



Community and place identity in change: a discursive approach to local participation

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Abstract

This study refers to participation and to relationships between individuals and environment. We investigated the perception of the quality of the life in the neighbourhood, the perception and evaluation of social ties and of participation by means of a semi-structured interviews on a sample of 29 active citizens. We ran a content analysis on the interviews and then a co-occurrences analysis to emphasize the relationships among the different topics investigated. Qualitative data shows both negative and positive features of the quality of life in the neighbourhood and they underline also some critical aspects involved in the process of participation. Further considerations are discussed.

Key words: bottom-up participation, place identity, content analysis

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This study refers to two important topics: one of which is based on relationship between individuals and environment and involves psychological concepts such as place attachment and place identity, the other refers to participation. When dealing with the relationship with the place we hold in consideration a discursive construction of place identity, in as much as it examines how the narrative positioning of someone who is *of* a place can connect a speaker to the multiple established meanings and identities of that place (Taylor, 2003). This approach also highlights the collective practices through which specific place identities are formed, reproduced and modified (Danziger, 1997; Dixon &

Durrheim, 2000).

As Manzo and Perkins (2006) report there is a vast amount of literature covering the relationship that persons have with places and, in particular with their place of abode. This study will not go into the theoretical details of this topic, but will only note, as reported by Manzo and Perkins (op. cit.), that such a relationship is a critical aspect of people's involvement in their local community. It is well known that participation is a resource for both individuals and the community alike (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990); it is broadly considered as a "good practice" of interventions that intend both to use and

increase the value of local resources and knowledge; in particular it allows for: a better quality of life perception (Berkovitz, 2000); an increase in the perception of being able to participate in decisional processes that directly involve citizens (Heller et al., 1984); a development of knowledge and skills, that is *empowerment*, on both an individual and social level (Wandersman & Florin, 2000); an improvement of the quality of social ties (Kieffer, 1984; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Foster-Fishman et al., 2007). However, little attention has been paid to the conflict this may trigger.

Presentation of the research

The present contribution proposes a reflection on the issue of bottom-up participation, to verify if it has reached the theorized aims (see below) and to evidence the psychosocial strategies that have been applied by individuals in an attempt to overcome the conflict and any sense of delusion and/or disempowerment that has arisen.

Instruments. To this aim, we conducted semi-structured interviews to investigate: participation and residential story; perception and evaluation of the present participation; evaluation of participation; perception of the quality of life in the neighbourhood. The interview took approximately 30 minutes.

At the end of the interviews subjects filled in the Place Attachment Scale (Italian version by Bonaiuto et al., 1999) to identify their level of place attachment and answered some sociodemographical questions. We ran a content analysis on the interviews and then a co- occurrences analysis to emphasize the relationships among the different topics investigated.

Subjects The present study involved 29 subjects engaged in initiatives undertaken in

their local area, such as residents' associations and/or committees that aim at social and structural improvement of the neighbourhood.

They are equally distributed according to gender (M = 14; F = 15); and length of participation (13 "short-lasting" participants - less than 7 years -; 16 "long-lasting" participants - more than 7 years) and they show high levels of place attachment (scale ranking 1-7; average = 5.28; sd = .91; min = 3.13; max = 6.38); age: average = 51.76 yrs; sd = 13.34, min = 25, max = 75).

Method: The thematic and the concomitances analysis. The thematic analysis method has the scope of providing a coherent way of organizing interviews material in relation to specific research questions (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell 1996).

The category construction on which the content analysis is based, is, at the same time, both a peculiarity and intrinsic limit of this technique. Indeed, the dividing of the text into categories may give rise to fragmentation of the communication content. Whilst, it may be important to highlight how the single components link one to the other and what kind of image results from this. Although thematic analysis may be the first step at a qualitative level, there is a risk that investigation remains at a descriptive level and shows only the topics and the sub-categories.

Therefore, in an effort to overcome this limit, we used a method of structural analysis that allows for the highlighting of both associations among categories and a significant configuration of what the study cohort cited the most. This association means a correlation between each of the categories with the others, in groups of two at a time. The statistically significant concomitances are considered for the analysis ($p = .10$) using the chi square test.

We specify that the chi square test is applied within each single cell i.e. for each association between the two categories and not on the table as a whole.

The Categories

The content analysis enables the study to extrapolate representations, perceptions and evaluations expressed by the study cohort. Table 1 reports the frequencies that indicate how many subjects used each category and not how often they were used for each subject. We chose the subject as the unit of measure because we are of the opinion that this evidences if each category is an expression of a shared thought, or an evaluation formulated by few persons and, therefore, not representative of a common thought.

