

Rebuscadores de la Calle: a Photograph of the Working Poor in Bogotá*

*Rebuscadores de la calle: una fotografía de un grupo
de trabajadores vulnerables en Bogotá*

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de trabalhadores vulneráveis em Bogotá*

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Abstract
Resumen
Resumo

Using qualitative methodologies, this paper offers a contribution to the very recent literature on *rebusque* by characterizing the practice of the social grouping that I will refer to as «street rebuscadores» in Bogotá. Based on eighteen months of ethnographic research in the localities of Ciudad Bolívar and Suba (2012-2014), this paper draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice, particularly on the concepts of habitus and capital, to argue that street *rebuscadores* share a similar volume and composition of overall capital (or habitus), as well as various practices associated with their habitus. Within that theoretical framework, this paper describes and analyses four common practices of street rebuscadores, in the hope of shedding some light on the logic underneath those practices. Ultimately, my political goal is also to give some visibility to the most vulnerable segment of the working poor.

KEYWORDS:

Rebusque, Vulnerable Workers, Ethnographic Research, Theory of Practice

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Este texto busca contribuir a la literatura reciente sobre el *rebusque*, a través de una caracterización basada en datos cualitativos de la práctica de la agrupación social a la que me referiré como «rebuscadores callejeros» en Bogotá. Con base en los resultados obtenidos en dieciocho meses de investigación etnográfica en las localidades de Ciudad Bolívar y Suba (2012-2014), y aplicando la teoría de la práctica de Bourdieu (en particular los conceptos de habitus y capital), en el presente texto argumento que los *rebuscadores* callejeros comparten un volumen y una composición de capital total (o habitus) y, en consecuencia, comparten diferentes prácticas asociadas con su habitus. Usando ese marco teórico, describo y analizo cuatro prácticas comunes de los rebuscadores callejeros, con la esperanza de iluminar la lógica que subyace a dichas prácticas. En última instancia, mi objetivo político es dar visibilidad al segmento más vulnerable de los trabajadores en Bogotá.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

rebusque, trabajadores precarios, etnografía, teoría de la práctica

Este texto procura contribuir para a literatura recente sobre el *rebusque*, através de uma caracterização baseada em dados qualitativos da prática do grupo social ao qual me referirei como «rebuscadores callejeros» (camelôs em português) em Bogotá. Com base nos resultados obtidos em dezoito meses de pesquisa etnográfica nas regiões de Cidade Bolívar e Suba (2012-2014), e aplicando a teoria da prática de Bourdieu (em particular os conceitos de habitus e capital), no presente texto argumento que Los rebuscadores callejeros compartilham um volume e uma composição de capital total (ou habitus), e consequentemente dividem práticas diferentes associadas ao seu habitus. Utilizando esse referencial teórico, descrevo e analiso quatro práticas comuns de Los rebuscadores callejeros, na esperança de iluminar a lógica subjacente a tais práticas. Em última análise, meu objetivo político é dar visibilidade ao segmento mais vulnerável de trabalhadores em Bogotá.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

rebusque, trabalhadores precários, etnografia, teoria da prática

Introduction

«Laura: So.... how can I explain what *rebuscársela* means?

Street vendor: To whom? Is there anyone in this world who doesn't understand the term?

Laura: Of course there is.

Street vendor: Well... if there is, then fuck them. They don't care about us, we don't care about them».

Ciudad Bolívar, Bogotá, 2013

It is usual for those who live in a city like Bogotá to make daily contact with ordinary brave men and women who survive by employing different productive strategies in the street. We see them every day, but we rarely look them in the eyes. I conducted eighteen months of ethnographic research in the localities of Ciudad Bolívar and Suba in Bogotá (Sept 2012 to Jan 2014) with 'street *rebuscadores*'.¹ More specifically, I shared my days with street vendors, recyclers, street sex workers, amongst others, who share the following five common characteristics: 1) they identify themselves as self-employed or family workers, 2) they conduct their work mainly in the street or other public spaces, 3) they report that this work occupies most of their time, 4) they are affiliated to the subsidized health care system, and 5) their highest educational degree (if obtained) is high school. In big numbers, I am talking approximately about 82,000 people in Bogotá and 818,000 people in Colombia (DANE, 2015).

In this paper, I offer a contribution to the very recent literature on rebusque (Portes, 1988; Menni, 2004; Ochoa y Ordóñez, 2004; Dakduk, 2008; González, 2008; Kenbel, 2010; Mendoza, 2011; Avendaño y Paz, 2013; Muñoz y Andrade, 2014; Giraldo, 2016), by employing qualitative methodologies to characterize street rebuscadores.² There are few academic texts on the subject, none of them written by legal scholars. Economists, anthropologists, sociologists and journalists, amongst others, have written from different parts of Latin America about rebuscadores drawing on different political approaches and methodologies. However, the scholarly literature written on rebuscadores so far does not describe the practice of rebusque in depth, nor does it present this practice within a given theoretical framework.

