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The effects of built environment on community participation in urban neighbourhoods: an empirical exploration

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ABSTRACT

Attention to the physical characteristics of the urban environment is the fundamental aspect of urban studies. Despite the many theoretical contributions that explore the interaction between space and social phenomena from a theoretical point of view, we still find today the absence of a general empirical reflection on this issue. In this article the results of the doctoral thesis of the author will be presented, where the relationship between the socio-physical characteristics of the neighbourhood and community participation has been studied. The reason why we focused on the community participation lies on the need to explore the role played by urban environment in affecting the propensity by dwellers to participate to local activities. Since most of literature on community participation draw the attention only to the socio-demographics factors, we want to stress the impact of socio-physical variables in affecting the phenomenon here presented. The research has been carried out using the contribute of environmental psychology, from which we took the methodology in order to address the study of the interaction between humans and environments. Multivariate regression models show a high explanatory capacity of spatial variables on community participation and the effect of sociodemographic variables is in fact marginal. The results of the analyses show that the socio-physical characteristics of the neighbourhoods studied are not a passive background of the social phenomenon, but are variables that intervenes directly in. The research thus reveals the active role played by spatial factors in neighbourhoods when local participation processes occur. In the neighbourhoods, improving the scientific debate on the community participation and urban studies.

1. Introduction

The analysis of the community engagement is one of the highly debated topics in urban studies and planning. Ways to improve and enhance the participation of people on neighbourhoods' life constitute the main goal of the scholars' effort, although most of the time they pay attention only to the social factors involved in this issue. The connection between community participation and the urban environment has not been effectively clarified, even though the attention to urban space and social phenomena has been gaining relevance in urban studies (Francis, Giles-Corti, Wood, & Knuiman, 2012; Gans, 2002; Gieryn, 2000; Hillier, 2008; Logan, 2012; Simpson, 2011; Tonnelat, 2004). Community participation is a social phenomenon that occurs within a community spatially contained. Since living in a city means to interact with a high rate of both physical or social complexity, and we already know how strong is the quality of the living environment on wellbeing, it may be interesting investigate how the features of an urban setting, such as neighbourhoods morphology, affect the way in which people act and participate to local development. Many researchers have

actually underlined how living in a neighbourhood constitutes an essential factor in influencing individuals' quality of life (Marans & Kweon, 2011; Sirgy & Cornwell, 2002). For example, environmental psychology offers interesting results regarding the relationship between physical characteristics of the neighbourhood and the wellbeing of residents (Barker, 1968; Führer, 1983; Guite, Clark, & Ackrill, 2006; Stokols, 1982; Wicker, 1972). In this article we offer an example about the importance to explore the role played by built environment's features in studying participation processes in neighbourhoods. The case we are illustrating do not enable to a general inference, this is because of the specific characteristics and unicity of each neighbourhood and the limited sampling. But our empirical evidence offer an insight on how different settings of urban space may affect the propensity to participate in different ways according to the socio-physical quality perceived of the neighbourhood.

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2. The interaction between the neighbourhood's features and social phenomena: a link still unclear

Studying the interaction between the urban morphology of a neighbourhood and the community participation bring into play the neighbourhood studies. This field has been one of the crucial topics that American urban sociologists have been investigating since the last three decades (Wilson, 1987). The founding idea of these studies is the existence of the possibility that the concentration of poverty in certain neighbourhoods is at the origin of the persistent lack of work, social degradation and crime (Massey & Fischer, 2003; Sampson, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2012). Other scholars have tried to extend the analysis of the variables to the heart of negative social effects, focusing on the neighbourhood's individual characteristics as, for example, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000), who worked on the impact of neighbourhood pollution on young residents. Still, Small and Newman (2001) highlighted the role played by the family environment in determining the effects of children's growth. Currently, neighbourhood effect studies are focusing on the relationship between the residents' vulnerability and the temporal exposure to the neighbourhood (Galster, 2012; Harding, Gennetian, Winship, et al., 2011; Small & Feldman, 2012). This research is solidly supported by empirical evidence (Goering & Feins, 2003; Ludwig, Duncan, Gennetian, et al., 2012; Ludwig, Sanbonmatsu, Gennetian, et al., 2011; Turner, Comey, Kuehn, et al., 2012), however some authors criticise the widespread approach of excluding the multidimensional nature of the neighbourhood, such as physical features of the built environment (Faber & Sharkey, 2015). In this article we aim to test the existence of effects provided by the physical shape and the social milieu of the neighbourhoods on community participation. Actually, the quality of built environment and the modification of the urban space, especially in the neighbourhoods, has been stressed as one of the most important catalyst of local participation processes. The public or private action to transform the urban shape facilitate the reaction of dwellers and associations, putting the territory and its physicality at the middle of the debate. The territory, in fact, represents the point where expectations and tensions of a plurality of actors converge. The theory points out the link with the places as one of the most important factor predicting the community participation processes in urban communities. This type of participation has been deconstructed by Ciaffi and Mela (2006), who identified four factors: communicating, animating, consulting and strengthening citizens' ability to act. The relationship between space and participation is expressed at different levels. Mostly because a participatory process can develop effectively when people live together in a community such as neighbourhoods. The common belonging to a spatial context implies the reference to a set of implicit or explicit knowledge of the territory; in short, it implies the access to local knowledge that can represent a basis for collective action and decision (Calafati, 2004; Mela, 2004). Even though the existing literature shows some interesting effort in understanding the role played by the urban space and the participation processes, we should get through this topic deeper. In fact, many questions are still open: in which sense does places push people to participate actively? What is the way and the measure in which places interact with people? Is an interaction between built environment and people possible? Since other social sciences, such as environmental psychology, have been stressing the effects of built environment on human behavior and wellbeing, an exploration of the effects provided by the built environment is here needed in order to understand better the shape and the strength of this connection. So, on the one hand we see a theoretical interest pointed out by the scholars, but, on the other hand the link is not clear from an empirical point of view. The objective of our research has been to start an exploration of this research field using both urban studies and environmental psychology.

