

Social Participation, Sense of Community and Social Well Being: A Study on American, Italian and Iranian University Students

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Abstract Aim of the study was to assess the relationship between social participation and Sense of Community in a sample of University students and the impact of such variables on Social well being. A further aim was to assess the generality of the relationships between these constructs across different countries, and specifically, the USA, Italy and Iran. The sample includes 200 Italian, 125 American and 214 Iranian University students, male and female. Results show higher levels of social participation, Sense of Community and Social well being among American students. Sense of Community is positively correlated with social participation in all three samples; however, only among Italian students social participation positively predicts Social well being. Implications of results will be discussed.

Keywords Social participation · Sense of Community · Social well being ·
University students

1 Introduction

Over the past 20 years, social participation among young people has gained increasing attention in the scientific literature, as well as among policy makers. Youngsters' active involvement in their community and citizenship behaviours are implicitly considered indicators of positive youth development and well being, and their promotion has become a

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central aim of youth policies in different countries. However, far less attention has been devoted to the empirical test of such assumptions.

This study focuses on a relatively unexplored topic: the relationship between social participation and Sense of Community (SoC) among young adults and the impact of both variables on Social well being. The generality of the pattern of associations between these variables across different nations (USA, Italy and Iran) will also be investigated.

2 Social Participation among Youth

The concept of “social participation” occupies a central place within different disciplines (e.g. Political Science, Social sciences, Community Psychology), and has been the focus of many conceptualisations and theoretical perspectives. It has been defined as “a process in which individuals take part in decision making in the institutions, programs, and environments that affect them” (Heller et al. 1984; Wandersman and Florin 2000). Social participation takes place within a community context, where people engage in social activities in many formal and informal social networks. Forms of participation are determined by issues arising within a community, a place, and include its culture, norms, values, institutions.

Considerable interest has been devoted to examining the nature and significance of the different forms of social participation over the course of adolescence and young adulthood, and to investigate their correlates (e.g., family background, peer group influences, school education, mass media influences) and effects on youths’ development and social adjustment (e.g., Eccles and Barber 1999; Da Silva et al. 2004; Youniss et al. 2002; Smetana et al. 2006). Different kinds of activities are examined as forms of participation; these include political participation, voluntary activities, engagement in social, cultural, sports, recreational events, extracurricular activities.

Considering the degree of involvement in social activities, results of descriptive studies conducted in several nations in the last 20 years have provided a fairly consistent picture of increasing apathy toward traditional politics among youth, but also showed evidence of interest in a range of no mainstream forms of civil involvement, including voluntary activity (e.g., Youniss et al. 2002; Verba et al. 1995) and “alternative” forms of participation (Weller 2006). In the Italian context, only 3% of a nationally representative sample of youngsters aged 18–26 years declared to be actively involved in politics (Buzzi et al. 2002); this result has been explained by the general mistrust in politics, originating partly from political vicissitudes of Italy during the last decades. The more recent IARD Euyoupart WP8 survey (Cornolti et al. 2005), involving a national representative sample of 1,000 young people aged 15–25, shows that the most popular ways of being politically active are participation to public meetings dealing with political and social issues (39% participated at least once), to legal demonstrations (48%) and to a strike (56.8%). About 26% of the sample signed at least one petition, and 27.9% occupied houses, schools, universities, factories or government offices. The survey has also shown a trend of pro-active participation in associations. Half of the sample took part in youth, religious, pacifists, charity and cultural organizations, while 63% took part in a sport club. At the same time young people are involved in cultural, theatre, music and dance groups (24%) and sports clubs (41%).

Comparative data between the USA and other nations indicate that Americans display higher levels of social engagement (e.g., Putnam 2000). As regards young people, there is a long tradition of involvement in voluntary and private social services (cf. Yates and Youniss 1999).

Forms of participation have been found to differ according to ethnic origin (e.g., Lindström 2005), and socio-political context (Yates and Youniss 1999). In those countries which experienced a long tradition of democratic institutions and values, there is a higher number of possibilities for involvement in formal types of participation. Where such formal channels of participation are not available, individuals might express their associative needs in different ways.

