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Public Involvement: How to Encourage Citizen Participation

TERRI MANNARINI[1]*, ANGELA FEDI[2] and STEFANIA TRIPPETTI[1]
[1]*University of Salento, Italy*
[2]*University of Turin, Italy*

ABSTRACT

The study was aimed at identifying the impact of a pool of variables on the willingness of the participants in five consultative arenas (Open Space Technology) to become involved in future experiences of civic engagement. The study also intended to verify whether such willingness varied among subgroups of participants. In total, 194 participants (49.5% men, 50.5% women; mean age ¼ 37.04) were recruited during five OSTs held in Italy between May and November 2008 and asked to fill in a questionnaire composed of the following measures: perceived costs and benefits, emotions, sense of community, trust in institutions and need for cognitive closure. Findings suggested that the setting-related variables—namely the perception of costs and benefits and the arousal of positive feelings—were more influential than the community-related variables, such as sense of community and trust in institutions. Indications and suggestions for the design, implementation and evaluation of participatory settings were discussed.

Key words: citizen participation; public involvement; deliberation

INTRODUCTION

According to community psychology and community development literature, citizen participation is a positive event both for people and institutions (Montero, 2004), as well as for society at large (Clary & Snyder, 2002). Citizen participation plays a relevant role in many community settings, ranging from work places to health programs, urban planning programmes and public policies (Wandersman & Florin, 2000). It constitutes the basis of the processes aimed at improving the environmental, social and economical conditions of a community, therefore enhancing the quality of life of its members. In addition, general participation can serve as a buffer to stress and contribute to social cohesion and to both individual and collective

well-being (Cantor & Sanderson, 1999). Generally speaking, commitment in achieving personally relevant aims strengthens agency (Cantor, 1990) and self-efficacy, and consequentially generates psychological empowerment. Moreover, participation can increase social well-being (Keyes, 1998) by reinforcing the perception of individuals and groups as socially integrated and accepted and by strengthening their belief in being beneficial to themselves and society. In particular, according to Kagan (2007), bottom-up participation is the most influential form of action that can foster well-being and change the material circumstances of people's lives.

This is likely to happen because of the occurrence of several processes (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000; Campbell & Murray, 2004): (a) conscientisation, through which the group's awareness increases and the development of critical thinking is promoted; (b) re-negotiation of collective social identity and associated views of the world that increase the likelihood of adopting healthier behaviours as people develop shared understanding and information; and (c) empowerment achieved by the reinforcement of peoples' confidence and ability to take control of their lives. Here, we focus on citizen consultation practices, also defined as public involvement practices. Although consultation has been classified as a tokenistic form of participation (Arnstein, 1969), it cannot be denied that it allows citizens to have a voice and be heard by institutions. Moreover, even if consultative arenas can be regarded as top-down forms of participation, they share the capacity of promoting critical thinking and shared understanding with the bottom-up modes. The vast majority of the practices of public involvement, although they do not give citizens the power to make a decision, constitute a powerful tool for shaping responsible and effective public policies that can change the material circumstances of people's lives.

Specifically, we intend to focus on the factors that favour the willingness of participants in consultative arenas to get involved in future experiences of civic engagement. Among such factors, we included some of the psychosocial variables that research in community participation and cooperation has regarded as potential determinants of past and future participation—namely sense of community and trust in institutions—but we also took into account the role of an individual cognitive variable (need for cognitive closure) and the nature and quality—in terms of associated costs, benefit and emotions—of the subjective participatory experience in a consultative arena.

Costs and benefits

To make participation work, a strong motivation is needed. Classically, studies have used the cost/benefit model (Olson, 1965) to understand individual motivations for collective action, viewing the decision to act

collectively as the outcome of a rational evaluation of drawbacks and advantages. Costs of participation are usually related to energy level, economic loss and time consumption, but also to possible physical risks (e.g. clashes with the police), social isolation and stigma. Benefits include not only material advantages but also psychological and social ones: satisfaction (Hirschmann, 1982), sense of belonging, and social status rewards (Kelly & Breinlinger, 1996). More recently, a dual-path model has been proposed (Simon et al., 1998; Stürmer & Simon, 2004), according to which the decision to participate can be the result of a cost/benefit estimate or the outcome of identification with the group/movement. In the second pathway, sense of belonging and processes involved in the construction of a shared collective identity serve as the main motivational factors for participation.