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1. More specifically, I conducted research in the neighbourhoods of San Francisco and Sierra Morena (Ciudad Bolívar) and in the neighborhoods of Rincón and Lisboa (Suba). For more about the methodology, see: Porras (2018).

2. The content of this paper is based on part of my unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. See Porras (2018). In the past, I have written other papers where I refer to street rebuscadores and I describe some of their main characteristics to introduce other arguments not included in this text. See: Porras (2015; 2017).

I contribute to fill that gap by using Bourdieu's theory of practice, and in particular the concepts of habitus and capital (Bourdieu, 1987a, 1990, 1998). Bourdieu argues that social space is constructed in such a way that agents or groups are distributed based on two basic principles of differentiation: economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1998: 6). For Bourdieu, the position that each individual occupies in the multidimensional social space, is defined by every single kind of capital he or she can mobilize through social relations. Therefore, the position of individuals who are relatively poor in economic capital but rich in cultural capital (e.g. artists, professionals, academics, etc.), is very different from the position of those poor in cultural capital but rich in economic capital (e.g. commercial employers). Their tastes in food, sports, music, politics etc., differ greatly. Different combinations of capital give rise to different forms of habitus. Therefore, habitus is what gives different groups consistency beyond all the undoubted variations in the behaviour of individuals, or what Bourdieu calls a «feel for the game».

One way of approaching the habitus of a certain group of individuals is by describing the type of practices they share, since habitus and practice are two concepts strictly correlated. In fact, practices depend on habitus as much as habitus depends on practices, because the homogeneity of habitus is what causes practices to be intelligible and foreseeable, transcending subjective intentions and conscious projects, whether individual or collective (Bourdieu, 1990: 59). That being said, Bourdieu makes clear that within the same habitus practices are never identical. It is impossible for members of the same habitus to share the exact same experiences, but «the corrections and adjustments the agents themselves consciously carry out presuppose mastery of a common code» (Bourdieu, 1990: 59). In other words, habitus excludes the most improbable practices as unthinkable, «by a kind of immediate submission to order that inclines agents to make a virtue of necessity, that is, to refuse what is anyway denied and to will the inevitable» (Bourdieu, 1990: 54).

Building on Bourdieu's theory, my hypothesis is that street rebuscadores share a similar volume and composition of overall capital (or habitus), and share different practices associated with their habitus. Following that theoretical framework, my aim in this paper is to describe and analyse four common practices of street rebuscadores based on my ethnographic research. These practices are all subordinated practices within the field of power, and more specifically within the economic field.

Description of four different practices shared by street rebuscadores in Bogotá

They «choose» to work in the street, by and for themselves

Individual choices are constrained by historical, legal, cultural, political and economic factors. Consequently, individuals with less amounts of total capital have less room for choice (Bourdieu, 1998, Bourgois 2003, Sylvestre, 2007, Pine, 2008). The choices of street rebuscadores are particularly limited by structural constraints, while still leaving some space for agency. It is not that the most vulnerable working poor lack agency. Rather, the point is that their choices and options must be imagined within the context of key structural constraints such as class discrimination and sexist oppression. Consider, for instance, the choice of working in the streets. As Sylvestre argues, «choosing between begging, squeegeeing, selling lost goods, singing or performing qualifies as a choice between dying (and doing nothing) or doing something (anything) to survive» (Sylvestre, 2007: 382-383).

During my fieldwork, it was common for street rebuscadores to tell me that the reason they worked in the street was because they were uneducated and other working alternatives were not really available. Others, however, admitted they had other working alternatives besides working in the street (washing cars in parking lots, cooking, working as construction workers, attending small businesses or marketplaces, picking flowers, etc.), but argued they ‘chose’ the street because they had flexible hours, more stability, but most importantly, because they had higher incomes, could comply with caregiving responsibilities and had to withstand less humiliations. For instance, a female street vendor told me:

My brother tries to rebuscársela as much as possible. During the weekend he sells alcohol, at night he washes trucks, and during the day he works in a gym. But he makes less money than those of us who concentrate on the street. Or else, why do you think that the streets are full of workers? (...) There is nothing like the street. I once worked in a marketplace where they relocated a group of vendors. But while in the street you need un plante (amount of money to start selling) of around 100,000 pesos (of 2013) per week to make your diario, in the marketplace you need about 1 million pesos to make the same diario! And yes, of course, the marketplace is more organized, the police do not harass you and you feel more... like a human being. But isn't the point to get food on the table? I don't have to tell you that life is no fairytale. Plus, I work close to where I live, so I can make sure that my daughters are having lunch and that they are behaving. No... I'm not leaving the street. Leaving the street means becoming some

asshole's slave for eight hours a day. No mamita... I'm not selling my life to any bastard... and for a minimum wage? Ha! You work in the street and you make the same kind of money in three hours.