3 Sense of Community and Social Participation

The concept of Sense of Community (SoC) is used to describe feelings of belonging to different kinds of communities. These include formal and informal social organizations bounded by a physical or geographical location, like the local community, the town or city, the neighbourhood, the school. Moreover, the term has been used to refer to social entities based on common interests, goals or needs, like sport groups, political groups, volunteering groups.

In Community Psychology, Sense of Community is considered a core construct, as well as a central value and ideal (Fisher et al. 2002), capable of orienting interventions aimed at increasing the well being within communities. In current research and theoretical debate the term is used to describe the belief that healthy communities exhibit an extra-individual quality of emotional interconnectedness of individuals played out in their collective lives (Bess et al. 2002).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed a four-dimension model of SoC including the following components: Membership, Influence, Integration and Fulfilment of Needs and Shared Emotional Connection. Membership refers to the feeling of being part of a community and identification. Influence is the opportunity of individuals to participate to community life, giving their own contribution in a reciprocal relationship. Integration and fulfilment of needs refers to the benefits that people derive from their membership to a community. Shared Emotional Connection is based on a sense of shared history, and the bonds developed over time through positive relationships with other community members. More recently, from a Social Identity Theory framework (Tajfel and Turner 1986), Obst et al. (2002) distinguished a fifth important dimension of Sense of Community: the extent to which individuals identify with their community (Community Identification). Studies that have incorporated measures of Identification with the Community indicated that a strong relationship exists with SoC even though the two constructs are distinct (Obst and White 2005).

According to some authors, Sense of Community can be considered as a catalyst for social involvement and participation in the community (e.g., Chavis and Wandersman 1990; Davidson and Cotter 1986; Perkins et al. 1990). Hughey et al. (1999) argued that participation enhances Sense of Community. Community participation offers young people the opportunity to cultivate social ties with persons other than the family and peers within different social settings, and through this, helps them to gain a sense of connectedness and belonging as well as to strengthen their social identity and identification processes (Cotterell 1996). However, limited attention has been devoted to the empirical study of the relationships between the two constructs.

4 Social Participation, Sense of Community and Well Being

According to Wandersman and Florin (2000), contributions given to the community through participation imply an aspiration for life and are indicative of individuals' well

being. Gamson (1992) argues that participation in social movements involves enlargement of personal identity and represents an opportunity for self-realization. A similar position has been advanced in the developmental literature on adolescence and young adulthood. According to Smetana et al. (2006) during adolescence, contributing to community life through social participation increases adolescents' self-efficacy and personal control and enhances positive developmental outcomes. Research studies showed that adolescent participation increases leadership competences, sense of cohesion, social responsibility, perceptions of personal efficacy and agency. According to Prilleltensky et al. (2001), opportunities for participation and self-determination and the possibility of giving a contribution to community life are fundamental for increasing psychological and Social well being and their sense of belonging.

There is also some empirical support for the positive role of Sense of Community in increasing personal well being (e.g. life satisfaction, loneliness), both in adult and adolescent populations (e.g., Pretty et al. 1996; Prezza et al. 2001; Chipuer et al. 2004). According to Berkman et al. (2000) socially oriented behaviours, and feeling of belonging to a meaningful social context (Sense of Community), increase Social well being and reinforce social participation.

Even though the available literature suggests that both social participation and Sense of Community play a role in increasing some indicators of youngsters' well being, empirical studies are limited and are mostly focused on indicators of subjective well being (e.g., life satisfaction). A more socially-oriented conceptualisation of well being has been proposed by Keyes (1998) to capture individuals' appraisals of their own circumstances and functioning in society, along five dimensions: Social Integration (individuals' appraisal of the quality of their own relation with society and community); Social Contribution (the feeling of being a vital member of the society, with something important to offer to the world); Social Acceptance (trusting others, and having favourable opinions on the human nature); Social Actualisation (the evaluation of the potentials of society and it corresponds to the idea that society has potentials that come true through institutions and citizens); Social Coherence (the perception of the quality and the organization of social world). Social well being is considered an important component of overall well being, besides emotional and psychological well being (Keyes 2003). This construct seems particularly promising to capture well being of individuals as nested within social structures, since its five dimensions are broad enough to cover the evaluation of self with respect to the social context (social integration, social contribution), the evaluation of other people (social acceptance), and the evaluation of the society (social coherence, social actualisation). Preliminary empirical data collected in Italy found evidence of the significant impact of some forms of social involvement in the community (e.g. volunteering) on young adults' Social well being (Cicognani et al. 2001). However, more support of such relationship is needed.