Emotions

Affective and reactive emotions are integral parts of our social activities and enter participation at every single stage (Jaspers, 1998). Emotions have been mainly studied in protest cases (Van Zomeren, Spears, Fischer, & Leach, 2004), and specific attention has been paid to negative moods as frustration, dissatisfaction and anger, all emotions able to prompt voice behaviours. Nevertheless, these feelings can also result in helplessness and passivity if a sufficient quota of optimism is not available (Klandermans, 1989): Emotions such as loyalty, respect, satisfaction, interest, pride and even happiness can positively frame participatory settings.

Trust in institutions

Although controversial outcomes have emerged from studies on the relationship between perceived trust in institutions and participation, evidences support the thesis that citizen participation can only be developed on the basis of a reciprocal trust between people and institutions (Alford, 2001; Huseby, 2000; Orren, 1997; Uslaner & Brown, 2005). In addition, research on the issue of cooperation with authorities (e.g. De Cremer & Van Vugt, 1999; Van Vugt & De Cremer, 1999) identified trust in authority as one of the two most important psychological antecedents of collaborative forms of participation (the other being procedural fairness).

Sense of community

Sense of community (SOC) is related to mental, physical and social wellbeing (Chavis & Newbrough, 1986), and it ‘can also serve as a catalyst for community change’ (Hyde & Chavis, 2007, p. 179). Many studies have found that SOC positively correlates with social and civic participation (see, among others: Berry, Portney, & Thomson, 1993; Brodsky, O’Campo, & Aronson, 1999; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Florin & Wandersman, 1984; Kingston, Mitchell, Florin, & Stevenson,

1999; Ohmer, 2007; Obst, Smith, & Zinkiewicz, 2002; Prezza, Amici, Roberti, & Tedeschi, 2001; Wenger, 1998).

Need for cognitive closure

Need for cognitive closure (NCC) is definable as an unspecific need for clear and unambiguous responses to events and objects (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). In everyday language, NCC corresponds to the desire for stable and secure knowledge, as opposed to the tendency to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty. NCC can increase or decrease according to the circumstances, as benefits associated with either closure or openness become more salient. For instance, under time pressure, or when information processing is particularly demanding, closure is preferred to openness. On the contrary, when individuals are afraid to make mistakes or have a personal motive for being accurate and cautious, openness is chosen. Although principle participatory settings characterised by uncertainty and heterogeneity should be scarcely attractive to individuals with high NCC, and conversely intriguing for people with low NCC, several setting variables can make NCC levels vary, as they contribute to make participants feeling safe and relaxed or threatened and tense (Mannarini, 2009).

GOALS AND HYPOTHESES

This study intended to test the influence of the above-mentioned factors (independent variables: costs/benefit ratio, emotions, need for cognitive closure, trust in institutions, and sense of community) in predicting the willingness of the participants in five consultative arenas (Open Space Technology) to get involved in future experiences of civic engagement (dependent variable). We expected:

(a) Perceived benefits to exert a positive influence on the willingness of being involved in future participatory settings, and conversely, perceived costs to be detrimental, thereby discouraging commitment.
(b) Positive emotions to enhance the willingness of repeating similar experiences, and conversely, negative emotions to depress it.
(c) High level of NCC to prevent individuals from taking part in future participatory experiences because of the difficulty in tolerating uncertainty and diversity.
(d) High levels of trust in institutions to positively affect the dependent variable, serving as an indicator of the willingness of people to engage in future participatory settings.
(e) High levels of sense of community to increase the probabilities of investing future time and energy in addressing community issues in participatory settings.

Moreover, the study also intended to verify whether the willingness

to get involved in future experience of engagement varied among subgroups, according to the response profile of participants on the above mentioned variables. Therefore, while establishing the single influence of costs/benefit ratio, emotions, need for cognitive closure, trust in institutions and sense of community on the willingness to get involved in future experiences of civic engagement, our investigation was also aimed at identifying which type of participants was the most likely to engage again.

