


# Taking Care of Us from the Neighborhoods in Times of Quarantine. Citizen Solidarity Practices in Vallcarca, Barcelona (Spain)

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## Abstract

In the last weeks and months, COVID-19 has challenged and changed societies and social life around the world. In the case of Spain, the health crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic led to the declaration of a state of alert by the central government, which involved partial home confinement. Given this exceptional situation, neighborhood activation through mutual support networks has been very important in the city of Barcelona. This article describes and analyses, based on the method of autobiographical imagination, the example of a citizen solidarity practice *Xarxa de Suport Mutu Vallcarca*  in the Vallcarca neighborhood. Its main objective is to carry out actions of social support to palliate the effects of the confinement, fundamentally in the areas of care and support, as well as childhood and education. From 2008, the creativity of the neighborhoods and citizens has been a relevant motor and multiplier for social protection and change.

## Keywords


quarantine, citizen solidarity practices, neighborhood, autobiographical imagination, creativity

## Introduction

In the last weeks and months, COVID-19 has challenged and changed societies and social life around the world, which has led to an important health threat that has resulted in an economic, political, and social crisis.

On March 11, 2020, WHO elevated the public health emergency caused by COVID-19 to an international pandemic. The rapid escalation at national and international levels requires immediate and effective measures to address this challenge. The extraordinary circumstances that surround the pandemic undoubtedly constitute an unprecedented health crisis of enormous magnitude because of the large number of citizens affected and the extraordinary risk to their rights.

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In the case of Spain, the health crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic led to the declaration of a state of emergency by the central government on March 14, 2020, which involved partial home confinement. On March 30, 2020, that measure was extended and tightened up to total home confinement.

Spain is one of the European countries with the highest number of diagnoses and deaths from COVID-19<sup>1</sup> (Jonh Hopkins University, 2020).

Given this exceptional and unprecedented situation in recent world history, neighborhood activation through mutual support networks has been very rapid and significantly intense across Spain, and the city of Barcelona is no exception. (Associació Catnova, 2020).

The main purpose of this neighborhood mobilization is to offer help and company to neighbors who, due to their circumstances, have added difficulties during confinement. The networks behind this mobilization identified two large vulnerable groups—elderly people and families with children—and five different priority areas of action: (a) care and mutual support, (b) education and childhood (c) culture, (d) sports, and (e) technology.

This article describes and analyses, by using the autobiographical imagination method, the example of a solidarity practice promoted by the *Xarxa de Suport Mutu Vallcarca* (XSMV)<sup>2</sup>, a grassroots movement originated in the Vallcarca neighborhood that aims to foster social support among residents to palliate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in the areas of care, support, childhood, and education.

To this end, the text is structured as follows: first, a brief analysis is presented of the relationship between neighborhood and confinement and how this is an important actor of community resistance and creativity; second, methodological notes are presented on how to do research in times of quarantine based on autobiographical imagination; and finally, the XSMV experience is described and analyzed as an example of a citizen solidarity network in response to the needs arising from the quarantine.

## **Quarantine and Neighborhood: The Consolidation of the Neighborhood as a Place and Actor of Resistance and Community Creativity**

Quarantine is the use of space to separate one thing from another for the purpose of preventing infection or interaction—for instance, travelers exposed to diseases can be quarantined. The assumption behind quarantine is that there is a zone of purity that can be isolated from a zone of danger. Those quarantined are all equally under suspicion, although they may not have been infected. Therefore, quarantine is a spatialization of the risk.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic does not force the isolation of a potentially infected group from the rest of society, but rather forces the isolation and confinement of everyone. Each and every one of us is both a suspected carrier of the virus and a potential victim. Each and every one of us is a risk, a threat, and, at the same time, a hope. That is why the measures taken do not involve “confinement” in a particular area of the city, but rather confinement at home; and each and every one of us must isolate and entrench ourselves in our homes. In this sense, the COVID-19 places us in a very paradoxical situation: social distancing becomes the most extreme form of social cohesion.

In this context, where physical contact and face-to-face social interactions are severely restricted, bonds and ties are woven mainly through virtual means and, we must not forget, the neighborhood—those neighbors that you see through the window and in whom you find basic forms of social interaction and mutual support, despite having to interact from a distance.