Finally, owing to the differences in social participation forms and opportunities due to the socio-political and cultural context, it is important to test the generality of the pattern of relationships between the variables across different nations and cultures.

4.1 Aims and Hypotheses

The general purpose of the study was to assess the relationship between social participation and Sense of Community in a sample of University students and the impact of such variables on Social well being. A further aim was to assess the generality of the

relationships between these constructs across three national contexts, which differ in terms of socio-political structures, level of economic development, cultural and religious traditions: the USA, Italy and Iran. Differences in levels of social participation, Sense of Community and Social well being between countries and according to gender were also assessed.

Hypotheses were the following.

H1 Based on the literature (e.g., Putnam 2000; Youniss et al. 2002), levels of social participation were expected to be higher among American students, compared to Italian and Iranian students. Some differences in the most typical social activities were also expected between the three samples. In particular, levels of political engagement were expected to be particularly low among Italian students (Buzzi et al. 2002). A higher involvement in volunteering activities was expected among American students. As regards Iranian students, religious forms of participation were hypothesised to play a more significant role in comparison with the other two countries. Gender differences in participation levels were expected among Iranian students in view of more traditional gender roles expectations in this society. In particular, the hypothesis was of a higher involvement in social activities among male students compared to females.

H2 Levels of Sense of Community should be higher among American students compared to Italian students. Previous research conducted in Italy showed medium-low levels of Sense of Community in this age group (Cicognani et al. 2006). As regards Iranian students, no specific hypothesis was made. As far as gender differences are concerned, the available evidence is inconsistent.

H3 Social well being was expected to be higher among American students. Such hypothesis was partly based on findings from research conducted in the USA (Keyes 1998) and Italy (Cicognani et al. 2001). As far as Iranian students are concerned, the literature on other indicators of individual well being provides some evidence of lower levels of happiness in comparison with the USA (Kousha and Mohseni 2000); however, these results refer to the mid-90s and we lack recent data to advance a strong hypothesis on levels of Social well being in this nation.

H4 Social participation and Sense of Community were expected to positively influence levels of Social well being, in all three national samples. Social participation should indirectly affect Social well being by increasing Sense of Community and Community Identification. In fact, participation offers the opportunity to cultivate social ties within different social settings and to gain a sense of connectedness, belonging and identification with a community, leading to a higher Social well being (cf. Hughey et al. 1999). A direct effect of social participation on Social well being was also expected (cf. Smetana et al. 2006).

Summarizing, differences across nations were expected mostly on the forms and frequency of social participation, which should reflect the specificities of the social, political, cultural and religious systems, as well as the types of contexts and available opportunities for participation; more similarities were expected in the pattern of relationships between the constructs: i.e. on the processes through which social participation affects Sense of Community and Social well being. In particular, the expectation was that, independently of the specific contexts where social participation occurs, its role in strengthening Sense of Community and in increasing Social well being should be similar.

5 Method

5.1 Participants

Data collection took place in Spring 2004. Italian participants were 200 young adults attending the University of Bologna in Cesena (a large city 100 km far from Bologna, hosting a branch of this University) (Table 1). About 38.6% were male. Age ranged from 19 to 28 years ($M = 23.4$, $SD = 4.26$). About 12.6% of the sample lived in Cesena from birth; 41.2% lived in a different town (in different parts of Italy, including the Southern part) but remained here during the period of classes and exams; the remaining 46.2% lived in the surrounding towns (less than 100 km.) and moved from home to the University every day (e.g., by train). About 20.2% of participants had a part time job. Socio-economic background of the student population is mostly at average levels, similar to students attending other Italian Universities, since the generally low costs of enrolment allows almost all youngsters to attend University and obtain a degree. The University of Bologna is amongst the most important in Italy, and the Cesena branch, even though still “young”, attracts students motivated to attend some Faculties (e.g. Psychology) which have reached a position of excellence in Italy.

