

The Finnish Breadline: an enforcer of social class and right to space?

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Abstract: The Finnish breadline is known for long lines of people queuing up to receive food aid. However, when looking deeper into the breadline we can see that it is acting as a marker of poverty. It is highlighting and labelling the financial situation of those who stand in the line and also influencing the way people behave, interact and use common space. This article looks at how the breadline is furthering exclusion due to perceived social class, what does it mean from the perspective of the rights and how the use of public space around the breadline is compromised. The empirical study focuses on Kallio, Helsinki. Kallio is known for being a traditional blue collar working area, and more recently it has become a popular and fashionable place due to low level gentrification. The gentrification has manifested in rising house prices and cultural changes which appeal to younger generations of residents.

The article is based on thesis work grounded on empirical research and fieldwork consisting of immersive observations, observations and a small-scale survey.

The study shows that a lengthy breadline is problematic in terms of increasing the level of stigmatisation for those in the line. The queues also influence the area negatively in terms of its physical upkeep and social behaviour. It argued that the breadline has become a pocket of social unrest and general disregard for the space around it.

Keywords: Breadline, poverty, social exclusion, social class, right to space



Introduction

Breadlines have been in existence in Finland for a great period of time, but the use of them rapidly grew during the economic recession of the 1990's. The welfare system struggled under the enormous strain of mass unemployment and the breadlines were anticipated to be a temporary situation under harsh conditions.

In short, the breadline food is collected or delivered from shops. It is often just the day past its sell by or use by date, so cannot be legally sold any more. It is collected by organisations, such as religious groups or

standalone charities and then distributed to those in need usually on a first come, first served basis. The popular breadlines often have long queues forming from the early hours with people waiting to receive some supplies. Finland is also the only Nordic country which receives EU food aid, dating back from 1996, though as of July 2014, it was replaced with the 'European Aid to the Most Deprived'. The Finnish income support benefit comes with the acceptance that the right to food is included with it, a constitutional and legal right for everyone living permanently in the country (Riches & Silvasti 2014).

The breadline is often in the Finnish media, and frequently there is a politically motivated bias considering that Finland is known to be a strong welfare state. A country with a strong ethos for protecting its citizens and guaranteeing a certain standard of life, but yet there are queues of people forming (Figure 1). Media interest and political campaigns use the breadline as an example of a failing state and government in order to further their own agendas.

The breadlines have become part of some sectors of society's everyday life, a hand forced to stand in a busy urban area to make a public statement regarding a personal financial situation. Social sciences studies are focusing on the potential embarrassment and stigmatisation of the situation; it can be a hard thing to deal with on top of the harsh blow of food insecurity. It is easy to imagine the sociological aspects that come along with abject poverty: shame, embarrassment and the stigmatisation of being lazy and workshy (Walker 2014) or maybe being labelled as a substance abuser. It can even be understandable that it's easier to think that a user of a breadline has created that problem for themselves (Niemelä 2008) rather than face the fear that in reality anything could happen in our lives and we may quickly find ourselves faced with the same need. Not only do we as a society question the reasons people are resorting to food charity, we also make an assessment to decide upon someone's 'worth' of being in that line as moral judgements affect treatment (Walker

2014). The reality is that the breadline is made up of a cross section of society, including families, students and pensioners (Yle, Leipäjonoihin...2017). Research by Ohisalo and Saari (2014) discovered that the Helsinki breadlines also consist of what would be termed the 'working poor', 8.7% of those using food aid were either on fixed term contracts, part-time contracts or with permanent work.

The public nature of the breadline has the potential to label an area as being poor as it becomes a focal point of the community, something which the area is well known for. It can be asked whether the bread line can affect the community in other ways? Is there the potential to create ill within the society, enforcing a rich/poor divide which had previously been blurred due to a strong welfare state? If so, how is that division showing itself in the social community?

Some question if the breadline has become part of Finland's everyday existence. However, the breadlines have been in existence for over fifty years and larger demand took over with the economic crash of the 1990's. Current periods of austerity and budget cuts look bleak and it seems that those involved appear to the outside world to be very much resigned to the situation:

"The long lines of people queuing for food have become an accepted feature of everyday life in Helsinki... In Finland, a country so revered for much of its social policy, there is generally an uncritical acceptance that food aid is here to stay." (MacLeod 2016:)

The aim of the study

The study was carried out in early 2017 to look into what effect the breadline was having on the local community with particular interests in the socio-spatial impacts, the rights and the perceived rights of the people that used the breadline.