Suggesting that many street rebuscadores have enough room to 'choose' to work in the street, can be seen as a way to recognize their agency, as well as the soundness of the reasons that many give to argue that they actually 'like' to work in the street (flexible hours, increased labour stability, higher levels of income, complying with caregiving responsibilities, lack of subordination etc.).³ However, stating that they 'like' to work in the street, can also be seen as their way to make «virtue out of necessity» (Bourdieu, 1990), or in other words, as a way to accept exclusion or exclude oneself rather than attempt to achieve what is already denied. Bourdieu makes the point that people do not necessarily make those kinds of calculations and decisions freely, uninfluenced by habitus. For instance, if a young man from a poor neighbourhood says he likes football more than anything else in the world, it might also be because he has never been in a swimming pool in his life.

Bearing that in mind is important, because the fact is that working in the street is not easy. One of my main informants always told me, the street «wears you out (*te acaba*)». As much as I acknowledge that many street rebuscadores argue they 'like' to work in the street, I also want to insist that their working conditions are very difficult. Their daily income is too low to meet life's basic needs, they labour excessively, their social protection rights are severely restricted, their jobs usually take place in stressful and violent areas, they can rarely access the financial system so they access informal loans at absurdly high rates, their work is usually physically and emotionally exhausting, they get sick frequently, and it is common for them to be treated arbitrarily by the police and other public servants.

Furthermore, street rebuscadores lack associational structures that allows them to expose their demands as a group. In fact, street rebuscadores have been portrayed as free individuals, who manage everything by themselves, and who act under the law «every man for himself» (Mendoza, 2011: 123). Following Castel, and highlighting their lack of attachment to a given community, Mendoza also characterizes them as a good example of «negative individualism» (Mendoza, 2011: 123). Giraldo simply states that it is a myth to argue that solidarity is a value shared by rebuscadores: «most of their economic activities take place within strong schemes of competition. Solidarity is present only when they face adversity, more specifically when they are attacked by the State» (Giraldo, 2016: 73; my translation).

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3. Dakduk, Kenbel and Giraldo report very similar reasons given by street rebuscadores to argue they like to work in the street (See: Kenbel, 2010: 17; Dakduk, 2008: 71-73; Giraldo, 2016: 128).

My fieldwork confirms that street rebuscadores distrust neighbours and usually run away from offers of cooperation to build better strategies of employment and divide earnings. Why? I will offer three possible explanations: First, many of them do not see how cooperation could increase their revenues. Instead, they believe it will mean splitting their meagre income in half. I was once trying to explain to a female street vendor the advantages of joining efforts and building economies of scale. She quickly interrupted me:

I see it differently, and my point of view is based on real experience. To associate means that if we make a diario of 30,000 pesos, you get 15,000 and I get 15,000. It is a way to divide earnings between the associates. See? No, thank you. I am not interested in learning any more about it.

Second, cooperation is difficult to achieve in an environment of distrust. Street rebuscadores not only distrust politicians and the public sector in general, but they deeply distrust their own leaders and themselves. The leader of a group of street vendors, explained it as follows:

I once tried to make a small group work together, and what happened? I got there and they were fighting with iron rods. You need to know that... they will start a fight for almost anything. They will insult, blame, and physically threaten each other for anything. I used to ask them to stop that kind of behavior. What do you gain by fighting each other? Is that the way you are going to put food on your tables? Is that the way you are going to pay your *gota a gota*?⁴ Is that the best way to make el diario? Ha, ha, ha! Now I don't make that kind of speech anymore.

The resistance of street rebuscadores to work together translates into their practical desire to work by and for themselves. During our many conversations it became clear that self-employment was not a burden for most of them, and that many actually embraced the kind of autonomy that came with it. For instance, a street vendor told me:

I love my work, not only because it saved me from alcoholism, but because it is really creative and I help other people (he buys shoes from recyclers who pick them in the garbage in wealthier parts of the city, fixes them, and then sells them back in the streets of Ciudad Bolívar). Plus, I like working by and for myself. I don't bother anyone, and no one bothers me.

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4. Street rebuscadores can rarely access the financial system, so they access informal loans called *gota a gota* (at very high rates (usually 20% of daily interest)).

However, the resistance shown by street rebuscadores to work with each other, to build economies of scale or to start collaborative projects, does not mean they cannot be supportive of each other during everyday duties. For instance, street vendors will take care of the working spot of other vendors, or they will look out for their children during temporary absences. I met recyclers who used to pick up «*good stuff*» for those who were ill and could not walk, so that they could sell them in the street. A female recycler once told me: «I try to help as much as I can... if someone is ill, then I try to go to the northern (wealthier) part of the city to pick something good that they can sell. One has to be supportive, because one never knows...» In other words, street rebuscadores can help each other without receiving immediate economic compensation. As Bourdieu makes clear, debts of gratitude can be understood as a form of symbolic capital that can be convertible in the future into more traditional forms of economic capital (Bourdieu, 1987a).

