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Murky moralities: performing markets in a charitable food aid organization

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how competing moralities are brought together in the performance of a market for charitable food aid. Markets, rather than functioning as neutral technologies for bringing together supply and demand, are thoroughly moral phenomena. In markets, calculative devices are crucial for realizing exchange, by facilitating mutual agreement on price and quality. However, such practices of calculation can violate moralities of charity. This paper examines what happens when market practices and moralities are introduced in charitable settings. This is done through an in-depth case study of a food aid organization in the Netherlands that is organized as a supermarket, and part of a broader trend in re-organizing the provision of emergency food aid through the introduction of practices and technologies that shape a market. The case study shows how the socio-technical arrangements which organize market exchange, such as price labels and budget cards, are entangled with neoliberal moralities encouraging financial responsibility. At the same time, the findings show that moralities associated with charity are also present, which can lead to contestations over 'good' market performances. Such shifting moral judgements require participants to navigate conflicting moralities to be recognized as deserving recipients of aid.

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Introduction

Then we asked ourselves: 'what do you actually need as a client [food aid receiver]? You have to make sure you are in control, that you make decisions on your own, that you don't become dependent of what other people wish for you, but that you in a way put together your own needs with your head held high.' So, then we started with the supermarket principle and also with budgets in favour of the price consciousness of the people and to prevent them from, when they leave this place after on average seven months, being scared to death when they see the actual prices in regular shops. [Interview, 27 November 2019]

These are the words of the founder of a social grocery in the Netherlands that provides food aid in a supermarket setting. The quote introduces judgements about good and bad ways of doing food aid, and two foundational notions for the inquiry that we present in this paper. First, the rationale for organizing food aid through a supermarket reveals an economic understanding and enactment of food aid. In other words, it is a clear example of a process of economization (Çalışkan and Callon 2010). Second, the quote highlights that economization can be expressed through multiple

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modalities, including a market but also charitable giving. Both modalities are intertwined in this particular social grocery. While markets are a common form associated with economization, in this setting a market is intermingled with charitable giving and assuming a neat demarcation obscures an analysis of this fuzzy empirical reality.

Based on those two notions, we can introduce the central aim of this paper, which is to explore how multiple moralities are embedded in different economic modalities and combined in this particular food aid setting. We use the term moralities to refer to normative ideas about good or bad ways of organizing services, as well as the kinds of interactions and practices that perform such notions of 'good' or 'bad' (Miller 2002), i.e. more generally defined as codes of conduct put forward by society, groups, or individuals through which behaviour is judged (e.g. Sprigge 1964, Gibbard 1990). Like Jackson *et al.* in their discussion of moral economies, we find that 'economic activities of all kinds are influenced and structured by moral dispositions and norms' (2009, p. 13). When a market is intermingled with charitable giving, as in our case, this involves not just the combination of economic activities, but also of related moralities.

Two observations underscore the relevance of an analysis of intermingling of economic practices and related moralities. First, the organization described in this research is part of a broader trend of food aid organizations in Europe integrating market practices in their approach to food aid (Holweg and Lienbacher 2010, Hebinck *et al.* 2018, Saxena and Tornaghi 2018, Andriessen *et al.* 2020). This trend reflects a broader belief in the virtues of markets; evidenced in their capacity to satisfy individual needs and desires, efficiently allocate resources, and create social harmony (Fourcade and Healy 2007). These virtues are used to justify the marketization of a wide variety of public services, and now seem to have reached charitable food aid. This trend makes it vital to understand how charitable moralities and transactions exist alongside and within market moralities and transactions within food aid through a shop setting.

Second, navigating different and conflicting moralities to access food aid can be challenging for recipients, and an inability to meet such conflicting social norms can harm people's dignity (Killmister 2017). Moralities associated with utility maximization, financial responsibility, and thrift commonly shape markets, like the founder explains: the social grocery is a setting for practicing self-discipline by being 'in control' and 'price conscious' as part of performing dignified food aid transactions. Markets are simultaneously believed to reinforce these and other moralities in their participants, by, for example, encouraging 'virtues of honest behavior, civility, and cooperation' (Fourcade and Healy 2007, p. 287). Charity, in turn, is shaped by moralities that include the duty to give unconditionally, receive with satisfaction (e.g. not being picky), as well as to practice solidarity with others in need. Several studies have shown that foodbank users' expressions of gratitude and satisfaction are used to judge their level of neediness and deservingness (Van der Horst *et al.* 2014, Garthwaite 2017, Salonen *et al.* 2018, Beck and Gwilym 2020). This case study shows how such charitable codes of conduct remain but have become intermingled with ideas about appropriate consumer behaviour, whereby judgements of behaviour as too greedy, not thrifty, or too thrifty relate to an understanding of undeserving. In the Netherlands and elsewhere, a neoliberal understanding of markets has become dominant (Mirowski 2009, Callon 2016). Adopting a Foucauldian lens on neoliberalism, we can see how this market incentivizes the performance of self-interested, utility maximizing, economic subjectivities (Foucault 2008). How food aid recipients navigate these moral complexities needs better understanding.

Next to a practical need to better understand the implications of changing practices of food aid for recipients, the social grocery provides a unique setting to explore the role of moralities in performing markets. Rather than being guided by unambiguous guidelines that will achieve desired outcomes, spaces of economic exchange such as this food aid market are sites of construction, calculation, contestation, and failure. Offering food aid through a shop setting reveals dominant beliefs about what markets do – they solve problems (Fourcade and Healy 2007). In the case of social groceries, markets are believed to solve the problems of charity – 'being dependent on what others wish for you' – by restoring dignity to food aid receivers – 'holding your head high' – providing

consumer choice and the possibility to act as ‘responsible’ consumers (Andriessen *et al.* 2020). Despite such optimistic beliefs, such outcomes are not a given but dependent upon how people perform markets.

