

This is the post peer-review accepted manuscript of:

Cicognani, E., Mazzoni, D., Albanesi, C., & Zani, B. (2015). Sense of Community and Empowerment Among Young People: Understanding Pathways from Civic Participation to Social Well-Being. *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*, 26(1), 24–44.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-014-9481-y>

The published version is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11266-014-9481-y>

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Sense of community and Empowerment among young people:
understanding pathways from Civic participation to Social well-being.

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Abstract

Civic participation in community life and within community organizations is generally considered as associated with positive outcomes for youth development and well-being. However, supportive empirical evidence on such benefits is still limited, as well as on the processes that may explain such positive outcomes. In this paper, we examined the impact of young people's participation in different community and youth organizations on Social well-being, and the mediating role of Sense of community (SoC) and Empowerment. The sample comprised 835 adolescents and young adults, aged 16-26 years old ($M = 20.8$). 414 participants were males (49.6 %) and 421 participants were females (50.4 %). Results confirm that organizational membership of volunteer, youth, and religious associations significantly enhances Social well-being, both directly and through the mediation of SoC and Empowerment. Membership of leisure and recreational associations only marginally and indirectly affects Social well-being through the mediation of Empowerment.

Key words: sense of community, civic participation, empowerment, social well-being, youth

Introduction

There is a wide consensus, in the academic, educational and political literature, on the idea that participation in community life and within community organizations is intrinsically good.

Within the discipline of Community Psychology, it is suggested that participation is a key process to promote social change, to improve the social, economic, political and environmental conditions of the community, strengthen social bonds among citizens and their sense of belonging to the community, and enhance individual and collective well-being (Wandersman and Florin 2000). Participation has been proposed as a key mechanism to perform citizenship, to develop critical awareness and to empower community members. Such benefits have been pointed out also by research on youth's civic and political socialization (cf. Sherrod, Torney-Purta and Flanagan 2010); positive outcomes of participation in community and youth organizations include the opportunities for the development of political knowledge and literacy, tolerance, interpersonal trust, sense of belonging, and psychological empowerment (e.g., Flanagan 2004, Youniss and Yates 1999),

However, even if these ideas are fascinating, supportive empirical evidence on the benefits of civic participation for individuals' psychosocial well-being is still scarce, in particular regarding the processes that may explain such positive outcomes. Such questions have attracted more attention by developmental psychologists within the Positive Youth Development perspective (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1990, Eccles and Barber 1999; Feldman and Matjasko 2005, Mahoney, Schweder and Stattin 2002). Developmental psychologists focused on the benefits of participation in extracurricular and leisure activities for developmental outcomes and psychosocial functioning (e.g. reduced problem behavior, better academic achievement, and increased psychological adjustment). "Extracurricular activities" include

school-based and community-based activities (e.g. organized by youth or religious centers), useful to act out the developmental tasks of adolescence (e.g. identity formation, skills building) and sports and cultural activities that do not have any explicit civic aim.

In this paper we will examine the impact of young people's participation in different kinds of community and youth organizations on Social well-being, an understudied dimension of well-being that comes from the eudaimonic tradition in the study of positive mental health (Keyes 2002). Moving from the assumption, arising from the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979) that organizations offer youth differing benefits, in terms of learning environments, with distinct "opportunity structures" (Larson and Verma, 1999, Hansen, Larson and Dworkin 2003, Quintelier 2008), or "developmental niches" (Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2011) for psychosocial development and growth, we will consider the role of organizations that have an intrinsic civic aim (volunteer organizations, youth organizations, religious groups) and organizations primarily aimed at enhancing young people's individual competences and skills (e.g., leisure or recreational groups). We will also test the role of two possible mediation mechanisms between organizational membership and Social well-being: Empowerment and Sense of community.