A blind categorization was carried out by two independent researchers; any ambiguous classifications were discussed along with a third researcher who had not taken part in the first stage of the codification. If no unanimous agreement were reached as to the phrase, then the categorization was not done.

Herein we will not present all the categories used for the interview analysis, but rather only the topics in line with the aims of this communication (see table 1).

Individual empowerment

The meaning of empowerment has been well known since Rappaport's definition in 1981. In our categorization the individual empowerment is referred to a development of *knowledge* (as seen in table 1), of a personal competence achieved through activism (*awareness*) and to a feeling of being an active subject (*feeling active*) and protagonist within the context, reinforcing a positive self-image. We placed sentences in which subjects said that through participation they felt satisfied with what they have obtained and they felt more

“important” for the neighbourhood and for others into this category. It includes experiences that report having exerted control by participation in decision-making, or problem-solving in one's immediate environment, which, according to Zimmerman, (2000) is an important part of the empowering processes.

Another aspect of individual empowerment is placed into the category *active subject* when the subject referred to his/her own personal participation, describing him/herself as a proactive person and as a point of reference for the others. It doesn't refer to a consequence of the participation, but rather to a characteristic of the subject, that is why it differs from the category *feeling active*.

Social empowerment

This category refers to various aspects that involve the local community. By collective action individuals develop a common purpose and create new responses to meet the challenges they face (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). Also the research by Leavitt and Saegert in 1990, demonstrates that the relationship among individuals, groups and the physical communities in which they exist are significant elements of community empowerment. This category includes: *social relationships*, which are fundamental elements of participation; the concrete acquisition, through a social action, of goods and/or services that are useful for the community (*usefulness*) and the perception that a *co-participation* (by co-participation we mean the references to the importance of acting together as a whole to reach a common aim), constitutes a resource for the community. Cottrell (1983) describes a competent community by the extent to which interdependent components of a community work together to identify community needs, develop strategies to

address the needs and perform actions to meet those needs.

Critical aspects of participation

This constitutes a central category for the research. It is related to what subjects referred about what happened after their participation, both on an individual and/or an a societal level. *Negative outcomes* refers to any negative consequences that arose out of the participation. *Evaluation of others' participation* referred to any negative consideration related to participation enacted, or not enacted, by other people.

Comparison within and between neighbourhoods

As collective identities are typically fashioned through symbolic contrasts between “our” space and “their” space, place identity derives, not only from individuals' attachment to their environment, but also from their dis-identification with the spaces of others (Rose, 1996). As place identity is a social category, it activates comparison processes (see: similarity and differentiation). Therefore, for us this category included information as to whether subjects referred to other places they compared their present place of residence with, distinguishing the comparison between his/her neighbourhood with other areas of the city and/or with other areas of the same neighbourhood.

Temporal comparison

We think that the temporal comparison allows for a clarification of the change perception: differences between past and present indicate the presence of a change: is it positive or negative? What topics are involved in this comparison? Temporal comparison may be *general* i.e. it is merely a consideration that there is a difference between past and present without any specification; or the aspects mainly involved

by a temporal change are: *structures* (public places, shops, services); *inhabitants* (the kind of inhabitants in the area); *insecurity* (the feeling of insecurity in the neighbourhood).

Perception of the quality of life in the neighbourhood

As participation increases so does the quality of life perception (Berkovitz, 2000), we were interested in investigating what dimensions and structures are involved in the definition of the quality of life, both from a positive and negative point of view; these are: *environment*, *services*, *commerce* and *insecurity*.

Social ties

Social ties also contribute to the quality of life, but, as they are of particular interest, we distinguished this topic from the others linked to the quality of life.

Foster-Fishman et al (2007) specify “social ties refers to the type and extent of relational interactions that exist within a neighbourhood, such as the extent to which neighbours socialize with each other or exchange favours or resources (...). Social ties within a neighbourhood provide a critical mechanism for connecting residents to their neighbourhood and fostering the social networks needed to engage residents in change efforts and in collective action” (p. 94).

We distinguished relationships the subjects live directly with others (*relationships between the subject and others*) from general relationships (*relationships between inhabitants*).

The social tie category differs from the similar one we named *participation consequences: relational*, in as much as the former specifies the social ties present in the zone, the latter, refers specifically to social

ties developed thanks to participation.

Inhabitants' perception

We have also specified this category to verify whether there are stereotypes, or prejudices that may interest particular social categories and that may characterize the social ties.

