

Sense of Community, Civic Engagement and Social Well-being in Italian Adolescents[†]

CINZIA ALBANESI*, ELVIRA CICOGNANI and BRUNA ZANI

Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione, University of Bologna, Italy

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between sense of community, civic engagement and social well-being in a sample of Italian adolescents. Participants were 14–19 year-old high school students ($N = 566$) from two demographically distinct cities. Participants completed a questionnaire assessing sense of community, social well-being (Keyes, 1998), involvement in structured group activities (group membership) and civic engagement. Results showed that involvement in formal groups is associated with increased civic involvement and increased sense of community. Sense of community predicts social well-being and explains some of the association between civic engagement and social well-being. Findings suggest that, to increase social well-being, it is important to provide adolescents with more opportunities to experience a sense of belonging to the peers' group and promote prosocial behaviours in the community context. Copyright © 2007 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Key words: sense of community; adolescence; civic engagement; group membership; social well-being

Psychological sense of community represents one of the key concepts of Community Psychology. Introduced by Sarason (1974), it reflects the belief that healthy communities exhibit an extra-individual quality of emotional interconnectedness of individuals played out in their collective lives (e.g. Bess, Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002).

In the attempt to understand and empirically analyse how Sense of Community (SoC) can influence relationships among individuals in communities and collective behaviours, Mc Millan and Chavis (1986) proposed a four-dimension model representing key processes. First, *membership* is the feeling of being part of a community (which includes perception of shared boundaries, history and symbols; feeling of emotional safety and personal investment in the community). Second, *influence* represents opportunities for individuals to participate in community life through their own contributions in reciprocal relationships (perceived influence that a person has over the decisions and actions of the

* Correspondence to: Cinzia Albanesi, E-mail: cinzia.albanesi2@unibo.it

[†]A preliminary version of this paper was presented at the 4th European Conference on Community Psychology, Berlin, 16–19 September 2004.

community). Third, *integration and fulfilment of needs* represents the benefits that people derive from their membership to a community, and refers to a positive relation between individuals and their community through which they satisfy personal needs and needs as a group or community member. Fourth, *shared emotional connection* defines the sharing of a common history, significant events and the quality of social ties. This model was used to develop the Sense of Community Index (SCI) (Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Chavis, 1990), the most popular instrument for empirically measuring the construct (Long & Perkins, 2003).

The measurement of sense of community with the SCI and other scales has exposed several shortcomings of the SoC approach (e.g. Chipuer & Pretty, 1999 for a critical review). The most common problems are the partial confirmation of the four theoretical dimensions, a lack of temporal stability of the measures, partial overlap of subscales of sense of community with similar concepts such as group identification and social identity and unsatisfactory psychometric properties of some instruments (Chavis & Pretty, 1999; Chipuer et al., 1999). Some researchers have improved the measurement of SoC by creating new instruments by re-assembling existing subscales (see e.g. Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002; Prezza, Pacilli, Alparone, Paoliello, & Ruggeri, 2004) or proposing revisions of the factor structure of scales according to confirmatory factor analysis (Obst & White, 2004). Some researchers have recently attempted to investigate sense of community using qualitative methods, particularly focus group discussions, to capture the relational nature of the concept and the mental representations of community (Bess, Fisher, Sonn, & Bishop, 2002; Brodsky, 1996; Puddifoot, 2003).

Research studies conducted on sense of community in adolescence have mainly used adult scales (e.g. SCI) or ad hoc scales developed through content analysis of interviews. It is unclear whether the measures of SoC adequately represent the nature and the experience of community for adolescents.

A new scale was, therefore, developed (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2002; Cicognani, Albanesi, & Zani, 2006), and followed Mc Millan and Chavis (1986) and articulated dimensions according to needs and experiences of this developmental phase. The new scale was intended to measure sense of belonging to a territorial community (country or city), considering it both as a geographical context and as a locus of meaningful social relations for adolescents (Puddifoot, 1996), and to understand how community and community relationships are perceived by adolescents. For the construction of the instrument, both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted. The final version includes items adapted from previous instruments (the *Italian Scale of the Sense of Community* developed by Prezza, Costantini, Chiarolanza, & Di Marco, 1999; the *Neighborhood Youth Inventory* by Chipuer et al., 1999; the *SCI* by Perkins et al., 1990), and new items taking into account the results of focus group interviews¹ with adolescents (Albanesi, Cicognani, & Zani, 2005).

Several authors suggest that different factors contribute to adolescents' sense of community development, specifically opportunities to exert power (Prilleltensky, Nelson, & Peirson, 2001), to be involved in school activities (Bateman, 2002), and to have places to congregate outside school (Pretty, 2002). According to Youniss, McLellan, and Yates (1997), adolescents' participation in structured group activities (e.g. sports, volunteer,

¹The focus group discussion was aimed to understand if the SoC dimensions proposed by Mc Millan and Chavis were salient for Italian adolescents' experience within the community; participants' discourses were used to select/build items reflecting their views of community and their experience of community attachment.

cultural) provide opportunities to develop relationships with peers and adults, and increase social *capital* and *civic responsibility*.

The relation between sense of community and forms of social participation other than involvement in structured group activities in adolescence is a relatively understudied topic. Da Silva, Sanson, Smart, and Toumbourou (2004), studying civic responsibility, found that adolescents' attachment to peers and participation with peers strongly facilitate being actively engaged in behaviours like taking part in fundraising activities, and supporting organisations that help disadvantaged people. Moreover, contributing to community life through social participation enhances adolescents' sense of control, domain specific self-efficacy and generally promotes positive developmental outcomes. Some studies find that adolescent participation in structured social activities positively affects academic achievement and well-being (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Larson, 2000). Spending time with peers in unstructured social activities is even a more common experience for adolescents (Larson & Verma, 1999) and has important functions for identity development (Hendry, 1983), but also has been found to be associated with involvement in risky behaviours (e.g. Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004).