To unravel such outcomes, we build on a diverse body of work that approaches markets as performative entities (e.g. Callon 1998, MacKenzie 2006) in order to understand the ways in which economic practices at the social grocery are shaped by multiple moralities and ideas about markets. Within this perspective, markets are both moralized and moralizing and can take multiple forms, resulting in a diversity of possible marketization processes (Callon 1998, Fourcade and Healy 2007, Gibson-Graham 2008). The extent to which a market setting satisfies the needs and desires of food aid receivers, donors, and volunteers is highly dependent on the social and institutional context of that particular market. Social and institutional contexts at various levels (micro, meso, macro) shape all economic transactions (e.g. Wheeler 2019), including non-market transactions at food banks. And as Williams *et al.* (2016) observe, varying and sometimes contradictory moralities can occur at the same food bank at different times, depending on the particular mix of clients and volunteers.

The next section provides theoretical background on the performativity of markets, considering how varied moralities shape expectations of market and charitable practices. We then review existing research on food aid, which explores how moralities are used to judge the behaviour of clients and determine their deservingness. Thereafter, we introduce the specific context and outline the methods used to study this case of the marketization of emergency food. In the results section, we describe how calculative devices are used to organize market exchange at this food aid organization and show how a neoliberal morality of financial responsibility is communicated through these socio-technical arrangements. The following sections will address how the market is constantly contested through practices and moralities of charity, rendering ‘good’ market performances a fragile and tenuous achievement. Contestations and market ‘failures’ are expressed through disputes over price labels and personal budget use, and inconsistent regulations regarding personal spending limits and eligibility. This results in multiple and shifting meanings of deservingness, that vary according to the situation and actors involved. This moral maze exposes how hybrid markets can accommodate multiple moralities and helps us understand the complexity of market performances in a charitable setting. This case study will contribute to contextual understandings of market performativity and explore how economic performances falter when moralities clash. Our results point to the ways in which such conflicts can harm dignity. However, we do not claim that moral conflicts or ambiguities are always problematic in and of themselves. Such conflicts can generate ambivalence and challenge existing economic performances by making power inequalities visible, and may stimulate actors to voice discontent with the policies and moralities that organize the social grocery and everyday life for people with low incomes. Understanding these processes of marketization and the role different actors play in shaping the moral economy of social groceries, including the tensions and potentials for transformation, is vital for realizing a more dignified experience of food aid.

Theoretical background

Performing markets

Performativity has its origins in linguistic and feminist theory and is used to question the taken for granted ‘natural laws’ of culturally constructed categories. As an analytical method, performativity draws our attention to the ‘diverse mechanisms’ that construct markets, gender, the state, and so on, and helps us to ‘describe a set of processes that produce ontological effects’ (Butler 2010, p. 147). In 1998, Callon introduced the concept of *performativity* to the sociology of markets to argue that the economic models (designed by economics, e.g. accountants, supply chain managers, or consultants) which organize market exchange contribute to the construction of the reality that they describe.

Hereby, socio-technical arrangements¹ organize a market (e.g. price labels and surveillance of exchange processes) and direct market performances toward realizing particular outcomes and ideals. Within this idea of market performativity, Callon and Muniesa (2005) have emphasized the importance of arrangements that allow calculation. They describe concrete markets as ‘collective organized devices that calculate compromises on the value of goods’ (Callon and Muniesa 2005, p. 1230), defined by three elements: calculable goods, calculative agencies, and calculated exchanges. Their conceptualization of ‘calculation’ creates a continuum between quantitative calculation and qualitative judgement, and it is distributed between human actors and material devices. For calculation to be possible, goods must possess objectified properties which have a calculatable value for the buyer. To constitute the calculative value of goods, they need to be ‘disentangled’ from their social relations and become abstractions capable of being ranked. Prices afford this process (Çalışkan and Callon 2010).

Approaching markets as performative entities brings attention to both the particular systems and devices that enable calculation and *frame* market action, and the agency of market actors in *reframing* the rules and arrangements of market exchange. In relation to the first, economic sociologists have exemplified through case studies that market devices (e.g. physical setting, price labels, packages) are strategically deployed to shape the world of the market actor in specific ways (e.g. MacKenzie 2006, Muniesa Millo and Callon 2007). For instance, Garcia-Parpet (2007) illustrated with a case study of a strawberry auction how architecture, technology, and seating arrangements construct market agents’ capacity to calculate. Additionally, they show how these market devices construct the agents’ desire to perform as economically ‘rational’ market actors, demonstrating how market moralities are entangled with deployment of market devices. This confirms Callon’s initial argument (1998), that market devices become part of socio-technical arrangements that frame market action.

In Callon’s later work (e.g. 2010), in line with evolving scholarship in market performativity (e.g. MacKenzie 2006, Garcia-Parpet 2007, Cochoy 2008) the agency of market actors receives greater attention. Within processes of economization (Çalışkan and Callon 2009), market frames are always open to contestation as actors seek to reframe market boundaries, which Callon (2007) refers to as *overflows*. For instance, in Kirman’s (2001) research at the Marseilles fish market, he shows that the same species of fish are sold at different prices to loyal and disloyal customers. This shows how moral judgements about loyalty influence deservingness, even in a market setting. Questions about the fairness of prices can be linked to the modalities of market calculation (Muniesa 2003, Guyer 2009). Such nuances are essential to understanding market performativity, because they show that markets realize themselves and are not simply performed according to the rules and rationalities of their designers. This emphasizes the temporality of the stability of markets within a double process of framing and overflowing (Callon 2007). Related to this idea of *overflowing*, Butler (2010) focusses on ‘failed’ performances according to theoretical ideas of a market and rejects any presumption that we can understand what happens within markets by just looking in the direction that devices lead us. For Butler, ‘the risk of breakdown and disruption are constitutive to any and all performative operations’ (2010, p. 152). Drawing on Butler’s understanding of performativity, it is crucial to examine the deliberate misuse of given market frames, as well as performances that ‘fail,’ according to the dominant moralities in a specific case.

