Sense of community in adolescence

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Abstract

In adolescence, Sense of Community (SoC) grows thanks to positive experiences with peers and significant adults in different settings (e.g., neighbourhoods, schools) and contributes to the development of personal and social identity and to positive developmental outcomes. In order to study SoC during this developmental period, it is important to develop instruments that adequately capture adolescents' feelings and experiences within the community.

This paper describes the process of construction of an instrument to measure Sense of community among adolescents. A series of qualitative and quantitative studies lead to the identification of five dimensions of SoC, consistent with McMillan & Chavis (1986) model, that are relevant for this age group: sense of belonging, support and emotional connection with the community, support and emotional connection with peers, satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement, opportunities for influence. The scale, both in its complete (36 items) and short (20 items) version, demonstrated good psychometric properties, and positively correlates with perceived social support and well being. SoC referred to the hometown decreases across the adolescent years. Results of research conducted using this instrument indicated the important role of SoC in enhancing social participation during adolescence, and its contributing role in increasing social well being.

Key words: Sense of community, measurement, adolescence, social participation

Introduction

Belonging to a community where people feel connected, supported and influential has to do with a "fundamental human phenomenon of collective experience" (Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008, 62). Collective experiences are the basis for the development of Sense of Community.

In adolescence, in particular, Sense of Community (SoC) grows thanks to positive experiences with peers and significant adults in different settings (e.g., neighbourhoods, schools) and can give important contributions to the development of personal and social identity and to positive developmental outcomes. Given such relevance, it is important to develop instruments to capture adolescents' feelings and experiences within the community.

In this context we will briefly illustrate the development of an instrument for measuring Sense of community in adolescence and some lines of research we conduced to investigate SoC in this developmental period.

How to measure Sense of community in adolescence

Research studies on Sense of community in adolescence have mainly used adult scales (e.g., SCI; cf. Pretty, Andrews, & Collett, 1994; Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williams, 1996) or ad hoc scales developed through content analysis of interviews (e.g., Chipuer, Pretty, Delorey, Miller, Powers, Rumstein, et al., 1999). It was unclear whether the adult scales adequately represent the nature and the experience of community for adolescents.

Studies conducted on Italian adolescents using the Italian Scale of Sense of community for adults (Prezza, Costantini, Chiarolanza, & Di Marco, 1999) confirmed that instruments developed for adults are not well suited for younger populations, both in terms of item formulation and differences in factor structure (e.g., Zani, Cicognani, & Albanesi, 2001; Albanesi, Zani, & Cicognani, 2004). For such reasons, a research programme was initiated, using both quantitative and qualitative methods, with the aim to develop a scale which could be suitable for young people.

A qualitative study, using focus group interviews, was conducted in order to investigate young people's meanings and understanding of community and sense of community (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2005) and verify whether McMillan & Chavis's (1986) dimensions of SoC were appropriate to conceptualize SoC also during adolescence.

Three leading questions drove our study:

1. Which kinds (local, virtual or relational) of communities are relevant in adolescents' experience?

2. What are their feelings and their experiences about community?

3. Is influence a relevant dimension of adolescents' SoC ?

To collect data we asked young people to tell us what "community" meant to them, which were the required characteristics in order to talk about community, and, if any, to which kind of community they felt they belonged. We asked them to indicate the reasons for their belonging to a particular community, what could endanger their bond with the community, and what could reinforce it. Moreover we discussed with youngsters what they did in practice in order to affirm that they belonged to their community, and if having power or influence was important in order to feel part of a community. Finally, we asked them if being part of a community

is always positive or if it can have negative (dark) sides (e.g., feeling of being trapped, impotence).

Data collected were analysed following a grounded theory approach. The analysis produced two groups of hierarchical descriptive categories, one referred to the term "community" and the other referring to "Sense of Community" (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 1
Categories about "community" emerged from focus group discussions

Figure 2
Categories about "Sense of Community" emerged from focus group discussions

Results indicated that the term "Community" is associated with words related to bonding (sharing, brotherhood, acceptance, support) in the context of specific relationships (friendship, family). Young people experience difficulties to conceive a community without a direct (face to face) contact among members and without a place allowing such interactions. The local community for adolescents is:

a) a place for experimenting feelings of belonging; this requires familiarity and experiences with the context;

b) a place "not chosen", allowing the satisfaction of material needs (cf., Obst &

White, 2007 on differences in levels of SoC between self selected and "not chosen communities").