Iranian participants were 214 students at Teheran University. About 48.6% were male. Age ranged from 18 to 34 ($M = 22.6$, $SD = 2.55$). About 40% of the sample was from Teheran and the remaining 60% came from different areas of Iran (including villages), and lived in the campus during the period of classes and exams. About 26.5% had a part time job. Since for the majority of Iranian students education is free of charge, students from different socio-economic backgrounds can afford attending University. However, academic intelligence of the students of Tehran University is slightly more than the average IQ of Iranian people, since it is the most popular University of Iran and many students compete to enter it.

American participants were 125 students enrolled at Emory University. Age ranged from 18 to 22 years ($M = 19.6$, $SD = 1.28$). About 32% were male and 32.3% had a part time job. This University ranks amongst the top 20 in the USA and attracts high IQ students enjoying a high family socio-economic background. However, it is important to consider that University education is generally much more expensive in the USA than in Italy and Iran. Participants generally came from cities that are far from Atlanta and lived in this city during the period of their studies.

Table 1 Participants

	Italy	USA	Iran	Total
Gender				
M	77 (38.5%)	40 (32.0%)	104 (48.6%)	221 (41.0%)
F	123 (61.5%)	85 (68.0%)	110 (51.4%)	318 (59.0%)
Age				
17–19	19 (9.6%)	63 (52.1%)	15 (7.0%)	97 (18.2%)
20–21	45 (22.8%)	49 (40.4%)	51 (23.8%)	145 (27.3%)
22–24	78 (39.6%)	9 (7.4%)	102 (47.4%)	189 (35.5%)
>24	55 (27.9%)	–	46 (21.5%)	101 (19.0%)
Total	200 (37.1%)	125 (23.2%)	214 (39.7%)	539 (100%)

Summarizing, students involved belong to three competitive Universities which attract students from all over the respective country. A specific difference is that the lower costs of education in Italy and Iran, compared to the USA, allow students from different socio-economic backgrounds to have the chance to attend University and get a degree. In terms of generalization of results, however, the issue of greatest interest is the pattern of associations between social participation, Sense of Community and Social well being, which was hypothesised to be similar irrespective of the specific characteristics of the samples. The peculiar characteristics of the three national contexts should be helpful to shed light on the processes through which the different forms of social participation may impact on students' Social well being.

5.2 Research Instrument and Procedure

The instrument was a self-administered questionnaire. It included the following scales.

- (a) *Social participation*. This was assessed by a list of 14 items, measuring the frequency with which students were involved in different forms of social participation (social, recreational, sports, political, religious, volunteering, etc.) in the last 3 months, using three response alternatives (1 = *never*; 2 = *once*, 3 = *several times*).
- (b) *Sense of Community* was assessed by the Sense of Community Index (cf. Chipuer and Pretty 1999), including 12 items (response alternatives from 1 = *not at all true* to 4 = *exactly true*). Respondents could choose whether to focus on their hometown or the town where they live during classes, by selecting the most important community for them. Internal consistency of the scale is good for American ($\alpha = .77$) and Iranian samples ($\alpha = .70$) and slightly low but acceptable ($\alpha = .68$) in the Italian sample.
- (c) *Identification with the Community* was assessed by the "Strengths of group identification scale" by Brown et al. (1986) (response alternatives from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The wording of the items in the original scale was modified replacing "group" with "community". Cronbach coefficients are fairly high in all three samples ($\alpha = .88$ in the Italian and Iranian samples and $\alpha = .89$ in the American sample).
- (d) The Social well being scale by Keyes (1998), was used to measure *Social well being*. The scale includes 33 items measuring (on a 7-point scale, from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*) five dimensions of Social well being: social integration, social acceptance, social contribution, social coherence, social actualisation. In this paper only the overall score of Social well being was considered. Cronbach alpha for the total scale is good ($\alpha = .90$ in the Italian sample and $\alpha = .88$ in American and Iranian samples).

The questionnaire was subjected to translation through a double blind procedure, to guarantee the equivalence of the meaning of the items in the three different languages. In particular, for the scales measuring Sense of Community, Community Identification and Social well being, originally validated in English, an Italian version was already available. The part of the instrument measuring social participation, developed by the Italian team, was translated into English and back translated into Italian. The Iranian team translated the English version of the questionnaire and then back translated it into Farsi. Those items and words whose translation remained unsatisfactory or ambiguous for the Iranian version of the questionnaire (e.g., there are no straightforward and well-established equivalents or translations for some English words in everyday Farsi such as, for example,

“community”), where carefully checked by the three principal investigators in each country, until it was found the equivalent terms and phrases.