So, to understand how markets are performed, it is essential to look at how devices, such as price tags and exchange rates, afford actors to behave in particular ways, as well as the situations in which these performances are challenged and reframed. As prices play an essential role in market exchange, they are at the heart of such dynamics of framing and overflowing. Çalışkan and Callon (2010) point to price-setting as crucial to market performativity, as it provides insight into the diverse modes through which market exchange is organized and functions, as well as power asymmetries in the distribution of value. Studying prices as co-productive processes of valuation through which things and human identities are enacted means to grasp the local construction of qualification (Guyer 2004). Studying formulas for calculating prices also reveals their relationality, since ‘the

price of any particular transaction is always calculated on the basis of other prices' (Çalışkan and Callon 2010, p. 17). Price-setting provides an entry point into the complex ways in which markets are intervened and maintained (Çalışkan 2007).

Within the double process of framing and overflowing, understood through the construction of prices as market devices, moralities about what can be bought and sold and how market agents should behave are at stake (Sayer 2000, Wheeler 2019). As Miller (2002) argues, market frames provide a moral system for how exchange ought to be carried out. The actual exchange contains a highly entangled world in which various actors bring in different moralities. Sayer (2000) emphasizes that such norms and associated behaviour are always influenced by networks of power, relational, and dependent on particular constellations of economic actors. While economies invariably embody moralities regarding the responsibilities and rights of individuals and institutions with respect to others, he explicates that these moralities don't always resonate with understandings of justice and equality. Moral conceptions of good behaviour can represent little more than legitimations of entrenched power relations (Sayer 2000). Callon's observation that 'Political and moral reflection is at the heart of markets' (2016, p. 34) captures this tension. In line with this body of literature, we approach charitable food markets as spaces in which various moralities are enacted and are embedded in networks of power.

For the last 50 years, the dominant market ideal has been neoliberal (Mirowski 2009, Callon 2016). Such a market is understood as a space in which rational actors compete to maximize their use of scarce resources, where economic incentives encourage actors to practice neoliberal moralities, enacting entrepreneurial, self-responsible subjectivities (Rose 1993). In such a setting, characterized by increased choice and competition through price mechanisms, consumers are empowered to act financially responsible by exercising calculative agency. This free market ideal includes a self-regulating, socially disentangled exchange system that can efficiently allocate resources and rewards desirable behaviours. The socio-technical arrangements used to organize such a market (e.g. price labels and surveillance of exchange processes) help shape market performances of food aid receivers and volunteers towards realizing this market ideal.

Moral economies of food aid or 'beggars can't be choosers'

According to cultural economists, all economies and modalities of exchange are made up of moralities. As indicated above, we understand moralities as normative ideas about good or bad ways of doing exchange, as well as the kinds of interactions and practices that perform such notions of 'good' or 'bad' (Miller 2002). This encompasses rules, norms, codes of conduct, and judgements about 'good' and 'bad' behaviour. Charitable giving, for example, is invested with multiple moralities – an ethic of solidarity with others in need, and an expectation to show gratitude and take whatever is offered without being picky. Markets, too, combine numerous moralities, including, for example, thrift, utility maximization, civility and honesty, loyalty and trust, freedom and fairness. While such moralities are enacted through specific economic modalities, e.g. a market or charity, moralities are not bound to particular economic modalities. For example, neoliberal moralities, such as the virtue of competition, personal responsibility, and self-reliance (Amable 2011) are evident in both charitable and market settings.

These moralities are not necessarily coherent or unproblematic, nor are they exhaustive of every morality that might occur in a market or charity. This would be impossible, since moral sentiments and obligations in economic life are relational and created through relationships between people, institutions, and policies which are diverse and shifting (Carrier 2018, Wheeler 2019). As discussed in the literature on moral economies, moralities are enacted through economic practices and come to shape economic realities and experiences. This literature also reveals the emotional and moral stakes of successful, contested, and failed economic performances. Following Miller (2002) who urges researchers to attend to the normative and moral foundations of market norms, this paper

demonstrates the value of attending to moralities and emotions in studies of economic performativity.

Moralities common to food charity can interrupt market performances. Moreover, food sold at the social grocery could be perceived as ‘tainted’ by its charitable origins. This challenges processes of social disentanglement and abstraction and muddles codes of conduct. In the context of charitable giving at foodbanks, several studies have shown that a charitable gift comes with codes of conduct for the recipient, e.g. receivers are expected to express feelings of gratitude and satisfaction with the gift (Van der Horst *et al.* 2014, Garthwaite 2017). Garthwaite (2017) observed that discussions at foodbanks about which users are considered deserving or undeserving are often closely linked to the anticipation of gratitude and other expected behaviours. In their research on charitable food in Finland, Salonen *et al.* (2018) note that in everyday discussions at foodbanks criticism was directed at individuals who were considered to be choosy. In line with Van der Horst *et al.* (2014), their qualitative study shows that refusing certain food items, i.e. exercising choice regarding food, casts doubt on whether one is really in need and ‘might lead to receiving nothing’ (Salonen *et al.* 2018, p. 10). These findings echo the common belief that ‘beggars can’t be choosers,’ which is often used to justify the restricted food choice of food aid receivers in the performance and policing of deservingness.

Several scholars have examined the organizational practices and regulations at foodbanks, which institutionalize these moralities. Their studies point to the ways in which foodbanks reproduce neoliberal subjectivities among food insecure citizens (Goode 2006, Trudeau and Veronis 2009, Hackworth 2012). Williams *et al.* (2016) argue that the organizational practices at foodbanks rely on the discourse of charity and therefore maintain and reinforce neoliberal ideologies of welfare, by ‘elevating a modus operandi in keeping with dominant discourses of dependency, deservingness, and self-responsibility’ (2016, p. 2294). Such dominant discourses contain harmful stereotypes about foodbank users being unable to manage money, lazy, criminal, or unwilling to get an education (Waxman 1977, Becker 1997, Wells and Caraher 2014, Garthwaite 2016). Enacted through policies, institutional rules, and in everyday interactions, these discourses are part of the moral economies of the social grocery. In line with this understanding of the complex interrelatedness of local interactions with broader phenomena, Wheeler (2019) adopts a multilevel approach and analyzes how moralities are constituted in and through markets in relation to everyday interpersonal reflections, collective customs, and state regulations. This underlines that moralities happen at the intersection of neoliberal state welfare policies, regulations at the social grocery, and interpersonal interactions.