The reluctance of street rebuscadores to work with others also explains why the whole discourse of individual entrepreneurship is well understood and received by them. By entrepreneurship discourse, I am referring to the neoclassical-based idea that entrepreneurship is a key player in ending global poverty by reversing the cycle of dependency with a cycle of self-sufficiency and employment (Amorós, Cristi y Naudé, 2010). The entrepreneurship discourse is reflected in documents of the United Nations Development Programme on legal empowerment of the poor,⁵ and has been well understood by local institutions in Bogotá.⁶ However, it has been largely criticized. According to Giraldo, there are at least three lines of criticism: First, it gives hope to poor individuals with the idea that they can reach success through their own individual efforts, while in reality most of them fail. Secondly, it is a discourse that blames the poor for either their success or failure, eclipsing the many structural factors that contribute to poverty, while highlighting the agency of the poor. Thirdly, it conveniently shifts the discussion from talking about precarious workers to talking about small capitalists. Can half of the working population really become a successful businessman or woman? Giraldo asks (Giraldo, 2016: 136).

As much as I acknowledge those criticisms, the entrepreneurship discourse is successful within street rebuscadores because it gives hope. It is a mechanism of domination that is linked to seduction more than to coercion (Bourdieu, 1990). It makes vulnerable individuals feel powerful, awakening the illusion of being able

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5. See, for instance, http://www.undp.org/content/dam/aplaws/publication/en/publications/democratic-governance/legal-empowerment/reports-of-the-commission-on-legal-empowerment-of-the-poor/making-the-law-work-for-everyone---vol-ii---english-only/making_the_law_work_II.pdf (last viewed, April 2017).

6. Please refer to: <http://www.ipes.gov.co/index.php/emprendimiento> (last viewed, April 2017).

to choose and to create their own destinies (Guevara, 2013). It appeals to creativity, autonomy, to the cultural code of ‘becoming someone’ of ‘beating poverty’ and doing it against all possible odds. A male street vendor told me:

See that car with armored glass? It is owned by a guy who was born poorer than me. What he has done is remarkable (*es verdaderamente un berraco*). I want to be like him. If he did it, anyone of us can do it. (...) Why is he inside a car with armored glass? (I asked) Well... no one becomes someone without making some enemies right?

Most of my informants did not escape poverty or have been able to reach the entrepreneur dream. But again, most street *rebuscadores* make more money in the streets than in any other available job for people with a similar amount of total capital, although they have to work longer hours. Making more money strengthens the internalization and reproduction of a narrative of choice amongst them. According to a female street vendor:

If you know how to manage money, then, the street is the best choice (...) of course; there are those who don't make money, but that is either because they are not well located or because they don't know how to sell. (...) The only problem I find here is the lack of time. Even if we don't work fixed hours, we end up working many more hours than in any business... but I don't care. I used to work in a formal business and I don't miss that job at all... AT ALL!⁷

Both self-employment and entrepreneurship discourses are particularly successful among women *rebuscadoras*, because for different reasons most of them do not have the aspiration of holding a full-time job. According to Vosko, full time jobs were structured over the male breadwinner/female caregiver contract. More specifically, the gender contract assumed a male breadwinner with access to «a full-time continuous employment relationship with a single employer and in receipt of a family wage», together with a female caregiver «performing unpaid work necessary for social reproduction, possibly earning a «secondary wage», and receiving supports such as social insurance via her spouse» (Vosko, 2010: 8). Full-time permanent employment is therefore gendered. However, the male breadwinner/female caregiver gender contract upon which it was built is disintegrating. For instance, it is undeniable that self-employment has been useful to empower street *rebuscadoras*. Entrepreneurship might not be enough to escape poverty, but it helps women

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7. Scholars from different disciplines corroborate similar findings (Dakduk, 2008; Avendaño y Paz, 2013; Muñoz y Andrade, 2014).

fight for less harmful gender arrangements. When I asked women of different ages if they could help me understand why there were always more women than men in the streets I visited, common answers included the following:

- Female street vendor (28 years old) - «The street saved me. I arrived here when I divorced the father of my son. I thought I was going to go crazy, but the street saved me. It allowed me to recover my dignity».
- Female street vendor (42 years old) - «What you find here are fighters, warriors. Women who know they have to stand up right after falling. I used to work in a business office and things were different. Rules, rules and rules... and people thinking how not to comply with rules. Here the attitude is different. It is the attitude of fight, of survival, and I always felt like a fighter. Maybe that's why I feel better here».

Self-employment is allowing women to believe they can provide for their family without having a partner, and without having to withstand the humiliations many associate with subordination and formal employment. Having a steady income allows women to demand less harmful arrangements, to ask for a divorce, and to feel strong and able to make their own decisions. That doesn't mean, of course, that female subordination is over. Social constructions that characterize patriarchy such as the one associating housecleaning and caregiving responsibilities with women are far from being overcome. A female street vendor explains:

The street gives women more time for their children. I used to work in a business, and I arrived home so tired that I just shouted at my children so they would hurry up with their homework and go to sleep. The street has given me more time for my children. It's a pity that they all grew up and that my time is over. I could have helped them with their homework.

