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Multiple Senses of Community: The Experience and Meaning of Community

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Running Head: The Experience and Meaning of Community

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## Abstract

The study intends to contribute to the debate on the meaning of community and sense of community, and to clarify the relationship between sense of community and civic and political participation. We interviewed 76 participants about their views and feelings about community. 47 were active members of political parties, neighborhood and cultural associations, and volunteers helping disadvantaged people. 29 had never been involved in any kind of social or political group. Results showed that: a) the experience of community emerging from participants' discourse is not remarkably different from the academic meaning of community; and b) the way individuals perceive community is linked both to sense of community, and to civic and political participation.

Key words: Sense of Community, Community Participation, Representation of Community

## Multiple Senses of Community: The Experience and Meaning of Community

The definition of the concept of community has proved to be a tricky issue in the social sciences. Although it is widely acknowledged that it is an ambiguous concept, and therefore unsuitable to serve as an analytic instrument, many sociologists, political scientists and community psychologists use it. An ongoing debate has taken place between opponents and supporters. The former insist on the necessity of getting rid of the concept because of its ambiguity and inappropriateness to contemporary society. According to this perspective, modernization erased the conditions which would enable community to form and persist, replacing informal primary ties, and social cohesion, with formal secondary ties, and social fragmentation. The latter strive to rehabilitate it on the ground that, notwithstanding its ambiguity, it expresses the emotional side of being together. From this point of view, the purpose served by small communities is still intact: individuals still seek high levels of interaction, common interests, identity, and shared values, and they are able to find them only in limited collectivities. One of the most successful rehabilitations of the term has possibly been provided by Zigmunt Bauman (2000) who has reutilized it to explain how the macro-level processes brought on by globalization, and characterized by enlargement, dissemination, and homogeneity, also imply micro-level processes, characterized by reduction, closure, and heterogeneity. From a different standpoint, communitarians such as McIntyre (1984) and Taylor (1989) have based their political views on the virtues of small collectivities. Finally, community psychologists have largely assumed the concept without questioning its implicit ambiguity.

On a theoretical level, the major critique presented by the notion of community consists in the fact that “community” implies the assumption of an undifferentiated

identity, and emphasizes unity instead of diversity, spontaneity instead of mediation, emotions instead of reasoning, cohesion instead of conflict, and stability instead of change (Young, 1990; Wiesenfeld, 1996). Defining the meaning of community seems to be, at present, virtually impossible, unless some specification of it is provided. A well-established consensus among social scientists can be found about the socially constructed nature of community, stemming from social interaction and negotiation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Cohen, 1985; Gusfield, 1975). This feature can account for the phenomenon of multiple belongings, that is the possibility for individuals to identify themselves as members of different communities, each of them fulfilling specific needs, even contradictory ones. The problems raised by the use of the notion of community are increased if the gap between *academic* meaning and *lay* meaning is not taken into account. As Puddifoot (1995; 1996) put it, people often think of a community as a very personal mental territory.

The same perplexities are engendered by the concept of sense of community, one of concepts most used by community psychologists. Sense of community (SOC) “fundamentally refers to an individual’s experience of community life” (Hyde & Chavis, 2007, p. 179). It was defined by Sarason as “the sense that one was part of a readily available mutually supportive network of relationship” (Sarason, 1974, p. 1). Sarason viewed the psychological sense of community to be the “overarching value by which to judge efforts to change any aspect of community functioning” (Sarason, 1974, p. 160). People need to feel this community membership, and any social change fostering it increases individual wellbeing and the quality of social life. Sarason did not refer explicitly to territorial community, and the sense of community definition applies also to relational and organizational settings (e. g. Burroughs & Eby; 1998; Heller,