In Spain, as it was already seen during the 2008 crisis, the neighborhood and its associative fabric become a space and an agent of resistance and community creativity against the vulnerability

that this pandemic unveils and exacerbates. In the European and Spanish context, the neighborhood is particularly presented as a privileged space for strengthening social capital and community building (Blokland, 2017); a space for developing new forms of solidarity, integration, and social cohesion (Kennett & Forrest, 2006); and, finally, a space for developing citizen creativity (Pradel et al., 2020), as will be illustrated in the following sections.

## **Autobiographical Imagination: A Method for Doing Research in Times of Quarantine**

Considering the state of emergency's social context and the confinement that we are experiencing, the method used to develop this paper is essentially autobiographical imagination. More specifically, we rely on the use of autobiographical material, based on personal narratives, to generate academic discourses on social change (Feixa, 2018, p. 15).

As Feixa (2018) explains, autobiographical imagination is the capacity to cooperate in the construction of the comprehension a time and a space through the autobiographical narrative. It refers to sociological imagination (Mills, 1977) and dialogical imagination (Bakhtin, 1994).

On the one hand, Mills (1977) argued for the need to reinforce the triad biography–history–society in order to better understand the social structure present in each individual story, and using intellectual craftsmanship; on the other hand, Bakhtin (1994), showed that the understanding of space and time depends on the interaction between the subject's own memory and the social environment. In short, with the autobiographical narrative method, we become at the same time analysts and actors of the historical moment in which we live.

Consistent with this methodological approach and with the extraordinary circumstances mentioned earlier, the techniques of data collection are: self-ethnography based on observation, documentary review, and social activism. The main dimensions of analysis are: (a) origin, objectives and targets, (b) driving groups and/or leaders, (c) dynamics of operation, (d) forms of organization, (e) scale, and (f) contributions and impacts.

## **XSMV: An Example of a Self-Managed Citizens' Network Facing the Covid-19 Pandemic and Confinement from the Standpoint of Neighborhood Solidarity and Mutual Support<sup>3</sup>**

This situation of crisis and social chaos generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has meant a very rapid neighborhood reaction through mutual support networks and citizen solidarity practices in many cities, particularly in the case of Barcelona. In this section, we will focus on an initiative that has emerged, and of which we are part of in the Vallcarca neighbourhood,<sup>4</sup> a middle-class neighborhood, linked to the artistic life in the city and the squatter movement. Besides, it has a strong degree of citizen mobilization, which is focused on the resistance to the gentrification processes and property speculation and claiming the right to the city.

### *Origin, Objectives and Targets*

The social organizations of Vallcarca were among the first in the city to act to tackle the confinement. The day before the emergency state was declared across the country, they called a neighborhood meeting (see Figure 1) in order to create a specific network of mutual support to identify the needs of older people in the neighborhood who live alone or in vulnerable groups and to manage and coordinate a response to those needs and create communication channels (see Figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Meeting to organize XSMV



**Figure 2.** XSMV advertising poster

### *Promoting Actors and Leaders*

The convening entities and leaders of this initiative are the Committee for the Defense of Liberties and the Referendum, Heura Negra, Vallcarca Housing Union, Vallcarca Som Barri Neighborhood Association, and the Youth Assembly. These actors, who are very active and integrated into the social fabric of this neighborhood, have managed to mobilize more than a hundred residents.

## *Dynamics of Operation*

This mutual support network is based on three pillars: building a pool of volunteers, identifying people who need help, and specifying what kind of help is needed. To do this, people who want to be part of this network must contact the promoting group and fill in a form (see Figure 3) where they identify themselves and state whether they are volunteers or recipients of aid. In the case of volunteers, this register asks personal information such as age, availability, address, and the type of support they want to offer, such as buying food or medicine, attending to the needs of an elderly person or supporting the care of children. Citizens requesting assistance are asked the address and the type of help they need.

Once this information is collected, the network connects people who need help with volunteers. At the same time, the network strengthens the sense of community based on trust, mutual support, and solidarity. As the spokesperson for this network states, “It is important to let everyone know that they are not alone, that they can count on the support and help of the neighborhood” (Field notes, March 2020). Along the same lines, the Vallcarca Som Barri Neighborhood Association points out that “The main idea is to cover the concerns that may arise during the confinement. Because, despite having to be isolated from each other, we want to continue to be a community, now more than ever” (Field notes, March 2020).