Most of my female informants argued they 'liked' working in the street because it allowed them to comply with caregiving responsibilities. I always questioned that kind of rhetoric because most of them did not have much choice. Leaving very small children at home alone, for instance, is not really a choice because it could be life threatening. Leaving them with the father in a highly patriarchal society is rarely a choice. For instance, according to one of my informants, a full-time job is a «*luxury for women without responsibilities*», by which she meant those with only one child, or those with someone else to take care of the sick and the old. For a female head of the household who doesn't count on the support of their children's father or on the support of a big family, it is almost impossible to have a full-time job. Consequently,

as Bourdieu argues, it is easier to refuse what is anyway denied and to say you ‘like’ the inevitable (Bourdieu 1990: 54). However, questioning that kind of rhetoric does not mean that I don’t acknowledge that some female rebuscadores actually enjoy complying with caregiving responsibilities. My aim is just to challenge the notion of ‘choice’ when few alternatives are available, especially after I saw women driven to physical and emotional exhaustion.

Finally, it is important to make clear that resistance shown to work with others excludes family members. Actually, street rebuscadores rely heavily on their families to perform their different productive strategies (Mendoza, 2011; Kenbel, 2010). In addition to the biological and social reproduction of the group, the family also assumes the roles of providing economic support and of helping individuals to cope and recover when something goes wrong (Giraldo, 2016: 76). Why? In Colombia, the only non-contributive social protection mechanism is the subsidized health-care system. Social insurance schemes all require that beneficiaries make a financial contribution. As vulnerable self-employed workers are very rarely able to contribute, their social security rights are restricted because they don’t have any real access to social pension, unemployment or disability benefits. Consequently, family members are usually carrying the responsibility of replacing the worker during their temporary or permanent absences. That was the case of a male street vendor (50 years old) who suffered from advanced colon cancer spreading to his pancreas and liver: *«while I was healthy, I worked all day long, but nowadays when I feel I cannot walk very well after my chemotherapy and radiotherapy treatments, or when I am hospitalized, my wife takes my place»*. His wife, however, was a 62 year old woman with her own health problems. Therefore, his brothers and sisters (eight in total of whom I met four) complemented their daily income.

Living with a minimum uncertain daily family income (el diario) and to be constantly ready for change

Street rebuscadores work each day to amass what they call el diario (daily income needed to cover life’s basic necessities). When I started my fieldwork, I was most concerned about family income. I used to ask street rebuscadores how much money they made per month, because within my habitus income is usually paid or accounted for on a monthly basis. Generally they had no idea: *«I can tell you approximately how much I make in a day, but in a month? I don’t know (es que como uno gasta es el diario...)»*. According to my field notes, street rebuscadores reported a daily income between 20000 – 60000 pesos in 2013. That means they made on average 1080000 pesos per month, assuming that they rested one day per week (which is not necessarily

true). In any case, their monthly average income was higher than the minimum wage (589500 pesos in 2013). Daily income was mainly used to pay for food, rent, loans (gota a gota), utility bills, transportation, school day care, and medicines.

Living from *el diario* means that street rebuscadores need to be extremely flexible and constantly ready for change. As Mendoza States, «*if it rains they will sell you umbrellas, if it's hot, ice-creams*» (Mendoza, 2011: 124). A street vendor gave me the best possible explanation when I asked him to explain in depth what being deeply flexible meant from the standpoint of a street rebuscador:

I was trying to explain that to a gringa the other day... I told her that el rebusque was sent to us from above to teach us how to survive... but gringos are usually atheists, so I had to give her an example. I once had to live two weeks without my diario after my crafts were seized during an eviction. So what did I do? I dismantled my motorcycle the best way I could, and got back in business by selling it by parts. I told her that being adaptable, being a true rebuscador, means not losing your drive for any reason (no vararse por nada). The problem is she didn't understand what vararse meant, because apparently there is no word for it in English.

As street rebuscadores need to earn a basic daily income, they cannot afford the unemployment gaps between temporary or part-time jobs typical of the globalized era. The family is simply unable to look out for them for long. There is no welfare in Colombia, so that excludes the possibility of using it to bypass unemployment gaps. Following the methodology used by Lipscomb and others (2007), I asked street rebuscadores how long they could be out of work without pay before the loss of income would be a major problem. According to my field notes, loss of their income creates hardship usually for more than a week and almost always for more than two weeks. In all cases, loss of their income for more than three weeks would become a major problem.

Living with *el diario* also means that the most vulnerable segment of the working population buys goods at higher prices than wealthier citizens. For instance, it is common to see street rebuscadores buying two expensive tablespoons of sugar for their daily needs, instead of a full bag of sugar at a cheaper price that would last them at least two weeks. Rent is also often paid on a daily or weekly basis. As Roig points out, fractionated consumption implies that goods are acquired at higher prices both in absolute terms as well as in relative terms when associated with the income of the poor. It is the opposite of economies of scale (Roig, 2017). Furthermore, the price of the items sold by street rebuscadores is usually not established by market prices, but by the need to amass the daily income they need to meet life's basic needs (Guevara, 2013). For instance, according to my field notes, it is common to see street vendors

lowering the price of the goods they sell by the end of the weekend or late at night to secure *el diario* if needed. A female sex worker also told me: «*I ask some clients – the ones I like the most – to come on Tuesdays and they will get a good discount. Tuesdays are the hardest days to make el diario, so one has to think about different strategies (una se tiene que ingeniar sus estrategias)*».