1989; Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002). Nevertheless, empirical research primarily has investigated this concept inside different levels of territorial community, from the block to the whole city (see Brodsky, O'Campo, & Aronson, 1999; Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978; Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Chavis, 1990; Prezza, Pilloni, Morabito, Sersante, Alparone, & Giuliani, 2001; Puddifoot, 2003).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) offered a clearer and more theoretical model of SOC as made up of four dimensions (i.e., Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfillment of Needs, and Shared Emotional Connection). After nearly 20 years, McMillan and Chavis' model remains the primary theoretical anchorage for most studies on SOC. Recently, the model has undergone thorough and in-dept examinations, which did not support the four-component structure (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999; Long & Perkins, 2003; Obst et al., 2002). Though several authors agree that sense of community should be a multidimensional concept, there is still no agreement on the identification of its components (Long & Perkins, 2003; Obst et al., 2002; Puddifoot, 1995; Tartaglia, 2006). Moreover, as Brodsky and colleagues (Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Brodsky, Loomis, & Marx, 2002) put it, SOC should be considered as placed on a continuum (positive-neutral-negative), and as simultaneously attached to different community settings (of different nature, and size). Finally, qualitative investigations of SOC (Pretty, Conroy, Dugay, Fowler, & Williamson, 1996; Rapley & Pretty, 1999) have indicated that the academic construction of SOC does not always represent the experience and the understanding that people have of community, and that the expression "sense of community" is opaque in members' discourse. In the final analysis, it seems reasonable to consider SOC a *shared narrative* (Mankowski & Rappaport, 1995).

## Sense of community and participation

The importance of SOC comes from its implications for planning and social intervention. As predicted by Sarason (1974), sense of community is related to various indexes of quality of daily life, such as life satisfaction (Prezza & Costantini, 1998), mental, physical and social wellbeing (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986), perception of safety and security (Perkins & Taylor, 1996), and even individual ability to use problem-focused coping strategies (Bachrach & Zautra, 1985).

In addition, many studies found SOC positively related to social and political participation (see among others: Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993; Brodsky et al., 1999; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Florin & Wandersman, 1984; Kingston, Mitchell, Florin, & Stevenson, 1999; Obst et al., 2002; Prezza et al., 2001; Wenger, 1998). Nevertheless, although SOC results closely intertwined with participation, the direction of the relation is unclear. According to Levine and Perkins (1987), SOC and participation develop in parallel: participation leads to a greater sense of community, which in turn leads to more participation. Moreover, in some cases SOC can be detrimental to collective action. If, on the one hand, high levels of SOC can increase ingroup cohesion and positive self-image, therefore fostering collective strategies aimed at change – as suggested by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) – minority groups in segregated conditions with a strong SOC can internalize social stigmas, and develop a negative collective identity (Fisher & Sonn, 1999; 2003; Sonn & Fisher, 1998). In analyzing the relationship between SOC and participation, it is important to note that many types of participation can take place, varying in activities, aims, and effort required. For instance, *instrumental* and *expressive* participation may have different relationships to SOC, or to its sub-dimensions. The former is specifically



goal oriented, and is very sensitive to the efficacy of the action undertaken, and to the influence it can or cannot exert on the social context. The latter is basically aimed at expressing belonging and common values, and thus it is more tightly linked to membership and emotional connection. In the literature it is also customary to distinguish between *political* and *social* (or civic) participation. Just to mention a few examples, political participation includes behaviors such as voting, campaigning, signing a petition, boycotting, and taking part in a sit-in or a demonstration, whereas social participation encompasses behaviors such as volunteering, organizing cultural events, or mobilizing to defend an area (e.g. one's neighborhood) or to promote the quality of services. From a more comprehensive point of view, it seems appropriate to differentiate one form from another, according both to the structural and to the psychosocial aspects of participation. This operation can definitely enable more subtle analysis of participation's relationship with SOC.

### Goals

Based on the considerations set forth above, the present study has three goals.

1. Contributing to the debate on the meanings of "community" and "sense of community". To achieve this goal, it was decided to use the representations of ordinary people as a starting point.
2. Critically reconsidering the McMillan and Chavis' (1986) SOC components, and comparing them to those emerging from members' discourse.
3. Examining the relationship between community, SOC and different forms of participation.

## Method

### *Participants*

Based on the assumption that many types of participation can take place, varying in activities, aims, and effort required, four different groups were selected: (a) political parties; (b) groups of volunteers helping disadvantaged people; (c) cultural associations organizing public debates, exhibitions, artistic performances, etc.; (d) neighborhood associations. In addition, we recruited individuals who had never been involved in any kind of social or political group. Participants were extracted from a larger sample who had been selected for a survey investigating the relationship between SOC and civic participation (Tartaglia et al., 2004). The survey was carried out on a sample composed of a total of 731 participants: 414 living in Turin a city in the North-West of Italy (900.000 inhabitants ) and 317 in Lecce, a town in the South of Italy (90.000 inhabitants). Participants were contacted by selecting several blocks within four neighborhoods of Turin and five in Lecce and asking residents for their cooperation. Within each city different neighborhoods were selected in order to represent the whole city. Both peripheral and central areas of the cities were selected. For each city, the total number of participants was parceled out among the residents of the main peripheral and central neighborhoods, so that a balanced sample (by sex, age and neighborhood of residence) was selected in each of the three cities. Of the participants, 46.2% were male and 52.5% female, and the average age was 42.24 years (S.D. = 13.77). The majority of the participants were workers ( $N = 452$ , 63.5%), but there were also students ( $N = 64$ , 9.0%), retired people ( $N = 73$ , 10.3%), and a small percentage of housewives ( $N = 37$ , 5.2%) and unemployed people ( $N = 29$ , 4.1%). There were 19 missing responses. As far as education is concerned, the majority were high school graduates ( $N = 296$ ,