The remainder of the paper will explicate how various moralities of market exchange and charity are brought together in a Dutch social grocery, thereby complicating the practice of accessing and distributing food aid and demonstrating the importance of moralities and emotions in market performativity. Expectations that charitable gift receivers be grateful, satisfied, and not picky seem to contrast with dominant ideas about how to behave as market-agents, e.g. making rational choices as financially responsible, self-interested, utility maximizing consumers. As we will show, this moral ambiguity provides challenges to recipients who need food, but also wish to maintain their dignity in the process of acquiring food.

Methods

This paper is based on data drawn from ethnographic fieldwork conducted at a food aid organization in a Dutch city with a high share of residents living in poverty (CBS 2021).² Although the Netherlands is one of the wealthiest countries in Europe, 584,000 households (about 8% of the population) are considered low income.³ In 2005, when the organization was founded, they were among the first food aid organizations in the Netherlands to abandon the parcel-based system common to food banks and transition to a shop setting. The social grocery is funded by donations, stocked with donated food, and used exclusively by people with low incomes who receive a donated

monthly budget to shop there. In 2018, 985 households utilized their social grocery over the course of the year, with 346 beneficiaries in the month of December alone.

To understand how moralities are expressed through economic performances at the social grocery, especially through social norms related to market behaviours and charitable receiving, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted over two months in the winter of 2019. With the help of 160 volunteers, the food aid organization maintained a social grocery, a second-hand clothing store, and a second-hand furniture store. The opening hours of the stores were: Wednesdays from 1.30–4.30 pm, Thursdays and Fridays from 9:30–2:30 pm and 1.30–4:30 pm, and every last Saturday of the month from 9:30–12:30 pm. Because this case study is part of a larger project in which different logics of food aid are compared, this fieldwork focused primarily on the dynamics in the supermarket. This supermarket had a size of about 70 m² with an assortment of about 160 different products, consisting of canned and packed food, fresh produce, bread, frozen meat and fish, some dairy products, as well as care products like shampoo, diapers, and toothpaste.

Participant observation was conducted during opening hours of the social grocery, three separate morning sessions covering a course about non-violent communication for volunteers, a meeting with volunteers about organizational changes, a weekly meeting in which a committee discusses the memberships, and a new-year's gathering of volunteers. Field notes were taken to register the physical setting, behaviours—including facial expressions and physical interactions—and conversations. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with people performing this market to gain insight into the thoughts and feelings behind certain behaviours. Both clients and volunteers are included in the research population of this study. Interviews were guided by a topic list, with space for participants to relate their own stories and add topics. All the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. In total, 18 individuals were interviewed: 1 initiator, 13 clients and 4 volunteers (see Table 1 and 2). Most volunteers interviewed were current or previous clients of the social grocery. The interviewed clients represent a mixed sample of adults of different genders and ages, living in diverse household arrangements. Most of the participants had a Dutch or a Surinamese background. The characteristics of the interview sample of clients are not representative of the demographic differences found in the organization, which include more diverse ethnic backgrounds. This is partly because interviews were conducted in Dutch and English. Unfortunately, this excluded more recent migrants from Arabic or French speaking countries who did not feel comfortable speaking one of these languages.

Data were categorized and thematically coded in *Atlas.ti* to facilitate analysis. This maintained a double process of induction and deduction; (1) important issues in the field were coded and categorized, while interpreted and sometimes reorganized based on theoretical concepts, e.g. stigma, thrift, deservingness; (2) based on theoretical understandings, the researcher went back to the field to collect more specific data (Table 2).

Table 1. Overview of interview participants – clients.

Participant number	Gender	Age	Ethnic background	Household	Duration client card at the moment of the interview
1	Male	35	Dutch – Tunisian	Single	1 month
2	Female	31	Dutch	Single, two children	6 months
3	Male	65+	Dutch	Single	3 months
4	Female	65+	Dutch	Single, adult child	12 months
5	Male	40	Dutch	Wife, one child	4 months
6	Female	55	Surinamese	Husband, two children	12 months
7	Female	62	Dutch	Single,	3 months
8	Female	56	Surinamese	Single, adult child (part-time)	3 months
9	Female	32	Dutch	Partner, two children	4 months
10	Male	45	Dutch	Single	5 months
11	Female	35	Dutch	Single, one child	18 months
12	Female	30	Surinamese	Single, two children	10 months
13	Female	41	Dutch	Single	10 months

Table 2. Overview of interview participants – volunteers.

<i>Participant number</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Ethnic background</i>	<i>Function</i>	<i>Volunteer since</i>
1	Male	–	Dutch	Initiator – Manager	The start (15 years)
2	Female	41	Antillean	Furniture and white goods store	1 year
3	Female	66	Surinamese	Furniture and white goods store	0.5 year
4	Female	63	Dutch	Manager clothes store	7 year
5	Female	–	Russian	Manager grocery store	2.5 year

Results

Calculative devices to organize food aid

As stated by Callon and Muniesa (2005), devices that enable calculated exchange are necessary for performing markets. The extent to which people can perform calculative practices depends on the calculative devices they have at their disposal, such as shelves, brands, labels, and promotions that participate in processes of qualification and singularization of products (Callon and Muniesa 2005). Within this food aid organization, market exchange is organized through displaying products on shelves, price labels on products, advertisements of weekly promotions, and personal budgets with which goods can be purchased. The assigned prices here are comparable to those of generic brand products sold in regular supermarkets, regardless of which brand is displayed. Thus, tea from the premium brand *Clipper*, sold for 2.89 euro per box in regular supermarkets, receives the same price as generic brand tea from *Albert Heijn*, 1.09 euro. The generic brand price is applied to a variety of brands, which may change weekly. This shows how markets – the social grocery and other supermarkets – are unified by a mechanism of relational price setting, based on other prices (e.g. Çalişkan 2009, Çalişkan and Callon 2010).

