a la investigación psicosocial sobre trabajo y subjetividad en América Latina. *Universitas Psychologica*, *12*(4), 1311–1324.

Thoene, U. (2015). A socio-legal exploration of the linkages between informal employment, social protection and labour law in Latin America. *Revista de Estudios Sociales*, *54*, 12–24. doi:10.7440/res54.2015.01

Thoene, U. (2019). Easing the tension between the state and the market? Developing social protection and labour law during Latin American industrialization. *Cogent Social Sciences*, *5*(1), 1654740. doi:10.1080/23311886.2019.1654740

Thoene, U., & Turriago-Hoyos, A. (2019). Trust, business, and society in a post-conflict scenario - The case of managing workplace practices in colombia. *International Journal of Business and Globalisation*, *23*(2), 232–249. doi:10.1504/IJBG.2019.102465

Thoene, U., & Turriago-Hoyos, A. (2017). Financial inclusion in Colombia – A scoping literature review. *Intangible Capital*, *13*(3), 582–614. doi:10.3926/ic.946

van Dijk, T. A. (1996). *El discurso como estructura y proceso*. Barcelona: Gedisa.

Vitale, L. (1998). Latinoamérica y Colombia, 1930–1960. In A. Tirado (Ed.), *Nueva historia de Colombia* (pp. 75–91). Barcelona: Planeta.

Williams, C. C. (2019). *The informal economy*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Williams, C. C., & Nadin, S. (2012). Work beyond employment – Representations of informal economic activities. *Work, Employment and Society*, *26*(2), 1–10. doi:10.1177/0950017012437006

Woodward, K. (2015). *Psychosocial studies – An introduction*. London: Routledge.

***Cogent Psychology* (ISSN: 2331-1908) is published by Cogent OA, part of Taylor & Francis Group.**