Participants to the research were approached in the campus by a trained researcher, and were asked to complete the questionnaire. Instruments were anonymous, and appropriate procedures were followed to obtain consent of participants to the study in all three countries (signing of a written form, in the USA; in the other two countries, the verbal consent was considered satisfactory by participants). Completion of the questionnaire required about 20 min.

6 Results

6.1 Social Participation

Table 2 shows the frequency distribution of the answers to the specific items (only alternatives “often” and “once” are reported). As can be seen, social participation is generally higher among USA students.

Most typical participatory activities, among USA students, are volunteering activities, involvement in associations in the community, religious, sports and cultural activities, recreational events (more than half of the sample was involved, at least once, in the last 3 months). Most notable is participation in volunteering activities, which is endorsed regularly by 58.9% of the sample.

Italian students most frequently engaged in conversations with other people on issues of importance in their community. Lower involvement was found in other types of activities; most typically mentioned are involvement in associations and cultural activities (about 46% at least once in 3 months) and sports activities (about 40% at least once). Volunteering activities concerned less than 40% of the sample (participants engaged in them at least once in 3 months), and religious activities 32% of the sample.

Iranian participants declared a more frequent involvement in cultural activities and in associations (about 50% of the sample), followed by volunteering activities (about 46%), religious and sports activities (about 40%).

Involvement in political activities is low, especially among Italian students.

Some differences in specific items were found according to gender. In the Italian sample, male students more frequently than females had face-to-face conversations about an issue concerning their community (62.7% at least once vs 46.4% of females; $\chi(195) = 14.530, p = .001$). In the American sample, female students have been more involved than males in volunteering activities (87.1% at least once, vs 66.7% of males; $\chi(124) = 7.367, p = .025$). In the Iranian sample, male students have been involved more frequently than females, in the following activities: face-to-face conversations about an issue concerning their community (39.8% at least once vs 34.5% of females; $\chi(213) = 6.136, p = .047$); helping in the organization of recreational events (45.6% at least once vs 26.2% of females; $\chi(213) = 10.214, p = .006$); helping in the organization of sports events (33% at least once vs 17.7% of females; $\chi(213) = 9.985, p = .007$); involvement in political activities (34.7% at least once vs 20.4% of females; $\chi(213) = 11.835, p = .003$); involvement in sports activities (51% at least once vs 30.9% of females; $\chi(213) = 12.188, p = .002$).

In order to assess the relationships between overall social participation and the other variables, a global score was calculated by averaging the scores of the 14 specific items (2 = *often*, 1 = *once*, 0 = *never*). Cronbach Alpha for the scale is above .80 in all three

Table 2 Frequency of participation to different activities (last three months) in the three countries (% and N)

	Italy		USA		Iran		χ^2	Sig.
	Once	More times	Once	More times	Once	More times		
1. I had an in-depth, face-to-face conversation about an issue concerning my community	22.1 (43)	30.8 (60)	25.0 (31)	38.7 (48)	14.6 (31)	22.5 (48)	24.138	$p = .000$
2. I attended a public meeting to press for a policy change	16.2 (32)	7.1 (14)	8.1 (10)	4.0 (5)	13.2 (28)	6.6 (14)	6.341	$p = .175$
3. I signed a petition	21.9 (43)	17.9 (35)	27.4 (34)	15.3 (19)	21.5 (45)	15.3 (32)	2.289	$p = .683$
4. I attended an event promoting information about community	26.5 (52)	11.7 (23)	22.6 (28)	22.6 (28)	19.6 (41)	12.9 (27)	10.970	$p = .027$
5. I attended a meeting to gather information about a neighbourhood issue	16.8 (33)	13.2 (26)	13.7 (17)	5.6 (7)	7.6 (16)	4.7 (10)	21.339	$p = .000$
6. I have been involved in volunteering activities	14.2 (28)	24.9 (49)	21.8 (27)	58.9 (73)	22.6 (48)	23.6 (50)	68.990	$p = .000$
7. I have been involved in religious activities	8.1 (16)	23.9 (47)	21.0 (26)	46.0 (57)	15.6 (33)	26.1 (55)	40.557	$p = .000$
8. I helped in the organization of recreational events	17.8 (35)	17.8 (35)	22.6 (28)	35.5 (44)	15.7 (33)	20.0 (42)	21.810	$p = .000$
9. I helped in the organization of sports events	10.2 (20)	19.0 (39)	16.9 (21)	21.8 (27)	11.4 (24)	13.8 (29)	8.466	$p = .076$
10. I helped in the organization of theatre events	11.8 (23)	14.9 (29)	7.3 (9)	8.1 (10)	9.5 (20)	3.3 (7)	19.880	$p = .001$
11. I have been involved in the activities of an association	16.3 (32)	30.6 (60)	5.7 (7)	66.7 (82)	17.9 (37)	32.4 (67)	49.889	$p = .000$
12. I have been involved in political activities	12.2 (24)	6.6 (13)	18.5 (23)	22.6 (28)	11.5 (24)	15.8 (33)	23.223	$p = .000$
13. I have been involved in cultural activities	18.8 (37)	28.4 (56)	18.5 (23)	44.4 (55)	16.2 (34)	41.0 (86)	11.614	$p = .020$
14. I have been involved in sports activities	12.7 (25)	28.4 (56)	12.9 (16)	48.4 (60)	16.5 (35)	24.1 (51)	24.203	$p = .000$

