SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTROL AND SENSE OF COMMUNITY. A STUDY ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

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RESUMEN	ABSTRACT
El objetivo de este artículo es analizar las dimensiones individuales (la percepción de control) y las dimensiones contextuales y de relación (el sentido de comunidad) en la participación política. La implicación activa en la acción social es considerada la base para desarrollar un sentido psicológico de comunidad y la percepción de control. El estudio se realizó con una muestra de 225 sujetos: 125 no estaban implicados en ninguna actividad política, mientras que el resto eran miembros de un partido político. Entre éstos últimos, se tuvieron en cuenta dos grados diferentes de participación: la participación en partidos políticos sin responsabilidad oficial (militante) y los sujetos que ocupaban puestos de responsabilidad en el partido y las instituciones (parlamentarios). En conjunto, los que participan en política mostraron puntuaciones más altas en *control sociopolítico* que los no militantes, pero una sola de las dimensiones del *sentido de comunidad* diferenció al grupo de parlamentarios de los no militantes.	The aim of the present work is to analyze individual dimensions (the perception of control) and contextual and relational dimensions (sense of community), in the field of political participation. The active involvement in social action is considered the basis for developing a psychological sense of community and the perception of control. This study was conducted on a sample of 225 subjects: 125 were not involved in any political activity, whereas 100 were members of a political party. Among these last, two different degrees of activism were taken into consideration: a) subjects participating to political parties' activities with no official responsibility (militants), and b) subjects with a leading role in the party and in the institutions (constituency counselors). Globally, political activists showed higher scores on *Sociopolitical Control* than non activists. On the contrary, only one dimension of *Sense of Community* differentiated constituency counselors from non activists.

Key words: sociopolitical control, sense of community, political participation.

The process of participation

Generally, participation can be viewed as a process by means of which individuals take part in decision making regarding the institutions, programs and environments that affect them (Heller, Price, Reinhartz, Riger, Wandersman, & D'Aunno, 1984; Churchman, 1987; Wandersman & Florin, 2000). For this reason, participation is seen as strictly linked to the sense of belonging to a community (Sarason, 1974). Although this defini-

tion is certainly correct and acceptable, it fails to account for the empirical complexity of the concept of participation. Several studies available on this topic focus on either individual psychological aspects (i.e. self-efficacy - Bandura, 1977- and locus of control -Rotter, 1966), psychosocial aspects having to do with the group (i.e. social identity, Pratkanis and Turner, 1996), or even ecological aspects (Perkins, Brown and Taylor, 1996). Furthermore, participation has been studied in all its various forms and all its possible aims: from participation in neighborhood watch groups to direct political participation, from participation intended as representational (e.g. voting in an election) to participation where the subject is directly involved (e.g. volunteer organizations) and many others.

It is therefore essential to define the type of participation under study and the manner in which the related constructs are understood.

For this study we refer to political participation, intended as a direct involvement into a political party. Such participation will be considered in relation to two dimensions: one connecting participation to the perception of the context, that is Sense of Community, and the other linking participation to an individual dimension, that is Sociopolitical Control.

Participation and Sense of Community
Studies on participation carried out within the framework of Social and Community Psychology have focused specifically on Sense of Community, a construct considered to be strictly interrelated with social participation (Sarason, 1974; Wandersman & Giamartino, 1980; Florin & Wandersman, 1984; Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Brodsky, O'Campo and Aronson, 1999) and political participation (Davidson & Cotter, 1989; Xu, Perkins and Chow, under review). Although the link between Sense of Community and political participation, some critical aspects still remain about operationalization of these two concepts. Indeed political participation was sometimes analyzed in terms of indirect involvement such as voting and other forms or representation, rather than direct political action. In Italy political participation usually means taking part in public meetings, strikes, demonstrations, debates, parties' activities. Simply exercising one's right to vote (as intended in some US studies) would not be considered a form of political participation, but simply a normal electoral procedure that does not necessarily indicate any particular interest for the political life of the country.