The specific aims of the study were:

1. What are the breadline's effects on social stigmatisation and how do they affect people's views and feelings?
2. How does the breadline influence the area itself and the social conditions and relationships with the area?
3. Is there any sort of power battle for ownership of the area?
4. Finally, it will be discussed is there another option to the breadline? Would it seem preferable to those using the food aid?



Figure 1. The Kallio breadline viewed from across the street.

Breadlines abroad

We may question why there is need to study the breadline when there are numerous insights, studies and research into poverty. A topic with a strong history of research grounded from the era of Rowntree whose first findings were published in 1901 with regards to the city of York, England. However poverty and its effects change, as does society and social expectations; a person's capabilities create and emphasise their social standings. Such emphasis can be reflected in basic consumerism, what car someone may drive, which mobile phone they own, where they live etc.

Poverty is generally considered to be a personal matter due to the stigmatisation attached to it;

“The significance of shame and humiliation is not to be underestimated. They play an important role in maintaining inequality and social hierarchy. They are painfully injurious to identity, self-respect and self-esteem, in other words to how we feel about ourselves.” (Lister 2004:119)

In Finland and abroad poverty is often viewed to be the direct fault of the poor due to matters such as a lack of intelligence or poor choice of lifestyle (Niemelä 2008; Riches & Silvasti 2014). The research from Ohisalo and Saari (2014:81) also highlighted similar veins of thought as their survey results showed perceptions of breadline users to be saving food money to go towards purchasing substances for intoxication, holidays or simply too lazy to work.

Sassen (2001), talks about city life being fully of inequalities predominately down to

financial resources, but in turn, this creates urban areas of wealth while the poorer members of society become grouped together, something which is clearly evident in the breadline. Massey (1994) explained how it is not possible to simply explain a town's situation by looking at what was occurring within it, but that there was a need to understand that there are multiple reasons and factors that come into play regarding the building of a reputation, and indeed the actual condition of an area. Massey goes further to explain that the resulting urban area spatial confinements are constructed from the power struggle created by social classes. That those of a certain perceived class tend to gravitate towards each other and that in turn means that even without the intent of segregation, it has been created naturally through social standing. The breadline therefore creates an immediate grouping of social class, while the need for food aid automatically comes with the stigmatisation labelling all those that use the line as poor, and therefore of a lower social class due to personal capabilities.

A monetary divide creates segregation by the ultimate means of the built environment; it is natural that more affluent sectors of society tend to group together in more expensive or highly desired locations. Less desirable areas can gain a reputation; if we think of the term 'ghetto' it conjures up the vision of somewhere rough and possibly crime ridden. In the same way if an area is thought to be poor it is not the immediate choice to reside or visit if there are other options. It becomes a mental segregation that potentially creates problems in areas known for poverty and can influence how

we use the space and our feelings towards it. Those feelings can be the choice in how we also move around the city, patterns related to locations of daily visits, home, school, work etc. and the methods of transport. The conscious choice can be the way that we may not like to use a certain train station or we may feel safer not using a particular underpass that feels a little too dark in the evening. Pain (2001) particularly remarks on the public safety aspect, how our fears depend upon our social identity. Social and spatial aspects must be considered in unison; they overlap, mix, affect and crash. Forms of exclusion for many and any reason in a place only serve to create further degrees of social segregation.

Other countries provide measures of food aid that are arguably less conspicuous though still come attached with the stigmatisation of shame. In America for example there are food stamps which allow the person to purchase their own food but there are also soup kitchens and pantries (Poppendieck 1998). In the UK there is a long standing tradition of food banks, a system where people can go in and collect food for several days. The package usually consists of a menu plan that uses packets and tins with the aim of providing a nutritional balance. Depending on the food bank, some such as the Trussel Trust require an official referral from social services or doctor but other charities are there for anyone that needs them. Clients are able to walk in without lining up and be helped, but furthermore some of the food aid places also offer the chance to sit down and have a warm drink, cake and a chat at no cost. The process becomes more 'human' or personal and not only attempts

to make the process easier, but having the chance to chat removes some of the isolation and stigma attached to food aid (Garthwaite 2016).

