



## Social cohesion, perceived safety and immigration in a run-down district in Reggio Emilia

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to analyze the representations and perceptions of people living in five streets of districts 6 and 7 of Reggio Emilia (Italy), in terms of perceived safety and specific problems related to the immigration process and to intergroup relations. In this part of the city, called “railway station zone”, about 70% of the residents are foreigners. Reggio Emilia is the Italian city included in the 12 Intercultural Cities Program of the European Commission Project on immigration and best practices.

Particularly, we put our attention on: 1) the attitudes expressed by people living and/or working in the two districts as well as by other involved actors: Italians and immigrants, shopkeepers, public administrators, police force, cultural associations, labour union representatives, civic committees, voluntary associations, religious groups; 2) the specific problems of both Italian and immigrant residents; 3) the existent intercultural and intergroup dynamics; 4) the quality of the relationships between Italians and foreigners.

**Key words:** immigration, perceived safety, social cohesion, intergroup relations, shared cohabitation rules.

### **1. The sense of safety**

Many psycho-sociological studies examined the concepts of sense of safety related to concerns for crime and of social cohesion. The common feeling is that the perception of safety among the Italian citizens decreases constantly, due to increasing levels of crime, and characterizes more and more their experience of the urban environment. In the last years, the crime rate has brought the institutions to pay more and more attention to the problem of safety. This crime rate is connected, at least in the common perception, to the increasing number of immigrants, above all non regulars.

The initial psychosocial studies concerning safety perceptions started around the Sixties. In many of them, safety was studied as a product of real crimes (see, for instance, Block & Long, 1973). In such

studies, the central idea was that the sense of safety depended on the objective characteristics of the society, and not on the subjective perceptions of the individuals. Subsequently, since various studies showed that the crime rates were poorly associated to the sense of safety, the latter has been investigated as a consequence of psychosocial factors.

Furstenberg (1971) proposed that the concept of sense of safety is multi-determined. In particular, the author distinguished two aspects: on the one hand “fear of crime”, that is fear to be victim of crimes, and on the other hand “worry”, defined as the perception of the degree in which crime represents a problem for one’s own country. The idea that fear of crime is a multidimensional concept is shared by many authors (e.g., Garofalo, 1981; Ferraro & LaGrange, 1987).

Starting from the multidimensional nature of the concept of sense of safety, some authors prefer to analyze separately its various dimensions. In particular, some researches distinguished among “personal safety” and “community safety”.

Considering these two dimensions as distinct, in fact, allows to distinguish among them the factors that determine the various aspects of safety perceptions and their consequences.

The concepts of sense of safety and of fear of crime were considered by many authors as synonymous. Nevertheless, the two concepts are theoretically and empirically distinct. We will now review some among the most relevant determinants and consequences of the sense of safety, that are analyzed by the psychosocial literature.

### 1.1. Antecedents of the sense of safety

Besides the socio-demographic factors, the psychological literature identified a number of potential antecedents of the sense of safety. Some of them mainly refer to personal characteristics. Van der Wurff, Van Staalduinen, and Stringer (1989), for instance, tested a model with four antecedents of fear of crime, measured as the degree of perceived danger imagining to be in some hypothetical dangerous situations: a) attraction (intended as the degree in which one perceives himself/herself and his/her own goods as potential target for criminals); b) power (sense of control on the potential dangerous situations); c) attribution of criminal intentions to other individuals or groups; d) degree of prudence in avoiding potential dangerous situations.

Another factor that can potentially determine the sense of safety is the personal level of prejudice. Prejudice and negative stereotypes toward members of other groups could increase negative expectations and exaggerate the potential risks of being victim of criminal actions by outgroup members (see Vander Ven, 1998).

A very important predictor of sense of safety is represented by sense of community or, in other terms, by social cohesion. This variable will be considered below. Victimization, that is the perception of being a potential victim of a crime, is another factor much studied in literature that can influence the sense of safety (Garofalo, 1979).