Although these prices reflect the interconnection between this social grocery and the formal economy, it distinguishes itself as a secondary market because only charitable currency is used, in the form of a client card with a personal budget. The allocated monthly budget varies depending on family size, with 40 euro for a single household, +15 euro for every extra adult, +10 euro for every child. This budget is a charitable gift from the food aid organization to its clients. Euros cannot be used to purchase items that exceed the charitable budget, and the charitable currency cannot be exchanged for cash. When clients do not spend their full budget, the remainder disappears and cannot be saved for future purchases.

The ways in which these calculative devices, such as a restricted monthly budget and comparable price labels, are used to frame market exchange in the context of charitable food aid reveals moralities about desired performances of recipients. The following section identifies the value market actors assign to behaviors that demonstrate price consciousness and responsible spending, i.e. a morality of financial responsibility. This shows that market assemblages and calculative devices are not morally neutral, but function to help economic actors realize ‘good’ market performances, which often reflect dominant neoliberal moralities.

Moralities of financial responsibility

Shopping seems to be the primary way in which financial responsibility is understood and performed at this social grocery. According to both volunteers and clients, the comparable price labels stimulate price consciousness, while the limited budget demands responsible, optimal spending, thereby sharpening clients’ budget management skills and preparing them for a return to the ‘real world.’ As one volunteer described:

That they know that when they have 30 euro, they can’t spend 50 euro. [...] And that they don’t think halfway a month ‘I have no budget left’. No, then they had to purchase differently. [Volunteer, 6 November 2019]

In agreement with the potential value of these market devices for instilling ‘good’ budgeting and price consciousness, interpreted as financially responsible behaviour, one customer explained:

I understand the reasoning behind it; it makes you more conscious about prices, you are going to pay attention, like: within the budget you need to get your products. So, in that sense I think it is good for those who need to become more conscious about the prices. [Customer, 11 December 2019]

While this customer seems to agree on the virtue of price labels and a restricted budget, and sees how such devices could improve price consciousness and budgeting skills for some people, she does not see herself as someone who needs this training. Although the majority of clients interviewed recognized the reasoning behind comparable price labels, only two clients saw a need to become more price conscious themselves. Regardless of the need for such training, broad support for these mechanisms to raise price consciousness reveals an attachment to a morality of financial responsibility, and a broad belief that markets can ‘civilize’ those who lack such skills.

In addition to price labels and restricted budgets, a morality of financial responsibility is communicated with two commands that are printed on posters at the entrance of the social grocery: (1) Check your budget before you go shopping, to make sure you are aware how much you can spend, (2) Check your receipt directly after you have paid, because if you notice a mistake, this is the only day you can get a refund. Besides supporting conscious spending from a moral angle, according to volunteers, these commands are displayed to make the market exchange more efficient, e.g. preventing disagreements that could result from clients arriving at the cashier with more products than they can afford or feeling that they were overcharged.

This morality of financial responsibility is reinforced through stigmas about people seeking food assistance being unable to manage money. Such stigmas are embedded in a neoliberal discourse on poverty, in which financial difficulty is explained by poor personal decisions, to be solved through individual training (Chase and Walker 2013, Garthwaite 2014). They are used to justify the implementation of calculative devices:

there are also a lot of customers whereby you think, like ‘are you still here? Are you still not able to deal with money?’ Cause that’s the design, that you try to ... or the boss does want to teach them how to deal with money. [Volunteer, 20 December 2019]

then you think, those people, how did you create those debts? If they don’t live economically, they can’t save money. [Volunteer, 28 December 2019]

These quotes show that at the social grocery there is a thin line between implementing calculative devices to enable food insecure people to perform as market actors, i.e. supporting their calculative agency regardless of their level of calculative skills, and a didactic aim to ‘teach’ recipients ‘how to deal with money.’ In line with Sayer’s (2000) discussion about moral and political economy, this reflects dynamics of power in which moralities of this market are embedded.

Stigmas about people seeking food assistance being financially irresponsible overlook the complex and creative calculations that are necessary for surviving on a very low income that numerous customers described. As one customer reflected:

Yes, like this morning, I took the coffee pods ... then I saw these are 3,59 euro for 36 pieces and that’s just from the basic brand of [regular supermarket], and I already looked in the special deals folder to see which deals I can get in the regular supermarket and then I think about the best options; is it possible to take another product here [at the social grocery] which enables me to buy coffee in the regular store, which is much cheaper at that moment ... and in that way I am considering my purchases ... Similar with the chocolate milk, which is one plus one for free in the [regular] store, then I know ‘alright, in the [regular] store it’s cheaper and here I can buy this [another product] cheaper, so in that way I adapt my purchases a bit, it changes a bit.’ [Customer, 3 January 2020]

In managing their budget, clients consider (1) their entire household budget – they add the charitable currency to the euros they would spend in a regular supermarket when they decide what to purchase; (2) they have to shop within the budget set for them by the social grocery. So, although the charitable currency they exchange at the social grocery cannot be used in the formal economy, including prices at regular supermarkets in their calculations does favour ‘optimal’ spending of the charitable budget at the social grocery. Being choosy shoppers at the social grocery allows clients to

save real money when they shop at regular supermarkets. These complex calculations highlight how processes of valuation in various places and times are related to each other and how different markets are interconnected (Çalışkan 2009, Çalışkan and Callon 2010). It also shows the capability of clients to make complex calculations that optimize their budget and runs counter to stigmas about people in poverty.