Methodology: reflections from the field

The data for this research was collected in early 2017, through two types of observation and a questionnaire. These methods of data collection were easily suited to the research objectives being a form of ethnographic research. This means that experiences, emotive behaviour and actions are concentrated on, but it is imperative to observe them as natural behaviour. For this reasoning it was decided to first join the queue on several occasions (three or four times) and then later attempt to carry out questionnaires to ensure I would not be recognised. This would also give the advantage of knowing how people moved around the breadline, where would be a good place to stand, or how to approach people for example. Prior to collecting data, I had contacted the people that run the breadline and obtained permission to collect data outside of the building.

Observational data was carried out through direct and indirect measures. This meant placing myself in the line as though I was also taking food aid. It would allow first-hand experience of the personal emotional impact, and the way I was perceived and hence treated by those around me. In essence I appeared as everyone else in the breadline, "the complete participant, the researcher is totally immersed in the community and does not disclose his or

her research agenda” (Angrosinom, 2011). While I needed to join in naturally, it would not be ethical to take the food aid purely for research purposes so it was decided to pretend to take a phone call near the front of the line and leave.

Indirect measures involved general observations from across the road and also some minor ones during the time of the survey. It was important to observe the people in the breadline, but also how passers-by behaved or reacted. Points to note were how people moved and was there any obvious cause, to look at body language, but importantly to also understand what was not said or done. Were there any general interactions missing you would expect from being on the street?

In order to obtain the best possible observations, it was decided to visit across several different days and at different times of the day over a few weeks. This would give more scope for outside influences such as weather or different people in the queue such as the working poor or families who may be tied to certain times.

Before undertaking the research, it had to be considered, what would be the best way to record observations? Writing notes would be too conspicuous; using a phone may draw too much attention depending on how other people used theirs. It had been decided to try and observe as much as possible then record events immediately afterwards. However, after some observations it was evident that it was possible to record some key points on a phone. In the same nature, it

was possible to take some discreet photos with a phone (ensuring sounds were turned off) and ideally they would not allow identification of those in the bread line. After observations the notes were expanded into a narrative form while the experience and details were still fresh.

The questionnaire itself was anticipated to be problematic in gathering enough data. The researcher’s personal language skills in Finnish were not the strongest and so the questionnaire was prepared in both languages and available for the respondent to also read if they preferred, the added benefit of this being that it was also immediately visible that it was a short survey (only seven questions) with no personal information required.

The questionnaire was planned so that there would be no bias in approaching people, for example asking every fifth person in order to gain as varied cross section of participants as possible. It was also expected that it would be hard to collect respondents due to the nature of the breadline and those using it potentially feeling stigmatised. The survey responses were recorded with permission of the person answering the questions.

The data from the survey had been earmarked for a theoretical analysis, looking at responses and similar patterns in replies. Gathering themes together and also looking for any terms used that would have a specific meaning or feeling attached to them. There was also potential for a statistical analysis depending on the number of surveys collected, ideally totalling 50 sets of data.

Best laid plans...

As expected gathering survey data was problematic. The language wasn't the obstacle that had had been anticipated, managing between Finnish and English was fairly easy. The biggest problem was that people simply did not want to stop and talk, we can perhaps blame the stigmatisation of the breadline or even that people were simply cold and fed up and just wanted to head home as quickly as possible. Unfortunately after many hours trying to collect data only 10 surveys were completed, not enough for a statistical analysis but the empirical data was valuable. I originally had planned to go back on another occasion to collect more data but after an altercation with breadline staff which left me feeling threatened it was decided to just use the data I had collected. This is also the nature of research, learning to use and adapt when the research does not go as planned.

What had been the hardest part of data collection was the personal emotional experience. Joining the queue for the first time caused a great degree of anxiety and feeling of shame. It would have been unethical to take food under the circumstances so I could not experience the full emotive journey. However, my own feelings were enhanced by the people around me and the fact that passers-by were not prepared to acknowledge my own presence on the street. I felt invisible.