## *Forms of Organization and Scale*

The main way to organize ourselves is virtual, through the use of social networks as well as through micro-groups organized by the flat’s homeowners’ associations (see Figure 4).

To operate effectively, this network is articulated in commissions that provide help, give advice, listen to complaints, and offer company. Specifically, we have organized ourselves in the commission of communication, work, care for vulnerable people, child care, legal support, and housing support. Any request for support is redirected to the relevant committee. In particular, our contribution is focused on early childhood care. We create educational content, exchange educational resources with families to play with children at home, and generate communication channels between them.

## *Contributions and Impacts*

The main contributions or impacts that this network has had so far have received a strong positive response from all the people involved in it, both from those who offer help and from those who receive it. We all agree that feeling accompanied makes this difficult situation of uncertainty more bearable. We can see that, among neighbors, we not only share information or resources but also give and receive emotional support by commenting on how the day has been, sharing concerns, and using humor as a resistance strategy (see Figure 5).

Likewise, the calls are perceived as a longed-for entrance of fresh air to the dynamics of each house. A colleague from another committee tells us that one of the elderly people she is helping out thanks her enthusiastically for bringing groceries home. By doing that, she doesn’t need to go to the shops by herself, which reduces the risk of contagion that, at her advanced age, could be fatal.

## **Final Reflections**

This article presents an example of neighborhood solidarity as a response of the citizens’ needs, especially the most vulnerable ones, at a time of unprecedented health, socio-economic, and political crisis in our environment.



**DAVANT LA CRISI DEL CORONAVIRUS:  
AJUEM-NOS ENTRE LES VEÏNES DE FORMA SEGURA**

Hola veïnes i veïns!

Soc \_\_\_\_\_ del pis / adreça \_\_\_\_\_. El meu telèfon és el \_\_\_\_\_.

Davant de les mesures del govern per fer front a coronavirus, us proposem a totes les veïnes i veïns de l'edifici / tram del carrer, d'organitzar-nos per ajudar-nos entre totes.

Us proposem crear un grup de Whatsapp per estar totes connectades i poder saber qui té necessitat de suport i qui pot ajudar.


Ompliu aquesta graella per afegir-vos al grup:

NOM	PIS / NÚMERO CARRER	TELÈFON

La proposta és parlar entre totes per ajudar-nos aquests dies i setmanes que venen en què han anunciat que tanquen escoles, feines, centres de gent gran, etc. Volem trobar-nos per saber quina gent de l'edifici pot necessitar ajuda, qui té disponibilitat per ajudar, etc.

Per tal de relacionar-nos, hem de prendre totes les mesures preventives per no escampar el virus, però alhora hem de trobar maneres de fer veïnatge i ajudar-nos entre totes.

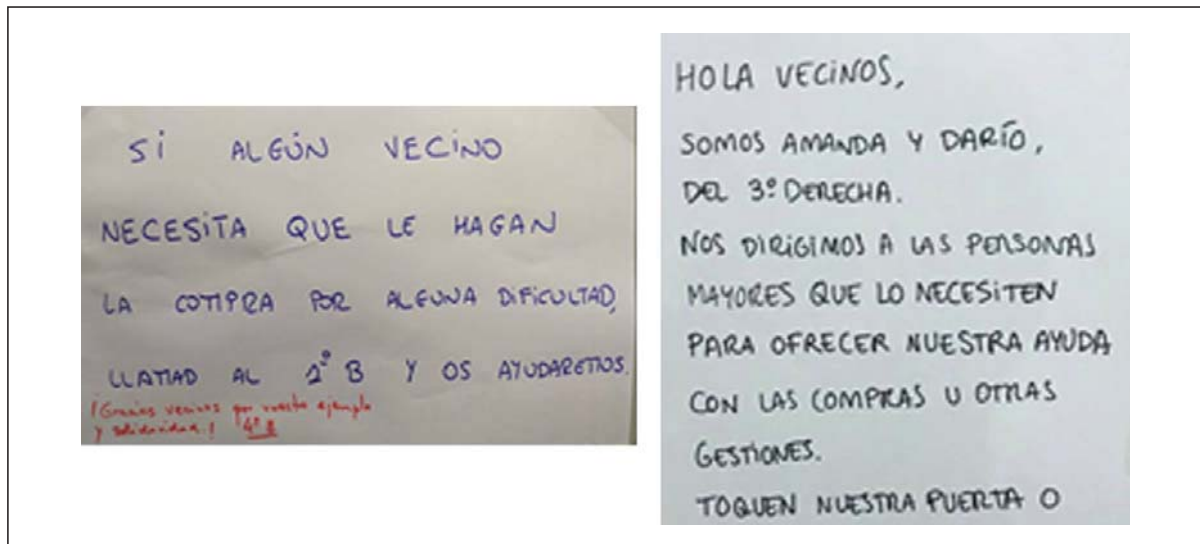
**Et pots mantenir informada a:**  
 Telegram: [te.me/suportgracia](https://t.me/suportgracia)  
 Twitter: [twitter.com/suportgracia](https://twitter.com/suportgracia)  
**Ateneu La Barraqueta** (Carrer Tordera 28)  
 932 131 056