STUDY CONTEXT

The study focuses on the specific participatory setting known as Open Space Technology (OST), an approach to organise meetings that is characterised by a simple operative mechanism (Owen, 1997). The general topic of the discussion is presented at the very beginning of the meeting by a group facilitator; then, as participants come up with an area of exploration they would like to analyse, they would write its brief description on a placard that will be posted on the wall. People interested in a particular topic sign up, and the original proposer determines the time and place to discuss it. In this way, small discussion groups are formed and begin to work on the topic chosen. No external professional facilitation is provided for group work. On the contrary, groups are encouraged to take their own responsibility for methods, rules, contents and outcomes of discussion. The main issues raised by each group are reported in a final document, which is normally used by the organizers (mostly local administrations or agencies acting on behalf of the administrations) as the starting point for planning urban policies.

Participants and procedures

Participants were recruited during five OSTs held in Italy between May and November 2008. Four out of five took place in towns of the Apulia region (Bari, Putignano, Galatina, Lecce), whereas one was held in Livorno, in Tuscany. The OSTs held in Putignano, Livorno and Galatina were organized by the respective municipalities. The first two OSTs were aimed at identifying possible uses of a public building (a former slaughterhouse in the first case, and a former cistern of an aqueduct in the second case), and the third OST had the goal of defining the guidelines of an urban renewal project. The OST that took place in Lecce was organized by two local associations along with the municipality with the aim of formulating cultural community-based policies. Finally, the OST in Bari was organized by the Democratic Party in order to define the priorities for public policies in underprivileged geographical areas. Researchers contacted the organizers in advance, presented the study and asked permission to deliver the questionnaire to the participants at the end of the OST

session. Participants did not receive any benefits for their participation, either in the OST session or in the study; they were asked to fill in a questionnaire before leaving. Researchers introduced themselves, both to organizers and participants, as independent academic investigators and clarified that the questionnaire was anonymous and that the data gathered would be used only for academic purposes. In total, 194 participants filled in the questionnaire (33% Lecce, 24.7% Livorno, 23.2% Bari, 10.3% Galatina and 8.8% Putignano). The proportion of men was 49.5%, and the mean age ¼ 37.04 (*SD* ¼ 12.92). Among them, 17.1% had a master degree, 41.2% had a college degree, 36.9% were high school graduates and 4.8% completed only primary school. Participants knew about the OST through the following channels: 13.4% responded to a public call, 45.6% happened to know about the OST by friends or acquaintances, 23.3% were personally invited by the organisers, and 8.3% were recruited through a community group. They were all residents of either the towns in which the OSTs were held or in the immediate surroundings. The questionnaire was composed of the following measures.

Benefits (a.87) were measured by a 5-point response (1 ¼ very little, 5 ¼ very much) 11- item scale adapted from Wandersman et al. (1987). Sample items following the introductory question 'Do you think any of the following are personal benefits you received from participating in the OST?' included 'solutions to specific problems of direct concern to you' and 'increased political infl nce'. Higher scores indicated higher perceptions of benefits. *Costs* (a.65) were measured by a 5-point response (1 ¼ very little, 5 ¼ very much) six- item scale adapted from Wandersman et al. (1987). Sample items following the introductory statement 'Sometimes there may be difficulties or costs involved in civic engagement. To what extent has your OST participation caused you the following costs'?
Included 'the amount of time it takes' and 'interpersonal conflict with others'. Higher scores indicated higher perceptions of costs.

Emotions were measured by a 7-point response scale (1 ¼ very little, 7 ¼ very much). Participants were asked to report on the intensity of a list of emotions experienced during their participation in the OST session. Positive (satisfaction, interest, hopefulness, pride, responsibility and happiness) (a .85) as well as negative emotions (anger, disgust, unease, irritation, boredom, frustration and embarrassment) (a .79) were assessed. Higher scores indicated more intense feelings.

Trust in institutions (a.86) was measured by a 7-point response scale (1 ¼ great distrust, 7 ¼ great trust) adapted from Mishler and Rose (1997). Individuals were asked to rate their level of trust in 13 different institutions: banks and financial services, organised religion, education, national government, local government, judicial branch, organised labour, press and TV news, health system, scientific community, political parties, military European Union and United Nations. Higher scores indicated higher trust.