More evidence on the positive association between sense of community and participation has been collected in adult populations (e.g. Prezza, Amici, Roberti, & Tedeschi, 2001). These findings support our view that sense of community is a catalyst for community participation, increasing individual and collective action (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Simon et al., 1998).

There is also a general consensus about the positive effects of social participation on individuals' well-being and developmental outcomes. Wandersman and Florin (2000), for example posited that contributions given to the community through *participation* imply an aspiration for life that facilitates individuals' well-being. According to Gamson (1992), *participation in social movements* involves enlargement of personal identity and represents an opportunity for self-realisation. Teske (1997) observed that '*activism enables activists to develop and to live according to concerns rooted in a sense of who they are and who they want to be*' (p. 96). Berkman, Glass, Seeman, and Brisette (2000) suggest that socially oriented behaviours, and feeling of belonging to a meaningful social context, increase social well-being and reinforce both participation and civic engagement.

Research investigating the effects of sense of community and social participation on individuals' well-being has generally focused on indicators of individual (subjective, psychological) well-being, and to a lesser extent of *social well-being*. Moreover, the conceptualisation of such dimension of well-being has been less than clear and coherent among the authors.

According to Keyes (1998), social well-being refers to the appraisal of one's own circumstances and functioning in society. It can be conceived as the outcome of the optimal relationship ('fit') between person and social context, because it is built within social and community structures, where individuals must face many social tasks and challenges (see also Larson, 1993). Keyes defined five dimensions of social well-being: social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social realisation and social coherence. *Social integration* consists in individuals' appraisal of the quality of their own relation with society and community. It refers to the degree to which people feel they have something in common with others and they belong to their own community, in opposition to feelings of isolation and loneliness. *Social acceptance* refers to positive attitudes toward other people: individuals scoring higher on this dimension trust others, and have favourable opinions on the human nature. *Social contribution* refers to the feeling of being a vital member of the

society, with something important to offer to the world. *Social actualisation* is the evaluation of the potential of society and social groups, and corresponds to the idea that society has potentials that come true through institutions and citizens. *Social coherence* refers to the perception of the quality and the organisation of social world, and reflects a sense that social life and society are meaningful and intelligible. This model was developed in a specific cultural context (USA), to measure social well-being among adult populations. A preliminary study conducted on a sample of Italian university students using the social well-being scale developed by Keyes showed a positive association among sense of community, social participation and social well-being.

In sum, few studies have explored the concept of sense of community, its relevance, its, measurement and its relationships with civic engagement in adolescents. Prior research, which has focused mostly on adults, suggests the relevance of participation for positive developmental outcomes, stressing the benefit of group membership. However, the influence of sense of community and social involvement on adolescents' social well-being has not been investigated (Cicognani, Albanesi, & Berti, 2001).

AIMS AND HYPOTHESES

Aims of the present study were to analyse the relationships between sense of community and civic engagement in an adolescent population and their effects on social well-being.

Based on the findings of Youniss et al. (1997) and Da Silva et al. (2004), it was hypothesised (H1) that civic engagement should be greater in adolescents involved in structured activities through formal group membership compared to their peers who do not belong to formal groups. We expect to find higher levels of sense of community in adolescents who participate in structured activities within formal groups (H2), because such activities provide opportunities to develop significant relationships with peers as well as with other adults in the community. Following the position of Chavis and Wandersman (1990) and the findings of Da Silva et al., who suggested that community attachment strengthens civic responsibility, we predict a positive relationship between sense of community and civic engagement (H3).

Consistent with previous findings, we predict that sense of community will be lower in larger communities compared to smaller ones (Prezza et al., 2001) (H4). Consistent with studies of activism and collective action (Gamson, 1992; Teske, 1996), we predict that civic involvement should increase social well-being (H5). Moreover, sense of community is expected to be the strongest predictor of social well-being (H6), and a mediator of the relationship between involvement in formal groups or organisations and social well-being (H7).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 566 high school students, 238 males (42%) and 328 females (58%). Ages ranged from 14 to 19 years ($M = 16.10$, $SD = 1.20$). Participants were recruited from two cities in Northern Italy (Mantova, $n = 258$ and San Giovanni in Persiceto, $n = 309$). Mantova is a large city located in Lombardy. The city of the Gonzaga, famous for its rich

artistic historical heritage, is surrounded by three lakes, which have positively influenced its urban development. The population currently resident in Mantova is nearly 48 000 inhabitants (720 inhabitants/km).

San Giovanni in Persiceto is a small town located in Emilia Romagna, 20 km far from Bologna. The population is approximately 24 000 inhabitants (200 inhabitants/Kmq). Every year, for the past 130 years, an historical carnival is carried out in the town, organised by 11 local associations that devote many months of the year to the organisation of the event.

Comparison revealed that the sex composition of the sample from San Giovanni was balanced, but there were more girls than boys in the sample from the city of Mantova ($\chi^2 14.24_{(3)}, p = 0.01$). Seventy-one percent of the sample was born in the town where they currently reside, while 11% live have lived there for over 10 years; only 18% of the total sample has moved to the current place of residence within the past 10 years. Concerning family structure, 59.6% of adolescents had a brother or a sister; only 12.3% of the sample had two siblings.

Instrument and procedure

The instrument is a self-administered questionnaire, covering the following topics.

