PARTICIPATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN CIVIC LIFE:

THE ROLE OF SENSE OF COMMUNITY

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1.Introduction

In this paper we will focus on the relationships between social participation in civic life and psychological sense of community among adolescents and young adults. Specifically, we will discuss the role of sense of community in affecting young people participation to civic life and the effects of involvement in the community on young people's social well being.

We will begin introducing the basic concepts and relevant theoretical perspectives. We will then discuss the results of our research with adolescents and young adults. In the conclusions, we will mention some interventions adopted in the Italian context with the aim of promoting social participation.

2.Theoretical background

Sense of community

The concept of "Sense of Community" (SoC) has become very popular in the last decade within a vast range of disciplines (e.g. psychology, sociology, social work,

political sciences, etc.) and practices. It appears in the popular press, governments' policies, and many other places. Further, the term has quite different meanings in commonsense discourse, and it is used to describe feelings of belonging to different kinds of communities (e.g. social organizations, formal and informal, that are bounded by a physical or geographical location, - like the local community, the town or city, the nation, extra-national entities like the EU, the neighbourhood, the school, - or are based on common interests, goals or needs, - like sport groups, political groups, volunteering groups, etc.).

In the context of Community Psychology, Sense of Community is considered a core construct, as well as a central value and ideal, and as such, it has been the topic of considerable research and intervention programmes (e.g. Fisher, Sonn & Bishop, 2002).

Introduced by Sarason in 1974 (who defined it as "*the perception of similarity with others, a recognized interdependence, a willingness to maintain such interdependence offering or making for others what is expected from us, the feeling to belong to a totally stable and reliable structure*") (p. 174), it is used to describe the belief that healthy communities exhibit an extra-individual quality of emotional interconnectedness of individuals played out in their collective lives (see Bess et al., 2002).

In the attempt to understand and empirically analyse how Sense of Community (SoC) can influence relationships among individuals in communities and their collective behaviours, McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a 4 dimension model including four components:

- Membership, defined as the feeling of being part of a community (territorial community or relational community). It includes perception of shared boundaries, history and symbols; feeling of emotional safety and personal investment in the community.
- Influence, identified with the opportunity of individuals to participate to community life, giving their own contribution in a reciprocal relationship (perceived influence that a person has over the decisions and actions of the community).

- <u>Integration and fulfilment of needs</u>: the benefits that people derive from their membership to a community; it refers to a positive relation between individual and community, where they can satisfy some needs as a group or as community members).

- <u>Shared emotional connection</u>, defined as sharing of a common history, significant events and the quality of social ties).

Sense of community has been the topic of considerable research attention within Community Psychology. High levels of SoC have been found associated with several indicators of individual well being (e.g. life satisfaction, loneliness, etc.). Moreover, it is considered as a catalyst for social involvement and participation in the community (e.g. Chavis and Wandersman, 1990; Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Perkins et al., 1990).

Some authors investigated sense of community and its relevance for young people (e.g. Pretty et al., 1996; Chipuer et al., 1999; Zani et al., 2001, 2004). Research has shown that sense of community is related to many aspects of adolescents' well being (e.g. mental and physical health, health risk behaviours, social integration and adaptation) and developmental outcomes (e.g. educational achievement).

Research on SoC among adolescents conducted using adult scales (based on McMillan & Chavis's model) have been usatisfactory, and it has been pointed out the need to re-define the concept so as to capture the specificities of the relationships between young people and their living context. For example, Chipuer et al. (1999) have suggested that the adolescents have limited opportunities of exerting Influence over their community, so this dimension is not relevant for them. Moreover, conceptualisation of SoC with reference to the local community in adolescence should be based on the neighborhood, as a significant context for daily life, and should take into account the nature of the experiences typical of this age period.