Data analysis

To identify any association between categories and gender, place attachment and length of participation, we then analysed the

data by the Chi-square test. There were no statistically significant differences for place attachment (globally high for all participants), or as to the length of participation in the neighbourhood. Whilst, there were some statistically significant differences for gender. Females say more than males the participation favours a feeling of *being active* ($\chi^2 = 4.144$; sig. $< .05$) and women more than men made references to social ties ($\chi^2 = 6.807$; sig. $< .01$).

The content analysis

Table 1: QUALITATIVE DATA

Individual empowerment: Participation consequences

Knowledge	12
Awareness	18
Feeling active	16
Active subject	21

Social empowerment: Participation consequences

Relationships	22
Usefulness for others and for the community	7
Co-participation	13

Critical aspects of participation

Evaluations of others' participation	25 (12 neg., 4 pos. and 9 ambiguous)
Participation consequences: negative outcomes	13

Comparison within and between neighbourhoods

Comparison with other neighbourhoods	17
Comparison with other areas within the neighbourhood	8

Temporal comparison (yesterday vs. today)

Temporal comparison: general aspects	14
Temporal comparison: structures	14
Temporal comparison: inhabitants	18
Temporal comparison: insecurity	9

Perception of the quality of life in neighbourhood

Positive features: environment	11
Positive features: services	13
Positive features: commerce	7
Negative features: environment	8
Negative features: services	10
Negative features: insecurity	12

Social ties

Relationships between inhabitants	14
Relationships between the subject and others	21 (3 neg., 15 pos. and 3 ambiguous)

Inhabitants' perception

Negative features	8
Positive features	4
Incivility	12
Social category	17

We will present data that refers to the content analysis and some sentences as example of the content for each category, expressed by the subjects.

Social and individual empowerment is it a consequence of participation? Has participation improved social ties?

People said that they were more aware of their abilities, skills and social/ political processes related to participation (see: awareness: 18 subjects):

“Awareness...something in the planning has changed for the better; at first I ran after emergencies, now I try to foresee them, I try to make projects...I ask information”; “I learnt a lot of things ...and I got a lot of information...I learnt to speak to politicians who didn't give a damn...”;

participation developed a feeling of being active (16 subjects):

“I work with this association so I don't have the feeling that I'm doing nothing”; “Active participation makes me feel well, I get the feeling of keeping in touch with the territory”

and developed knowledge; 12 subjects refer to a practical understanding of the neighbourhood:

“I had the possibility to get to know places, persons, events and things I ignored before”; “The association allowed us not only to bring up our children properly, but

also to see a bit of the territory”.

Other consequences of participation concern relational aspects (22 subjects):

“Here now we are all a big family, we are all friends; I met a lot of people and introduced lots of others”; “When you are involved in the neighbourhood, that is with the people, you feel much more at home. I rarely go down the street without meeting someone I know or who knows me”.

7 subjects talked about something they considered useful, which they are able to obtain thanks to their participation, such as cleaner streets in the neighbourhood, or services that did not exist before (usefulness):

“This activity, of participation in civil life, is also motivated by the possibility of having a return: you see things are developing they change, it's not wasting time”; “Here there was a big problem, there was no centre for the elderly, there was nothing at all and it only took 4 or 5 of us to get a room for them”.

13 subjects refer to the importance of acting together as a whole to achieve their goals (co-participation):

“Acting together makes us stronger”; “Here, helping one another and the help that was given to us, to re-qualify the area, was of benefit to all of us”.

The evaluation of social ties

We have already seen that social relationships develop thanks to participation (22 subjects). Now we will consider the perception of social ties, not necessarily referred to participation, but what subjects think about the possibility to have good or bad social relationships with the other inhabitants.

The people interviewed expressed a global positive *perception of the relationship between the inhabitants* (14 subjects);

“We all know each other in the building”; “This area is like a big village; nobody is abandoned because this is a very united reality”.

We may, therefore, consider social ties to be a central aspect for all the participants, even if some critical aspects come to light. Among the 21 subjects referring to *social ties: subject/other*, 3 persons expressed negative features:

“Here, nowadays, in this court yard, if they see on the terrace they don’t even say hello”; “They have never really trusted me ...a lot of people think I work for the council”;

3 evaluated them both in positive and negative terms:

“I know almost everyone who lives in this building and it’s not that everything always turns out nicely”

and finally 15 expressed a positive evaluation:

“Nowadays, if I go out, I always come across someone who stops to chat to me”; “I speak to everyone, even the gypsies ..I meet them on the street and I say hello”.