Intuitively, the factors that make more or less probable the perception of being victim of crimes influence, indirectly, also the sense of safety. Such factors can be defined as contextual, rather than individual, since they refer to aspects associated to

the environment and not to personal characteristics. Some of these contextual variables are connected to daily activities and to the personal situation (Rountree & Land, 1996).

Some variables are related to the context (for instance, the district) in which people live. Also factors that underline the urban decay, consequent to the incivilities, might reduce the sense of safety (e.g., Lewis & Salem, 1981; Rountree & Land, 1996).

In general, it is possible to say that also the information provided by the mass media represent a contextual factor that can potentially influence the sense of safety. It was found, for instance, that news concerning serious local crimes brought by media decreased the perceived safety (e.g., Liska & Baccaglini, 1990).

### 1.2. Consequences of the sense of safety

One of the most remarkable consequences of the sense of safety is the quality of the perceived life, that can be defined as a general concept referred to personal comfort and satisfaction for one's own existence, derived from positive experiences in one's own environment. Few studies considered the relationship between perceived safety and quality of life. In one of these studies, Michalos and Zumbo (2000) examined a sample of adults in Canada and found that measures referred to perceived safety were associated to measures of happiness, variation in the satisfaction for one's own life and quality of life.

Fear of crime and anticipation of the risk of being victim of crimes can involve notable costs for people. Doland and Peasgood (2006) distinguish the costs related to the health from those not linked to it; for both such categories it is possible to distinguish the quantifiable from the non-quantifiable costs. The amount of costs that are not associated to health can be of several types. They include, for instance, the costs concerning the increase of safety measures (like alarms). The reduction of the quality of life represents a clear example of non-quantifiable cost not (at least not directly) associated to health.

The non-quantifiable costs not associated to health include, for example, the stress and the anxiety provoked by a low sense of safety. In certain cases, high levels of fear of crime could worsen, at least indirectly, the psychophysical state of people and their mental health and reduce the behaviours directed to lower the risks for health (e.g., Dowdell & Santucci, 2003). Other costs associated to the sense of safety include worse psychophysical conditions derived from repeated exposure to threatening stimuli

(Ross & Mirowski, 2001), reduced physical activity (Kilgour, 2003), reduced participation to social activities (Kennelly, O'Shea, & Garvey, 2003). Finally, the quantifiable costs associated to health can be, for example, those for medical expenses as a consequence of feelings of lack of safety.

The sense of safety was showed to have a consistent influence on people's behaviour. The effects on the behaviour can be positive or negative. Some behaviours, in fact, can be facilitated, others inhibited. The individuals can, for example, try to avoid risk situations or adopt measures that reduce victimization. The relationship between fear of crime and behaviours of precaution was found in numerous studies carried out in different contexts, as, for instance, the scholastic one (Wilcox, Jordan, & Pritchard, 2007).

The behaviours aimed to increase the sense of safety also include active participation to social activities, as for example groups aimed to improve the safety of the area of residence (e.g., Hope & Steven, 2001).

## 2. The role of social cohesion

Social cohesion is often associated, in the studies related to its effects on the urban environment, to sense of community. The sense of community refers to the processes that make a group of individuals members of a community, and consists in the perception of similarity and interdependence with respect to other members, the idea of belonging to a reliable group (Sarason, 1974).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) elaborated a very influential model of the sense of community, according to which this sense is composed by four dimensions: a) membership, constituted by possibility of emotional attachment, identification with one's own group, personal investment in material or symbolic terms, shared symbols; b) influence, exerted by the individual toward the community and, vice versa, the influence that the community has toward the individual; c) fulfilment of both personal and collective needs; d) shared emotional connection, when the interactions among members, the shared history and the investments of people in their own community are taken into consideration. Social cohesion can likewise be defined as the resultant of the attraction forces that tie a number of people as members of a group and not as single individuals (Turner, 1987).