**XARXA DE SUPORT  
MUTU DE GRÀCIA**

**Figure 3.** Form registration to the XSMV

The actors who have guided this initiative propose an innovative social approach to the problems of social vulnerability of citizens in a situation of extreme and unprecedented gravity. The main innovation of such approach is to reinforce mutual support and community-based



**Figure 4.** Micro-groups organized by neighborhood stair communities



**Figure 5.** Empirical evidences of informational and emotional support exchanged in the XSMV

solidarity, despite the limitations of social (physical) interaction that total a confinement implies. This network emerged and organized itself spontaneously, but its existence could not be explained without considering a well-established associative movement in the neighborhood.

A central element of this initiative is to place citizens at the center of the development of political responses to the challenges posed by this pandemic. In practice, this means that all citizens affected by the risk of being infected and, by the obligations of social alienation, participate in the construction of solutions and alternatives. Even the most vulnerable people, who are priority targets of this neighborhood solidarity network, also offer their help to the rest of the neighbors, especially by providing company and support. Therefore, the XSMV is not an example of a welfare experience, but quite the opposite: it is a network of neighborhood solidarity that empowers citizens to participate to the extent, scope, and manner in which they can, and, at the same time, receive help from their neighbors. Thus, the main values guiding this experience are solidarity, redistribution, and voluntary reciprocity. This generates responses that are less dependent on public administrations or markets; responses delivered quickly, close to the neighborhood reality, and centered on the particular needs of its residents.

A second key aspect is that at the same time that a need is met (e.g., buying food), social relations and social capital are strengthened, which has a clear territorial basis in the neighborhood and the district. In this way, emphasis is placed on community action as a method of reducing social vulnerabilities (health, economic, social, and relations) that exacerbate a total confinement.

A third relevant aspect of this initiative is the transversality from which it offers the aid needed during this complex crisis.

In terms of impact, this experience presents new guidelines for sociability, organization, and operation, with a fundamental emphasis on support and care in a context of confusion and uncertainty.

This urban actor operating from the neighborhood is strengthening a local welfare system, which is extremely necessary in view of the current collapse and previous deterioration of welfare systems at regional and national levels.

In short, during the 2008 crisis and the period of austerity from 2012 onwards, we can see how the creativity of the neighborhoods and citizens was a relevant motor and multiplier for social change and this initiative provides empirical evidence that they continue to be so in a context of pandemics and global confinement.

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## Notes

1. <https://gisanddata.maps.arcgis.com/apps/opsdashboard/index.html#/bda7594740fd40299423467b48e9ecf6> [AQ: 3]
2. Similar experiences have emerged in multiple neighborhoods in the city. See <https://www.catnova.cat/redes-de-apoyo-en-los-barrios-de-barcelona-en-los-diferentes-barrios-de-barcelona-existen-grupos-de-contacto-e-iniciativas-de-colaboracion-para-los-vecinos-afectados-por-el-aislamiento-que-debemos-resp/>
3. <https://suportmutuvallcarca.noblogs.org/>; <https://twitter.com/avallcarca/status/1238796227602497536>
4. For extra-information, consult <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/gracia/es/el-distrito-y-sus-barrios/vallcarca-i-els-penitents>

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