Sense of community. The Sense of Community Scale for adolescents² includes 36 items and has 5 subscales: 'Sense of belonging' (9 items), 'Support and emotional connection in the community' (6 items), 'Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement' (7 items), 'Support and emotional connection with peers' (10 items) and 'Opportunities for influence' (4 items). Adolescents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point scale ranging from 'not true at all for me' (=0) to 'absolutely true for me' (=4). The pilot study conducted to measure the psychometric properties of the scale (Cicognani et al., 2006) showed that the instrument has good stability over time ($r = 0.88$) and good construct validity. It correlates positively with life satisfaction and perceived social support (particularly from friends). Scores on sense of community decreased with age among the pilot study adolescents. For the present study, confirmatory factor analysis³ was conducted in order to determine whether the five factors identified in the pilot study emerged in these data.

The factor patterns we found were consistent with the pilot study and accounted for 53.8% of the common variance. Correlations between subscales were all positive and statistically significant, and ranged from $r = 0.33$ ($p < 0.001$) to $r = 0.57$ ($p < 0.001$). The overall scale had excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.93$). On the items belonging to the five factors, sub-scales were computed by averaging across, and summing together, the individual items. Moreover, items were averaged to measure global sense of community.

Social well-being. Social well-being was measured using the short-form version of the scale that consists of five items (see Keyes, 2005); each item reflects one of the five dimensions of social well-being: 'In the last month, how much of the time did you feel that you had something important to contribute to society?' (*Social Contribution*); [...] that you belonged to a community (like a social group, your school or your neighbourhood)?

²See Appendix 1.

³See Appendices 2a and 2b.

(*Social integration*); [...] that our society is becoming a better place? (*Social realisation*); [...] that people are basically good? (*Social acceptance*); [...] that the way our society works made sense to you? (*Social coherence*). Responses were given on a seven-point scale ranging from 'never' (=0) to 'every day' (=6) ($\alpha = 0.72$). Items were averaged for the individual perception of social well-being.

Involvement in structured group activities (group membership). To assess participation in structured activities, adolescents were asked if they belonged to any of four kinds of formal groups (sports teams, religious groups, cultural or music groups, volunteers organisations). For each group to which they belonged, participants were asked to assess their level of involvement on a three-point scale, from very active (=1), if they used to attend all the group meetings, to non-active (=3) in case of low attendance.

Civic engagement. Civic engagement was measured by asking how often, during the previous year, participants had been involved in 10 forms of social participation, using a four-point scale, ranging from never (=0) to often (=3). The list of activities included the following: (1) political manifestation, (2) protest parades, (3) occupation of schools, (4) self-management of school activities, (5) charity purchasing, (6) donations, (7) cultural events, (8) local folk festivals, (9) petitions, (10) strikes.

Principal Component Analysis (PCA) was conducted to assess the dimensionality of the items. Due to high levels of kurtosis, items (1), (2) and (6) were excluded. Since we expected correlations among factors, Oblimin rotation was used. Items (3) (4) (9) (10) loaded on the first component, called *Protest-oriented civic engagement* ($\alpha = 0.69$), while items (5) (7) (8) loaded on the second component, called *Prosocial-oriented civic engagement* ($\alpha = 0.65$). Correlation between factors was 0.31; the total variance explained was 57%. On the items belonging to the two factors, sub-scales were computed by averaging across the individual items.

Table 1 shows a summary of the measures used in the present study including reliability, scale range, means and standard deviations.

Data collection took place in December of 2003. Adolescents were approached by a trained researcher in schools, during class time, after obtaining the consent of school authorities. Adolescents were informed of the purpose of the study (e.g. 'We are interested

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: reliabilities, means and SDs for each measure in the study

	Alpha	Mean	SD
Sense of community (global score)	0.93	1.81	0.60
Needs satisfaction*	0.82	1.64	0.69
Support and emotional connection with peers*	0.90	1.84	0.88
Support and emotional connection in the community*	0.81	1.45	0.62
Sense of belonging*	0.85	1.95	0.81
Opportunities for influence*	0.71	2.18	0.78
Civic engagement			
Protest-oriented civic engagement**	0.69	1.68	0.86
Prosocial-oriented civic engagement**	0.65	1.51	0.85
Well-being			
Social well-being***	0.72	2.50	1.02

*Range 0–4.

**Range 0–3.

***Range 0–6.

in adolescents' participation in community life') and of the anonymity of responses. None refused to participate. The completion of the questionnaires required about 30 minutes.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

Involvement in structured group activities (group membership). Fifty-two percent ($n = 304$) of the samples were members of a sports group, 25% ($n = 145$) belonged to a religious group (parochial or Scout), 9% ($n = 54$) was part of a group of voluntary service, while 12% ($n = 73$) belonged to a cultural group. Only 11 adolescents reported to be members of political organisations.

Twenty-nine percent ($n = 162$) of the adolescents did not belong to any formal group, while 25% ($n = 144$) belonged to two or more formal groups. Youth belonging to sports groups indicated high levels of involvement (attendance to all group meetings); members of religious groups were very active in 38% of cases and active enough in 48% of cases. Thirty-one of the 73 adolescents that were members of cultural groups said they participated often. The percentage of the low participation reached 50% in the volunteers group: 26 out of 54 volunteers admitted to participate rarely to the meetings.

Sense of community

One-way ANOVA was used in order to test mean-level differences among demographic groups (Table 2). We found significant differences according to size of city: adolescents living in small town scored higher on sense of community ($F_{(1,560)} = 6.82, p = 0.012$), and in the following subscales: needs satisfaction ($F_{(1,558)} = 9.52, p = 0.001$); support and emotional connection with peers ($F_{(1,560)} = 16.57, p = 0.000$) and support and emotional connection in the community ($F_{(1,557)} = 20.31, p = 0.000$).