We studied adolescents' (students) sense of belonging to (territorial) community (e.g. country or city), considering it not only as a geographical context, but as the locus of meaningful social relations for adolescents (Puddifoot, 1996), and using a qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative approach (Albanesi et al., 2005; Cicognani et al., 2006). Our data suggested the usefulness of a model of adolescent sense of community which is consistent with McMillan & Chavis's perspective, even though it

articulates the concept and its dimensions according to needs and experiences of this developmental phase. Specifically, research confirmed that adolescents' sense of community includes the following dimensions: Sense of Belonging, Support and Emotional connection in the community, Support and emotional connection with peers, Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement and Opportunities for influence. Focus group research confirmed the opportunity of distinguishing emotional connection referred to the community and to the peer group, the latter being a more significant context for meaningful emotional relationships during this developmental period; moreover, we found that, even though adolescents perceive of having limited influence over their community, they would be interested in having more opportunities for exerting influence. Actually, the subscale "Opportunities for influence" obtains the highest scores, confirming the importance of providing youngsters more opportunities for active involvement in their community contexts. This picture is consistent with data collected by da Silva et al. (2004), who found that 50% of the adolescents of their sample would participate in volunteer and political activities if more opportunities existed. Therefore, youngsters' sense of community should be on the agenda of policy makers.

Social well being

In recent years, following the Positive Psychology movement (e.g. Seligman & Csiksentmihalyi, 2000) there has been a growing interest in the study of the positive dimension of well being. Seligman (2002) pointed out at least three aspects which should be the focus of research attention: positive subjective experiences, positive individual qualities and traits and the characteristics of positive institutions, organizations and communities.

Ryan & Deci (2001) distinguished two main perspectives in the study of well being: hedonic (the study of positive subjective experiences or subjective well being: Diener) and eudemonic. Within the second research tradition, Keyes (1998; 2005) proposed the concept of social well being, referring to the appraisal of one's own circumstances and functioning in society. It can be conceived as the outcome of the

optimal relationship between person and social context, because it is built within social and community structures, where individuals must face many social tasks and challenges (Larson, 1993).

Keyes (1998) distinguished 5 dimensions of social well-being:

- <u>social integration</u>: the degree to which people feel they have something in common with others and they belong to their own community. Social integration requires the construction of a sense of belonging to a collective and the perception of a common fate. Individuals who score higher on this dimension, should perceive the neighborhood as safer and people more reliable, and should be more involved in the care of their life context. Social integration, according to this definition, should promote (and be affected by) social involvement and participation.

- <u>social contribution</u>: the feeling of being a vital member of the society, with something important to offer to the world. Individuals who score higher on this dimensions should perceive themselves as active members of their society, capable of providing significant contributions to others; moreover, they should feel more responsible toward their society. Social contribution enhances individuals' involvement and participation in the community (Keyes, 1998).

- <u>social acceptance</u>: trusting others, and having favorable opinions on the human nature. Individuals who score higher on this dimension hold favorable opinions and expectations toward other people.

- <u>social actualization</u>: the evaluation of the potentials of society; the idea that society has potentials that come true through institutions and citizens. Individuals scoring higher on this dimensions hold the belief that the society is evolving in a positive way, and have positive opinions toward its institutions.

- <u>social coherence</u>: it refers to the perception of the quality and the organization of social world. Higher scores on this dimension are related to the attempt to better understand the world and its functioning, and also people from different cultures and traditions.

The concept of social well being appears more useful to study positive functioning within social units, like the different community contexts. Unfortunately, research on social well being has been limited, and centred mainly on adult populations (Keyes, 1998).

Moving from Keyes's (1998) model, we studied social well being in Italian adolescents and young adults (students). Results generally showed the significance of such construct and its dimensions in the Italian context. Scores on social well being of Italian youngsters are generally at average levels, and generally lower than scores on subjective and psychological well being. Moreover, social well being among adolescents shows strong and positive correlations with indicators of personal well being (e.g. emotional well being, positive psychological functioning).

Social participation

In this context we will discuss the concept of "social participation" with reference to conceptualisations and theoretical perspectives within Community Psychology (e.g. Heller et al., 1984 ; Wandersman and Florin, 2000).

It is a wide concept, which can be manifested in different forms (e.g. political, voluntary activity, participation to groups and organizations within the community); these forms vary according to places and historical periods.