Table 3 Descriptives, Cronbach alphas and differences between countries

Scales	Cronbach α			$M (SD)^d$			Anova Sig.
	Italy	USA	Iran	Italy	USA	Iran	
Social participation ^a	.84	.81	.84	.55 (.44) ^a	.79 (.42) ^b	.52 (.42) ^a	$F_{(2,537)} = 17.088$ $p = .000$
Sense of Community ^b	.68	.77	.70	2.41 (0.40) ^a	2.66 (0.44) ^b	2.43 (0.43) ^a	$F_{(2,537)} = 14.46$ $p = .000$
Identification with Community ^c	.88	.89	.88	4.40 (1.40) ^a	5.39 (1.22) ^b	4.54 (1.46) ^a	$F_{(2,534)} = 21.45$ $p = .000$
Social well being ^c	.90	.88	.88	4.30 (0.70) ^a	4.94 (0.60) ^b	4.33 (0.73) ^a	$F_{(2,532)} = 39.35$ $p = .000$

^a Range 0–2; ^b range 1–4; ^c range 1–7

^d Means with the same letter do not significantly differ (Duncan $p < .05$)

samples. Mean scores are shown in Table 3. As can be seen, global scores of social participation are higher among American students, whereas no significant differences were found between Italian and Iranian students.

6.2 Sense of Community and Identification with Community

Sense of Community and Identification with Community are higher among American students; no significant differences were found between Italian and Iranian students in overall scores (Table 3) and according to gender.

6.3 Social Well Being

Global Social well being scores are higher among American students compared to Italian and Iranian participants (Table 3). No significant differences were found according to gender.

6.4 Correlations among Variables

Sense of Community and Identification with Community are strongly correlated (see Tables 4, 5 and 6). In two out of three samples (Italian and American), the correlation

Table 4 Correlations among variables: Italian sample

	Social participation	Sense of Community	Identification with community
Sense of Community	.261**		
Identification with Community	.223**	.723**	
Social well being	.370**	.401**	.429**

** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed); * $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

Table 5 Correlations among variables: American sample

	Social participation	Sense of Community	Identification with community
Sense of Community	.231**		
Identification with Community	.264**	.638**	
Social well being	.194*	.416**	.396**

** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed); * $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

Table 6 Correlations among variables: Iranian sample

	Social participation	Sense of Community	Identification with community
Sense of Community	.202**		
Identification with Community	.152*	.546**	
Social well being	.146*	.267**	.332**

** $p < 0.01$ (2-tailed); * $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed)

coefficient is above $r = .60$, suggesting a possible partial overlap between the two constructs, at least in some national contexts. Since correlation coefficient was below $r = .60$ among Iranian participants, and considering the findings in the literature about the specificity of the two constructs (cf. Obst and White 2005), it was chosen to maintain the two variables as distinct in further analyses.