As for Sense of Community specifically, there is a contradiction between its theoretical definition and the empirical measures. It is noted that Sense of Community, according to the well-known definition suggested by

McMillan and Chavis (1986), is characterized by four dimensions, but in research practice it has often been dealt with as either one-dimensional (Davidson & Cotter, 1986; Prezza, Costantini, Chiarolanza and Di Marco, 1999) or analyzed without proper focus on its multifactor structure (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999). More recent studies have however rehabilitated the multidimensional nature of the Sense of Community (Obst, Smith and Zinkiewicz, 2002; Long & Perkins, 2003; Tartaglia, 2006), thereby reestablishing consistency between theoretical claims and experimental practice. In particular, we have recently suggested a three-dimensional model to analyze Sense of Community (Tartaglia, 2006): the tie with the community's physical environment *(Place Attachment)*, the tie with the people *(Social Bonds)*, and pragmatic relationships with the community *(Needs Fulfillment and Influence)*. Therefore, if we assume Sense of Community to be multifactorial, it is necessary to investigate the relationships between its different components and the participation processes.

Participation and perceived control

Besides Sense of Community, among the psychological aspects which seem to be at the root of the motivation to participate, the perception of control can certainly not be ignored. Perceived control relates to the beliefs an individual has about the relationship between action (behavior) and outcomes (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990).

Perkins, Brown and Taylor (1996) showed that a sense of personal power appears to precede one's participation, whereas other studies (Itzhaky & York, 2000; Langer & Rodin, 1976; Florin & Wandersman, 1984; Stone & Levine, 1985) have indicated that, at an individual level, being involved in social and collective action allows one to develop a greater sense of competence and control, increases self esteem and self-efficacy, and modifies one's social identity. "Participation in decision-making is very important, because it is correlated with empowering people and giving them a socio-political control in their lives. It is associated with increasing their sense of belonging to their communities and their general sense of well-being" (Itzhaky & York, 2000).

However, the assessment of perceived control with a single global measure may not adequately describe one's sense of control in different contexts: it is necessary to consider that the perception of control differs across different psychological domains (Bandura, 1982; Pahulus, 1983; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991). Indeed, "distinguishing control across life spheres enables researchers to study setting-specific aspects of behavior and evaluate issues regarding person-environment" (Zimmerman & Zah-

niser, 1991, p. 190). For this reason, Zimmerman and Zahniser (1991) introduced the concept of Sociopolitical Control for the political context. Sociopolitical control has been identified as a critical element of the intrapersonal component of psychological empowerment (Zimmerman, 1995; Peterson, Lowe, Hughey, Reid, Zimmerman and Speer, 2006). It refers to individuals' beliefs about their capabilities in social and political system (Paulhus, 1983; Zimmerman & Zahniser, 1991) and involves self-perception of their ability to organize a group of people (Smith & Propst, 2001) as well as influence policy decisions in a local community (Itzhaky & York, 2003). Indeed, Sociopolitical Control is made up of two different aspects: *Leadership Competence* and *Policy Control*. The first reflects how much people agree with the concept that they are leaders, whilst *Policy Control* refers to the subjective perception that one's action has, or may have, an impact on political processes.

According to Chavis and Wandersman (1990), the results of research trying to link the perception of control to participation have been inconsistent. This may be due to two problems: one depending on different ways of understanding the concept of control (i.e. as referring to a specific context or as a specific personal disposition of the subject); the other depending on the various forms of participation under study (political participation, social participation, protesting, etc.). As aforementioned, it is in fact too generic consider the concept of participation *per se,* since the already numerous existing studies define participation in reference to extremely heterogeneous contexts and environments, whereas it is necessary to take into account the various forms through which participation is effectively carried out (De Piccoli & Tartaglia, 2006).

Objetives and hypotheses

The aim of the present work is to analyze individual dimensions, i.e. Sociopolitical Control, and contextual and relational dimensions, i.e. Sense of Community, in the field of political participation.

As above specified, political participation is intended here as having an active commitment into a political party, but considering different levels of engagement (Steward, Seattles and Winter, 1998). Indeed, two different degrees of activism are taken into consideration: a) subjects participating to political parties' activities with no official responsibility (militants), and b) subjects with a leading role in the party and in the institutions (constituency counselors). Political participants are considered in respect to a control group of non activists.

Regarding Sense of Community, if we assume this concept to be multi-factorial, not all the dimensions may be connected to political participation. In order to clarify the relation between Sense of Community and the other constructs we will explore: 1) the relation between Sense of Community dimensions and the two dimensions of Sociopolitical control, since both these constructs are involved in the participation process (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990) and 2) the differences in Sense of Community dimensions among constituency counselors, militants and non activists.