Significant differences were found also according to age: total score of sense of community was lower among older adolescents ($F_{(1,556)} = 4.84, p = 0.028$); the same tendency was observed on needs satisfaction ($F_{(1,554)} = 8.84, p = 0.003$), support and emotional connection in the community ($F_{(1,553)} = 4.34, p = 0.038$) and opportunities for influence ($F_{(1,552)} = 4.00, p = 0.046$) (see Table 2). No significant differences were found according to gender.

Sense of community significantly differs according to group membership: adolescents belonging to at least one group had higher levels of SoC ($M = 1.88, SD = 0.58$) than adolescents who did not belong to any formal group ($M = 1.63, SD = 0.61$) ($F_{(1,559)} = 20.01, p = 0.001$). However, considering more specifically the kind of group, we found significant differences on SoC only for members of sports and religious groups.

Sports group members had higher levels of sense of community ($F_{(1,556)} = 12.66, p = 0.001$), compared to non-members. They differed from non-members in four subscales: belonging ($F_{(1,556)} = 7.69, p = 0.006$); needs satisfaction ($F_{(1,556)} = 4.15, p = 0.042$); support and emotional connection with peers ($F_{(1,556)} = 13.07, p = 0.000$); support and emotional connection in the community ($F_{(1,553)} = 11.05, p = 0.001$). Those who belonged to religious groups had a higher level of sense of community ($F_{(1,555)} = 7.79, p = 0.006$), particularly perceptions of opportunities for influence ($F_{(1,552)} = 20.72, p = 0.000$), needs satisfaction ($F_{(1,553)} = 5.15, p = 0.024$) and support and emotional

Table 2. Sense of community, civic engagement and social well-being: differences according to adolescent gender, town size and age

	Gender				Town size				Age			
	Boys		Girls		Large town		Small town		14–15 years		16–19 years	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Sense of community (global score) [†]	1.80	0.62	1.82	0.59	1.74	0.60	1.87*	0.58	1.87	0.61	1.76*	0.59
Needs satisfaction [‡]	1.70	0.71	1.61	0.67	1.54	0.69	1.73***	0.67	1.73	0.68	1.56**	0.68
Support and emotional connection with peers [†]	1.84	0.87	1.84	0.90	1.68	0.86	1.98***	0.87	1.90	0.89	1.80	0.90
Support and emotional connection in the community [†]	1.44	0.64	1.46	0.61	1.31	0.64	1.56***	0.59	1.51	0.61	1.40*	0.62
Sense of belonging [†]	1.93	0.88	1.98	0.76	2.01	0.78	1.93	0.81	2.00	0.82	1.93	0.80
Opportunities for influence [†]	2.11	0.79	2.24	0.76	2.24	0.82	2.16	0.71	2.26	0.78	2.12*	0.76
Civic engagement												
Protest-oriented civic engagement [†]	1.92	0.95	1.50***	0.75	1.11	0.69	2.17***	0.66	1.68	0.88	1.70	0.86
Prosocial-oriented civic engagement [†]	1.54	0.88	1.49	0.84	0.93	0.69	1.87***	0.67	1.59	0.87	1.46	0.84
Well-being												
Social well-being [‡]	2.62	1.10	2.40*	0.91	2.46	1.03	2.54	1.04	2.57	1.00	2.43	1.00

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
*** $p < 0.001$.
[†]Range 0–3.
[‡]Range 0–4.
[‡]Range 0–6.

connection with the community ($F_{(1,552)} = 5.20$, $p = 0.023$). No significant differences were found between members and non-members of volunteers and cultural groups.

Civic engagement (protest and prosocial)

Overall, levels of protest-oriented civic engagement were higher than levels of prosocial-oriented civic engagement (Tables 1 and 3). One-way ANOVA was used to assess mean-level differences among demographic groups (Table 2) and group membership (Table 3). No significant differences were found according to age. Differences according to gender were found only on engagement in protest activities ($F_{(1,563)} = 35.29$, $p = 0.001$): boys scored higher than girls. Strong differences were found according to the size of city. Youth living in small town had higher level of protest-oriented civic engagement ($F_{(1,549)} = 336.60$, $p = 0.000$) and a higher level of prosocial-oriented civic engagement ($F_{(1,545)} = 313.82$, $p = 0.000$) compared to adolescents living in the large town.

Significant differences on levels of prosocial civic engagement and protest-oriented civic engagement were found between adolescents belonging to at least one group ($M = 1.63$, $SD = 0.88$; $M = 1.73$, $SD = 0.87$) and adolescents who did not belong to any formal group ($M = 1.20$, $SD = 0.67$; $M = 1.56$, $SD = 0.83$) ($F_{(1,560)} = 31.71$, $p = 0.001$; $F_{(1,564)} = 4.56$, $p = 0.05$). This global effect, however, seems to be related to specific formal groups. Adolescents belonging to sports groups reported engaging more often both in protest and prosocial activities compared to non-members ($F_{(1,561)} = 11.93$, $p = 0.001$; $F_{(1,558)} = 12.32$, $p = 0.000$). Members of volunteer, cultural and religious groups differed from non-members only on (higher) levels of prosocial-oriented civic engagement (respectively, $F_{(1,549)} = 5.51$, $p = 0.05$; $F_{(1,549)} = 7.36$, $p = 0.05$; $F_{(1,546)} = 52.91$, $p = 0.001$).

Social well-being

Overall levels of social well-being were moderately low. Significant differences were found according to gender, with boys scoring higher on social well-being than girls ($F_{(1,564)} = 6.25$, $p = 0.013$), and sports group members ($F_{(1,562)} = 18.00$, $p = 0.001$), volunteers ($F_{(1,565)} = 8.10$, $p = 0.01$) and members of religious group ($F_{(1,561)} = 7.37$, $p = 0.05$) reported higher levels of social well-being than non-members.