The peer group is the context for satisfying relational needs (a nested community within the local community, cf. Brodsky & Marx, 2001).

Influence refers to the opportunity to participate and to contribute to the life of the community through vote, individual and collective action, and it is fundamental for experiencing feelings of membership; however, contexts allowing to experience it are limited and previous experiences of influence have been unsatisfactory.

According to these results a new scale was developed, including both items drawn from previous instruments (the Italian Scale of Sense of community by Prezza et al., 1999; the NYI by Chipuer et al., 1999; the SCI by Perkins et al., 1990) and new items taking into account the results of the focus group interviews, in the effort to measure SoC according to the needs and experiences of this developmental phase. The new scale was meant to measure SoC referred to the local community (country or city), considering it both as a geographical context and a locus of meaningful social relations for adolescents (Puddifoot, 1996). More specifically, the process of scale construction involved the following steps:

1) *Selection of items from pre-existing scales*: in particular, we excluded items referred to specific past experiences of influence because they were not relevant for adolescents (relevant experience of influence reported during focus group discussions referred mainly to school or religious groups and not to local community); we included items measuring shared emotional connection with the community as a whole (*People in this place support each others; People in my town work together to improve things, Many people in this town are willing to help each others*).

2) *Adaptation of some items*: in order to have the possibility to use the scale for the assessment of SoC with reference to different territorial contexts, we formulated the items using specific terms (e.g., this place, which could be easily replace by the name of the town, or this/my town, etc.) and we included specific instructions for its completion.

3) *Reframing of some items*: items measuring influence and needs satisfaction were modified by using a language closer to adolescents' experiences (e.g., *If only we had the opportunity, we (youngsters) could organize something good for this town; In this place there are many situations and initiatives which*

are able to involve young people like me). Moreover, since youths' lack of commitment in their community was a core topic of discussion in all focus groups, we included an item assessing perceived opportunities to exert influence on the local community with respect to the improvement of quality of life *(Honestly I feel that, if we engage more, we would be able to improve things for young people in this town).*

4) *Inclusion of new items* referred to support and emotional connection with peers (*I like to stay with other adolescents of this town)* and with the local community (*In this town people look for each others and want to stay together).*

The final version of the instrument, emerging from the validation study (Cicognani, Albanesi, & Zani, 2006), includes 5 subscales, for a total of 36 items (response alternatives ranging from 0 = *not at all true* to 4 = *completely true*) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
The Sense of Community Scale for Adolescents

The instrument showed good psychometric properties, good stability over time (*r* = .88) and good construct validity. It correlates positively with life

satisfaction and perceived support from friends and the family.

More recently, attempts to develop a shorter version of the scale (20 items) have also been made (cf. Cicognani, Menezes, Nata, & Marcon, 2007). Results of the validation study indicate that the short version has good psychometric properties (Chiessi, Cicognani & Sonn, 2010).

Sense of Community and its relationship with adolescent social and political participation and well being

Results of studies conducted using this instrument indicated the following. Scores on sense of community are higher in the dimensions *Opportunities for influence*, and *Sense of belonging*, and lower for *Support and emotional connection in the community*, suggesting that opportunities for adolescents to exert influence over their community are a critical aspect in the development of sense of belonging. This result is consistent with Evans (2007, 704): "SoC for these teens is incomplete without the experience of power (…) power comes from developing capacity, experiencing voice and reasonance, and having opportunities to play meaningful roles in the context of caring adult support and challenge".

Moreover, for adolescents the dimension *Support and emotional connection with peers* scores higher than *Support and emotional connection in the community*, confirming that at this age, the peer group is a more significant context for social interaction (a "nested community" within the territorial community).

As regards age differences, results indicate that SoC decreases with age, and particularly the dimensions *Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement* and *Support and emotional connection in the community:* this result suggests that as adolescents grow, they find their town as less adequate in satisfying their changing needs (cf. also Cicognani, Albanesi, & Zani, 2008; Cicognani, Zani, & Albanesi, submitted). As stated by Evans (2007, 706): "evidence shows that young people's global SoC decreases as they move through high school – no doubt due in large part to the mismatch between their increasing need to exert influence and the lack of meaningful roles afforded by them". In fact, "as teen age, they congregate in areas away from neighbourhood and thus feel less connected and have less opportunities to influence the neighbourhood" (695-696).