In all three groups, social participation positively correlates with Sense of Community and Identification with Community (Tables 4, 5, and 6). Correlation coefficients are not high, however, and are lower among Iranian participants.

Sense of Community and Identification with Community also positively correlate with Social well being. Correlation coefficients are higher among Italian and American participants. The correlation coefficient between social participation and Social well being is higher in the Italian sample, suggesting a more important role of involvement in social activities for youth's Social well being.

6.5 Predicting Social Well Being

A further step in the analyses involved testing the predictive role of social participation, Sense of Community, Identification with Community on Social well being, separately in the three samples. Hierarchical Regression analyses were used to test the direct vs. mediated (by Sense of Community and Community Identification) effects of social participation on Social well being.

Social participation positively affects Social well being, through the mediation of Sense of Community and Identification with Community (Table 7). Its effect is stronger among Italian participants; only in this sample, social participation has also a strong direct effect on Social well being. The variance explained by the regression equation is higher in the Italian sample.

In the American sample the impact of social participation on Social well being is totally mediated by Sense of Community, whereas in the Italian and Iranian samples, Identification with Community has a stronger role. In the Iranian sample, the impact of social participation is totally mediated by Identification with Community.

Table 7 Regression analyses on Social well being

	Italy		USA		Iran	
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2	Step 1	Step 2
Social participation	.371***	.274***	.194*	.074	.145*	.085
Sense of Community		.152		.263*		.105
Identification with Community		.265**		.206		.261***
R^2	.138	.28	.037	.205	.021	.127
R^2 (corrected)	.133	.269	.029	.185	.016	.114

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

7 Discussion

Youth's social engagement within their communities and "active citizenship" are gaining increasing attention in the scientific literature, as well as amongst policy makers, and are considered of crucial importance for the development and quality of life of both individuals and the communities and societies where they live.

The research presented in this paper investigated a relatively understudied topic in a sample of University students: the relationship between forms of social participation and Sense of Community, and the impact of these variables on Social well being. Moreover, the generality of the pattern of relationships among the variables across three different national contexts (USA, Italy, Iran) was assessed.

Results confirm the higher social engagement of American students compared to Italian and Iranian peers (H1). This general pattern is confirmed for most activities considered (with the exception of signing petitions, attending public meetings and organizing sports events, where the percentages do not differ across countries). The most notable difference concerns voluntary activities, in which almost 60% of the USA sample is involved on a regular basis. Such results can be explained by the long tradition of involvement in voluntary associations and private social services (cf. Yates and Youniss 1999), which positively contributes to indicators of social capital of the American society (Putnam 2000). Also, religious participation is endorsed regularly by almost half of the sample. Differences according to gender were also found, especially in the Iranian sample, consistently with the traditional gender role expectations in the Iranian society.

The expected lower affection toward formal politics in Italian society is confirmed by the data. The percentage of students who are involved in political activity is extremely low in the Italian sample. A similar trend concerns religious involvement and, to a lesser extent, voluntary activity. Such results are consistent with the general "crisis" of the principal formal Institutions (the State and the Church) in Italian society. The low percentage of students who engage in voluntary activities finds support in other data collected on nationally representative samples (Buzzi et al. 2002).

Iranian students do not differ from Italian in overall scores of social participation. On inspection of specific items, they score lower on activities related to informal meetings to discuss about issues concerning their community or gathering information about neighbourhood issues. Religious participation is more important in the Iranian sample than among Italian students.

Results also support the hypothesis concerning the higher levels of Sense of Community and Identification with Community among American students (H2). Feelings of belonging

to a collective are based on sharing of activities, positive experiences, and a common history, and these processes occur through membership of social groups, associations, etc. Such phenomena are more widespread among American students.

Finally, as expected, also levels of Social well being are higher in the American sample (H3). A possible explanation is the role of family SES. In the literature, SES levels have been found as associated with the degree of civic involvement (McBride et al. 2006); individuals with higher SES levels generally have more opportunities to engage in social participation activities. However, in this study we refer to the experience of individuals with high levels of education and intellectual abilities, as compared to the average of the population of their own country: so, at least for what concerns two of the traditional indicators of SES (education and present occupation), the three samples can be considered as similar.