Sense of Community (a .65) was measured by the sense of community index developed by Perkins et al. (1990). The 12 items were rated (1) 'strongly disagree' or (5) 'strongly agree'. Sample items included: 'I think my community is a good place for me to live in'; 'I care about what neighbours think of my actions'; 'I expect to live in this community for a long time'. Higher scores indicated stronger sense of community.

Need for cognitive closure (a .76) was measured by the need for cognitive closure scale (Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993). Items were rated (1) 'strongly disagree' or (6) 'strongly agree'. Sample items included 'I don't like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect from it' and 'When faced with a problem I usually see the best solution very quickly' and 'I like to know what people are thinking all the time'. The psychometric properties of the scale were assessed by a confirmatory factor analysis; fit indexes (x^2 226.716 $p < .001$; CFI .922; TLI .905; RMSEA .049) showed that the construct included five subsets of items identifying different aspects: preference for order and structure, intolerance of ambiguity, decisiveness, predictability and close-mindedness (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994).

Willingness to get involved in future experiences of civic engagement was measured by a 10-point single item ('How willing are you to get involved in future experiences of civic engagement'? 1 ¼ very low; 10 ¼ very high).

DATA ANALYSES

We produced correlations for all study variables and performed two hierarchical linear regressions to predict the willingness to get involved in future experiences of civic engagement. In the first one, socio-demographic variables such as gender and education, which several studies regard as main predictors of political participation, were entered at the first step; costs, benefits, emotions, sense of community, trust in institutions and the need for cognitive closure total score at the second step. The two groups of variables were entered at different steps so as to separately assess the variance explained by each of them. In the second regression, we introduced one single variation: The need for cognitive closure total score was replaced with its five major aspects, namely order, ambiguity, decisiveness, predictability and close-mindedness (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994). The rationale for conducting the second regression analysis was motivated by the peculiarity of the construct. Whereas the total score indicates a high-*versus* low-general tendency towards closure, the subscales constitute the observable manifestations of such tendency.

Successively, we proceeded with a classification analysis aimed at

identifying differences in sample subgroups. A hierarchical cluster analysis was performed; an examination of the dendrogram's structure according to the indications provided by Roggenbuck, Haas, Hall and Hull (2001) recommended a 3-cluster solution, and a subsequent k-mean cluster analysis was then executed. Finally, we tested (through a univariate analysis of variance) whether differences existed among clusters in the willingness to get involved in future experience of engagement. Gender and age were entered as covariates in the model so as to keep their effect under control.

RESULTS

Correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1. As shown, several correlations were significant, some of which were also great in magnitude.

Table 1. Correlations for all study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
(1) Willingness to participate	—						
(2) Benefits	.54**	—					
(3) Costs	-.29**	-.14	—				
(4) Trust in Institutions	.25**	.35**	-.18*	—			
(5) Emotions (+)	.54**	.75**	-.29	.42**	—		
(6) Emotions (-)	-.34**	-.28**	.37**	-.16**	-.28**	—	
(7) SOC	.19	.35	-.04	.45	.30	-.12	—
(8) NCC	-.17	.02	.17	.07	.06	.04	.20

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

Table 2 displays the results of two hierarchical regressions, predicting the willingness to get involved in future experiences of engagement. At step 1, two socio-demographic variables were entered, namely sex (0 ¼ male, 1 ¼ female) and education; at step 2, all of the other variables were added. Socio-demographic variables alone explained a very small amount of variance (Model 1 Adj. R^2 .011; Model 2 Adj. R^2 .022). In Model 1, costs, benefits, emotions, sense of community, trust in institutions and need for cognitive closure (total scores) were used as predictors. In Model 2, need for cognitive closure was replaced by order, ambiguity, decisiveness, predictability and close-mindedness factors. A third model was also executed and aimed at testing interactions among all the study variables, none of which were significant. As shown in Table 2, in Model 1, costs, benefits, positive emotions and need for cognitive closure predicted the dependent variable, whereas in Model 2, none of the need for cognitive closure sub-dimensions exerted a significant influence on the

willingness to get involved in future experience of engagement.