Living from *el diario*, has also an undeniable impact upon how street rebuscadores understand and live with time. The fact that they have few (if any) plans for the future, for instance, can be understood as a defense mechanism against the unpredictable or even the tragic, but it can also reflect the somehow liberating experience of living in very short intervals of time. *Cada día trae su afán* (each day has enough trouble of its own) is an expression commonly heard in the street. The relationship of street rebuscadores with time is one of the ways in which I could see more clearly how «*habitus is internally incorporated through postures, movements, feelings and gestures of the body*», how it is «*not a mental process*» (Sylvestre, 2007: 367). Having been socialized in a very different habitus, it was interesting for me to experience –if only for brief moments– that embodied experience of living life in very short time frames. As a female recycler told me: «*Once you grab the street (ya cuando uno agarra la calle), you start to live day by day and not thinking about the future*». There is a strong liberating logic underneath that practice that should not be underestimated.

Finally, living from *el diario* means that street rebuscadores lack both the time and space to articulate a common political discourse, although they share common feelings of injustice, uncertainty and discontent with the political and economic system. In other words, they do not have the space to reflect on political issues. The leader of a group of street vendors once told me:

It is only under pressure, either the pressure of the State or the pressure of armed groups (de grupos pesados) that we join efforts and get together. I know I can be killed for telling you this, but I actually miss evictions. When they occur, we all suddenly share common claims. Rebuscadores live on a daily basis (quien se la rebusca vive del diario). If we don't feel touched, if we are not thrown out of the streets, then we don't move (si no los tocan, si no los botan de la calle, no nos movemos ni avisamos) or even think about speaking with one voice. There is no time for that.

Ideally, the political claims of street rebuscadores (even if they manifest themselves only through short-term atomized expressions) should be articulated through political parties or unions. However, for different reasons, the voice of street rebuscadores is still marginal within political parties and unions. In 2009, for instance, informal workers created a division called «United Workers of the Informal Economy» (UGTI) as part of the biggest Colombian union (at least in number of affiliated

members) «United Workers Trade Union Federation» (CUT). UGTI brings together street vendors, recyclers, motorcycle-taxis drivers and rebuscadores who work with animal-drawn vehicles, amongst others.⁸ Unfortunately, UGTI has received only marginal attention from street rebuscadores themselves. I had the opportunity to talk to Alfredo Manchola (one of the main leaders of the union) and to ask his opinion on the role of the union in articulating the broader emancipatory claims of street rebuscadores. While he acknowledged the political potential of street rebuscadores, his answer was not surprising:

Our impact is still marginal because it is very difficult to organize informal workers. It is simple: if they go to a meeting, they can't work, and that means many won't eat that day. Unfortunately, we generally lack the resources to pay them for their diario when they attend meetings. It is very difficult... we all agree that if a union or a political party could mobilize the informal sector of Bogotá... I mean, just by mobilizing street vendors... we could paralyze the city. Guerillas paralyzed the whole country with a tiny fraction of the potential number of associates we have. ¡Cuál trasmilenio, ni cuáles taxistas! We would simply paralyze the city.

So far, however, and as long as they live from *el diario*, it is unlikely that street rebuscadores will be able to articulate a common political discourse incorporating broader emancipatory claims.

Developing practical skills needed for their different productive strategies (cooking, heavy lifting, befriending clients, flirting, tolerating high and low temperatures, amongst others)

As Dakduk puts it for the case of Venezuela: «Not everyone has the skills to rebuscársela, and the ones who know how to do it should be considered ingenious entrepreneurs, atypical Venezuelans, not for their economic shortcomings but for their ability to overcome limitations» (Dakduk, 2008: 71; my translation). I collected many testimonies from street rebuscadores about the practical skills needed to develop different productive strategies, whether it is cooking, heavy lifting, tolerating high and low temperatures, tolerating long hours without food, etc. However, in this section, I will focus only on two of them that are less documented: befriending clients/flirting (in the case of male street vendors and sex workers) and tolerating strong smells (in the case of recyclers).

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8. There is not much information that can be found online about the UGTI. However their official facebook page is: <https://es-la.facebook.com/Ugti-Cut-Colombia-185141238248548/> (last viewed, September 2016).