As regards gender, results are not consistent: some studies did not find differences (Cicognani et al.,

2006; Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2007) but others indicated higher scores for males (Cicognani, Albanesi, & Zani, 2008; Zani & Cicognani, 2008; cf. also Albanesi et al., 2004). Gender differences in adolescent' SoC should be further examined: it is still unclear to what extent they are an effect of different experiences of specific communities (with males having more opportunities to explore different ways of belonging, receiving more support from adult members of the community and having the opportunity to belong to a wider range of communities) or an effect of different perceptions of the community. Colarossi and Eccles (2003), provided different explanations of gender differences in social support involving both gender role-related behaviours and beliefs about communality: even if the authors did not clarify the causal path that lead males to receive more support from adults compared to females, their findings could be an interesting starting point in order to verify and understand gender differences in SoC.

As regards the size of the town, adolescents living in small towns score higher on SoC, particularly on *Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement*, *Support and emotional connection with peers* and *Support and emotional connection in the community* (Albanesi et al., 2007). This result is consistent with studies on adult population (Prezza et al., 1999).

As regards group membership, scores in SoC are higher among adolescents who belong to a formal group than among those who do not belong to any group. This results holds particularly for religious groups and sports groups, and differences concern mostly *Sense of belonging*, *Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement*, *Support and emotional connection with peers*, *Support and emotional connection in the community* and, in case of religious groups, *Opportunities for influence*.

As regard participation we found that SoC has positive correlations with both protest oriented and prosocial-oriented civic engagement (Albanesi et al., 2007): this result is consistent with our previous studies that showed that adolescents and young people who participate more to local community life have higher SoC compared to less involved youth (Zani, Cicognani, & Albanesi, 2004) and with a general recognition of the relevance of participation in order to increase adolescent' SoC (Pretty, 2002; Evans, 2007). Other studies (Flanagan, Cumsille, Gill, & Gallay, 2007; Foster-Fishman et al., 2007) have shown that "sense of community connectedness" is a significant predictor of civic

commitment and that it reinforces individuals' willingness to engage for the benefit of their neighbourhoods. Overall, these studies emphasise the need to deserve particular attention to the relationships between SoC, social and political participation: in fact, SoC can play a significant role in the development of attitudes toward politics and in willingness to be involved in political processes (Boeckmann & Tyler 2002). These issues are very important, notably nowadays, a period characterized by a constant decline in political participation, particularly among the younger generations.

A result that is consistent through all our studies is the significant role of SoC in influencing young people's social well being (Zani et al., 2004): SoC increases social well being directly when studied in deprived context (Cicognani et al., in press), and mediates the relation between group membership and social well being when we studied it in connection with civic engagement (Albanesi et al., 2007). SoC exerts its positive effect increasing the adoption of active coping strategies, especially among female adolescents. These results are consistent with a bulk of literature that emphasizes the protective effect of family, school and community relationship against adolescent loneliness (Pretty et al., 1994), depression and anxiety (McGraw, Moore, Fuller, & Bates, 2008) and their importance in determining wellbeing (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). However, they also suggest that the way contexts are perceived (and not only their objective characteristics) is relevant in order to understand contextual effects on stress, coping and wellbeing. On the relationship between SoC and residential stress our results suggested that at least in some circumstances, a stronger emotional investment in the community might lead to a more critical attitude towards what happens within it, and may possible become a source of stress when ones' expectations are not met (Cicognani et al., 2008). However this topic should be further examined: in a different research (Cicognani et al., in press) we found that when using the global score of SoC its effect on stress was not significant, but using its dimensions we found a significant effect of *sense of belonging* in reducing stress levels.

McWayne, McDermott, Fantuzzo & Culhane (2007) suggest that in order to understand neighbourhood and community effects on child development, information about multiple dimensions of the physical and social aspects of their neighbourhood should be collected: our studies confirm that SoC is one of them, but posit the question of levels of specificity we want to apply to when using it.

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