Table 2. Hierarchical regression analyses of factors that influence willingness to get involved in future experiences of engagement

	Model 1 Adj R^2 .327			Model 2 Adj R^2 .305		
Independent variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error	Beta
Constant	7.08	1.267		6.44	1.197	
Sex	-.049	.276	-.079	-.193	.011	-.390
Education	.050	.046	.076	.055	.274	-.707
Benefits	-.098	.025	.207*	-.129	.027	.068*
Costs	.000	.042	-.175*	.004	.043	-.982*
Trust in institutions	.068	.012	.001	.076	.013	.329
Emotions (þ)	-.050	.031	.233*	-.030	.032	.353*
Emotions (-)	.021	.033	-.109	.011	.035	-.858
SOC	-.030	.025	.065	—	.026	.437
NCC	—	.011	-.184**	.382	—	—
Decisiveness	—	—	—	-.190	.297	1.286
Order	—	—	—	-.179	.356	-.534
Ambiguity	—	—	—	.003	.511	-.351
Close-mindedness	—	—	—	.406	.433	.006
Predictability	—	—	—		.372	1.092

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$.

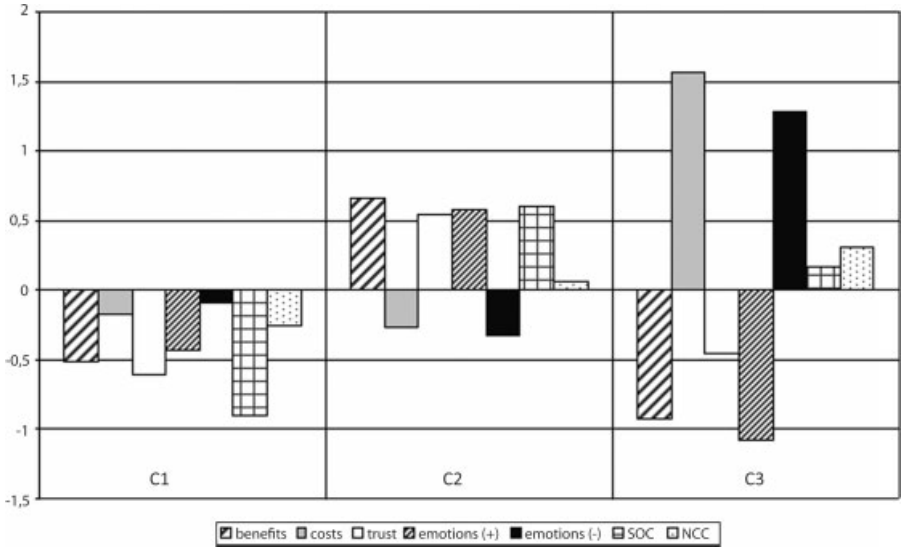

Figure 1. Cluster analysis: Mean scores for benefits, costs, emotions (positive/negative), sense of community and need for cognitive closure (Z-scores).

Results of cluster analysis are displayed in Figure 1. Cluster 1 (*N* ¼ 61) grouped participants who showed scores below the average on all the variables considered, both the setting related variables—i.e., emotions and costs and benefit—and the community- related ones—i.e., sense of community and trust in institutions—and also on need for cognitive closure. Nevertheless, they exhibited very low scores, especially on the community-related variables. Respondents grouped in Cluster 2 (*N* ¼ 83) showed scores above the average for perceptions of benefits, sense of community, trust in institutions and positive emotions, but scores below the average for negative emotions and perceptions of costs. Participants included in Cluster 3 (*N* ¼ 21) exhibited scores much above the average as for perceived costs and negative emotions, but much below the average as for perceived benefits, positive emotions and trust in institutions. They also showed levels of sense of community slightly higher than the average. The analysis of variance indicated that there were significant differences between the clusters in the mean scores of all the variables except for need for cognitive closure (F ¼ 3.065 n.s.): benefits (F ¼ 72.460 $p <$ .001), costs (F ¼ 49.317 p < .001), trust in institutions (F ¼ 39.05 $p <$ .001), positive emotions (F ¼ 55.607 $p <$ .001), negative emotions (F ¼ 36.494 $p <$. 001), sense of community (F ¼ 71.636 $p <$ .001). Specifically, a Bonferroni *post hoc* test showed that the differences between Cluster 1 and 2 concerned: benefits, trust in institutions,

positive emotions, and sense of community. Differences between Cluster 1 and 3 concerned: costs, positive and negative emotions and sense of community. Differences between Cluster 2 and 3 concerned: benefits, costs, trust in institutions, positive and negative emotions. All differences were significant at $p < .001$.