There are various aspects, connected to social cohesion, that influence the reduction of people's lack of safety. A fundamental role is played, for

instance, by perceived social support. This factor can be associated to the community in general, but also to specific people. In general, the strength of social ties reduces the vulnerability perceived by individuals, who do not need to face singularly the risks related to criminality (DeLisi & Regoli, 2000). Another variable associated to the perception of social support, that attracted the attention of scholars, is represented by social bonds with one's own neighbours. Generally, the spatial proximity, by increasing the occasions of meeting, allows the development of positive and cooperative relationships among neighbours that, independently from their intensity, reduce the feelings of lack of safety (Kennedy & Silverman, 1985).

## 3. Content analysis of the in-depth interviews with key witnesses

Twelve privileged witnesses were interviewed. They were institutional subjects, social workers and representatives of non-profit associations and of social centres that operate in the 6th and 7th districts of the city. The interviews were de-recorded and the content was analyzed applying the Grounded Theory method. The most relevant aspects emerged during the interviews are presented below.

### 3.1. The railway station zone

There is a general agreement on the fact that the district was born as residential area. The proximity to the historical town centre, to the railway station and to several facilities contributed to increase its value and to characterize its destination for buyers of the middle-upper class. During the Nineties, due to the arrival of more and more immigrants, things began to change.

At present the zone, above all Turri street, is characterized by an overcrowding of immigrants belonging to different ethnic groups, such to determine a completely different social context. The "Reggiani" (people born and still living in Reggio Emilia) are for the most part elderly people, together with few families with young components that decided to remain.

The change concerns also the attachment to the district, that is no longer felt as an element of identification, because the Reggiani feel foreigners at home.

### 3.2. Immigrants and Italian residents

The shared perception is of a thick presence of immigrants, especially in Turri street, that determines conditions of low quality of life. This is due first of

all to the overcrowding in the apartments, the precarious economic conditions in which the immigrants are and the lack of recognition of the cultural habits and the rights of the immigrants. The interviewed emphasize that many immigrants do not have a regular residence permission and therefore it is likely that they have illegal activities and that they are non regular sublessees.

The interviews put in evidence that the Italian residents do not accept the situations in which the rules of cohabitation are not respected. They also feel a resentment that is translated into a progressive loss of attachment to the district of residence.

The interviewed have the perception that the presence of Italian residents is limited to elderly people and few families that still live in the zone. After the arrival of the immigrants, many Italians sold their apartments below price. Many of those people who are still owners tried to take advantage of the situation, subleasing without regard for the living conditions of the immigrants, and this contributed to determine the current situation and condition of uneasiness, described in the preceding paragraph.

### 3.3. The sense of safety and integration among groups

According to interviewed people, integration among the groups who live in the zone seems still distant. There is a sort of appropriation of the housing, commercial and recreational spaces, perceived above all as an invasion of the different ethnic groups. Each immigrant has primarily social relations inside his/her own ethnic group. Nevertheless, there are many attempts to realize meetings among the residents, as well as moments and spaces that allow mutual knowledge.

The scarce sense of safety is not perceived in relation to real criminal actions, that seem to constitute sporadic events and are emphasized by the media to give more importance to some news; moreover, there is no media communication about the positive events organized in the district. The lack of shared common rules both in the condominiums and in the public places and the lack of mutual knowledge are the background of the perception of insecurity.

The feeling of fear seems also to increase in virtue of the media news, that give a distorted vision of the events, in particular for what concerns Turri street: it appears as if all negative events happen in that zone. Interviewed people, on the contrary, say that the railway station zone presents crime levels similar to those in other parts of Reggio Emilia.

The activities developed to face the negative situations in the zone are aimed at the improvement of the quality of life and of the cohabitation, in the attempt, above all, to manage the emergent conflicts and the irregularities. The citizenry takes part into different events, for instance the feasts of the district, that are an occasion of mutual knowledge.

Even if various groups and organizations exist on the territory, the experience of the last years did not satisfy the needs of the zone. To answer to these needs and to the present problem list, many of the interviewed people expressed the intent to improve the level of dialogue as a means of aggregation. These claims are related to the reconstruction and to the search for a sense of affiliation and of emotional connection, through which it is possible to satisfy and to integrate the needs of the people.