For what concerns Sociopolitical Control, globally we hypothesize significant differences among political activists at different degrees and non-activists. In particular: a) we expect a difference between political activists and not involved subjects on *Policy Control* because perceived control in the political sphere constitutes an essential aspect for political participation (Zimmerman & Zahniser 1991); as Itzhaky and York (2003) pointed out, Policy Control is more closer linked with the activist's social skills and ability to manage y b) as to *Leadership Competence,* since it is more concerned with the potential leader's psychological feelings (Itzhaky & York, 2003), we hypothesize a significant difference between constituency counselors (who play a leading role in the party) and both non activists and simple political militants, as this psychological dimensions is necessary to assume leading roles in political associations.

Method
Participants

The research was carried out on a sample made up of 225 subjects living in Turin[1] whose involvement in political activity greatly varied. In particular, 125 were not involved in any political activity, whereas 100 were members of a political party. Of the latter, 57 were militants with no official responsibility and 43 had a leading role. In the present study, this leading role is that of constituency counselor. Political participants were sampled by choosing base sections from 11 parties (equally distributed amongst right-wing and left-wing parties), and by asking for the collaboration of those militants who attended the section at least twice a month. Subjects who were not members of any political party were contacted directly at home by selecting different residential buildings throughout the city, within the same neighborhoods as the political party base sections. Questionnaire completion took about 15 minutes.

Of the participants, 50.7% were male and 49.3% female, whose age ranged between 25 and 60 years (mean = 39.59; sd = 10.60). Participants' education level was noted in years of schooling, and the average was 13.36

years (sd = 3.31). The majority of the participants had jobs (75.1%), but some were students (13.3%), retired (5.8%), or unemployed (5.8%). Concerning gender, age, educational level, and occupation there were no significant differences between political militants and non-militants.

Constituency counselors spend much time in political action than militants. The average time spent in political action in the first group was 51.51 hours per month, whereas in the militants' group was 18.26 hours (t = 5.279, p<.01).

Instrument and analyses

Data were gathered by means of a self-report questionnaire including the following measures:

Zimmerman and Zahniser's (1991) Sociopolitical Control Scale. This two-factor scale is made up of 17 items scored on a five-point scale. The first factor is *Leadership Competence* (α = .72), the second factor is *Policy Control* (α = .82).

The multifactorial version of the Italian Sense of Community Scale (ISCS) (Prezza, Costantini, Chiarolanza and Di Marco, 1999; Tartaglia, 2006), an Italian adaptation of SCS of Davidson and Cotter (1986). This three-factor scale is made up of a total of 15 items, to which participants respond based on a 4-point response scale. The first factor is *Place Attachment* (α = .79), the second is *Needs Fulfillment and Influence* (α = .60), and the last is *Social Bonds* (α = .72).

Four demographic items relating to sex, age, years of education and occupation.

In order to verify our hypotheses, we calculated correlation indexes among all the subscales and we performed a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA).

Results

Relationships between Sense of Community and Sociopolitical Control

Correlations between subscales are reported in Table 1. As expected, the two dimensions of Sociopolitical Control were significantly correlated, and the dimensions of Sense of Community were significantly correlated with one another.

Sense of Community and Sociopolitical Control were found to be only partially related. *Place Attachment* and *Social Bonds* were not correlated with *Leadership Competence* and *Policy Control,* whereas the pragmatic subscale of Sense of Community, *Needs Fulfillment and Influence*, was correlated with both the dimensions of Sociopolitical Control. Therefore,

there appears to be a relationship between perception of control in the political sphere and perception that a local community can satisfy individual needs.

Table 1
Correlations: Sociopolitical Control and Sense of Community subscales.

	Leadership Competence	Policy Control	Place Attachment	Social Bonds
Policy Control	.51*			
Place Attachment	.147	.035		
Social Bonds	.115	.140	.455*	
Needs Fulfillment and Influence	.291*	.422*	.361*	.504*

*p<.01

Political activism, Sociopolitical Control and Sense of Community

The second aim of this study was to investigate differences among constituency counselors (A), political party militants (B), and people who are not involved in political activity (C) on the components of Sense of Community and Sociopolitical Control.

The MANOVA results indicated that groups differed significantly on the omnibus test (MANOVA Wilks' $\Lambda(10, 436)=.568$ p<.001) with an effect size $\eta^2 = .246$. ANOVAs indicated that the groups differed significantly in *Policy Control* (F(2,222)=41.45, p<.001, $\eta^2 = .272$), *Leadership Competence* (F(2,222)=10.63, p<.001, $\eta^2 = .087$), and *Needs Fulfilment and Influence* (F(2,222)=37.62, p<.001, $\eta^2 = .253$). The three groups did not differ in *Place Attachment* (F(2,222)=3.03, p=.051, $\eta^2 = .027$), and *Social Bonds* (F(2,222)=1.27, p=.283, $\eta^2 = .011$).