42.0%) followed by college graduates ( $N = 251, 35.7\%$ ) and people with a lower level of education ( $N = 157, 22.3\%$ ). Missing responses were 27. Participants were administered the Italian Sense of Community Scale (Prezza, Costantini, Chiarolanza & Di Marco, 1999), a unifactorial scale composed of 26 items (e.g. “I like the neighborhood in which I live”; “This neighborhood gives me an opportunity to do a lot of different things”; “Many people in this neighborhood are willing to give help if somebody needs it”; “It would take a lot for me to move away from this neighborhood”). In the study, the scale showed good internal coherence (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .84$ ); the mean score was 48.28 (min 21 – max 69) and the standard deviation 9.35.

When they had been contacted for the survey, participants had also been asked to declare their willingness to be re-contacted to take part in an open-ended interview exploring the subjective experience of community. Seventysix participants accepted to participate in the interview. Of the participants 55 were from Turin and 21 from Lecce; 59.2% were men and 40.8% women; the average age is 47.2 years (S.D. = 15.12). The majority were workers ( $N = 40, 58.7\%$ ), but there were also students ( $N = 6, 8.0\%$ ), retired people ( $N = 13, 17.1\%$ ), and a small percentage of housewives ( $N = 3, 3.9\%$ ) and unemployed people ( $N = 3, 3.9\%$ ). As far as the educational level is concerned, 28 participants were high school graduates (37.8%), 32 were college graduates (45.9%) and 12 had a lower level of education (16.2%). Missing responses were 2. The majority were active members of cultural associations ( $N=10$ ), political parties ( $N=14$ ), volunteer groups ( $N=14$ ), and neighborhood associations ( $N=9$ ). The others ( $N=29$ ) were not engaged in any social or political group, nor had they been in the past. As in the larger sample, also in this group the Italian Sense of Community Scale showed good internal

coherence (Cronbach's alpha =.87); the mean score was 66.44 (min 39 – max 88) and the standard deviation 12.55.

As showed in Table 1 the group of participants available for the interview was not representative of the larger sample: they were older, more educated, and showed on the average higher SOC scores. Nevertheless, it was not a goal of the study to generalize the outcome of the qualitative investigation to the survey sample.

### *Procedure*

The open-ended semi-structured interview was aimed at exploring the concept of community: its meanings and connotations, as well as the empirical settings they referred to, and potential correlates, such as sense of belonging, rootedness, and ideal models of community. Interviewers firstly asked participants to describe what they have in mind when they thought of “community” and also to specify which community they were referring to.

Participants were then asked to focus on the six following topics: (a) the area they lived in, if they would define this place as a community, and why or why not; (b) their perception of the area, the activities that take place in it, and the elements (persons and objects) they think it is composed of; (c) the value (importance) of living in the area, the feelings of attachment or detachment, and the reasons for their opinions; (d) the meaning they were likely to attribute to the expression “sense of community”; (e) the emotions, thoughts, and behaviors related to sense of community; (f) their views on the characteristics of what they think a “good community” is, or should be.

Questions were deliberately formulated at a very general level, and phrased in an open-ended format, the main aim of the interview being to make participants express

their opinions and feelings unconstrained. Four interviewers (two in Lecce and two in Turin) were trained to probe each single topic, and asked to change the order of the questions according to the responses of participants, so that they could follow and support the participants' discourse.

Interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and merged into a single text, composed of 130,387 occurrences, and 9,321 different lexical units (average frequency = 14). Occurrences are quantities which result from the computation of how many times (frequencies) a single lexical unit occurs within a corpus. Lexical units are words, or multi-words (two or more words that stand for just one meaning), as they appear in the corpus. Words whose frequency was equal to or lower than 3, and "meaningless" words such as pronouns, articles, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions, were removed. Verbs, nouns and adjectives were reduced to their common lexical root. Once these procedures were completed, the resulting text was composed of 1,260 lexical units, and 3,115 segments (strings of words into which the text was divided). We grouped responses through a descending cluster analysis (by means of Alceste 4.6 software). This technique is based on lexical co-occurrences within strings of words (or segments) (Reinert, 1983), and it permits distinguishing semantic classes, each of which is characterized by a distinctive vocabulary. Through this technique, we were able to identify a variety of community images which were shared by groups of participants. We analyzed the most salient words and segments composing each cluster--i.e. those which showed the highest  $\chi^2$  value--according to a qualitative approach, aimed at extracting the underlying core theme. This operation enabled us to label each cluster emphasizing the most prominent component.

The software we used enabled us also to test the association between clusters and particular subgroups of participants. We selected subgroups according to the type of group participants belonged to (political, cultural, neighborhood, volunteerism, and no group), and level of SOC (high, medium, and low). SOC scores were grouped in three categories (low, medium and high) using the 33rd and the 66th percentile of the frequency distribution as division points. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of relationships between SOC and representations of community, we also searched interviews in order to highlight representations of community in participants with low vs. high levels of SOC.

Finally, a correspondence analysis of the contingency table lexical units x clusters enabled us to explore relationships between clusters. Like all factorial analysis techniques, correspondences analysis allows the extraction of new variables (i.e., the factors) through summarizing in an organized way the significant information. In geometrical terms, each factor sets up a spatial dimension--that can be represented as an axis line--whose center is the value "0", and that develops in a bipolar way towards the negative (-) and the positive (+) ends, so that the objects placed on opposite poles are the most different.

## Results

### *Clusters description*

The cluster analysis resulted in five clusters. Each cluster is characterized by a set of distinctive words and strings of words which identify its main features and marks it. Each word and string has a chi-square value indicating the strength of its association to a cluster. We labeled each cluster according not only the meaning expressed by the

words and strings showing the highest chi-square value, but also according to the global meaning expressed by the whole set of distinctive words and strings. A comprehensive view was therefore granted. Based on the considerations set forth above, cluster 1, which is associated with interviewees who were not involved in any form of participation, was named *shared community*. This cluster groups 270 strings of words, covering 13.0% of the whole text. It illustrates a representation of community based on common rules, reciprocal respect, and mutual understanding. It evokes the idea of interacting people who share common objectives and ideals. The terms *rules* ( $\chi^2$  226.93), *share* ( $\chi^2$  119.17), *respect* ( $\chi^2$  90.10), *common* ( $\chi^2$  73.29), *ideals* ( $\chi^2$  77.89), *understand* ( $\chi^2$  52.58), and *interact* ( $\chi^2$  36.41) are among the terms with the highest chi-square value in this cluster. On the whole, it seems to represent conception of the “good” community, in which similarities and cohesion prevail rather than diversity and conflict. In this cluster, for example, one respondent (female, not involved in any group) referred to community as follows:

You know, it's something that you can find at different levels. It could mean just living in the same area, but to me it means that you have values, ideals, or goals to share, and this common ground is what make people collaborate. [Community] is something you can share... [...] You can have people living in the same physical environment but no community, if they don't share projects, and expectations... I don't mean executive projects, just desires, and imagination. Personally I think sharing is the key word, and sharing means having relationships... so you have to take for granted that there must be someone who wants to share... (int. n. 10).

Sharing can occur at different levels: values, life styles, political principles, and relationships, but sharing does not necessarily imply that community erases individuality and agency. As a participant (male, not involved in any groups) put it:

Belonging means respecting common rules, not blind obedience... maybe the risk is accepting rules without internalizing them... a too strong identification with the community means losing one's own individuality, but community is an interaction between individuals and community: individuals must not overcome community, nor overwhelmed, and vice versa... (int. n. 20).

Cluster 2, composed of 242 strings of words equal to 11.7% of the whole text, was labeled *affective community* because it underlines the importance of bonds, the role of emotional aspects, and identification. The terms *trust* ( $\chi^2$  69.41), *feel* ( $\chi^2$  51.81), *tie* ( $\chi^2$  49.84), *affect* ( $\chi^2$  36.88), and *identify* ( $\chi^2$  32.31) are among the terms with the highest chi-square value in this cluster. This cluster is associated with interviewees who were members of neighborhood associations. According to one of the participants in this cluster, male, active member of a neighborhood organization:

To me community is important because it is part of what I am, of my identity... (int. n. 21).