We can distinguish a "weak" meaning of participation (e.g. taking part in activities) and a "strong" meaning (e.g. actively contributing to decision-making processes).

In Community psychology, by social participation we mean the "a process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them" (Heller et al., 1984; Wandersman and Florin, 2000). It is the essence of democracy. At an individual level, it is considered as a component of civic competence and civic responsibility (Youniss et al., 2002; da Silva et al., 2004).

The Community Psychology perspective emphasizes that social participation takes place within a community context. Forms of participation are determined by issues arising within a (local) community, a place, and include its culture, norms, values,

institutions. Thus, the community (and the social groups in it) are the context within which it is possible to experience the different forms of social participation.

According to Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000), social participation can be considered the actualization of the community ("*the process by which the community is actualized, negotiated and eventually, modified*").

In this literature there is agreement on the existence of a positive relationship between social participation and sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The direction of the relationship between the two concepts is not completely clear and most probably, it is bi-directional. For example, according to Chavis and Wandersman (1990), Sense of Community should be considered a catalyst for social participation (cf. also Simon et al. 1998). However, Hughey, Speer and Peterson (1999) suggest that participation itself might enhance Sense of Community.

Forms of participation during adolescence

In the developmental literature on adolescence, we can distinguish different lines of research and theorization on social participation. In this context, different behaviours are considered (and investigated) as forms of participation, though not inevitably "social", but nonetheless, as possible precursors for more mature forms of social participation. Social participation in adolescence includes not only political participation (which is not formally possible before the legal age), but also voluntary activities, participation to social, cultural, sports, recreational events and activities, extracurricular activities. A useful classification of forms of participation for adolescents has been proposed by Menezes (2003), including the following:

- ❖ <u>Within-school activities</u> (e.g. participation in student councils, school newspaper groups, student exchange programs)
- ❖ <u>Extra-school enrichment activities</u> (e.g. participation in sporst and arts, drama, music organizations and computer clubs). These activities are generally related to the expansion of adolescents' education and the use of leasure time, rather than with actual opportunities for civic participation. However, to

the extent that they occur within the context of formal groups, they may be a context for learning social competences)

- ❖ Voluntary activities (e.g. participation in a charity collecting money for a social cause or in a group conducting activities to help the community)
- ❖ Involvement in civic-related organizations (e.g. youth organizations affiliated with political parties, environmental, human rights, cultural/ethnic and religious organizations, girls' and boys' scouts).

Data concerning the pattern of civic engagement by youth collected within different national contexts consistently show a picture of apathy toward traditional politics, but an interest in a range of nonmainstream forms of civil involvement, including voluntary activity.

In the Italian context, the IARD survey (conducted on a regular basis on representative samples of over 3 thousands Italian young people aged 18 to 26 years) shows a steady decline (from early nineties to 2000) of involvement in formal participation. In year 2000, only 3% of youngsters declared to be actively involved in politics (Buzzi, Cavalli & De Lillo, 2002) and about one third is interested in knowing more about political events. Youngsters' involvement within associations shows a slight decline from 1982 to 2000 (from 51,1% to 46,8%); the preferred associations are those of consumption (30%), followed by political and social (21%) and religious (11%). Only one fourth of young adults participates regularly. Public events are attended only by 33% of the sample. Children and adolescents are mostly involved in recreational extra-curricular activities. The level of awareness about participation is generally low. Opportunities of participation at school are well known, but most adolescents are not willing to take on such responsibilities.

