Chapter 13
Positive Communities: Dimensions for Assessment and Intervention

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13.1 "Positive Community": The Theoretical Construct

In ancient Greece, the primary meaning of the concept "community" showed that *common* does not necessarily mean "one's own", it goes beyond personal ownership; it concerns everybody, and therefore has a public character (Esposito, 2003). Thus, the reciprocity of giving entails commitment. The political and social organization of the Greeks, the Polis, was founded on the basis of the value of citizenship, hereby the political constitution, as an objective expression of the State, was forging in the community narrow links which unified the divergent forces. The top force of 'the Greek spirit depended on its deep root in the life of the community' (Meza Rueda, 1999, pp. 89–90).

In the twentieth century, Sarason (1974) defined community as a network of mutual support relations in which the subjects perceive themselves as similar to others. This is a recognition of the interdependence with the others, a will to support this interdependence by giving or doing for others what is expected from them, as well as a feeling of being part of a wider, more stable and trustworthy structure. During the nineties, Lo Biondo (1999) stated that the concept of community is specifically related to inter-subjectivity and to matters of sharing.

However, the beginning of twenty-first century has presented us with new models of communities which imply that the traditional concept has changed along with the way people participate in the community (Tonon, 2009). When we refer to the community we are not considering the traditional definition that mainly regards it as the territory that facilitates an identity. Today, the place of residence is not necessarily the space people identify themselves with neither the space where they participate.

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In this sense, Maya Jariego (2004, pp. 188–190) highlights the flow of different types of virtual communities on the internet, that does not need face-to-face contact and is independent of people' geographical residence.

As to the term "positive", Peterson (2006) considers that "positive" is not simply an adjective that merely referred to a positive thing. Thus, it leads us to the question, why positive or positive for what?. The author builds the notion of "enabling" what certain institutions, better than others, make it possible: facilitating and promoting successful results in the individual. In particular, we will consider to a positive community as the one that makes a better life possible to its citizens as compared to other communities.

Finally, we need to consider another point which arises from the observation of everyday life. Community life varies according to the citizen's requirements, depending on whether they reside in the city or in the country, in the urban areas or in a rural context. In this chapter, we will refer to the quality of community life in urban context, including big metropolis and their outskirts or suburbs.

13.2 Satisfaction with Life in the Community

When people are asked about their degree of satisfaction as members of a certain community, the aspects that arise are diverse. Satisfaction with life in a community involves feeling satisfied with different situations: Safety on the streets; social services; interaction with neighbors; infrastructure and facilities; public transport; employment; and public spaces for leisure activities that bring the possibility of meeting with other members of the community to exchange ideas and to discuss common problems and concerns.

In the specific case of satisfaction with life in the community, it is interesting to mention Ferris (2006) who considers that there are two forces that determine life quality: The endogenous ones – mental, emotional and physiological responses to the subject in living conditions – and the exogenous ones – social, psychological, cultural and environmental influences, and social structure.

Royuela, Suriñach, and Reyes (2003) developed a model to study quality of life in the community based on three aspects: Opportunities to progress; existence of social inequities; and, living conditions in the community. The analysis of the opportunities to progress in the community leads to the study of the possibility of improvements on housing and infrastructure; and individuals' opportunities of social mobility and the promotion in the labor and educational fields. The study of social inequities involves identifying the inequalities based on gender, sex, culture, and religion in the community, as well as the situation of migrant populations. Finally, the study of the living conditions in the community, requires the study of: housing (equipment and building structure); public transport; educational services (schools at every educational level, libraries); health system (hospitals, clinics and private physician's offices, health community centers, and drugstores); environment and climate; cultural spaces (cinemas, theatres, cultural centers, bookshops, art galleries,

museums); and spaces for leisure activities and the practice of sports (clubs, sport fields, gyms, parks and squares).

In 2001, Sirgy and Cornwell explored the satisfaction obtained from the interaction between the spaces and institutions mentioned above and the community. This study found that the satisfaction generated by these institutions and spaces was extended to the community. Later, Sirgy, Gao, and Young (2008) developed a study that showed that satisfaction with the community services plays an important role in the community well-being. Well-being was understood as individuals' global satisfaction with the community and perception of quality of life in the community and their own life. They hypothesized that individuals' level of satisfaction with their community would be mainly determined by the public services offered, the non-lucrative services, and, the business that can be developed. It was analyzed individual's levels of satisfaction with the following aspects: Housing; education; local government; health-care system; employment opportunities; public safety; places for religious worship; availability of shops and trades; means of transport; and, places for leisure time activities. The results showed that satisfaction with the community leads people to compromise with it, and, the more satisfied with the community services and living conditions, the higher the satisfaction with the community life (Sirgy et al., 2008).

13.3 Third Places as Positives Scenes in Urban Communities

13.3.1 Characteristics of Urban Communities

In the last decades, in Latin America, cities experienced a vast and intensive growth resulting in the cohabitation of a great number of culturally heterogeneous individuals in small areas. This is the result of the arrival of migrant populations from rural zones and/or from neighboring countries with the aims of obtaining jobs and improving their living conditions (Tonon, 2012). Thus, not only new neighborhoods come into existence, but also the existing ones have become overcrowded.