3. The concept of community participation

A look to the literature on community participation reveals an ambivalent nature of the concept of participation. On the one hand we can point out the participation as a top-down process where political decisions are taken by formal level of policy, and on the other hand we can find a bottom-up participation process where people informally and spontaneously act in favour of their neighbourhood. In the first case, Milbrath and Goel (1965) define political participation based on the gradual involvement of the citizen: people are solicited by political news, then they go to vote, they organize public discussions, and finally they convince another person to vote in a particular way. In this sense, a top-down model is identified, where the role of the citizen appear to be quite passive in triggering the participation process. On the other hand, another part of the literature deal with a concept of participation where people spontaneously begin acting in favour of their living place. This is the kind of participation we want to address our attention. The concept of "community participation" usually refers to a form of social participation that take place in neighbourhoods and in small communities (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Ley, 1973). This concept overlaps with other terms, such as "civic participation" (Kang & Kwak, 2003), "citizen participation" (Goodspeed, 2008) or "civic engagement" (Atkins, 2016; Boulianne & Brailey, 2014; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas, 2001; Youniss, 2009). It's clear that a decisive definition of community participation is hard to find, but scholars have tried to propose some solutions. Abrams (1970), for instance, stressed a concept of community participation with an active role played by residents in improving programs which involve their neighbourhood directly; Hamdi (1995) notes that community participation refers to those processes for which professionals, families, social groups, local government members and other actors cooperate for a common goal, preferably in a formal and informal partnership. These definitions are useful to frame the concept, but they don't acquire the complex nature of the community participation. In this sense, we think that one of the best definition proposed so far comes from Ehrlich (1997) who gives more emphasis to the active involvement of the individuals' participation is here understood as what an individual "can do" and what can "daily do" to improve the community. This definition of participation is particularly useful because introduce two dimensions involved in this social practice: the attitude to participate and what people practically do in their daily life. Recently, Doolittle and Faul (2013) validated a scale in order to measure this double nature of community participation. We used this tool to operationalize the concept and measure it as we will present later in the article.

4. The predictors of the community participation

If little or no attention has been given to the spatial variables, the literature shows interest mainly on sociodemographic ones. For example, some authors have highlighted that a decrease of social capital causes a decrease in local participation (Coleman, 1988; Hyman, 2002; Lin, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1995). Instead, Chavis and Wandersman (1990) identified the positive relationship between "sense of community" and propensity to participate. In last decade, there has been a lot of attention on the contribution of place attachment in fostering community participation (Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003; Lewicka, 2005; Manzo & Perkins, 2006), but few empirical outcomes have been provided. The length of residency, in addition to being a fundamental predictor for place attachment (Bonaiuto, Aiello, Perugini, et al., 1999; Hidalgo & Hernandez, 2001; Lavrakas, 1981; Lewicka, 2011; Sampson, 1988), has been documented also as a predictor for community participation (Kang & Kwak, 2003). The study conducted by Grillo, Teixeira, and Wilson (2010) highlighted how residential satisfaction can alter civic engagement, while Lenzi, Vieno, Perkins, et al. (2012) found a relationship between the services offered in the neighbourhood and a positive effect on participation among a sample of

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