### 4. In-depth interviews with native residents

Through 14 in-depth interviews with key witnesses living in five streets of the railway station zone we wanted to take into account the point of view of the "Reggiani". The interviews were de-recorded and the analysis of the thematic contents allowed us to individualize some cross categories. Particularly, these interviews show some aspects connected to the feeling of the Reggiani to be "ghettoized", their representations of the immigration and the intergroup conflicts. Moreover, the most representative problems of the district and the lack of respect of the cohabitation rules emerge, together with the feelings about a multiethnic district characterized by a low level of integration.

#### 4.1. Feeling to be in a "ghetto"

The first aspect emerging from the interviews is connected to the minority condition of the Reggiani in comparison to the foreigners, both resident in the railway station zone. Interviewed people perceive that zone as a ghetto-zone in comparison to the rest of the city and as populated by an indistinct mass of foreigners. The feeling is that the real ghettoized are the Reggiani themselves, who are in numerical disadvantage.

The interviews show the perceived uneasiness of those who have to interact with an "other" and strongly variegated majority. The social transformations, that have characterized and deeply modified this zone, are perceived by the residents with feelings of discomfort and extraneousness.

#### 4.2. Social categorization and representation of immigrants

Interviews show a sense of affiliation to a cultural group, “us, the Reggiani”, which is very different from other groups, “them, the foreigners.” The resident Reggiani almost always refer to the foreigners as a shapeless mass, “them”, and when they talk about known people they use the ethnic affiliation to define them, not their name, clearly defining them as a Chinese, Moroccan, Ghanaese.

In general, the opinion is that the foreigners submerge the country and are taking the overhand. The Chinese are seen as little ants, hunting dogs, an enigma, invaders, strategists who buy everything, but also ill people. In other cases, they are perceived as “mafiosi” and very dangerous because nobody knows what they do. Nevertheless, the shared opinion is that they do not disturb, they are busy workers well caring their children. The North Africans are perceived as the worst ones, pestiferous people, quarrelsome, uncivil, drug distributors and drunkards. Moreover they are felt to be the dominant group. The Muslims are seen as touchy people, who are sensible to the offenses and aggressive. People from Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria are considered by almost the majority of the interviewed as good, busy workers, with a high education level, who really take care of their children. Moreover they have the tendency to defend their territory.

#### 4.3. The problems of cohabitation and the lack of respect of the rules

Focussing on the hierarchy of problems of the railway station zone emerged during the interviews, drug-dealing and cohabitation in the condominiums seem to be the most important ones.

Dealing is perceived as a problem of degrade and safety by many people in the district, nevertheless, many recognize that this phenomenon can be observed also in other zones of the city and, therefore, does not characterize the railway station zone in particular.

For what concerns the problems related to the condominium, people consider two different situations. First, many difficulties of coexistence emerge and the attitudes of the immigrants are often described as disrespectful of the basic rules of daily life. Uncivil behaviours are associated to the foreign residents as well as precarious hygienic conditions inside the lodgings and hardly tolerable lifestyles like the overcrowding of the lodgings, the bivouacs in the staircases and troublesome noises up to late night.

This description gives an idea of the real difficulties that flow in situations of discomfort and serious

uneasiness in daily cohabitation, more accentuated as the number of foreign residents in a condominium is large. For these reasons every condominium has its own history and different problems. These difficulties seem to explain the representations that the resident Reggiani have of the immigrants. It is obvious that living in such exasperated situations leads to stereotypes, prejudices and attitudes of intolerance.

All the opinions of the interviewed about the principal problems of the district concern the lack of respect of the fundamental rules of civil cohabitation, rather than themes related to safety, intended as the fear to be victims of a crime.

#### 4.4. Mediatic stigmatization and place-identity

Interviews highlight the topic of mediatic instrumentalization, that leads to a negative image that stigmatizes the railway station zone. Nevertheless, a disarming ambivalence emerges: in fact, many residents believe that on the one hand the attention of the media is necessary to report the degrade of the district, on the other hand, it should be avoided in order to build a new, positive and attractive image. The determinants of this ambivalence must be sought both in the uneasiness that the residents experience and that forces them to ask for help and attention, and in the need to protect their own image.