Social participation positively correlates with Sense of Community and Identification with Community, even though correlation coefficients are not high and are especially lower in the Iranian sample. To shed light on such result, specific participatory activities were subjected to closer inspection. Results show both similarities and differences in the activities that are mostly correlated with SoC and Community Identification in the three countries. Among Iranian students, significant correlations concern especially helping in the organization of sports and recreational events and attending public meeting to press for policy changes or gather information about a neighborhood problem. In the Italian sample, a higher number of activities positively correlate with Sense of Community and Community Identification; moreover, only in this group, being involved in the activities of an association plays an important role. For American students, relevant activities are helping in the organization of sports, cultural, recreational events, attending events promoting information about community, and (only in this group) being involved in religious and volunteering activities. Such differences suggest that in different countries, there are partly different social contexts were youngsters draw as sources of belonging and identification (e.g., associations in Italy, volunteering and religious groups in the USA, recreational and sports activities in Iran).

Finally, social participation positively affects Social well being, through the mediation of Sense of Community (H4). The pattern of relationships partly differs according to country. The variables considered explain a higher amount of variance in the Italian sample; moreover, only in Italian University students social participation directly affects Social well being. In the other two samples, the impact of social participation is mediated by the other variables, and particularly, by Sense of Community in the American sample, and by Identification with Community in the Iranian sample. Since SoC covers predominantly emotional processes of attachment to the community and Identification is a more cognitively-oriented construct, such differences indicate the role of different processes (emotional attachment vs cognitive identification) as mediators of the impact of social participation on Social well being in different countries, which deserve a closer look in future research. This research considered a simple model of relationships between social participation, Sense of Community and Social well being that had found support in the theoretical literature (Hughey et al. 1999; Smetana et al. 2006), even though it had not been directly tested through empirical research. Future research should include also other potentially relevant psychological and psychosocial mediators and moderators of such relationships (e.g., characteristics of the social network of family and friends, individual and personality variables, perceptions of self-efficacy, social responsibility, etc.). Moreover, longitudinal research would be useful to shed more light on the causal paths of relationships between the variables.

The pattern of relationships between Sense of Community and Social well being confirms the distinctiveness of the two constructs, both from a theoretical (McMillan and Chavis 1986; Keyes 1998) and empirical (cf. also Cicognani et al. 2001) point of view. Sense of Community describes the quality of the relationships between individuals and their communities (geographical, relational) in terms of belonging, perceived influence, emotional connectedness and satisfaction of needs. Social well being refers to one dimension of individuals' overall well being (besides emotional and psychological) (cf. Keyes 2003) including perceived social integration into the society (conceived as a broader social entity), the feeling to be respected and that ones' contributions are valued by other people (social contribution), social acceptance (trust in other people in general), social actualisation (the perception of society as evolving in a positive direction and actualising its potentials) and social coherence (the quality and the organization of social world). Despite some apparent similarities between the two constructs, they are distinct, in term of the object of description (a specific community vs the society in general) and the dimensions of such constructs; moreover, more specific analyses conducted on subscales of Social well being confirmed that the subscale "social integration" (the one which bears the strongest similarity with the construct of Sense of Community) correlates with SoC scores with coefficients lower than .60 (see also Cicognani et al. 2001), confirming the distinctive nature of the two constructs.

Overall, it is possible to conclude that these findings further support the positive association between social participation, Sense of Community and Social well being in this population, confirming existing conceptualisations. However, more research is needed to confirm this pattern, in different groups (e.g., age groups, ethnic groups, etc.) and national contexts. This would help to further illuminate the mechanisms and processes underlying the phenomenon. Moreover, a closer look should be given to the specific forms of social participation activities: in this study the focus was given on overall participation, considering a wide range of activities, but further research should test whether some forms of social involvement (e.g. political activity) play a different role in affecting individuals' Social well being compared to others (e.g. religious participation, volunteering activities, etc.).

In conclusion, this study indicates that the processes through which students' social involvement affects their Social well being are broadly similar across different national contexts (at least in countries from different areas like America, Europe and East Asia) and that most differences concern the form and context of participation activities and their frequency in male and female individuals. On the latter points, differences emerged are in line with the available evidence from the three countries involved. So, the evidence is promising and sheds light on an important phenomenon, having both theoretical and applied implications (e.g., for education programmes and interventions aimed at enhancing social participation and "active" citizenship).

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