While this section has shown how a morality of financial responsibility is woven into market frames, which are reinforced by stigmas about people seeking food assistance at this social grocery, the following section will demonstrate how such frames are challenged and contested by customers who condemn the prices.

'Unfair prices' – moralities of giving

Many customers, even those who understood the reasoning behind the comparable price labels, showed displeasure about high prices at the social grocery. These customers contest the calculative value of goods on offer, and in doing so make a moral argument for lower prices that respects the narrow financial situation of customers and the donated origin of the products. All the products at the social grocery are donated by supermarkets or purchased with money donated by churches and companies. This donated origin was the primary reason for customers to be critical:

I don't think it's fair, because the products are donated by supermarkets for free ... and some people, for example, have a budget of 35 euro or some represent a single household, they maybe have just 20 euro per month [...] With 20 euro, you want to get something for free here and [for instance] you need cleaner, in the regular shop that's 99 cents but when you visit this market you pay 2 euro. That's not fair, I think. When it's donated you must sell it for half of the price, not make it more expensive. Because those people who organize this market are afraid the shelves will be empty, which makes them increase the prices of the products in this store, with the reason that your budget is easily gone, and others can get these products. But that's not fair. I think it's not fair, because everything is for free. [Customer, 11 December 2019]

Whereas the previous section indicated that the organization uses price labels as socio-technical devices to 'teach' customers price consciousness, this client accurately argues that these price labels are also used to regulate distribution and prevent empty shelves. But this form of regulation, through the price labels, in combination with the donated origin of the products and the charitable aim of the organization, can create confused, offended feelings among customers. For customers, it feels as if the organization teases them by pretending that products are expensive – disrespecting the needs of people with low incomes, while the organization receives these products for 'free.' This upsets a morality of gift giving as an act that should be bestowed with kindness and generosity (e.g. Schrift 1997, Komter 2007). This corresponds with other studies that show that discussions about fairness of prices are affected by consumers' interpretation of a seller's pricing policy (Campbell 1999, Vaidyanathan and Aggarwal 2003).

The injustice this customer feels regarding the high prices is reasoned by both the donated origin of the products in this market as well as the constructed scarcity the organization uses to regulate the distribution of food. At regular supermarkets, customers cannot oversee all the processes behind price arrangements. Callon and Muniesa (2005) refer to this asymmetry as the calculative power of supply. However, at the social grocery the calculative power of supply is very visible. Customers know where the products come from, that they are donated, and therefore interpret the price as socially constructed by the organizers of the market. Additionally, some volunteers also expressed incomprehension about the prices, wondering what those people 'who determine the prices' were thinking.

These critiques of price labels were frequent and tell us something about norms of behaviour in this social grocery. It could be argued that feeling free to express dissatisfactions is a sign that these clients are less affected by moralities common to foodbanks, which prevent food aid recipients from refusing food, exercising choice, or voicing dissent (Van der Horst *et al.* 2014, Salonen *et al.* 2018). The fact that clients at this social grocery dare to be critical about the prices shows a belief in their

role as market agents. This role allows clients to express certain needs and make moral demands (for respect and fairness) in the market. Such market performances reject the dominant norms of food aid, where ‘beggars’ are not allowed to be ‘choosers.’ This shows that a market setting can relieve food aid receivers from some of the social and emotional burdens of charity (see also Andriessen *et al.* 2020).

Moral ambivalence and autonomy in personal spending

While the market seems to create an environment where clients are free to critique prices, thereby practicing moralities of thrift and fairness, the stability of this market performance in a charitable organization is precarious, contested, and prone to failure. Observations in the social grocery expose the difficulty volunteers and clients experience in sustaining this fragile market performance. Multiple moralities are present in the social grocery, and volunteers and customers negotiate all of these to assemble their own cultural repertoire (Johnston *et al.* 2011) of ‘good’ behaviour, switching back and forth between moralities of market exchange and charitable giving. The appropriate repertoire depends on the people involved, the business in the social grocery, the time of day, etc. When a volunteer is highly invested in moralities of charitable giving this leads to humiliating encounters, in which market moralities abruptly cease – and market performances are revealed as ‘make believe,’ making the unequal power relations of charitable giving unavoidable. This can be demonstrated by an example of an interaction in the store on 8 November 2019:

- Customer: ‘That olive oil is really expensive.’
 Volunteer: ‘Yes, olive oil just is an expensive product sir.’
 Customer: ‘But at the Lidl [regular supermarket] a bottle is much cheaper.’
 Volunteer: ‘But you buy this with fake money and at the Lidl you have to buy it with real money. That’s something you have to realize.’

Because the products are paid for with a charitable budget, this kind of confrontation leaves little room for arguments from the perspective of a consumer. Pointing to the charitable origin of the budget in this way also denies the client autonomy over their personal budget, making market exchange, and therefore market performance, unplayable. As another volunteer mentioned: ‘It is paid with monopoly money, they get it. It seems they forget that sometimes. They act like it is their own money.’ These moralities of charitable giving are also voiced by clients who sometimes correct themselves and judge each other’s bargain hunting behaviour.

It is quite expensive ... yes ... but, there are often special deals and actually you get it for free, which makes me think like ‘nah, you shouldn’t complain about this.’ [Customer, 18 December 2019]

Like just now, that woman pays so much attention to the prices, then I think like ‘come on, you already get it for free actually’ and then also she bargains everything and that makes me think ‘you should be happy that the client card exists.’ [Customer, 28 December 2019]

This indicates how moralities of gratefulness common to charitable giving can challenge the personal autonomy clients have over their budget, as well as the morality of thrift in markets. Recognition of this dissonance generates ambivalence, and shapes market performances in this organization. When we compare this with social groceries where clients pay with euros, the cash payment creates a stronger position for food aid receivers to claim their status as consumers and relieves them from the debt of charitable receiving (Andriessen *et al.* 2020). Nevertheless, as we will argue in the discussion of this paper, making clients pay for products is not the only way to make a social grocery work.