Cluster belonging also resulted in significant differences in the willingness to get involved in future experience of engagement (F ¼ 019.709 $p < .001$). A Bonferroni *post- hoc* test showed that differences existed between Clusters 1 and 2 ($p < .003$), Clusters 1 and 3($p < .001$) and Clusters 2 and 3 ($p < .001$). Cluster 2 participants were the most willing to reiterate participatory behaviours (Mean ¼ 9.072), followed respectively by Cluster 1 (Mean ¼ 8.278) and Cluster 3 (Mean ¼ 6.265) participants.

DISCUSSION

The results of the study provided partial support for the hypothesised relationships. The willingness to reiterate participatory behaviours in the future varied across participants, according to their response profile on the variables considered. Cluster 2 participants, who were the most willing to undertake participatory behaviours in the future, perceived participation as a profitable and satisfying experience and also showed a fair sense of community belonging and positive relationships with institutions. Cluster 1 respondents were dissatisfied with the participatory experience, perceived as eliciting negative feelings and generating few advantages, but they also appeared to be not fully integrated in the community and, to some extent, distrustful of authority. They were less prone than Cluster 2 participants to get involved in future participatory settings, but more inclined than cluster 3 respondents, who, though more integrated in the community, were extremely dissatisfied with their participation in the OST.

Hence, at a descriptive level, findings suggested that both the perceived quality of the participatory experience—in terms of emotions and perceived costs and benefits—and the sense of belonging to a larger community, as well as trustful relationships with institutions, are important in facilitating citizen participation. Nevertheless, it seemed that the setting- related variables—and specifically the perception of costs and benefits and the arousing of positive feelings—were more influential than the community-related variables, as indicated by both the differences that emerged between clusters and regression analyses. Specifically, the emergence of a cost-benefit pattern influencing the intention to participate confirmed what was suggested by Stürmer and Simon (2004), that is that two paths to participation are available to

individuals: one, in which personal identity is salient, according to the cost/benefit ratio; the other, in which social identity is salient, according to group identification. In the consultative arenas such as those taken in consideration in this study, in which individuals meet for a very short amount of time for the achievement of a circumscribed and mostly pragmatic purpose, the conditions for the emergence of groupship are unfavourable. For this reason, social identity is unlikely to become salient for participants, who conversely can be more inclined to perceive themselves and the others as single individuals. The type of participatory practice considered in the study stood out as a sporadic, individualistic and instrumental form of participation, characterised by low commitment. Although all the settings that were examined addressed local issues that directly affected participants as members of a community, sense of community proved to be uninfluential. To put this in different terms, the results of the study indicated that problem-focused settings that have very short time to develop are likely to be chosen by potential participants because of the benefits implied, or the low costs perceived, rather than the sense of 'we-ness' that underlies sense of community or the feeling of being connected as citizens to institutions. As far as trust in institutions is concerned, it is fair to clarify that the study assessed a general sense of trust towards a variety of institutions, but did not measure trust in the specific institution promoting the participatory settings analysed. Had we used two distinct measures, results would have been much clearer.

A further finding of the study concerned the role of emotions, suggesting that positive feelings, and specifically being globally satisfied with the experience, strengthened the willingness of undertaking participatory behaviours in the future. Satisfaction emerged then as a factor of sustainable participation, enabling citizens to persist or transfer participatory behaviours to other settings. Such a result bears out the thesis that positive feelings can prevent individuals from choosing exit strategies, which are likely to be undertaken when participation is perceived as stressful, especially when low commitment is required (Klandermans, 1997).