Civic Participation and Well-being

According to the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2013), the total number of young people aged 14-24 donating their time to voluntary organizations has increased in the last 20 years from 7% (1993) to 12% (2012). Even those youth who are not involved in voluntary organizations participate regularly in organized activities offered by their community, and only few of them are not involved at all in any activity. Albano (2005) found that 50% of young Italian people aged 16-19 years belonged to at least one association: as they grow up,

organizational membership diminished (among 20-30 year olds only one out of three are members), even if it still concerned 30% of young adults. Recreational groups were the most popular; religious organizations, though less popular, still involved a significant 10% of young people. Analyzing participation in a sample of 1410 young people aged 14-30 years (M = 21 years old), Leone (2011) found that 65% had been/were currently involved in one or more associations. Cultural associations were the most popular (27.4%), followed by sport and scout groups (ranging from 14% to 18%). Student organizations and parish groups were less attended. Membership of volunteer associations tends to be higher among females.

Organizational membership and participation in adolescence is considered a precursor of civic and political participation in adulthood (Flanagan et al. 1998, Sherrod et al. 2002, Zani 2014). Active involvement in organizations enhances young people's capacity for agency, and their feeling that they can influence political decisions (Verba et al. 1995); moreover, it promotes the development of personal resources and skills (Eggert and Giugni, 2010), giving individuals extra information about social issues through communication and personal networks (Parry et al. 1992), and encouraging the acquisition and practice of skills like compromise, speaking in public, expressing an opinion, learning to work in groups (Checkoway et al. 2005). Participation in community organizations also promotes trust toward the institutional order, and enhances a sense of belonging and commitment to the community (Flanagan et al. 1998) as well as Empowerment (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988).

There are also grounds to expect that organizational participation positively enhance young people Social well-being. As conceptualized by Keyes (1998), Social well-being (including the dimensions of social integration, social contribution, social acceptance, social coherence and social actualization) can be considered as a subjective indicator of how individuals conceive of the larger society in which they are embedded and their perceived social

relationship with it. Individuals reporting higher Social well-being will think of themselves as more integrated in their community, feeling that their contribution is valued and that people can be trusted; they think that social organizations make sense and that society is moving toward a positive direction. There is some evidence on the role of community participation in enhancing Social well-being both among adolescents (Albanesi et al. 2007) and young adults (Cicognani et al. 2008). Such studies have examined the impact of involvement in a range of organizations and participatory activities at an aggregate level. However, following the studies that reported qualitatively different benefits from involvement in different organized activities (Hansen et al. 2004, Quintelier 2008), it is expected that the benefits differ according to the type of organization and the nature of the activities and experiences that they offer to young people.

How Organizational Involvement Can Enhance Social Well-Being: The Role of Sense of Community and Empowerment

The concept of Sense of community (SoC) was introduced by Sarason (1974), who defined it as “the perception of similarity with others, a recognized interdependence, a willingness to maintain such interdependence offering or making for others what is expected from us, the feeling to belong to a totally stable and reliable structure” (p. 174). McMillan and Chavis (1986) identified four core dimensions of the construct, capable to capture individuals’ perceptions of the quality of the relationships within different types of communities (e.g., geographical/territorial, relational, virtual). *Membership* is the feeling of being part of a territorial or relational community. It includes perception of shared boundaries, a common history and symbols; and feelings of emotional safety and personal investment in the community. *Influence* refers to the opportunity of individuals to participate in community life, giving their own contribution in a reciprocal relationship. This dimension corresponds to the

perceived influence that a person has over the decisions and actions of the community and is more directly related to actual participation. *Integration and fulfilment of needs* corresponds to the benefits that people derive from their membership of a community. It refers to a positive relation between individuals and community, where they can satisfy some needs as a group or as community members. Finally, *Shared emotional connection*, was defined as sharing of a common history, significant events and the quality of social ties. Research on SoC among adolescents have emphasized that this dimension includes distinct components: *Shared emotional connection with the community* and *Shared emotional connection with peers* (Chiessi et al. 2010) to emphasize the relevance of the peer group in this developmental period.

Research findings indicate that SoC referred to the territorial community (town) is higher among adolescents who belong to community and youth organizations than among those who do not belong to any group and that adolescents and young people who participate more to local community life have higher SoC compared to less involved youth; moreover, enhancing participation can increase adolescents' SoC (Pretty 2002; Evans 2007). The positive association between community participation and sense of community has also been confirmed by a recent meta-analysis (cf. Talò et al. 2013). SoC is generally higher among males (Chiessi et al. 2010), and tend to increase from middle to late adolescence and young adulthood (Chipuer and Pretty 1999, Albanesi et al. 2007) due to the growing complexity of developmental needs, but it has been found significantly correlated with Social well-being both in adolescent and young adult samples (Albanesi et al. 2007; Cicognani et al. 2008). Therefore, there is grounds to expect that Sense of community acts as a potential mediation process for explaining the impact of organizational membership on Social well-being, particularly for organizations having a civic purpose.