The more recent IARD Euyoupart WP8 survey (Cornolti, Cotti, Bonomi, 2005), conducted on a national representative sample of 1000 young people aged 15 to 25, shows that, among those youngsters who are eligible to vote, 85% went to the poll at the last election. Among the different ways of being politically active, the most popular are participation to public meetings dealing with political and social issues (39% participated at least once), to legal demonstrations (48%) and to a strike

(56,8%). 26% signed at least one petition, 23,6% bought products for ethical, political or environmental reasons, 23,2% wore an object with a political meaning, and 27,9% occupied houses, schools, universities, factories or government offices. Only 6% contributed to a political discussion on the Internet, only 12.1% wrote and forwarded a letter or an email with political content and only 10,3% wrote a political or non political article. As for participation in the school context, the sample is quite active: 88% took part in student meetings (40% played an active role). About 68% took part in a protest movement at school. In the work context political participation is lower: only 19% of those who had work experiences took part in union or workers meetings and only 7,8% took part in the organization of a work group to influence directions' decisions. The survey has also shown a trend of pro-active participation in associations. 49,9% of the sample took part in youth, religious, pacifists, charity and cultural organizations, while 63% took part in a sport club. In the last 12 months, about 20% of the sample took part in youth organizations, and religious organizations. Also charity and social-welfare organizations (about 15% of the sample) and pacifist, human rights or humanitarian aid organizations (about 10%) are well represented. At the same time young people are involved in cultural, theatre, music and dance groups (24%) and sports clubs (41%). Participation in environmental organizations is lower (3,9% is active) as well as in anti-globalization ones.

Below we will illustrate two lines of theorization and research on participation in adolescence; the former aims at explaining the variables that promote youngsters' involvement and participation in society, the latter is more concerned with the effects of participation on developmental outcomes and well being.

- <u>Research on the development of civic competence</u>

Youniss et al. (2002) define "*civic competence*" as "an understanding of how government functions, and the acquisition of behaviours that allow citizens to participate in government and permit individuals to meet, discuss, and collaborate to promote their interests within a framework of democratic principles" (p. 124).

In the study of civic competence among adolescents and young adults, there is a recognition, of the need to adopt a broad definition of the concept (expanded beyond

the confines of formal knowledge of government and normative acts like voting), that includes actions pertaining to civil society, aspects of daily life in which individuals freely associates in groups to fulfil their interests and protect their beliefs (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). A broad definition is also supported by data showing the long-term continuities between participation in youth organizations during adolescence and political participation in adulthood (e.g. Verba et al., 1995).

Research interest focused on antecedents and precursors of youngsters' social participation (e.g. within the family, the school, etc.). Moreover, current theoretical perspectives acknowledge the active, constructive role of adolescents in such process, and the importance of social participation for the construction of personal and social identity (e.g. Yates & Youniss, 1999; Boccacin & Marta, 2003). Empirical research showed that adolescent participation to social activities within their community increases leadership competences, sense of cohesion, social responsibility, perceptions of personal efficacy and agency. Opportunities of exerting influence over their living context are critical for personal and social realization. According to Prilleltensky et al. (2001), opportunities for participation and self-determination and the possibility of giving a contribution to community life are critical for increasing psychological and social well being and their sense of belonging.

- <u>Research on the effects of the adolescents' involvement in different forms of activities</u>

Another line of research on the issue of participation within psychology of adolescence has investigated youngsters' involvement in different kinds of activities during their leisure time and the effects of such involvement for adolescents' well being (psychological, physical) and development (e.g. academic achievement, psychosocial development, deviance, risk behaviors) (e.g. Larson et al., 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

Some research has been conducted within a sociological framework (adolescent "lifestyles"), examining how adolescents spend their time and the consequences of different kinds of activities (structured vs unstructured). Among the most consistent results are the benefits of involvement in structured activities and the

association of unstructured leisure activities with risk behaviours and deviance (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

Another theoretical perspective ("flow" theory; Csiksentmihaly & Larson, 1984) moves from the assumption that some activities may offer learning opportunities, useful for optimal development and growth. Some (challenging) activities are associated with high levels of motivation and involvement, providing an optimal context for personal and social development.

Several benefits of involvement in structured activities have been documented, including school achievement, psychological well being, a reduction in risk and deviant behaviours, better social relationships, higher self-esteem. Among the explanatory processes involved there is the construction (favoured by participation) of significant social relationships with peers and adult figures, the increase of sense of belonging to groups and the community, the possibility of playing significant social roles.