Follow-up pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni test (p<.01) indicated that constituency counselors (A) showed higher levels of *Policy Control*, *Leadership Competence*, and *Needs Fulfilment and Influence* than people not involved in political activity (C). Militants (B) showed higher levels of *Policy Control*, and *Needs fulfilment and Influence* than people not involved (C). Finally, constituency counselors (A) resulted statistically indistinguishable from militants (B). In other words, *Policy Control* and *Needs fulfillment and Influence* vary between activists and people who are not involved in political activity, whereas *Leadership Competence* varies

only between counselors and uninvolved people. Descriptive statistics and all analyses are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Differences between constituency counselors (A), political parties militants (B) and people not involved in political activity (C) on Sociopolitical Control and Sense of Community: mean scores, F values, η^2 values, and post hoc tests.

	Counselors A	Militants B	Not involved C	F	η^2
Sociopolitical Control					
1. Policy Control	4.11	3.76	3.17	41.45*a	.27
2. Leadership Competence	3.71	3.45	3.24	10.63*b	.09
Sense of Community					
1. Place Attachment	3.17	2.94	3.06	3.03	.03
2. Social Bonds	2.82	2.67	2.70	1.27	.01
3. Needs Fulfilment and Influence	3.20	2.93	2.43	37.62*a	.25

** p<.01
[a] Statistically significant contrast: constituency counselors (A) and political militants (B) differ from people not involved (C)
[b] Statistically significant contrast: constituency counselors (A) differ from people not involved (C)

Discussion

Almost all the hypotheses on Sociopolitical Control were verified. As expected, political activists showed higher levels of *Policy Control* than non activists. Concerning *Leadership Competence,* we found that constituency counselors had higher scores than non activists but, result unexpected, simple militants do not differ from both constituency counselors and non activists. Regarding Sense of Community, *Needs Fulfillment and Influence* resulted correlated to Sociopolitical Control dimension whereas other Sense

of Community dimensions did not. *Needs Fulfillment and Influence* was also the only dimension of Sense of Community that differentiated constituency counselors from non activists.

The present findings tend to be in line with what traditional literature has shown for some time now, since they underline the important relation between Sociopolitical Control and participation. However, for what concerns Sense of Community, this research contributes to specify which precise aspects of the construct are related to the political participation phenomenon (distinguishing it from other, generic forms of participation).

On the ground of these results two considerations can be proposed. The first one concerns Sociopolitical Control. Consistently with literature, *Policy Control* resulted a significant psychological correlate of political action, as all the activists differ on this dimension from non activists. On the contrary, *Leadership Competence* did not distinguish different kind of activists (leaders from followers) and activists from non activists (militants did not differ from people not involved in political activity). This dimension yet proved some theoretical problem in another study not resulting related to a measure of decision making (Itzhaky & York, 2000). We can argue that the conviction to be a good leader is necessary to decide to get a position of responsibility, but it is not related to the political activity *per se*.

The second kind of reflections regards Sense of Community and its relation with political participation. The classic study of Davidson and Cotter (1989) affirmed the link between this kind of engagement and the Sense of Community, but this study used a one-dimensional measure of Sense of Community. In light of recent literature on Sense of Community we could (and should) use more refined instruments. The scale used in this research (Tartaglia, 2006) allowed us to point out that only the pragmatic dimension of the classic theoretical model of McMillan and Chavis (1986), i.e. *Needs Fulfillment and Influence*, is relevant for this kind of participation. The feeling about the entire residential community (*Place Attachment*) and the good ties with other members of the community (*Social Bonds*) are not connected at all with political engagement. Consistently, there are the same relationships among Sense of Community dimensions and the psychological correlate of political action, i.e. Sociopolitical Control.

These last considerations underline once more the importance of a multidimensional conception of Sense of Community to better understand its links with other important social behaviors like participation. This result could not be in any case generalized to other forms of participation that can have different connections to Sense of Community dimensions (De Piccoli & Tartaglia, 2006) and should also be replied in different cultural context

where the same form of participation could be based on different values. Thus, future research should investigate differences between social and political participation in different countries. The development of cross-cultural studies focusing on the values which underlie participation could offer interesting contributions to Social, Political and Community Psychology, by definition fields focused on social and cultural contexts where people construct their individual and collective life.

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[1]Turin is a city of about 1 million people located in north-western Italy.

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