Interestingly, both my closest street vendor male informant (53 years old) and female sex worker informant (27 years old) thought that the main practical skill needed to be able work in the street was to flirt, since that was the best way to end up befriending clients. My male informant, for instance, is the leader of the street known as «El Líder» in Ciudad Bolívar. He had one of the best working spots any vendor could have because he was visible from almost any part of the street and he was in front of a store whose friendly female owner allowed him to take shelter when it rained. The day I asked him how he was able to get that excellent working spot, he replied as follows:

Don't think it is because I threatened someone! No... no, no. It is more difficult and simple at the same time. In this spot I started many friendships. I started to tell stories to the girls (echarle cuentos a las muchachas), and they like that, and they protect me more than anyone else. One has to talk to women so they won't think one is mute. And they just enjoy their brief time with me (esas viejas gozan conmigo mija). You've seen me at work when I ask a woman to buy my avocados, I say that they are just like me: the smallest, blackish, wrinkled and buttery fruit of Bogotá! (mis aguacaticos mamacita son chiquitos, negritos, arrugaditos y mantequilluditos como yo). Ha, ha, ha!! They laugh so much with me, that they come back any number of times just to hear my stories.

I thought his answer was reasonable. Although he is a big, strong man, maybe the most compelling reason why he is the leader of the street where he works, is that he has managed to build relationships with most of his fellow female vendors (who make up the majority), and has a large loyal clientele that is also basically made up of women. At first, it was really shocking for me to put up with what seemed to me to be patriarchal, offensive, even abusive 'compliments' reinforcing sexist status quo made by my informant to women. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that street *buscadores* are socialized in a deeply patriarchal habitus, where sexist oppression is deeply naturalized, and where his 'compliments' are taken as 'harmless,' 'nice,' 'gentle,' and 'warm.' In that context, flirting and befriending customers can be seen as an extremely helpful practical skill to be able to survive in the street. Something very similar happens with sex workers. My female informant told me that many of her clients are not necessarily looking for sex but for someone to pamper them and listen to their stories:

You approach clients by knowing how to flirt, but it's really listening that allows you to have a fixed clientele. I should get a psychologist diploma for free. I'm sure that if I had the money to study, I would fall asleep in every class unless they let me teach. Sex work is not easy... because it's not really about having sex. Not that having sex is necessarily easy either (she laughs).

Tolerating very bad smells is also a practical skill that is needed in order to be able to perform certain kind of jobs in the street. One of the main difficulties I experienced during my fieldwork was to overcome what I felt was a natural impulse to physically reject the smell of trash or human wastes. Most eloquently, Georg Simmel argues that «the social question is not only a moral question, but a nasal one». And he adds: «many individuals of the upper classes would surely make considerable sacrifices in their personal comfort (...) rather than endure bodily contact with the worker, covered by the honest sweat of labour» (Simmel, 1987: 686; my translation) Well, it turns out that tolerating very bad smells is also a practical skill that is learned by street *rebuscadores* as it is needed to be able to perform certain kinds of jobs in the street. According to a female recycler:

Being able to work in this is something that often has to do with one's own story (...) My mother taught me how to separate trash since I was very young because it was there where I could find my toys. She taught me what I needed to learn to survive... but it's not easy. Don't think I don't feel revolted sometimes. Like any other job, recycling is something you learn to do. It's my job, but it's not what I want for my children.

In addition to the practical skills street *rebuscadores* have to cultivate to work in the street, Mendoza argues that they need to develop a keen intuition, emotional tools to be able to control constant uncertainty, the capacity to be permanently alert, as well as the ability to improvise different strategies on the spur of the moment (Mendoza, 2011: 133). Not everyone can develop those skills, which explains why there are hierarchies among street *rebuscadores*. For instance, workers who share similar levels of total capital but have additional limitations that do not allow them to develop the skills they need to survive as self-employed workers in the street, are generally 'hired' by those who have developed those skills. I am referring here to young people with alcohol or drug problems, children, the elderly, homeless people and sometimes the mentally or physically disabled. The stories of two young women (18 and 21 years old) can illustrate how that type of hierarchy works. A female vendor (43 years old) 'hired' both of them to help her clean and slice the fruits and vegetables she sold in the street:

If one hires someone, it's because you want that person to do something you don't like to do. In my case, I hired them to clean and slice because I feel tired. I pay them 10,000 pesos for a day of work ... but that is when they actually show up (...) I know the poor girls are a disaster (*esas pobres niñas son un desastre*), but when they work, they work [both of them had drinking problems and had to work because each has a child to support]. *Ay Laurita*, not everyone has what it takes to be a real entrepreneur.

Performing illegal yet legitimate actions grounded on one main informal rule: survival at any cost

After spending a few months with street rebuscadores, I wrote the following note in my field notes:

Rebuscadores and I definitely do not share the same limits and social patterns of coexistence. Looking back, I now I understand that I have internalized cultural codes such as 'do not steal,' because it was easy for me to abstain from doing it.

I wrote that note as I was trying to understand the discrepancies between the informal rule of survival as shown in the daily practices of street rebuscadores and State law. A female street vendor once told me:

Maybe there are no State laws that protect us... but there is always the law of reason which is above everything... and the law of reason is loud and clear: one has to survive at any cost. So, that is what we do. That is the law by which we live.