Has participation improved the perception of quality of life in the neighbourhood?

The subjects report both positive and negative features as to their perception of

the quality of life in the neighbourhood. The *positive features* are: *services* (13):

“Now we even have an advisory bureau, so we’ve got more or less everything”; “We have all the public services, the bus, the market, the post office, a hospital nearby...we’ve got everything really. I’ll never go away from here”;

environment (11): *“It’s peaceful here...little traffic...open spaces...”; “The beauty of the garden. It’s the most beautiful thing ever”; commerce* (7):

“There are stacks of shops: the commercial places are more than adequate”; “There are a lot of artisans here”.

The *negative features* are: *services* (10):

“There is a shortage of health services and rehabilitation centres...for example if you need an injection, that kind of thing”; “I think we should have a registry office in the area ...if we need a document we have to go a long way to get it”; environment (8):

“The smog...it’s disgusting ...the quality of the air is really terrible”; “We should do something about the traffic it’s till very dangerous, also for cyclists”; insecurity (12):

“Sure, there’s a park but it’s horrible; bad people go there, even during the day, it makes you afraid to go there with children;” “We had a safety problem right under our own home, it had become a cove for pushers ...”.

The presence of services and a pleasant environment are the most important dimensions, while, among negative perceptions, the most critical features are the absence of public services and the feeling of not being safe in the environment.

Are there any critical aspects about participation?

12 subjects gave a negative evaluations on the participation of others, 9 considered both positive and negative aspects and only 4 expressed a positive evaluation.

A positive evaluation is one where the subject considers that people participate easily and that collaboration between inhabitants is possible:

“Here we’ve got some really important people that come and lend a hand they just come here and give us a bit of their time”; “I’m really pleased when I see that people participate...that evening we were in 800...because we managed to publicise it at the right time...”.

On the contrary 12 individuals perceived the participation of others in a negative way: because people tend to delegate others:

“I don’t see why I have to be by myself today;because it’s hard work to make other people become active:“Action isn’t spontaneous, you always need someone to guide things”; “Some just come to a couple of meetings and then disappear”;because of the inhabitants’ opportunistic attitudes:“What makes people come to the meetings is when there’s free grub and booze”.9 individuals emphasize both positive and negative aspects:“Although it’s an active neighbourhood as far as participation is concerned, there are still a lot of others who just do their own thing and simply don’t take part...”; “They are only a few because most people just live in their homes, they wall themselves in ...but there is a part of the population that wants to integrate and you only need to give them a chance to do so... a little opening...”.

13 individuals evaluated negatively participation itself. In their opinion, the experience of participation triggered feelings of disenchantment, bitterness, dissatisfaction, fatigue because the

commitment is not acknowledged either through the success they hoped for, or by others (co-actors, or inhabitants):

“It’s all too easy to go backwards and suddenly, all the efforts are lost, all the time... the hours passed, all the words spent, the whole thing , you risk in first person ...”; *“We work our arses off”.*

The thematic concomitances

An analysis of the thematic concomitances allowed us to further investigate into the reflections in such a way as to identify any correlations among the categories. We did not formulate any hypothesis on this point, but rather carried out data-centred investigation and not one based on theory. What relationships emerged? The analysis of the thematic concomitances (significant for the $p = .10$ at the Chi square test) led us to further investigate three thematic areas: A) the relationship between some dimensions considered to be critical by the subjects; B) the relevance of the social ties and lastly C) the comparison between times e.g. yesterday, today and between urban areas.

Now let’s look at the thematic concomitance involving critical aspects:

A) Relationship between critical dimensions

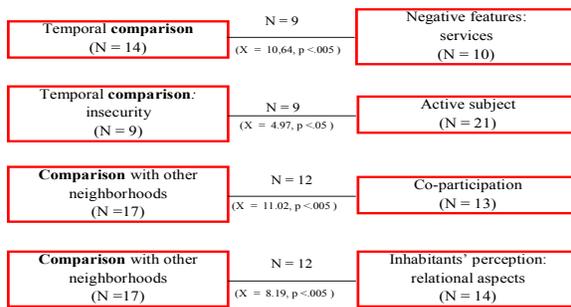
Participation consequences: negative outcomes N = 13	N = 6	inhabitants’ perceptions: negative features N = 8
	$\chi^2 = 4.07; p < .05$	
	→	

These data mean that, negative outcomes were referred to participation by 13 subjects, 8 perceived negative futures of the inhabitants; among these 6 persons utilized both the categories.