Regarding the word *urbanity*, Joseph (2002) claims that it refers to both city government and qualities of its inhabitants. However, the author adds that cities were already societies before their leaders' interventions as "*urbanity refers more to the work of the urban society itself than to the result of a legislation or administration*" (Joseph, 2002, p. 28).

This new century reveals characteristics such as, the crisis of the former socialization model based on the existence of public spaces as meeting places for socialization of different social groups, as well as the insecurity inherent to big cities (Svampa, 2002, p. 89). Thus, inhabitants of these cities are learning to walk along and circulate in anonymous spaces: Streets; parks and squares; railway stations; malls and markets; and, different places from those they would daily walk in their original communities; those "areas" where people meet and interact (Seibold, 1999, pp. 472–473).

Urban centers are considered, on the one hand, as the most appropriate territorial contexts for the generation of wealth, employment and innovative environments; but on the other hand, they are related to negative aspects such as environmental degradation, social exclusion, insecurity and traffic congestion (Santos, Martins, & Brito, 2007).

One of the most important problems in urban centers is urban transport. Road congestion is originated by the number of cars, buses and trucks in constant circulation; the insufficient investment in traffic organization and in transportation infrastructure, such as modern highways. All this aspects cause pollution, noise, and delays which damage people's quality of life and reduce leisure time. Hence, the development of other activities in individuals' lives.

In that sense, Joseph (2002, p. 24) emphasizes that sociability in urban village is "as if". Sociability and cities present a tangle of life styles among mixed races with juxtaposed social entities; with negotiated and crossed borders for others, exposed to the neighbors' look. The big city establishes the importance of "the sight", since the inhabitants have vast opportunities of watching each other (considering what a bus or train journey last). People who live in the city combine social mobility with residential mobility. But the inhabitants of the city do not always show an open disposition, they live in a permanent state of alarm and are afraid of being invaded by intruders (Joseph, 2002, pp. 24–29).

> Urbanity and worldliness use two techniques to communicate: On the one hand, the art of keeping up appearances (politeness as a mask for indifference, and reserve to prevent dispersal); and, on the other hand, the word of circumstances (forms of behaviour which are only valid in certain situations in which the idea is evaluated first) (Joseph, 2002, p. 29).

Urban environments are characterized by contradictions as they offer employment opportunities and provide services, but, at the same time, create environmental pollution and lack of personal safety. *The strategies used for cities to operate have positive effects (products originating from the use of economies of scale) and negative effects (resulting from the externalities that increase social and private cost)* (Pichardo Muñiz, 2011, p. 366).

In view of this description, is it possible to conceive the recreation of community meeting places in a big city? Since the end of the 1980s, much has been enunciated on this topic until the concept of "third places" was developed by Ray Oldenburg.

13.3.2   The Third Places

Oldenburg (1989) defines *third places* as those spaces that allow communication out of the first two fields of communication traditionally known: family (in the first place) and work (in the second place). He remarks that these are spaces where people enjoy meeting. Thus, generating a public scene of social interaction provides subjects with a context of sociability, spontaneity, construction of community ties and emotional expression, as well as the possibility of being in contact with reality,

out of the spaces of family and work (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982, p. 280 quoted in Jeffres, Bracken, Jian, & Casey, 2009, p. 335). Hence, third places offer people a space to rest from daily demands, and generate a sensation of inclusiveness and belonging associated with participation in a social group. In the community, third places promote the strengthening of a social interaction among its members, offering a secure space for formal or informal meetings. Third places are instrumental for the consolidation of local democracy and vitality of the community, as they promote social equality, create habits of public association and offer social support to the people and their communities.

Describing the characteristics of third places, Oldenburg (1989) remarks that these are spaces where every person is well-received as they provide neutral grounds for social and economic interactions. Their paramount activity is conversation,[1] although people go there for a drink, to practice sports or cut their hair. Third places are accessible spaces as they do not expose economic, political or physical barriers; they are nearby, preserve an atmosphere of good humor and inventiveness and, as they are popular, they become a second "home" to the individuals who pass by.

In 2009, Jeffres, Bracken, Jian and Casey developed a hypothesis acknowledging that communities with third places, where people can interact out of their homes and work places, are perceived by their inhabitants as communities with high levels of quality of life. From daily and systematic observation of those spaces where people meet and greet each other, it was possible to conclude that having access to third places increases people's perception about their individual and community quality of life.

Some spaces in urban context that can be considered third places are: bars and tearooms; hairdresser's; spaces for playing sports (gyms, fields and courts); shops and malls; parks and squares; community centers; community political parties; and gas stations, among others. It is worth mentioning that nowadays, people choose to live in certain neighborhoods because of the existence of third places; as well as the infrastructure – schools, medical centers, shops, etc.; public transport access and safety.