Several sessions altered my personality and behaviour, my own outgoing personality became meek and shy, shame turned into anger and then to a feeling of acquiescence to the situation. While I had personally expected it to be a very

emotional experience I could not imagine just how hard I would personally find it. The emotive viewpoints were of course useful in terms of data but it was also important to remain as impartial as possible from the scientific approach.

Research results

Once I had personally managed to get over the embarrassment I felt to join the line for that first time some things were very quickly observed. The first being that those in line had developed their own set of unwritten rules and almost self-governance in the way they patiently lined up, acted and the general demeanour. It became the way in which subdued behaviour became part of the immediate space and enforced expectations. It was oddly quiet to slowly shuffle in such a line and feel that there were already expectations of behaviour related to social status. Nyström (1999) reflects upon how any activity in public space is open to general perceptions, and it is as though those in the queue are very painfully aware of this in the way they present themselves and act.

It also became apparent that all in the line had their own personal strategies of coping. Some participants were alone and kept their head down, others braved it with a friend for hushed conversation, these are also elements of shame directly reflected in physical behaviour (Walker 2014). Furthermore, one survey respondent had gone a step further in order to protect herself, she actually commented upon the fact she did not want any friends to recognise her, she explained the reasoning

as “It’s shame, I feel ashamed. I have friends who don’t know I use the breadline, so I avoid it by wearing sunglasses and a big hood. It’s not nice.” (Survey respondent 6)

Those who answered the research questionnaire were asked what they supposed passers-by thought about the breadline, the answers were mixed. Some simply replied they didn’t know, others commented that some members of the general public were clearly angry towards the line. One interviewee replied:

“I don’t know because it has been here so long, because of that I don’t think people even mind. There might have been some little problems sometimes because the line has been so long, and it disturbs the other people walking here. The people that don’t know this place give bad looks, but people have been here so long lining that those that know don’t mind it.” (Survey respondent 3)

This respondent was a regular customer of the breadline and also lived close by. While almost placating himself to believe that in general things were fine he did then comment that there have been issues regarding the line. The issues are arising from the access and right to public space.

It is these issues regarding right to space that are coming into play. The perceived social inequalities are placing pressure upon the local community. Some sectors feel that they have certain ‘rights’ to the area over others who are perceived to be off a lower social class, also represented in observing an elderly man in the line that appeared to be Romanian being harassed by a younger Finnish man.

While only those in the breadline were questioned, the behaviour of residents was observed in the way they tried to gain access or exit from the buildings next to the line. I was personally pushed passed even when trying to step to the side to let a woman out from a building, she made no acknowledgement of my presence;

“The woman was around 60, she didn’t say thank you, give half a smile or little look to acknowledge me letting her through. I pondered over her apparent lack of basic manners but then realised she actually only saw me and the breadline as a massive inconvenience. We were blocking her doorway, we were eating up her personal space and access. We were unwanted.” (personal observation, Sara Haapanen, 2017:43)

This ownership attitude was also reflected in the behaviour of the staff that ran the breadline. While outside a woman (the gatekeeper) controlled the flow of people and made sure prams etc. were stored at the side. She also offered help to some wheelchair users or those using walking aids but was still selective with whom to help. At one point she even rudely shouted at one mother who hadn’t followed the requirement to leave her pram by the side in a timely fashion.

Furthermore, there was intimidation from the breadline staff during interviews as I was approached in a very aggressive manner. Prior permission had been obtained with an explanation regarding the research was given, and research was carried out on public pavement at a suitable distance with a strong regard not to cause offense or interfere in anyway.

“...I then simply pointed out that I was only stood on the pavement, I had no intention to interfere with their work and that I only talked to people happy to do so. I was then sharply told I couldn’t go inside (I had not even been near the door the time I was there or had any interaction with the staff before this event) and that I should finish my research and leave.

I choose to leave a few minutes after as I felt very uncomfortable and unwelcome. It felt like the food charity had taken ‘ownership’ over this corner of the road and that ‘outsiders’ were

not welcome.” (personal observation, Sara Haapanen, 2017: 67)

Further to these behavioural issues, the physical space dominance of the breadline is also an issue. The breadline operates in such a way that access to local businesses and homes are interfered with as the line snakes past them. The distribution point sets out cones and guidelines that force the queue into the street and in front of the nearby buildings. The breadline has become the dominant factor of the area, visually but also in terms of place ‘ownership’ (Figure 2).