Let me give just three of many common examples of illegal yet legitimate practices from the moral standpoint of street rebuscadores. First, and most obviously, when street rebuscadores occupy public space, they violate several State regulations (section 92.10 of the *National Police Code*, section 69.2, section 70.2 and 70.3 of *Bogotá Police Code*, amongst others). However, occupying public space is a legitimate action from the moral standpoint of street rebuscadores. According to a female street vendor:

We are not asking them (the police and other State officials) to find us a job. They have never been able to do it... but they have to be real son-of-a-bitches to prevent us from working honestly (que no sean tan hijueputas como para no dejarnos trabajar honestamente)... to prevent a poor person from rebuscársela in any possible way (...) the law of life is that one survives as one can... and those bastards cannot deny the law of life... even if they believe we are illiterate, we deserve respect.

Second, as street rebuscadores usually do not acknowledge the legitimacy of public institutions, deceiving them can be seen as a legitimate course of action. For instance, in Colombia we use a system called SISBEN (System for Selecting Beneficiaries of Social Programs), to target social programs for the poor and vulnerable.⁹ Variables such as availability and quality of housing and basic public services, possession of durable goods, and human capital endowments, are included as indicators

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9. For more about SISBEN, you can refer to the web page: <https://www.sisben.gov.co>

of a household economic well-being. Home visits are part of the mechanisms used to assess applicants. While we were talking about the recent home visit she received, a female recycler told me:

If you show as much as a fridge to the people of SISBEN, you are screwed. One has to juggle (uno hace malabares) to get a good score, and get into Familias en Acción (conditional cash transfer program). My brother screwed everything up because he gave his correct address and showed them the stuff he had. Can you believe it? Who does that? I gave the address of a friend of mine who is in a very bad condition because he drinks a lot. Once there, they asked me about his old and filthy fridge. I told them I found it in the garbage. They asked me how many people slept on that bed, and I told them, my son and two nephews. I also told them I was raising my four children alone ... which you know is not true. And you see... I got a good score!

A third example relates to lack of access to the financial system (Muñoz y Andrade, 2014: 332). As street rebuscadores can rarely access the system, they obtain informal loans called *gota a gota* at absurdly high rates (usually 20% of daily interest). Those loans are illegal because they charge higher interest than permitted by law, and usury is a crime in Colombia (section 305 of the *Penal Code*). They are also a source of public concern for the State, because the business is usually controlled by armed actors that used to belong to different left or right wing armed groups (Giraldo, 2016: 133; Guevara, 2013: 110). Therefore, when people do not pay, they can be physically threatened, attacked or killed, which means that *gota a gota* generates violence. However, from the moral standpoint of street rebuscadores, accessing illegal loans is also seen as necessary and legitimate, although it is an act of non-compliance with the law. While we were talking about *gota a gota*, a male street vendor told me:

Ha! Really Laura? Is gota a gota illegal? Really? So they would prefer us to steal to get the money we need to buy el plante? (money needed to start the business). Can you believe that? You explained to me once that rice is cheaper for wealthier people... then money should be cheaper too! That is life! It's really amazing... we don't complain of the unfairness, we don't steal from them, we survive without hurting anyone, we don't even ask them to find us a job or lend us money, but we always end up owing to those who invent the law... who own the country... Bastards!

In this case, the discrepancy between State law and the informal rule of survival is particularly ironic, since usury was first criminalized in order to protect vulnerable citizens who needed money. It is one of many examples that illustrate how street

rebuscadores have very few reasons to abide by our same limits and social patterns of coexistence. They are treated and raised as second-class citizens, and act accordingly. For instance, I was always surprised by the fact that many did not carry their citizen ID (*cedula*), and did not even remember the number. They manage to live without having the very card and number that recognizes them as citizens. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that non-compliance with the law is sometimes a legitimate choice, especially whenever it interferes with the informal law of survival.

Conclusion

My aim was to characterize different practices of street rebuscadores in Bogotá, as well as to shed some light on the logic underneath those practices. Building on Bourdieu's theory, my hypothesis was that street rebuscadores share a similar habitus, and therefore share different practices associated with their habitus. According to my fieldwork observations, street rebuscadores «choose» to work in the street, by and for themselves; live with a minimum uncertain daily family income (*el diario*) and are constantly ready for change; develop practical skills needed for their different productive strategies, and perform illegal yet legitimate actions supported by one main informal rule: survival at any cost. By describing the practice in depth and within a given theoretical framework, I offered a contribution to the very recent literature on rebusque.

However, there are at least two important restrictions when trying to describe the practices associated with the habitus of a particular social group: science has a time which is not that of practice, and practice has a logic which is not that of the logician (Bourdieu, 1990: 81, 86). I tried my best to abstain from detemporalizing practice and of imposing a forced coherence upon it. However, aware of both limitations, I can only rely on Bourdieu's conviction that the only way to possibly understand the social world's logic is by immersing oneself in the specifics of a historically and contextually situated empirical reality, which can be presented as a single representation of the «possibles» found in a universe of other possible configurations (Bourdieu, 1998).

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