Participants in cluster 2, similar to participants in cluster 1, based their definition of community on the concept of sharing. However, they specifically referred to the



emotional bonds, as reflected in the following quotation, from a female activist in a neighborhood association:

I feel attached to my community because I know the stories of people, and I love all the people I know, so if they get hurt, I'm hurt... Something bad happening to someone I know it's bad for me too, because there are affective ties, that to me are the most important thing... after all, this is what makes a community united.

(int. n. 25).

In addition to emphasizing affective ties to their community, interviewees mentioned problematic, negative aspects of relationships. Terms such as *problem* ( $\chi^2$  69.41), *negative* ( $\chi^2$  30.68), and *critical* ( $\chi^2$  30.27) are among the terms with the highest chi-square value in this cluster. Participants felt that sense of belonging is generally decreasing, and that this shift is resulting in shallow interpersonal relationships, as pointed out by a female member of a neighborhood association:

...You know, there's this couldn't-care-less attitude... only when something concerns you personally then you say 'Oh, but maybe if we all collaborate...', otherwise there's just apathy (int. n. 43).

Cluster 4 is distinctive in its focus on the political and cultural dimensions of community. This cluster gathers 352 strings of words covering 27.2% of the whole text. It includes terms referring to citizens' awareness of needs and rights, social commitment, and social action. The terms *politics* ( $\chi^2$  105.05), *project* ( $\chi^2$  52.13), *right*

( $\chi^2$  51.02), *conscious* ( $\chi^2$  37.63), *citizen* ( $\chi^2$  31.49), and *need* ( $\chi^2$  30.64) are among the words with the highest chi-square value in this cluster. In order to highlight these aspects of community cluster 4 was named *participatory community*. It includes a significantly higher number of responses from participants involved in neighborhood and cultural associations. The nature of this cluster is reflected in the following excerpt, drawn from the discourse of a woman involved in a neighborhood association:

We all should do what we can to improve our community, and make it better. Civic behaviors, that's really important, and all the people who engage themselves, and behave in a civic way deserve to be part of the community (int. n. 9).

The concept of participation seems to be intertwined with the concept of community, and even if civic engagement has to be encouraged, and promoted, being a community implies that members undertake action to better their lives and solve common problems. This point is further highlighted by a man from a cultural association:

You can't do anything without participation... if more individuals participate, then they become a community, but if they don't, they're not a community... because they lack the idea of helping each other, and solidarity (int. n. 51).

Cluster 3, composed of 431 strings of words covering 17.0% of the whole text, represents the *ordinary community*, as it is perceived by individuals in everyday life. Participants with high levels of SOC, and members of cultural associations and

volunteer groups showed strong relationships with this cluster. Words such as *home* ( $\chi^2$  87.57), *going out* ( $\chi^2$  62.56), *going around* ( $\chi^2$  39.02), *street* ( $\chi^2$  38.59), *husband* ( $\chi^2$  35.56), *people* ( $\chi^2$  34.32), and *car* ( $\chi^2$  30.64) are among the terms showing the highest chi-square value in this cluster. Key elements are the house, the family, the block, and more generally the residential area in which people spend their lives, and their normal social activities and routines, as reported by one of the participants in this cluster (male, member of a neighborhood association, high SOC):

We meet in the streets, in the square, we take possession of open spaces, which is the most safe... you don't need police, or control... I've been living here, and working, for 13 years, and there's my studio, and the building yard where I go every day it's just over there, 500 meters away. I don't even use a bike, I just walk (int. n. 50).

The sense of familiarity which is derived from perceiving community as the background for daily routines was highlighted by a woman (active in a cultural association) with high SOC, who emphasized that:

I've got everything I need within reach, I have the possibility to walk, to go to a movie, or to an exhibition, just walking, and I like that because I always know what's going on in this place... In the streets there are signs, you know, for example to explain that a bus route has changed. To me this is life, real life... this is the way I 'feel' being in this community (int. n. 56).

A male volunteer advocating for helping disadvantaged people described community using a vivid image:

The bus stopping every few minutes near my house, and the traffic in the morning, at rush hour, and honks, because they're all late, and then the market, every third Sunday of the month... (int. n. 76).