The third places are scenarios which prove to be suitable meeting places, where people can make friends and acquire a sense of belonging, at the time of experiencing certain privacy. Besides, this spaces promote the interaction of people from different age-groups as well as the emergence of public figures among members of the community who keep an attentive eye on what is happening in the daily life of the community. But, mainly, third places generate a positive effect on people's mental health and pursuit of happiness. Third places may, therefore, be considered "positives scenarios".

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[1] The conversation is defined as a social space in which a public is constituted for coalescence (the ability of two or more materials to fuse in one unique body) of informative sequences (Joseph, 2002, p. 41).

13.4   How to Identify "Positive Communities"?

When it comes to finding precedents in the studying of satisfaction with the community life, Santos et al. (2007) have raised two ways of studying quality of life in urban communities: (1) quantitative studies that statistically measure specific conditions of urban life; and (2) qualitative studies that gather opinions of the members of the community. Their proposal for the study of the quality of life in urban communities has been organized in four dimensions of analysis: quality of life in general (fundamental aspects of the quality of life in the city); quality of life in terms of the development of the city (from the study of specific domains); personal life quality (level of individual satisfaction of every person's life); and, quality of life in the area of residence (in each specific neighborhood of the city).

Later, Pichardo Muñiz (2011, pp. 366–367) described the existence of a group of indexes for the study of urban life quality: (1) some oriented to the assessment of services provided and the conditions and characteristics of the population that has access to those services (Euro-barometer); (2) others rank the best cities to live in (Global Cities Index); and (3) neighborhood studies combining objective data (hedonic prices) and subjective data (satisfaction with life).

Our contention is that the identification of positive communities requires a process which, in its first stage, aims at developing qualitative studies that provide a deep understanding and description of the community. Only then, we will be able to advance in the construction of quantitative indicators that facilitate the measurement and subsequent analysis of the obtained variables.

From previous studies as social workers in different communities, our initial proposal of dimensions of analysis, in order to identify positive communities, is the following:

Satisfaction with	Dimensions
The existence and possibilities of access	Open/green spaces
	Cultural spaces
	Sports and recreation spaces
	Socio-cultural spaces
	Religious worship spaces
The possibility of access to and efficiency of public services	Educational services
	Sanitary services
	Social services
	Public services
Level of access to and equipment of	Housing
	Public Transport
	Shops
	Employment
	Public Security
Levels of	Neighbour's social support
	Citizens' attitudes
Government policies	Local government

Some dimensions of this matrix were first used by a student,[2] who I am tutoring in the writing of her thesis for the PhD Program on Psychology at the *Universidad de Palermo*, Argentina. As part of the process, we have constructed some aspects to be used in her interviews with young people – it is a qualitative study – who live in a neighborhood situated in the boundary between the capital district and the suburbs.

According to the preliminary results, the major points of interest among the interviewed young people were: environment, health, education, employment, public services, public security, social organizations, religion, community festivities, sense of ownership, sense of identity, trust and equality.

Most young people pointed out the existence of green public areas, in terms of "third places", where people can gather, as well as social organizations that defend citizens' rights. Health and Education (two of the social services traditionally provided by the local State) were accessible, though with insufficient resources and infrastructure which has led part of the population to use private services. In terms of employment, they regard their neighborhood as a "family community", with no private enterprises or industries. The only job opportunities left were restricted to working at local commerce or in construction sites. The most serious problems were insecurity in main streets where shops and business are established and noise and air pollution produced by public transport. It is interesting to note, that it is the existence of numerous bus lines in that area what allows neighbors to commute to their jobs in different parts of the city. According to these young people, the best assets of their community were: their neighbors' kindliness and sense of friendship as well as the existence of a "community essence" and its tranquil atmosphere. Additionally, it was mentioned the access to public transport which allows the possibility of working in more distant parts of the big city. Our conclusion is that these features characterize a positive community.

This matrix will, therefore, be more useful if we continue to use it in other qualitative studies, in order to determine whether to include any further dimension or delete others.

13.5 Conclusions: Positive Communities in the Urban Space

The study of positive communities in urban space initially leads to the study of quality of life in urban communities, which implies remembering that the processes of urbanization have, in general, developed in a complex and untidy way. Though urban centers have turned into sources of employment and social innovative spaces, they have also wrestle with the degradation of the environment, social exclusion, traffic congestion and insecurity on the streets.

Third places act as spaces which support the community and contribute to its construction since they are a source of social interaction and discussion, accompaniment and organization. These places act as political forums of spontaneous deliberation and when people develop a sense of ownership, they tend to be more observant and responsible for their communities. Likewise, in moments of crisis, third places act as meeting places and as a shelter for community members.

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[2] A PhD candidate named Lucía Zanabria Ruiz.

Finally, if positive aspects of a community are related to the prospects it generates for its inhabitants, and if we consider that the quality of life people perceive in urban communities is positively related to the existence of third places, it can be concluded that the existence of third places promotes the positive aspects of a community.

A community is considered to be positive by its members when the experience of living in it makes people happier, less awkward and with major possibilities of development and freedom that if they were living in other community.

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