Correlations

Positive correlations were found among measures of civic engagement (protest-oriented and prosocial-oriented), sense of community and social well-being (see Table 4).

Predicting social well-being

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the hypothesis that a sense of community acted as a mediator of the relation between group membership (involvement in structured group activities) and social well-being, and that civic engagement was a predictor of social well-being. With social well-being as the dependent variable, group membership was entered in the first block, sense of community in the second block and civic engagement in the third block.

Results of these analyses showed that sense of community is the main, statistically significant predictor of social well-being ($\beta = 0.28$) (Table 5). Group membership is a significant and positive predictor of social well-being, while its relationship with social well-being is partially mediated by sense of community: the Standardised Beta regression

Table 3. Sense of community, civic engagement and social well-being: differences according to involvement in structured group activities (group membership)

	Sport groups				Cultural groups				Volunteers groups				Religious groups			
	Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No		Yes		No	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
SoC (global score) [†]	1.89	0.57	1.71***	0.62	1.84	0.60	1.80	0.60	1.91	0.61	1.80	0.60	1.93	0.59	1.77**	0.60
Needs satisfaction [†]	1.69	0.71	1.57*	0.66	1.62	0.80	1.64	0.67	1.66	0.79	1.64	0.68	1.75	0.70	1.60*	0.68
Support and emotional connection with peers [†]	1.96	0.86	1.69***	0.90	1.93	0.92	1.83	0.88	1.93	0.81	1.83	0.90	1.92	0.88	1.81	0.89
Support and emotional connection in the community [†]	1.53	0.60	1.36***	0.64	1.48	0.60	1.45	0.63	1.57	0.61	1.44	0.62	1.56	0.59	1.42*	0.63
Sense of belonging [†]	2.04	0.75	1.85**	0.86	1.96	0.82	1.95	0.81	2.02	0.80	1.95	0.81	2.03	0.75	1.92	0.85
Opportunities for influence [†]	2.21	0.78	2.14	0.77	2.27	0.71	2.17	0.78	2.35	0.74	2.17	0.78	2.43	0.75	2.10***	0.76
Civic engagement																
Protest-oriented [†]	1.79	0.87	1.54***	0.84	1.65	0.91	1.68	0.86	1.88	0.87	1.65	0.86	1.57	0.89	1.72	0.85
Prosocial-oriented [†]	1.63	0.88	1.37***	0.80	1.73	0.85	1.48*	0.85	1.81	0.98	1.48**	0.83	1.95	0.96	1.37***	0.76
Social well-being [‡]	2.67	1.04	2.31***	0.99	2.57	0.98	2.49	1.04	2.87	1.10	2.46**	1.02	2.70	1.01	2.43**	1.03

* $p < 0.05$.
** $p < 0.01$.
*** $p < 0.001$.
[†]Range 0–3.
[‡]Range 0–4.
[‡]Range 0–6.

Table 4. Correlations between group membership, civic engagement, sense of community and social well-being ($N = 566$)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
(1) Group membership				
(2) Protest-oriented civic engagement	0.09*			
(3) Prosocial-oriented civic engagement	0.23**	0.47**		
(4) Sense of community	0.19**	0.10*	0.21**	
(5) Social well-being	0.19**	0.11**	0.18**	0.320*

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.01$.

Table 5. Hierarchical multiple regression: dependent variable social well-being (standardised regression weights)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Block 1			
Group membership (2 = belong to at least one group)	0.18***	0.13**	0.11*
Block 2			
Sense of community		0.30***	0.28***
Block 3			
Protest-oriented civic engagement			0.00
Prosocial-oriented civic engagement			0.10*
R^2	0.03	0.12	0.13
F	18.53***	37.23***	26.84***
DF	1,551	1,550	5,549
F change	18.53*	54.14***	5.45*

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.01$.*** $p < 0.001$.

coefficient of group membership ($\beta = 0.18$) diminishes significantly⁴ ($\beta = 0.13$) when sense of community is entered in the regression and total variance explained by the regression equation increases significantly. Thus, in our study, sense of community explains about 28% of the shared variance between group membership and social well-being. Pro-social oriented civic engagement is a significant and positive predictor of social well-being ($\beta = 0.10$), while protest-oriented civic engagement is unrelated with social well-being.

DISCUSSION

The aims of the present study were to explore the relationships between sense of community and civic engagement, and the influence of these variables on social well-being in a sample of Italian adolescents. Moreover, we wanted to explore to what extent group memberships predict social well-being, and whether this connection is explained in part by sense of community being higher among adolescents who are members of groups.

Our results showed that involvement in formal groups is associated with increased levels of civic engagement, as expected according to hypothesis one. In particular, even if levels

⁴Significance was verified using Goodman (I) version of the Sobel test suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986).

of personal engagement in prosocial-oriented activities are moderately low, members of the group with an explicit prosocial orientation exhibit more altruistic behaviours.

Involvement in formal groups that offer young people opportunities to establish meaningful relationships with adults outside of the family and the school also is associated with an increased sense of community. These data confirm hypothesis two and are consistent with results of prior studies on adult populations (Prezza et al., 2001). However, this effect was found to be specific to sports and religious group membership, in which friends' endorsement of group activities is important to define membership (Huebner & Mancini, 2003), and in which levels of active involvement and attendance are higher compared to the other groups considered. The kind of group to which one belongs increases sense of community as a whole and its specific dimensions. Sports group members score higher on all dimensions of sense of community besides opportunity for influence. Furthermore, members of religious groups perceive more opportunities for influence, suggesting that the values shared within the group are critical in defining the extent to which one can consider community trustworthy and open to young people's initiatives and influence.