Cluster 5 includes a higher number of responses of people uninvolved in any form of participation, of politic activists, and of individuals with low a level of SOC. This cluster groups 715 strings of words, corresponding to 35.4% of the whole text. It depicts community as an organized container of places, whose purpose is to enable residents to achieve their practical aims. Words such as *neighborhood* and *neighbors* ( $\chi^2$  171.66), *area* ( $\chi^2$  161.21), *parish* ( $\chi^2$  74.80), *church* ( $\chi^2$  42.78), *market* ( $\chi^2$  32.02), and *landmark* ( $\chi^2$  30.62) are among the terms showing the highest chi-square value in this cluster. It was therefore labeled as *organized community*. Participants in this cluster provided descriptions of neighborhoods and of the large urban environment, emphasizing, as suggested by the following statements made by two women (both uninvolved in civic or political engagement), that what transforms a place into a community is the possibility of using the environment to satisfy material, and social needs:

It's a community because there are special places for people to meet such as churches, and bars, and shops, which attract people and make them meet each other... and the parks also, places where people can go and spend their time with others...(int. n. 29).

I think a community is made up of a lot of things, churches, clinics, houses, shops, services, everything...these places make the area where we live in a community... (int. n. 45).

### *Relationship between clusters*

The two-dimension graphic representation engendered by the correspondence analysis shows similarities and differences between clusters, in terms of proximity and distance (Figure 1). The first axis explains 34.56% of the inertia (i.e., variance, in correspondence analysis), the second 25.59%.

On the first axis are clusters 1, 2, and 4, all emphasizing the collective side of community--viewed as an entity in which people share feelings and aims. This is in contrast to clusters 3, and 5, which prioritize practical aspects of community life, rooted in specific physical settings. Consequently, the right pole was interpreted as representing the symbolic function of community, perceived in its general features, and the left pole as representing its practical function, perceived on a very concrete micro-level. Because axes represent a continuum, it is impossible to make a clear-cut division between clusters, and partial overlaps between them exist. Thus, the fact that some clusters focus more on routines and practical aspects does not imply that they do not include any references to collective and social aspects of community, but only that they focus less on the latter, and vice versa. The position of clusters on the axes helps to emphasize what characteristics are shared in common. Clusters 3 and 5, for instance, both refer to everyday life activities carried out by people in their area of residence (including social activities), and clusters 1, 2, and 4 all reflect collective sharing on an

affective, relational, or political level.

Following the same interpretative pattern, individuals involved in neighborhood and cultural associations appear closer to the symbolic pole, whereas political activists and volunteers are closer to the practical pole.

The extremities of the second axis are characterized by different levels of sense of community: low levels are displayed at the top, and medium and high levels at the bottom. Low levels of SOC are associated with cluster 5, including political activists, and individuals who have never been involved in any social or political group. On the other hand, medium, and high levels of SOC are respectively associated with clusters 2 and 3, encompassing participants who volunteer, and those who are active members of cultural associations.

#### *Representations of community and sense of community*

We searched interviews for information highlighting distinctive representations of community among participants with low vs. high levels of SOC. Participants scoring low on SOC (N=13; 7 involved in political, cultural, neighborhood, and volunteerism groups; 6 not involved in any group), generally reported negative perceptions of their community, both at the environmental and at the social level, and often showed feelings of detachment. They complained, as did a man volunteering to help disadvantaged people, about apathy, and selfishness of people:

On a socio-political level, I have bad feelings... we all live in a selfish society, where appearance overcomes substance, and money overcomes values. But in a community, all are supposed to contribute, even if the community doesn't deserve

it ... Instead of shaking hands, people prefer to pay, and instead of having a great time with a friend they prefer to work so they can make more money ... In my group, when we tell people we are volunteers, they are surprised (int. n. 15).

A similar concern was expressed by a female member of a neighborhood association:

Indifference prevails... we call these people community because they live in the same place, and work in the same place, they come across each other in the streets, but when there are problems to cope with... well, then there's indifference... Probably this is also why I don't feel really attached to my community, now less than before, because so many people praise me for what I do and say 'Well done!', but I'm sick and tired of those who just talk and do nothing... the bystanders (int. n. 43).