Moral judgements and flexibility of the rules

Shifting moralities alter the use and meaning of calculative devices at the social grocery and create unclarity about desired behaviour in the social grocery. This is a vital issue, because it effects how

volunteers interpret and enforce regulations according to moral judgements about appropriate behaviour. This further complicates the moral maze clients must navigate to access food aid. This is illustrated through the variable ways volunteers respond to the limitations of the personal budget. It was observed that most volunteers are flexible when it comes to enforcing the spending limit, permitting clients to overspend by a few euros. How a volunteer judges the behaviour and attitude of a client affects how strictly they enforce the rules. Flexibility with the spending limits is not extended to patrons who violate the unwritten rules of charitable receiving. Most of the volunteers expressed something similar to the following quotes:

Yes, yes, that's right [my flexibility differs per client]. Because for some clients I am more strict, because they did something once and then I won't forget that. For those clients I am not easy ... then I stick to the rules of the shop, because rules are rules. But when people behave normal and they think along, we can make it easy for them. [Volunteer, 28 December 2019]

You also do it [make allowances] for people who behave proper and seem honest. For those people who say '[I will take] this, and this, also this' ... I am not flexible and that isn't right of course, but yeah ... [Volunteer, 14 November 2019]

These quotes show that flexibility in regulating a customer's budget depends on how volunteers judge their behaviour. But how one is supposed to act is confusing in this setting. On the one hand, as explained above, the comparable price labels and limited personal budget are implemented with the idea to encourage acts that demonstrate financial responsibility. However, on the other hand, critical attitudes toward the price labels are rejected based on moralities of charity in which grateful, humble behaviour is valued. From the latter perspective, utility maximization can be negatively interpreted as 'greedy.' As one volunteer stated: 'You give a finger and they take your full hand. [...] I have trouble with such behaviour. You have to think about other families.' This morality of considering other people's needs counters the dominant neoliberal morality of individualism and competition. Additionally, it was observed that leniency toward the end of the budget is not practiced when the store is busy, presumably to prevent other customers from learning that the rules are applied in flexible and inconsistent ways. In other words, to maintain a certain stability for these always contested market performance.

The contested price labels, ambivalence about personal spending, and ambiguity about spending limits all show how moralities of charity can challenge market frames. As argued by Callon (2007), market frames are always open to contestation. Performances that challenge market frames at the social grocery are not dissimilar to the performances Kirman (2001) observed at the Marseille fish market, where implicit contracts with loyal and disloyal customers were part of individual price setting. Informal regulations at the social grocery are therefore essential to understanding the performance of this market in a charitable setting. However, the stakes of such informal regulations are much higher because the customers in the social grocery are people with low incomes who depend on this organization to put food on the table. These high stakes in combination with the confusing moralities and the power of volunteers to regulate the distribution of food can create real and perceived injustice.

Deservingness in the social grocery

The difficulties that these various, partly conflicting moralities create for customers who depend on the social grocery to access adequate food can be further understood through ideas of deservingness in the context of food aid. At parcel-based foodbanks, expressions of gratitude and satisfaction with the charitable gift are part of how food aid receivers are expected to behave while showing that they are deserving of aid (Van der Horst *et al.* 2014, Garthwaite 2017). Previous research on foodbanks has shown that selective clients are sometimes judged by volunteers as undeserving and not really in need of assistance (Van der Horst *et al.* 2014, Salonen *et al.* 2018). However, as shown in the previous sections, desired market performances of financial responsibility can challenge informal codes

of conduct that govern food aid, and the other way around. This section explores how these contested performances complicate the meaning of deservingness in the social grocery.

To appear deserving and realize the cultural repertoire of ‘good’ social grocery behaviours, food aid receivers negotiate multiple at times conflicting moralities. On the one hand, they must conform to appropriate modes of conduct in a charitable setting – expressing gratefulness and satisfaction. On the other hand, they also act as rational market actors by engaging in budget and utility maximizing behaviours, conforming to moralities of thrift and financial responsibility. The repertoire of behaviours that are considered appropriate or deserving are situational, personal, and context dependent. Depending on these contextual factors, calculative performances can elicit very conflicting moral judgements. For instance, optimal budget spending is both promoted as a sign of being ‘in need of food aid’ while also disapproved of as a ‘greedy’ and selfish response to the charitable gift. An illustrative example of this:

- Volunteer: ‘You have 11,34 euro left. Do you need anything else?’
 Customer: ‘No, I don’t really need anything else. That would be stock for me, while others maybe need it right now. I think it’s antisocial to get more when I don’t need it.’
 Volunteer: ‘I get your thought, but I would still advise you to fully spend your budget, otherwise it could be interpreted as a sign that you don’t need this food assistance.’

This interaction at the cash desk shows how, for the volunteer, fully spending the budget is an indicator of a client who is truly in need, and therefore deserving of food aid. At the same time, the customer interprets taking more products than she urgently needs as inappropriate in the context of food aid, argued by ‘others maybe need it right now.’ The latter reflects the moral obligation of being satisfied with a charitable gift, and exposes moralities of charity, including sympathy and solidarity with others in need, from which utility maximization is judged as ‘greedy.’ In other situations, for example clients’ displeasure in high price labels, it was the other way around – volunteers were critical of budget optimizing behaviours, while customers sought utility maximization through fully spending their budget and being critical of prices. This shows how multiple moralities at the social grocery result in shifting meanings of deservingness.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to explicate how moralities of markets and charity become entangled in the performances of a social grocery, and how and where such moralities come into conflict. This case study has shown how diverse economic modalities and related moralities are combined in a market for food aid and result in a moral maze for food aid recipients. While framed as a market, the way this market is performed demonstrates how this framing is constantly challenged through moralities and practices of charitable giving. The social grocery is a hybrid space in which economic modalities of charity and market exchange coexist and challenge each other. The case underlines the notion that regimes of exchange are not mutually exclusive and become entangled in practice. Taking this one step further, we could argue that the hybridity of organizing charitable food aid as a supermarket could be seen as a new modality of economization (Çalışkan and Callon 2009), whereby food aid is commodified – in the form of a budget – instead of being understood as a basic right or entitlement.