Sense of community shows a significant and positive correlation with civic engagement, as expected according to hypothesis three. The association is especially strong between sense of community and prosocial civic engagement. These variables are both higher among youth who reside in smaller towns compared to youth residing in large towns. This result is consistent with hypothesis four and former studies showing that sense of community is higher in small towns in adults and adolescents (Prezza et al., 2001; Zani, Cicognani, & Albanesi, 2001). Considering the relation between sense of community, civic engagement and social well-being, our hypotheses were only partially confirmed. On one hand, we found that prosocial civic engagement is associated with increased social well-being (consistent with hypothesis five). On the other hand, sense of community is the main predictor of social well-being, confirming the results obtained by Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, and Williams (1996) and hypothesis six. In addition, sense of community is a partial mediator of the relation between group membership and social well-being, as expected according to hypothesis seven. These data confirm the significant role of sense of community in explaining some of the processes through which involvement in structured group activities may cause positive developmental outcomes.

Despite these encouraging results some questions still remain unanswered. Protest-oriented civic engagement is not correlated with levels of social well-being, which is contrary to some results of research on benefits of social activism. A possible explanation could be the limited interest of adolescents in exerting influence on institutions, as suggested by Chipuer et al. (1999). An alternative explanation could be based on the analysis of the costs and benefits of protest and prosocial activities: costs implied in protest engagement against formal institutions may be higher compared to chances to affect power relationships and to produce real local changes. Prosocial behaviours, on the other hand, produce desirable outcomes with fewer efforts because they are primarily devoted to alleviate someone else's suffering providing personal resources (time, money) and not to change community power relationships.

Limitations of the study and suggestion for future research

Measures of protest-oriented and prosocial-oriented civic engagement have low levels of internal consistency, and refer to general behaviours. More research is needed to better measure and understand both forms of civic engagement among adolescents. Similar

problems were evident with the measurement of group membership. To better assess the effects of specific group membership on sense of community and civic engagement, future research should differentiate among groups according to their norms, values and roles. In particular, more information is needed about the role of adolescents in specific groups, values that characterise the groups, and levels of social identification with each group. The aim of this research would be to provide a better understanding of the group processes that increase social well-being in adolescence as well as foster prosocial behaviours.

Conceptualisation and measurement of social well-being need further investigation in order to define more clearly the distinctions of this construct for younger individuals and areas of overlap with sense of community. Our results are encouraging, but we used a five-item scale and an aggregate score; this did not allow us to consider the multidimensional structure of social well-being. Further studies should be devoted to develop a scale that operationalises the theoretical dimensions of the construct among youth in various cultural contexts, clearly defining the contents of each dimension of social well-being.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the above limitations, this study supports the hypothesised relevance of sense of community in adolescents, and emphasises the importance of involvement in structured group activities in this age period. Belonging to groups represents an opportunity for adolescents to explore different identities and social roles, and it is a situation that appears to enhance levels of connectedness to the community and prosocial behaviours.

Extrapolating from our findings suggests that opportunities to experience a greater sense of belonging (to peers and to the community) and increased prosocial civic engagement promote adolescents' social well-being. Future research that uses longitudinal data can answer the important question of whether social well-being is a cause or a consequence of civic engagement and sense of community. Overall, our findings suggest that increasing sense of community may represent a key intervention in order to promote well-being and positive developmental outcomes in adolescence and that formal groups may be a suitable context within which to host such interventions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported as 'Research Programme of National Interest' from the University of Bologna and the Italian Ministry of University and Scientific Research (for the years 2001–2003). We are grateful to C.L. Keyes for his support in editing the final version of this paper.

REFERENCES

- Albanesi, C., Cicognani, E., & Zani, B. (2002). La misurazione del senso di comunità in adolescenza. *Psicologia della salute*, 3, 123–137.
- Albanesi, C., Cicognani, E., & Zani, B. (2005). L'uso dei focus group per la costruzione di una scala di misurazione del senso di comunità in adolescenza. *Sociologia e ricerca sociale*, 1–2, 159–171.
- Baron, R. M., & Kenny, D. A. (1986). The moderator-mediator variable distinction in social psychological research: Conceptual, strategic, and statistical considerations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 1173–1182.