Detachment and a low sense of belonging were mentioned by several participants:

Honestly, this neighborhood is not that important to me, I don't perceive a distinctive identity... I don't feel attached, because I don't think there's a community there... I think these days people tend to emphasize too much the importance of community... and how we have to protect communities, but I'm afraid that this accentuation on community is detrimental for personal identity (man, member of cultural association, int. n. 23)

I don't know this neighborhood well, it seems to me it's a place where there's no social life... It only serves me to sleep at night, and that's it... I'm not attached to this place, I think my roots are somewhere else (man, uninvolved, int. n. 37).

Participants reporting high levels of SOC (N=31; 16 involved in political, cultural, neighborhood, and volunteerism groups; 15 not involved in any group) showed mixed views of community. Nevertheless, even those who were aware of problems that affected the community reported positive feelings and a sense of belonging. On the whole, these participants seemed to be more satisfied with their community than participants with low SOC scores. The following quotations depict how participants with high levels of SOC described community and relationships within it:

This is a very complicated community, with many problems, but I feel attached to it, I have been living here for 37 years and now that I have to leave it I'm in crisis. Maybe I'm romantic, but I can tell I'll miss this community, in the positive and in the negative parts. This community makes people improve, and enabled me to know many things, and many people (woman, uninvolved, int. n. 2).

This is a real community, there's a network I can rely on. If I need something, I turn to the stationer... In some sense this is a community, because people help each other, picking up others' children from school, for example. If I meet someone in the street I wave at him... I mean, there's always somebody to call if I'm on the spot (woman, uninvolved, int. n. 3).



I feel good in here, I've been traveling a lot, visited many places, but here there's still a sense of belonging... of course, that means also that who's not part of the community is 'out'... I'm very attached to this place, I've had the opportunity to move but I chose to stay. I feel very good because I know where to go, I know it in detail, I'm part of it, that's easy (woman, uninvolved, int. n. 10).

To conclude, the comparison between representations and experiences reported by participants with low and high SOC suggested that the former were particularly aware of the problems that affected community at different levels, which resulted in dissatisfaction, and detachment. This seemed to apply to individuals involved in one of the community groups selected for the study, as well as for individuals who did not belong to any group. High SOC participants, though not always depicting community in positive terms, appeared to appreciate at least some aspects of it, and reported feelings of belonging and attachment.

## Discussion

The experience of community emerging from members' discourses is not remarkable different from the meaning of community delineated by researchers. The "community" individuals live in is conceptualized as a tangible, physical entity, but also, and above all, as a relational and affective universe. Physical rootedness and social bonding are the two dimensions emerging from the discourses analyzed, which have also been identified as the two components of community attachment (Riger & Lavrakas, 1981).

The examination of the clusters' contents shows that all the components and the

functions that the literature associates with the community are mentioned: the symbolic function, which provides members with shared codes, representations and values, as well as the pragmatic function. The last one fulfills members' practical needs, and serves as a well-organized structure to which they can turn for dealing with both ordinary and extraordinary tasks. It is worth noticing that several representations of the community emerge, varying according to the type of participation individuals are involved in, and the intensity of their SOC.

The examination of meanings attached to SOC supports the theoretical model proposed by McMillan and Chavis (1986). Nevertheless, results suggest that the components can overlap and articulate with one another in ways that are different than those provided by the theory. A look at the lexical composition of the clusters shows that all four components of SOC are covered. The sense of *belonging* component is clearly expressed in clusters 1 and 2, whose contents highlight that sharing norms, rules, interest, and ideals represents the basis of social ties, so that membership is mainly defined by the use of the same symbolic code. The *shared emotional connection* component, emphasizing affective ties among members, results in reciprocal trust and "we-ness", as specifically captured by the second of the clusters described. Belonging and shared emotional connection appear to be tightly intertwined, and not always distinguishable from one other. The above mentioned spatial proximity of clusters 1 and 2 (see Figure 1) indicates marked similarities between the two components. The *influence* component is evident in cluster 4, namely in the citizen participation through which a community change is made possible. It is worth stressing that influence has a social rather than individual connotation, and manifests itself in specific behaviors. Finally, the *integration and fulfillment of needs* component is present, though with

different traits, in clusters 3 and 5; in daily routines and social life, and in opportunities to use the community, seeking satisfaction of material and relational needs.