In this case the failure of participation seems to be linked to the residents in the area. Therefore, one can observe the importance

of social ties as a central element when dealing with participation, as is further explained in the following thematic concomitances.

B) The relevance (and criticism) of social ties



Indeed, it can be observed that the social ties constitute a component that is able to offer both gratification or dissatisfaction.

Participation is linked to the capacity the inhabitants themselves have to build up positive relationships (see: *participation consequences: relational/inhabitants' perception: relational aspects*). Also through an analysis of the contents it was observed that one of the principal aspects that participation manages to develop is indeed determined by social ties: people express importance for relationships that have developed thanks to participation and that also influence the quality of coexisting one with the other in the neighbourhood.

Moreover, the content analysis has shown that positive and negative aspects coexist with one another. Data show us other significant concomitances: we can see a cluster of categories referring to social relationships connecting individuals to the social environment. Relationship is an element that gratifies the social commitment (see: *participation consequences: feeling active/ social ties: subject/other*).

However, this does not exclude the finding

of some social categories in the territory with whom the relationships does become more difficult and, at times, even one of conflict (see some examples of: inhabitants' perception: social category; *"They've even let gypsies come and live here. I think they sent them away twice ...then they put in Moroccans"*; *"I don't deny that there are some integration problems, also on the part of some groups"*).

C) Temporal comparison and comparison with other neighbourhoods

Nine persons who referred to a general temporal comparison expressed negative concepts about public services, formulating a comparison with a past the is "inevitably" different from the present. Therefore, they refer to a generic change (e.g. *"Things have changed a lot because there has been a transformation"*; *"Compare to what it was when I arrive the image has changed somewhat"*) or to a past that is worst than the present (e.g.: *"This neighbourhood has undergone a continuous improvement...it has improved a lot"*; *"This neighbourhood has gone forward in leaps and bounds"*).

Whilst all the 9 persons that referred to safety, which they perceived as being less pressing nowadays than it once was, also perceive themselves as active subjects. Although we cannot affirm that these subjects feel that the context has improved greatly due to their own personal actions, neither can we discard the hypothesis.

Lastly we can observe the thematic concomitances that involve *comparison with other neighbourhoods*. If indeed they do indicate place identity, expressing a process of comparison with other places of residence, we then believe it is of interest to show how some of these dimensions are correlated to the category we called co-participation (that is the awareness that acting together is a very important

instrument to achieve collective goals). These data are in line with Manzo and Perkins' opinions (2006) that "studies in community and environmental psychology on disruptions to place attachment illustrate the importance of place meaning to community members as well as their commitment to, and participation in, neighbourhood processes" (pag. 337). Another concomitance is with the category *inhabitants' perception: relational aspects*, that demonstrate once more the importance of social ties in contributing to the construction of place identity.

Discussion

We have observed that all the subjects who are active participants and have a high level of place attachment, perceive both negative and positive features of quality of life in their neighbourhood and they underline also some critical aspects involved in the process of participation.

A positive consideration of participation may support the motivation to continue the commitment. Furthermore, perceiving both a positive outcome of participation and the social expertise may be considered processes of empowerment that both develop and sustain participation.

How then is it possible to continue the engagement and, in the same time, perceive some critical aspects? What are the psychological processes that spur the individuals continue to be active?

In line with an epistemological perspective like those of the discursive psychology we consider that the discursive analysis may highlight psychosocial processes. The thematic concomitances analysis allows us to evidence which process drives individuals both to keep a cognitive coherence when faced with conflicting cognition (remembering Festinger's train of thought)

and in protecting one's own identity (in the sense of social identity and place identity): despite some critical aspects, social ties and place attachment remain strong and solid. This is cognitively possible because individuals operate a comparison, both temporal and geographic, one that permits them to maintain a positive image of their neighbours and neighbourhood; today it is better than it was once and this area is better than others. The comparison acts either as a reduction of dissonance, or as maintenance of a cognitive coherence

with the aim of protecting identity. One consequence of the participation is also that of reinforcing the individuals' social identity. They have the perception of being important for others and of being a reference point for the neighbourhood. This aspect is connected to the perception of belonging to a social network, not only as a participant, but also as a citizen.

We can also see how some of the people we interviewed place importance on some particular categories, that need special attention (see. Social categories) and that are sometimes responsible for difficult and conflicting social situations (14 persons reported on problems of integration and communal life). An important question arises from this reflection.

As social ties are a very important factor for social participation, then when and where does the need arise for a top-down participation we must, first of all, activate programmes and projects aimed at the development of a social network, something which in participation is considered an important feature, both for its maintenance and for its enactment.

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