- Bartko, W. T., & Eccles, J. S. (2003). Adolescent participation in structured and unstructured activities: A person oriented analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32, 233–241.
- Bateman, H. V. (2002). Sense of Community in the school: Listening to students' voices. In A. Fisher, & C. Sonn (Eds.), *Psychological Sense of Community: Research applications, and implications* (pp. 161–179). New York: Plenum Publishers.
- Berkman, L. F., Glass, T., Seeman, I., & Brisette, T. E. (2000). From social integration to health: Durkheim in the new millennium. *Social Science and Medicine*, 51, 843–857.
- Bess, K. D., Fisher, A. T., Sonn, C. C., & Bishop, B. J., (2002). Psychological Sense of Community: Theory, research, and application. In A. T. Fisher, & C. C. Sonn (Eds.), *Psychological Sense of Community: Research applications, and implications* (pp.3–22). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Brodsky, A. E. (1996). Resilient single mothers in risky neighborhoods: Negative psychological Sense of Community. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 24, 347–363.
- Chavis, D. M., & Pretty, G. H., (1999). Sense of Community: Advances in measurement and applications. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 27, 635–642.
- Chavis, D. M., & Wandersman, A. (1990). Sense of Community in the urban environment: A catalyst for participation and community development. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 18, 55–82.
- Chipuer, H. M., & Pretty, G. H. (1999). A review of the Sense of Community Index: Current uses, factor structure, reliability, and further development. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 27, 643–658.
- Chipuer, H. M., Pretty, G. H., Delorey, E., Miller, M., Powers, T., Rumstein, O., Cordasic, N., & Laurent, K. (1999). The Neighbourhood Youth Inventory: Development and validation. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 9, 355–368.
- Cicognani, E., Albanesi, C., & Berti, P. (2001), Dimensioni del benessere sociale: Applicazione di uno strumento di misurazione. *Psicologia della salute*, 1, 105–122.
- Cicognani, E., Albanesi, C., & Zani, B. (2006), Il senso di comunità in adolescenza: Uno strumento di misura. *Bollettino di Psicologia Applicata* (accepted for publication).
- Da Silva, L., Sanson, A., Smart, D., & Toumbourou, J. (2004). Civic responsibility among Australian adolescents: Testing two competing models. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 32, 229–255.
- Fisher, A. T., Sonn, C. C., & Bishop, B. (Eds.). 2002. *Psychological Sense of Community: Research, applications, and implications*. New York: Plenum Press.
- Gamson, W. A. (1992). The social psychology of collective action, In A. Morris, & C. Mueller (Eds.), *Frontiers of social movement theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Glynn, T. J. (1981). Psychological Sense of Community. Measurement and application. *Human Relations*, 34, 780–817.
- Hendry, L. B. (1983). *Growing up and going out. Adolescents and leisure*. Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press.
- Huebner, A. J., & Mancini, J. A. (2003). Shaping structured out of school time use among youth: The effect of self, family and friend systems. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32, 453–463.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (1998). Social well-being. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 61, 121–140.
- Keyes, C. L. M. (2005). The subjective well-being of America's youth. Toward a comprehensive assessment. *Adolescent and Family Health*, 4, 3–11.
- Lalli, M. (1992). Urban-related identity: Theory, measurement and empirical findings. *Journal of Environmental psychology*, 12, 285–303.
- Larson, J. S. (1993). The measurement of social well-being. *Social Indicators research*, 28, 285–296.
- Larson, R. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, 55, 170–183.
- Larson, R., & Verma, S. (1999). How children and adolescents spend time across the world, work, play and developmental opportunities. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125, 701–736.
- Long, D. A., & Perkins, D. (2003). Confirmatory factor analysis of the Sense of Community index and development of a brief SCI. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 31, 279–296.
- Mahoney, J. L., Stattin, H., & Lord, H. (2004). Unstructured youth recreation centre participation and antisocial behaviour development: Selection influences and the moderating role of antisocial peers. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 28, 553–560.
- Mc Millan, W. D., & Chavis, M. D. (1986). Sense of Community: A definition and a theory. *Journal of Community psychology*, 14, 6–22.

- Obst, P., Smith, S. G., & Zinkiewicz, L. (2002). An exploration of Sense of Community, part 3: Dimensions and predictors of psychological Sense of Community in geographical communities. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 30, 119–133.
- Obst, P., & White, K. M. (2004). Revisiting the Sense of Community index: A confirmatory factor analysis. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 32, 691–705.
- Perkins, D., Florin, P., Rich, R., Wandersman, A., & Chavis, D. M. (1990). Participation and the social and physical environment of residential blocks: Crime and community context. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 18, 631–655.
- Pretty, G. M. H. (2002). Young people's development of the community-minded self: Considering community identity, community attachment and Sense of Community. In T. Fisher, C. C. Sonn (Eds.), *Psychological Sense of Community: Research, applications, and implications* (pp. 183–203). New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Pretty, G. M. H., Conroy, C., Dugay, J., Fowler, K., & Williams, D. (1996). Sense of Community and its relevance to adolescents of all ages. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 24, 365–379.
- Prezza, M., Amici, M., Roberti, T., & Tedeschi, G. (2001). Sense of Community referred to the whole town: Its relations with neighbouring, loneliness, life satisfaction and area of residence. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 29, 29–52.
- Prezza, M., Costantini, S., Chiarolanza, V., & Di Marco, S. (1999). La scala italiana del senso di comunità. *Psicologia della salute*, 3, 135–158.
- Prezza, M., Pacilli, M. G., Alparone, F. R., Paoliello, A., & Ruggeri, M. R. (2004). Verso la costruzione di una scala multidimensionale del senso di comunità: Tappe e principali risultati. Relazione presentata a V Congresso Nazionale di Psicologia di Comunità, Palermo, 3–5 giugno.
- Prilleltensky, I., Nelson, G., & Peirson, L. (2001). The role of power and control in children's lives: An ecological analysis of pathways toward wellness, resilience, and problems. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 11, 143–158.
- Puddifoot, J. E., (1996). Some initial considerations in the measurement of community identity. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 24, 327–337.
- Puddifoot, J. E. (2003). Exploring "personal" and "shared" Sense of Community identity in Durham City, England. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 31, 87–106.
- Sarason, S. B. (1974). *The psychological Sense of Community: Prospects for a community psychology*. Cambridge: Brookline Books.
- Simon, B., Loewy, M., Sturmer, S., Weber, U., Freytag, P., Habig, C., Kampmeier, C., & Spahlinger, P. (1998). Collective identification and social movement participation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 74, 646–658.
- Teske, N. (1997). *Political activists in America: the identity construction model of political participation*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wandersman, A., & Florin, P., (2000). Citizen participation and community organizations. In J. Rappaport & E. Seidman (Eds.), *Handbook of community psychology*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Youniss, J., McLellan, J. A., & Yates, M. (1997). What we know about engendering civic identity. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 40, 620–631.
- Zani, B., Cicognani, E., & Albanesi, C. (2001). Adolescents' sense of community and feeling of unsafety in the urban environment. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 11(6), 475–489.