A second potential mediating mechanism is Empowerment. Some authors have attempted to identify the qualities of participatory settings offered by organizations that are more likely to influence positive outcomes for youth (e.g., Ferreira et al. 2012) have shown that when youth, supported by adults, actively participate in organizational and community decision-making, they are likely to show greater confidence and agency, increased community connections, and higher level of empowerment and critical consciousness (Krauss et al. 2013). Such qualities should be offered both by organizations having a civic aim and by organizations/associations that have as a primary aim the enhancement of youth's positive development in terms of personal competences and skills.

Aims and Hypotheses

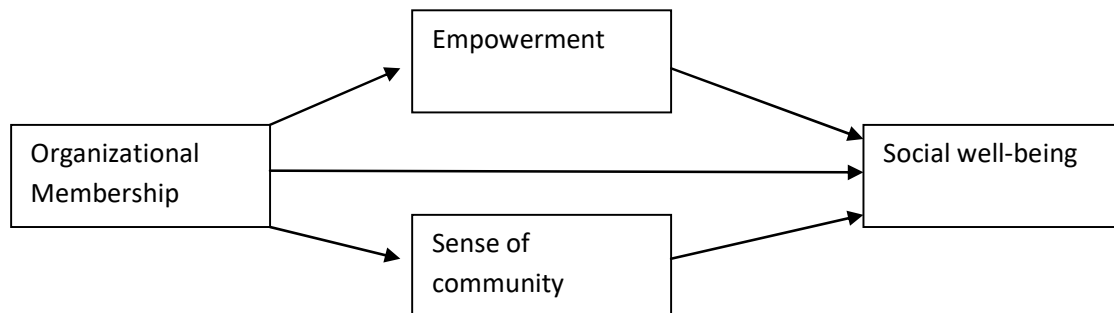
General aim of the study was to analyse the impact of organizational membership on young people's Social well-being and the mediation role of Sense of community and Empowerment. By organizational membership we mean in this context participation in the activities of an association or organized group with some continuity in time (e.g., at least 6 months), as distinct from occasional involvement. In fact, we assume that active and continuous involvement is important in order to gain benefits in terms of developing a Sense of community and perceptions of Empowerment, and thus, a higher Social well-being.

The literature suggests that organizational membership can be a fertile ground for young people to develop personal and social skills (Eggert and Giugni 2010); that it can provide opportunities to develop social relationships (Teney and Hanquinet 2012) and to increase their connectedness with their community (Albanesi et al. 2007; Cicognani et al. 2008), all factors that should positively impact on Social well-being.

Following such considerations, our first expectation was that young people who are members of community or youth organizations (associations, organized groups) will have higher level of Sense of Community, Empowerment and Social well-being compared to those who do not participate, or report only occasional involvement. More specifically, following the studies that have demonstrated that different kinds of organizations provide young people with different opportunities and resources (Quintelier 2008; Hansen et al. 2003) we expected that organizations that foster civic engagement in the community (e.g., volunteer association, youth associations, religious groups) would positively enhance youth's Sense of community, Empowerment and Social well-being, whereas organizations that do not have a civic aim but mainly aims of enhancing youths' personal competences (e.g., recreational or leisure associations or groups) would positively affect only youths' Empowerment and Social Well-being.

Thirdly, as the literature suggests that gaining personal skills and developing social connections within the community may be key mechanisms through which organizational membership can enhance positive development and well-being, we hypothesized that Empowerment and Sense of Community would mediate the relationship between organizational membership and Social well-being (Fig. 1). In particular, we expected to find a mediation effect of Sense of Community and Empowerment for those associations that foster civic engagement, while organizations that do not have explicit civic aims would positively increase Social well-being only by enhancing youths' Empowerment. We also assessed gender and age group differences in the variables considered in order to ascertain whether previous findings would be replicated.