An important relationship exists between the individual and the place; there are several concepts that specifically define this identity. Twigger-Rooss, and Uzzell (1996) refer to two concepts to explain the connection between place and identity. The first one is place identification and it refers to the identification expressed by a person to a place. In this sense it is considered a social category, therefore it is subject to the same rules that govern social identification according to the classical theory of social identity. Therefore place identification is a kind of social identification that derives from a feeling of affiliation to a well delineated physical space. The second concept refers to place-identity (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983) and it underlines how the physical environment contributes to the formation of the most complex personal identity. The place plays an important role in the satisfaction of the biological, psychological, social and cultural needs and, therefore, it contributes to the definition of the identity.

Starting from these assumptions the consequences related to self-esteem and to the evaluation of oneself of those persons who live in devalued and stigmatized contexts. Moreover, the mediatic propaganda makes the district seem dangerous to

those who do not live in it: a place where anything can happen. This increments the prejudice against immigrants. At the same time the fears of those who live in the railway station zone are confirmed: residents feel less safe.

#### 4.5. The real estate devaluation

The real estate devaluation represents a recurrent theme in the interviews. The resident Reggiani of the railway station zone have feelings of regret toward their own investments, the apartments are devalued, and it is hard to find buyers willing to purchase them, in fact, walking down the streets of the zone you can see “for sale” on many houses.

It is difficult not to understand the resentment of these people, many of whom have invested the savings of a life in the purchase of their own house, and it is possible to hypothesize that this factor affects the perception and the construction of stereotypes and prejudices. Some interviewed do not directly attribute the degrade of the district to the presence of the foreigners, but to a careless and myopic local policy, incapable to govern the migratory phenomenon that has interested the area. Nevertheless, they recognize that something today is changing and that finally the municipality is present with proposals and concrete actions.

#### 5. Some comment as conclusions

Acculturation is a process of social change that involves both the immigrant and the local society. To move to a new environment implicates important changes in the life of a person that leaves consolidated habits and family environments and has to deal with new values, rules and lifestyles. On the other hand also the members of the local society have to deal with the novelties brought by the new residents and to get used to their different practices and beliefs, to new ways to dress, to eat and to behave. For these reasons also their environment becomes “not familiar” (Chrysochoou, 2006), and cultural and social control conflicts can emerge.

To perceive someone as “foreigner”, other and contrasted, from one’s own group is fruit of a process of social categorization (Tajfel, 1971), through which the social world is simplified. This process allows to build a net of similarities and differences that reduces the multiform variety of the experience and helps accentuating the negative characters of those who are out of the group. As they feel this difference and do not really know the “others”, the Reggiani tend to depict them using these social categories that sometimes have not human or ontological

characteristics, as shown by the affirmations characterized in terms of prejudice, as the terms uncivil, without culture, beasts, little ants, hunting dogs used to represent and define foreign people.

When the minorities are associated to the nature, they are also considered out of the borders of civilization and in an intermediary condition between men and animals. On the other hand, to perceive the “others” as a threat can lead to such extreme reactions. When the own vision of the world is put again in discussion, identity is upset and problems related to justice rise, people can perceive fear and insecurity.

Dialogue and cooperation are the most emphasized needs highlighted by the interviewed key witnesses. The mostly underlined proposals can be summarized in the possibility to be involved in best practice projects that let people be active participants for a common job with a time perspective. This kind of actions would help resident people of the railway station zone to develop a sense of affiliation, through which the personal and social wellbeing would be increased, in contradiction to the sense of loneliness and isolation that addresses people toward purely personal purposes.

For the interviewed it is important to activate a force of associationism that has the purpose to take care of places and relationships and to promote cultural activities for all residents. Such a proposal leans on the need to share interests and purposes with other citizens, and to develop a sense of affiliation and therefore a sense of safety toward the territorial community, through the exploitation of the history that characterizes this community.

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