APPENDIX 1

The sense of community scale for adolescents.

Items	Source
'Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement'	
In this place, there are enough initiatives for young people	CA
In this place, it is easy to find information about things that interest young people	CA
In this place, young people can find many opportunities to amuse themselves	CA
This place gives me opportunities to do many different things	ISCS
There are many activities that young people can do in my town	NYI
In this place, there are many situations and initiatives which are able to involve young people like me	NYI
In this place, there are enough opportunities to meet other boys and girls	CA
'Support and emotional connection with peers'	
I spend a lot of time with other adolescents that live in this place	CA
Many of my real friends are young people that live in this town	NYI
I like to stay with other adolescents that live in this town	NYI
In this place, I feel I can share experiences and interests with other young people	NYI
I think I have a lot in common with other young people that live here	CA
In this place, there are people able to stay beside me if I need it	CA
If I need a little help, I can ask for it to someone who lives in my town	NYI
If I feel like talking I can generally find someone in my town to chat to	PSCS
There are people here that represent an important source of moral support for me	CA
In this place, it is not difficult to find someone that can give some advice if I have to take some decisions	NYI
'Support and emotional connection in the community'	
People in my town collaborate together	NYI
People in this place support each others	NYI
People in my town work together to improve things	NYI
Many people in this town are willing to help each other	NYI
In my town, people look for each other and get along well	NYI
People in my town are willing to share things	ISCS
'Sense of belonging'	
I think this is a good place to live in	SCI
This is a pretty town	ISCS
I feel like I belong to this town	ISCS
I feel safe here	ISCS
As compared to others my town has many advantages	UIS
Some of our local holidays and celebrations attract many people because they are very nice and well organised	CA
During local holidays and celebrations, I feel proud to live here	CA
I like to notice that when some local events are organised, many people participate and get involved	CA

(Continues)

APPENDIX 1 (Continued)

In this town, there are many places loved and appreciated by all inhabitants	CA
'Opportunity for influence'	
Honestly, I feel that if we engage more, we would be able to improve things for young people in this town	CA
If only we had the opportunity. I think that we could be able to organise something special for our town	CA
If the people here were to organise, they would have good chance of reaching their desired goals	ISCS
I think that people who live here could change things that are not properly working for the community	CA

Notes: ISCS, Italian Sense of Community Scale (Prezza et al., 1999); NYI, Neighbourhood Youth Inventory (Chipuer et al., 1999); UIS, Urban Identity Scale (Lalli, 1992); SCI, sense of community index (Perkins et al., 1990); PSCS, Psychological Sense of Community Scale (Glynn, 1981); CA, constructed by the authors.

APPENDIX 2A

Standardised regression weights for the five-factor confirmatory factor analyses ($N = 566$) of the sense of community scale for adolescents.

Items	SNOI	SECP	SEMC	B	OI
In this place, there are enough initiatives for young people	0.70				
In this place, it is easy to find information about things that interest young people	0.65				
In this place, young people can find many opportunities to amuse themselves	0.66				
This place gives me opportunities to do many different things	0.60				
There are many activities that young people can do in my town	0.60				
In this place, there are many situations and initiatives which are able to involve young people like me	0.61				
In this place, there are enough opportunities to meet other boys and girls	0.57				
I spend a lot of time with other adolescents that live in this place		0.59			
Many of my real friends are young people that live in this town		0.60			
I like to stay with other adolescents that live in this town		0.61			
In this place, I feel I can share experiences and interests with other young people		0.68			
I think I have a lot in common with other young people that live here		0.74			
In this place, there are people able to stay beside me if I need it		0.67			
If I need a little help, I can ask for it to someone who lives in my town		0.76			
If I feel like talking, I can generally find someone in my town to chat to		0.65			
There are people here that represent an important source of moral support for me		0.70			
In this place, it is not difficult to find someone that can give some advice if I have to take some decisions		0.70			
People in my town collaborate together			0.56		
People in this place support each other			0.53		
People in my town work together to improve things			0.71		
Many people in this town are willing to help each other			0.68		

In my town, people look for each other and get along well	0.69
People in my town are willing to share things	0.73
I think this is a good place to live in	
This is a pretty town	0.62
I feel like I belong to this town	0.64
I feel safe here	0.65
As compared to others, my town has many advantages	0.63
Some of our local holidays and celebrations attract many people because they are very nice and well organised	0.68
During local holidays and celebrations, I feel proud to live here	0.66
I like to notice that when some local events are organised, many people participate and get involved	0.64
In this town, there are many places loved and appreciated by all inhabitants	0.54
Honestly, I feel that if we engage more, we would be able to improve things for young people in this town	
If only we had the opportunity, I think that we could be able to organise something special for our town	0.50
If the people here were to organise, they would have good chance of reaching their desired goals	0.53
I think that people who live here could change things that are not properly working for the community	0.76
	0.58
	0.47

Notes: SNOI, satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement; SECP, support and emotional connection with peers; SEMC, support and emotional connection in the community; B, sense of belonging; OI, opportunity for influence.

APPENDIX 2B

Model fit statistics for confirmatory factor analyses of the sense of community scale for adolescents comparing seven uncorrelated-factor, seven correlated-factor and five correlated-factor solutions ($N=566$).

Measures of fit	Models		
	Seven-factors uncorrelated	Seven factors correlated	Five factors correlated
χ^2/gdl	5.615	2.943	2.653
RMR	0.294	0.089	0.070
GFI	0.685	0.857	0.879
AGFI	0.647	0.825	0.842
CFI	0.667	0.871	0.897
RMSEA	0.090	0.059	0.054