Figure 2. The use of cones and rope for queue control.

The use of the space around the breadline is problematic, the corner is well known for general anti-social behaviour and a hangout for those with heavy social alcohol use which was witnessed during the observations. From ten survey responses, four very quickly replied that it was not a nice area in which to socialise. Finnish news reported that “the booze-soaked area is also a breeding ground for various types of illicit activity” (Crackdown... Yle 2011).

A vintage kiosk stands outside the distribution centre which has become the long term home to graffiti while rubbish remains dumped and uncleaned around the area, almost in essence to make a statement. In contrast, on the next corner building had fallen victim to some graffiti though attempts to clean it were being made while the kiosk remained vandalised. Graffiti is often seen as a method for expression, for tagging of friends or to let it be known an area belongs to a particular group. Predominantly it is viewed as anti-social behaviour. The queue for the breadline, passes directly around the kiosk, it is almost like a traffic cone in controlling where people stand. The graffiti stands out in the corner when the breadline is not active, it stands proud as a symbolic gesture of defiance and an emblem of a power struggle. Lefebvre (1991:141) explains how such symbols in clear view represent an “emotional investment” at a particular place and are done so that everyone maybe witness to this. The upkeep of the two corners were in stark contrast to each other and almost a representation of the

two social classes and their entitlements (Figure 3).

A different approach?

In the same area of Helsinki, the Salvation Army also offer food aid but use an appointment system. They offer this so that there is no need to queue; that people they call ‘customers’ are offered the dignity to drop in at a suitable time. Visiting this breadline was astounding, no queue, the area was peaceful and well kept. There was no line, waiting people or groups socialising nearby to be observed (Figure 4).

There was one elderly lady who popped into the building and promptly back out, she put her food into her own bag (also an emotional coping strategy at the Kallio breadline). The purpose of this breadline was exactly the same and yet there was no queue, there was no need to wait outside and have passers-by know why you were there. The local area was also treated and kept differently, there was no rubbish or graffiti, it very much looked like an area that was well cared for and respected by those that used it. The appointment system enforced personal dignity but also was a means to which social standings could not be immediately identified.

Those interviewed at the Kallio breadline were also asked if they would prefer a different method to the lengthy breadline, all respondents replied yes, very simply one participant said “It would be better, it’s kind of embarrassing to be in public ” (Survey



Figure 3. The vintage kiosk vandalised with graffiti.



Figure 4. The Salvation Army breadline in operation.

respondent 8). Clearly those using the breadline are doing so from need, not from choice under constrained circumstances.

Conclusion

The current necessity for food aid cannot be removed as there are clearly people in great need; however, the breadline in its current form is furthering the cause of social segregation. The line is acting as a marker of poverty highlighting all those that need to stand in it to receive food aid. Some of those standing in the line are feeling a strong degree of stigmatisation and a sense of shame for their situation, while public attitudes are also labelling those in the queue to be of a certain 'type' of person.

The area itself is struggling between the two titles it is renowned for, the gentrified 'hipster' area and the poorer blue collar history which still remains as a strong

presence. The breadline has a strong 50 year history here and it is potentially suffering for this. This particular corner has become the home for social unrest in Kallio while the area around the Salvation Army breadline remains quiet and peaceful. The vicinity of the Salvation Army remains kept and appears to be respected by people that live and visit the area.

The breadline is clearly a point of friction when it comes to ownership of that particular corner. It has become dominated by the charity and appears to very much rule the physical environment reflected in the dominant way the queue and staff take over the area. The public space has become a place in which the community appear not to take care for its physical presentation or upkeep, and it has become an area for unrest and antisocial behaviour.

There are other possible methods that could be used to provide food aid that may

benefit those that need help and benefit the area. The nearby breadline of the Salvation Army operates an appointment system and the area is treated differently in a way that would indicate there is no differentiation between community rights or social classes. Those using the breadline would certainly prefer an alternative method of receiving food aid and in return it may have the ability to create a more unified and welcoming public area for all sectors of the community regardless of any perceived social class.

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