Fig. 1 Theoretical model



Method

Participants

The sample comprised a total of 835 adolescents and young adults. Their ages ranged from 16 to 26. For the purposes of the analyses they were classified into two groups: adolescents (16-19 years old) and young adults (20-26 years old). Adolescents were 38.1% of the sample (318 participants). 414 were males (49.6%) and 421 females (50.4 %). Mean age was 20.8 years (SD = 3.1). Participants are mostly full time students (high school or university) (95.1%) and only a minority had a part time job (4.9%). As far as parents' education, 28.1% of the mothers and 31.8% of the fathers had completed compulsory education, 49.4% of the mothers and 46.6% of the fathers had completed high school, and 22.5% of the mothers and 21.6% of the fathers had a university degree.

Instrument and procedure

Participants' recruitment and data collection took place in different types of high schools and universities in the region of Emilia Romagna (North Italy), following authorization of the school Principal/Dean of the Faculty¹. Prior to questionnaire submission, participants were provided with information about the aim of the study and informed consent was collected. None refused to participate. Participants completed the questionnaire individually; a trained research assistant was available to provide clarifications if necessary. Completion of the questionnaire took about 30 minutes.

The questionnaire included several sections; for the purposes of this paper, the following were considered.

Organizational membership. We measured the degree of involvement in four kinds of associations or organized groups (volunteer and charity groups; youth associations or groups; religious associations or groups; leisure and recreational associations or groups). Participants were asked whether they had ever been part of or collaborated with each of them. Responses were provided on a four-point response scale (1 = "never", 2 = "occasionally"; 3 = "less than 6 months"; 4 = "more than 6 months"). In the following analyses, we collapsed the two intermediate response categories into one owing to the low percentages of "less than 6 months" responses.

Sense of Community was measured using the Sense of Community Scale for Adolescents (SOC-A) (Chiessi et al. 2010). The scale includes 20 items measuring five dimensions of SOC, namely: Sense of Belonging (SB) (e.g., "I feel like I belong to this town"), Support and Emotional Connection in the community (SCC) (e.g., "People in this place support each other"), Support and Emotional Connection with Peers (SCG) (e.g., "I like to stay with

¹ The data have been collected as part of the PIDOP project, funded by the 7th Framework programme of the European Commission (2009-2012).

other adolescents that live in this town”), Satisfaction of needs and opportunities for involvement (NS) (e.g., “In this place, there are enough initiatives for young people”), and Opportunities for Influence (I) (e.g., “Honestly, I feel that if we engage more, we would be able to improve things for young people in this town”). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the items using a Likert type scale (1 = “not at all true”; 2 = “slightly true”; 3 = “fairly true”; 4 = “very true”; 5 = “completely true”). The validation study (Chiessi et al. 2010) provided support for a five-dimension structure of Sense of community (see also Cicognani et al. 2014). Cronbach’s alphas were the following: SB, $\alpha = .87$; SCC, $\alpha = .86$; SCG, $\alpha = .89$; SB, $\alpha = .87$; NS, $\alpha = .85$; I, $\alpha = .80$. Alpha for the total scale was .80.

Empowerment was measured using the following items: “When I have a problem I know the resources (people, institutions, etc.) that are needed”, “Lack of resources prevented me to reach my aims”, “I think that in the group/organization/community that I belong to I can find the resources that I need to reach my aims”, “I’m able to look for people, institutions and services that can help me to find solutions to my problems” and “When I have a scope I’m able to find the necessary resources to reach” (response scale from 1 = “totally disagree” to 6 = “totally agree”). Exploratory factor analysis was performed, using Principal Component Analysis and Varimax Rotation. The item “Lack of resources prevented me to reach my aims” was excluded due to low communality. We obtained a single factor solution that explained 49% of variance. Reliability of the scale was good, ($\alpha = .73$), thus a mean score of empowerment was used in the analysis.

Social well-being. We used the five items of the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes et al. 2008) assessing Social well-being dimensions: “In the last month, how often did you feel that...”... “you belonged to a community (e.g., social group, your school, your neighborhood)?” (*social integration*); “you had something valuable to give to the world?”