The images of the community, articulated as the place in which individuals spend their daily lives, vary according to the type of participation members are involved in. Individuals involved in political forms of participation and those volunteering to provide health and social assistance to disadvantaged members are inclined to stress the pragmatic sides of community. In contrast, individuals who belong to neighborhood or cultural associations tend to emphasize the identity and collective sides of community. This distinction recalls the instrumental vs. expressive participation dichotomy, which seems to apply to our outcomes. The first, achievement oriented, aims at undertaking effective actions, which can yield visible outcomes. The second, identity oriented, is intended to assert a collective subjectivity, and a shared vision. Our results indicate that both political activism and volunteerism fall in the instrumental category: They are both focused on specific problems and they address them using a task oriented strategy. On the contrary, neighborhood and cultural activism fall in the expressive category: The meaning individuals assign to these types of participation is associated with their need for belonging, and sharing. Of course, the use of this dichotomy helps to capture a difference, but it does not imply that instrumental participation is non relational, or that expressive participation is goalless. The distinction between these two forms is fluid because participation may take on a more expressive or instrumental bent--or both--depending on the situation (Swaroop & Morenoff, 2006).

As our data suggest, not all the individuals who actively take part in community life show high levels of sense of community: we found, indeed, that political activism is associated with low SOC. This outcome suggests that it is not necessarily true that a

weak sense of belonging to the community is likely to result in apathy, and unconcern, or in delegating to others the responsibility for solving social problems. On the contrary, low sense of community can be an indicator of a very critical view of the context individuals are embedded in. It can be framed as a consequence of an acute perception of problems, discontent, and injustice, which might serve as motives to undertake social action, as claimed by deprivation theory (Stouffer, Suchman, De Vinney, Star, & Williams, 1949) and more recently by Klandermans' (1997) model of protest.

In summary, the study showed that even if the gap between academic and lay meanings can be bridged, the complexity of narratives cannot easily be reduced to simple, unidimensional models. In fact, one of the main implications of the study is that a complex pattern of relationships linking participation, sense of community, and perception of community exist. Individuals involved in different types of groups show different levels of SOC, and variations in SOC are associated with different representations of community. Though we are not able to propose a conclusive, definitive model, it seems that the way individuals perceive community affects both sense of community, and participation. At the same time, specifying different modes of participation has proved fruitful in understanding the relationships of social, cultural, and political commitment to sense of community.

In conclusion, the major findings of our study concern the relationships between three variables: the perceived image of the community, the feelings that people associate to that image (resulting in their SOC), and their participatory (or non participatory) behaviors. Firstly, our results strengthen the necessity of exploring the personal territory that people have in mind when they are asked to verbally report on their feelings about the community. Indeed, it is apparent from our investigation that

SOC cannot be definitely separated from the meanings individuals attach to their community. Secondly, findings suggest that the relationship between SOC and participation is more complex than it has been hitherto depicted: It has often been assumed that high levels of SOC favor participatory behaviors, which in turn increase SOC (Berry et al., 1993; Levine & Perkins, 1987), and consequently that low level of SOC are related to feeling of detachment, apathy and unconcern. Our study suggests that what makes a difference between active and inactive citizens is not simply their SOC, but the main frame underlying their representation of community: In some cases, it seems that weak feeling of SOC can be uninfluential, or at least that they can be counterbalanced by a state of critical awareness, which serves as sufficient anchorage for action.

Our study also highlights the value of qualitative investigations of community and SOC, and the possibility of approaching these constructs as “culturally situated” narratives. Our research has some limits. Among them, it is worth remarking that we are not able to generalize the outcomes of the qualitative investigation to the larger group of participants who had been involved in the survey on the relationship between SOC and civic participation. Although it was not in the scope of the study to extend the findings concerning the group who agreed to the follow-up interview to the participants who did not, we are aware that the contribution to the literature on SOC would have been sounder have we had the possibility to select a representative sample for our qualitative study.

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Tables and figures

Table 1.

*Gender, age, work status, education and SOC in the survey sample and in the interviews sample*

		N=731	N=76
Gender	Men	46.2	59.2
	Women	52.5	40.8
Age (Mean)		42.24 years	47.2 years
Work status	Employed	63.5	58.7
	Unemployed	4.1	3.9
	Students	9.0	8.0
	Retired	10.3	17.1
	Housewives	5.2	3.9
Education	High school	42.0	37.8
	College	35.7	45.9
	Primary education	22.3	16.2
SOC (Mean)		48.28	66.44
SOC (St. Dev.)		9.35	12.55

## Figure captions

*Figure 1.* Correspondence analysis

Figure.1