3. The relationships between social participation, sense of community and social well being in adolescents and young adults: some research data

In our research programme we focuses on the role of sense of community on social participation among adolescents and young adults (high school and university students), and on their impact on social well being.

The relation between Sense of Community and the different forms that participation can take during adolescence is a relatively understudied topic. Da Silva et al. (2004), found that community attachment plays a role, even if smaller compared to the role of peers' pressure and attachment, in the adoption of behaviors that reflect civic responsibility.

The exact direction of the relationship between sense of community and social participation is not clear, however. Many authors suggested that opportunities to exert power (Prilleltensky et al. (2001) and to be involved in school activities (Bateman, 2002) or having places to congregate outside school (Pretty, 2002) increase adolescents' Sense of Community development.

As regards the effect of social participation on well being, in the literature there is a general recognition that during adolescence, contributing to community life through social participation increases adolescents' self-efficacy and personal control and enhances positive developmental outcomes and well being (Smetana, Campione-Barr & Metzeger, 2006) . Most indicators used consider individual well being; less attention has been given to social well being.

A first study (Zani, Cicognani, Albanesi, 2004; Albanesi, Cicognani, Zani, in press) was conducted on a sample of 567 high schools students living in two cities in North Italy, half male and half female, aged 14 to 19 yrs, living in two cities situated in North Italy. To assess social participation, we considered two indices:

a)*Involvement in structured group activities (Group membership)*. We considered sport teams, religious groups, cultural or music groups, volunteers organizations, including environmental groups or advocacy groups.

b)*Civic engagement*. We asked the frequency with which adolescents had been involved in ten forms of participation on a 4 -point scale, ranging from never to often. The list of activities included: political manifestation, protest parades, occupation of schools, self management of school activities, charity purchasing, donations, cultural events, local folk festivals, petitions, strikes. Two underlying dimensions of social participation emerged: Protest-oriented Civic Engagement (occupation of schools, self management of school activities, petitions, strikes) and Prosocial-Oriented Civic Engagement (charity purchasing, cultural events, local folk festivals).

Sense of community was measured using the Sense of Community Scale for Adolescents (Cicognani, Albanesi & Zani, in press), whereas social well being was measured using Keyes's (2005) short scale.

52,8% of the sample declared to be member of a sport group, 25,2% belongs to a religious group (parochial or Scout), while 9,4% is part of a group of voluntary service, 12,7% belongs to a cultural group. Only 11 adolescents declare that they are members of political organizations. 29 % of the adolescents declare they do not belong to any formal group or organization, while 25% belong to two or more formal groups.

Our results show that being involved in formal groups, which offer young people opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with significant adults out of family and school, increases Sense of Community. However this effect seems to be specific for groups in which friends' endorsement of group activities is important to define membership (Huebner and Mancini, 2003) and in which young people have the opportunity to play specific roles (like in sport teams) or in groups in which members are actively involved, as it happens in religious groups. The kind of group to which one belongs, however, does not increase Sense of Community only as a whole, but seems to affect its specific dimensions: sport group members score higher on all dimensions of Sense of Community except for opportunity for influence, while members of religious groups perceive that they have more opportunities for influence, suggesting that the values shared within the group are critical in defining to what extent one can consider community trustworthy and open to young people initiatives and influence.

Similar considerations can be made also when referring to the relation between group membership and prosocial civic engagement. On the one hand, it appears that even if levels of personal engagement in prosocial-oriented activities are moderately low, belonging to formal groups seems to act as a catalyst for it: the more the group has an explicit prosocial orientation, the more often young people show altruistic behaviors.

Considering the relation between Sense of Community, prosocial-oriented civic engagement and well being, on the one hand, Sense of Community appears to be a mediator of the relation between group membership and social well being. and to be the main predictor of social well being, confirming the results obtained by Pretty et al. (1996). On the other hand, we found that its effect increases social well being through the partial mediation of prosocial-civic engagement, suggesting that behaviors that reflect the affective and cognitive component of Sense of Community (doing things for other members of the community, participation in events that reflect the culture and the traditions of the community) increase young people's perception of their social well being.