(*social contribution*); “people are basically good?” (*social acceptance*) “the way our society works made sense to you?” (*social coherence*), “our society is becoming a better place?” (*social actualization*). Answers were provided on a frequency scale from 1 (= “never”) to 6 (= “every day”). For the mediation analyses an overall mean score of social well-being was used ($\alpha = .66$).

Analyses

Firstly, we conducted descriptive analyses and a test of the differences according to relevant socio-demographic characteristics (age group and gender) in all the variables (organizational membership, Sense of community, Empowerment, Social well-being).

Secondly, we tested the differences in Empowerment, Sense of community and Social well-being according to organizational membership (“no involvement”; “occasional involvement”; and “high involvement”) using two-way ANOVA.

Finally, in order to test the impact of organizational membership, Sense of community and Empowerment on Social well-being, we performed four Hierarchical Regression analyses (one per each association or group). Subsequently, to test the mediation effect of Sense of community and Empowerment, we performed bootstrapping - an alternative approach to Baron and Kenny's (1986) causal steps of mediation testing for mediation models with one independent categorical variable. The SPSS macro *MEDIATE*, developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004), was used. For organizational membership simple indicator coding was used with the no-participation group treated as the reference category (Hayes and Preacher 2013). The total scores of Empowerment and Sense of community were inserted as mediators. Social well-being was inserted as dependent variable. Gender and age group were included in the model as covariates. An estimate of confidence intervals for the indirect effect in each resampled data set

was calculated from the sampling distribution. In the current study, 5,000 bootstrap resamples were used to generate 95% confidence intervals.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Differences According to Gender and Age Group

12.8% of the participants were members of volunteer associations or groups (“high involvement”), and over one third of the sample (34.8%) reported occasional participation in volunteer activities (Table 1). Significant differences were found according to gender. In particular, occasional participation is higher among female youth vs. males ($\chi^2(2) = 11.42; p < .01$). Moreover, membership of associations increases in the group of young adults versus adolescents ($\chi^2(2) = 9.46; p < .01$). A significant gender difference was found also for membership of leisure or recreational associations or groups, in favour of males ($\chi^2(2) = 7.91; p < .05$). No significant differences were found for youth associations or groups and religious associations or groups.

Insert Table 1 about here

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) of the Empowerment, Sense of community (total scale and subscales) and Social well-being (total scale and subscales) for the whole sample, and separately according to gender and age.

Insert Table 2 about here

ANOVA on the scores of Empowerment indicated a significant difference according to age group [$F(1,833) = 4.77; p < .05$]: young adults report higher Empowerment than adolescents.

ANOVA on Sense of community indicated the presence of significant differences in the total scale score according to both adolescent gender [$F(1,831) = 6.01; p < .05$] and age group [$F(1,831) = 13.30; p < .001$]. Specifically, male youth report higher values than females, a finding that is confirmed for the subscales SCC [$F(1,828) = 5.35; p < .05$], SCG [$F(1,829) = 16.02; p < .001$], and SB [$F(1,829) = 8.90; p < .01$]. A general reduction of SOC with age group was also found, particularly in SCG [$F(1,829) = 21.98; p < .001$], SB [$F(1,829) = 11.35; p < .001$] and NS [$F(1,831) = 29.73; p < .001$].

As regards Social well-being, a significant main effect of age group [$F(1,829) = 9.17; p < .01$] as well as a gender by age group interaction [$F(1,829) = 8.95; p < .01$] were found, indicating an increase in Social well-being in the older group, only in the male subsample (male adolescents $M = 2.49$, $SD = .83$, male young adults $M = 2.85$, $SD = .84$; female adolescents $M = 2.65$, $SD = .85$, female young adults $M = 2.66$, $SD = .86$). Considering the subscales separately, male youth score higher than females in Social contribution [$F(1,826) = 3.95; p < .05$], Social acceptance [$F(1,826) = 10.06; p < .01$], but lower in Social integration [$F(1,821) = 19.97; p < .001$]. The increase in Social well-being with age group was found, in both genders, in Social integration [$F(1,821) = 8.09; p < .01$] and Social contribution [$F(1,826) = 35.82; p < .001$], however, the increase in the latter was stronger among male youth [$F(1,826) = 10.47; p < .001$] (male adolescents $M = 2.86$, $SD = 1.45$, male young adults $M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.36$; female adolescents $M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.37$, female young adults $M = 3.25$, $SD = 1.28$). As regards Social acceptance [$F(1,828) = 5.91; p < .05$] and Social coherence [$F(1,826) = 6.24; p < .05$] the increase with age group was found only among males whereas among females scores decrease (Social acceptance: male adolescents, $M = 2.41$, $SD = 1.10$; male young adults, $M = 2.67$, $SD = 1.26$; female adolescents, $M = 2.51$, $SD = 1.18$; female young adults $M = 2.36$, $SD = 1.07$;