As for the predicting power of need for cognitive closure, the findings pointed out that variations in the general tendency towards 'seizing' and 'freezing' information (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) can influence the decision of taking part in participatory settings. Since the loose structure of consultative arenas such as the OSTs is likely to enhance uncertainty and ambiguity, it was not surprising that individuals with high need for cognitive closure could not tolerate it. In addition, the propensity for seeking a stable and secure knowledge can vary according to contextual factors (e.g., as a consequence of a perceived threat, extreme environmental ambiguity, or time pressure) (Pantaleo, 1997). Hence, the need for cognitive closure can be regarded as a personality variable, but also as a tendency induced by specific events occurring in determinate settings.

The study suggested useful implications at the applicative level, as well as indications for the design, the implementation and the management of participatory settings. Indeed, given the role of community participation practices in triggering and sustaining virtuous development processes, it is important that researchers, institutions and social workers make such practices successful and attractive experiences for citizens. In fact, it is likely that, if settings of public involvement are experienced by citizens as stressful or ineffective, they might tend to withdraw into private life. Moreover, if such practices entail more costs than benefits, people might not be encouraged to participate and choose to invest their time and energy elsewhere. Hence, the failure of public involvement practices might result in damage for both participants and the enlarged community. For instance, such a failure is likely to enlarge the gap between citizens and institutions, undermine social trust and reduce the sense of personal and collective political efficacy. Undoubtedly, consultation arenas are not designed to make citizens exert a substantive influence on decision-making processes, nor do they ensure that the suggestions and recommendations they make will be actually implemented. From this point of view this kind of public involvement practices preserve a significant power asymmetry between authorities and citizens. Although the present study did not focus on such an aspect—which is certainly worth investigating—it is true that power dynamics permeate the participatory setting itself, affecting the way people perceive their present and future involvement.

According to our findings, what makes individuals willing to get involved depends on the perceptions of costs and benefits, on the opportunity for a satisfactory experience, and on the openness to new information. A translation of such results into practical suggestions highlights the relevance of making benefits salient for citizens (for instance increased knowledge, political influence, sense of responsibility, and sense of contribution and helpfulness), minimising costs (such as the need to give up personal and family matters, potential interpersonal conflicts, and time consumed) and managing the participatory process so as to elicit positive feelings and prevent participants from experiencing threats that induce them to defend themselves and close their mind to innovation and diversity. In terms of application, researchers, institutions and social workers who wish to improve participatory experiences should design and manage the consultative arenas so as to make them: (a) more *accessible* to people (in terms of time and information provided to participants on the issue at stake); (b) more *sustainable* (in terms of interpersonal relationships, i.e., using facilitators who can prevent the explosion of destructive conflicts among participants); (c) more *transparent* (in terms of aims and scope, i.e., making publicly clear what participants are expected to do and what use will be made of

the outcomes of the discussion, and by who); and (d) more *effective* (in term of impact on the community, i.e. transforming suggestions and recommendations into concrete interventions).

We are aware that the findings of the study apply to a very specific participatory setting, and thus cannot be extended to the generality of participation practices. In addition, we acknowledge that the measures employed have some limitations. First, they are self- reported measures, and as such, they are subject to all distortions that are distinctive of these kinds of instruments. Specifically, the statement about the willingness to get involved in future experiences of participation is not an assurance that any actual participatory behaviour will be undertaken by participants. Moreover, as we used a single item, the measure is not entirely precise. Second, we also want to point out that the item was worded in a very general sense, thereby covering a wide variety of actions. A more specific operationalization of this variable, identifying one single meaning of participation, would have been a more accurate choice. Finally, we also have to acknowledge that assessing how involvement in a specific participatory experience may impact future (generic) civic participation can be a questionable choice. In conceptual terms, one could argue that a specific participatory behaviour cannot be considered a valid predictor of general participation. Nevertheless, studies attested that people who are involved in a participatory setting (no matter whether a protest movement, a citizens committee, a voluntary group, or a consultative arena) are likely to 'migrate' in different participatory settings and undertake a variety of participatory activities (Hooghe, 2003; Mannarini, Talò, & Legittimo, 2008; Putnam, 1993; Van Deth, 1997). Future investigations in different settings, deepening the role of setting and community variables, and using measures that overcome the limitations of those used in this study should be carried out so as to consolidate and elaborate on such results.

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