The hybrid performance of food aid and the moral ambivalence we outlined is not without consequences for those who are expected to partake in the performance of a market in a charitable setting. This is especially challenging for clients, who depend on the social grocery for food aid. Based on this case study, two threats for the dignity of food aid recipients can be identified. First, we observe that market practices in the context of food aid can reinforce stigmas about people in poverty. Ethnographic examples have shown how neoliberal moralities of personal responsibility in the context of food aid easily turn into statements about people seeking food assistance being unable to manage money. This was reflected in how market agents understood the use and purpose of the

socio-technical arrangements, such as comparable price labels and limited budgets. These examples emphasize the thin line between implementing calculative devices to enable food insecure people to perform as market actors, i.e. supporting their calculative agency regardless of their level of calculative skills, and a didactic aim to ‘teach’ recipients ‘how to deal with money.’ Such stigmas, resulting in didactic aims, jeopardize the dignity of food aid receivers, underestimating their ability to take care of themselves.

Secondly, while inconsistent and failed performances are essential to understanding market performativity (Kirman 2001, Callon 2007, Butler 2010), the paper highlights how such contested market performances reinforce a moral maze in a context where moral judgements are key to respectful social interactions. The repertoire of behaviours that are considered appropriate or deserving in the social grocery are highly situational, depending on the persons involved, business in the store, historical interactions, etc. Whereas in one interaction optimal budget spending is understood as appropriate behaviour for a financially responsible market actor and promoted as a sign of being ‘in need of food aid,’ in another interaction the same behaviour is disapproved of as a ‘greedy’ or ‘ungrateful’ response to the charitable gift. These shifting meanings of deservingness contribute to an environment in which it becomes very difficult for food aid receivers to adequately meet the social norms of charity or the market, possibly harming their dignity (Killmister 2017).

These insights challenge a notion that shifting from foodbanks to social groceries necessarily results in more dignified experiences. Although several case studies have shown that a ‘Social Supermarket Model’ can protect the dignity of food aid receivers by enabling them to meet the standards of a consumer society (Holweg and Lienbacher 2010, Hebinck *et al.* 2018, Saxena and Tornaghi 2018, Andriessen *et al.* 2020), through this case study, we bring attention to the diverse and context specific ways in which such models are performed. There is a risk in viewing markets as solutions to the logistical, political, social, and emotional challenges of delivering food aid. Yet, these kinds of assumptions seem to underlie the current trend in the marketization of food aid. There is thus an urgent need to unpack the ‘black box’ of the market in the marketization of food aid, including power dynamics across multiple scales (Sayer 2000, Wheeler 2019). Following Callon (1998), this case study has demonstrated that markets do not make people (dignified, deserving, or financially responsible), but people make markets. People themselves realize a market; perform as economic agents calculating compromises on the value of goods (Callon and Muniesa 2005) and these same people bring in moralities about how exchange ought to be carried out (Miller 2002).

While our findings challenge the assumed positive effects of markets that seem to underlie the marketization trend in food aid, we do not claim that markets are always a problem. Approaching markets as performative entities means that a diversity of marketization processes is possible (Callon 1998, Fourcade and Healy 2007, Gibson-Graham 2008). The extent to which a market setting satisfies the needs and desires of food aid receivers, as well as donors and volunteers, and encourages respectful social interactions is highly dependent on the social and institutional context of that particular market. Further research should indicate how food assistance can be organized in ways that allow people to express and respect their values when receiving food aid, in market or alternative settings.

In this paper, we have argued that moral ambiguity can be disruptive of market performances and violate the dignity of food aid receivers. However, moral ambiguity is not a problem in and of itself. If anything, it reveals that economic realities (including markets and charity) can and do change. In the context of charitable food aid, ambivalence could be a starting point for critiquing and transforming economic practices and policies that threaten the dignity of people in poverty. Following Van der Weele and Driessen (2019), we appreciate the role that ambivalence can play in processes of moral change. ‘One of the effects of (widespread) ambivalence is that it unsettles the self-evidence of the status quo. In this way, ambivalence can be generative of other possible ‘relations to the world, each other, and ourselves’ (2019, p. 2). The ambivalence that is generated at the intersection of murky moralities in the marketization of food aid could potentially contribute to unsettling neoliberal understandings of markets and support new modes of economization

(Çalışkan and Callon 2010) which privilege the needs, food preferences, and values of people who need food aid. Market exchange in the context of food aid potentially opens up space for food aid recipients to express their needs and desires (see also Andriessen et al. 2020) and shakes up unambiguous understandings of deservingness, possibly moving away from neoliberal framings excluding people living in poverty from normal practices in consumer society, such as product choice and selecting appropriate food. However, for such a change to be possible, moral ambivalence must be shared more widely – it cannot only be carried by recipients of food aid. At the micro-level, tapping into collective ambivalence could lead to the negotiation of more equitable economic performances that respect the dignity of people in poverty, and consciously and deliberately refuse the status quo of neoliberal moralities. At the macro-level, ambivalence must be shared by citizens and policy makers beyond the emergency food sector to realize changes in social policy and institutions that protect the right to food and make charity and charitable moralities obsolete.

Notes

1. Defined by Çalışkan and Callon (2009) as hybrid collectives in which action takes place, ‘including its reflexive dimension which produces meaning’ (p. 9). Socio-technocultural arrangements, or in French ‘agencements’, include ‘human beings (bodies) as well as material, technical and textual devices’ (p. 9).
2. The city is not named in order to protect the identity of the organization.
3. 1.060 euro per month for a single household and 2.000 euro per month for a couple with two underaged children.

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