Protest- oriented civic engagement does not play a significant role on levels of social well being, contrasting some of the results of research on social activism. This could be related to a limited interest of adolescents in exerting influence on institutions, as Chipuer et al. (1999) suggested. An alternative explanation, however, could be based on the analysis of the different costs and benefits of protest and prosocial activities: costs implied in protest engagement against formal institutions are high compared to the chances to affect power relationships and to produce real local changes. Prosocial behaviors, on the other hand, produce desirable outcomes with less efforts because they are primarily devoted to alleviate someone else suffering providing personal resources (time, money) and not devoted to change community power relationships.

A second study (Cicognani, 2004; 2006) focused on social participation, sense of community and social well being in a sample of young adults (university students). Further variables investigated were perceived social support (from the family, friends and special person) and individual variables like self-esteem and self-efficacy. The sample included 200 Italian university students (Cesena), and comparable samples of 125 USA students (Atlanta) and 214 Iranian students (Teheran).

To assess social participation, a list of 14 activities was presented, covering different forms of participation. Factor analyses showed 4 correlated factors: Sports and recreational participation, Political and cultural participation, Attendance to meetings and signing petitions, Volunteering and religious participation.

Levels of social participation are overall low. The highest scores concern voluntary and religious participation.

Social participation positively correlates with sense of community and friend support (cf. da Silva *et al.*, 2004).

Social well being is positively affected by social participation, sense of community and, to a lower extent, friend support.

Specifically, political-cultural participation has the greatest influence on social well being (particularly on social integration and social contribution): youngsters that are more involved in political and cultural activities feel that they belong to their community and that their own contribution is valued by other people.

Volunteering and religious participation play an important role in enhancing social acceptance: young people that are involved in such activities trust other people and hold more favourable opinion toward them.

An interesting result is that the pattern of relationships between social participation, sense of community and social well being is not the same in youngsters from other countries considered (USA and Iran). Specifically, among Italian youngsters (and to a low extent among Iranian students) sense of community positively correlates with social participation, confirming that a higher social involvement is related to stronger feelings of membership to one's community. The correlation is not present in American data; in this context, social participation is related to a higher perceived support from the family.

Sense of community and, to a lower extent, friend support, appear to be significant predictors of social well being across countries

Social participation (especially political-cultural participation) predicts social well being only in the Italian sample . It is possible that specific meanings of participation in the Italian context can explain such result.

These results point to the important role of sense of community experienced within formal groups in increasing social involvement and social well being. Also, the role of social participation in enhancing youngsters' social well being is confirmed, even tough different forms of participation seem to be crucial at different ages (prosocial involvement for adolescents, political-cultural participation among young adults). Further results and possible explanations will be discussed at the seminar.

4.Interventions to promote social involvement and active citizenship

The last part of the presentation will focus on some examples of interventions developed in the Italian context to promote active citizenship among adolescents (for further details and experiences, see www.politichegiovanili.it), and on the existing laws concerning the promotion of young people citizenship and social participation.

In this context we will just mention the experience of active citizenships "Leve Civiche" (Sequi et al., 1999), consisting in a public "invitation" by the municipality

(directed at young people from 19 to 29 yrs) to voluntarily engage in their own local community. The purpose is to activate community resources through the involvement and participation of young people, to offer solutions to some problems experienced within the community itself (e.g. preventing school dropout). It is a way of actualising the concept of "active citizenship", the latter meaning the right of every citizen to participate to community life. The procedure is the following: young people living in a particular community receive a letter from the Municipality, explaining the project in which they will be involved, and an invitation to participate to a public meeting where the project will be presented. Those youngsters that decide to participate, will take part to a training course, on topics like solidarity, civic engagement, social competences to be able to act as tutors for younger children. Each tutor will have the task of taking care of a child with difficulties at school or in the family, and together with social workers and teachers, will participate in planning an individualized socio-educational project, involving a series of meetings with the child in his/her home. The activity will end with a formal evaluation of its impact on children, their families, the school environment and on young tutors.

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