Social coherence: male adolescents, $M = 1.97$, $SD = 1.03$; male young adults, $M = 2.06$, $SD = 1.17$; female adolescents, $M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.06$; female young adults, $M = 1.84$, $SD = .89$).

Organizational Membership: Differences in Sense of Community, Empowerment and Social Well-Being

As a second step of analysis, we tested the differences in Sense of community, Empowerment and Social well-being according to membership in the four types of associations considered. Table 3 displays means and standard deviations, as well as post-hoc results. Descriptive statistics on the distinct subscales are displayed in Table 4 (Sense of Community) and Table 5 (Social well-being).

Insert Table 3 about here

For volunteering or charity groups significant differences were found for Empowerment [$F(2,810) = 18.67$; $p < .001$], indicating higher levels among members, followed by youth who report occasional involvement (Bonferroni, $p < .05$); the latter scored significantly higher than youth who never participated ($p < .05$) (Table 3).

Significant differences were also found for the total score of Sense of community [$F(2,808) = 18.67$; $p < .01$]. Young people who have done volunteer experiences, even occasionally, have higher Sense of community than youth who never participated ($p < .05$). Analyses on the SOC subscales indicated that the differences are present in the subscale I [$F(2,810) = 14.22$; $p < .001$], among all the three groups (Table 4).

Participation in Volunteer associations discriminates also in Social well-being [$F(2,806) = 24.81$; $p < .001$], indicating higher scores among members and occasional participants versus those youth who never took part in volunteer activities. Such differences are confirmed for most

of the subscales: Social integration [$F(2,802) = 24.37; p < .001$], Social contribution [$F(2,806) = 24.51; p < .001$], Social acceptance [$F(2,805) = 7.14; p < .001$] and Social coherence [$F(2,807) = 3.21; p < .05$] (Table 5).

For youth associations or groups, members report significantly higher levels of Empowerment [$F(2,809) = 8.40; p < .001$] than the other two groups. Significant differences were also found for the total score of Sense of community [$F(2,807) = 7.15; p < .001$], as well as in the subscales I [$F(2,809) = 13.16; p < .001$], SCC [$F(2,806) = 4.05; p < .05$], and SB [$F(2,807) = 3.16; p < .05$] (Table 4): members of associations report higher levels of SOC than youth who never participated.

Organizational membership discriminates also in scores of Social well-being, total [$F(2,805) = 17.36; p < .001$], and in the following subscales Social integration [$F(2,800) = 12.46; p < .001$], Social contribution [$F(2,804) = 12.19; p < .001$], Social acceptance [$F(2,804) = 9.23; p < .001$]. In all cases, members report higher levels of Social well-being than youth who never participated ($p < .05$); moreover, even occasional participants show higher levels of Social integration, Social contribution, Social acceptance and Social coherence than no-participants ($p < .05$) (Table 5).

For religious associations or groups significant differences were found for Empowerment [$F(2,817) = 6.28; p < .01$]: members score significantly higher than youth who never participated. Significant differences were also found for the total score of Sense of community [$F(2,816) = 5.31; p < .01$], confirming the benefits of membership versus occasional involvement or no-participation. The differences are confirmed also by scores in the subscales I [$F(2,818) = 5.58; p < .01$], SCC [$F(2,815) = 5.04; p < .01$], SB [$F(2,816) = 3.90; p < .05$], NS [$F(2,818) = 3.10; p < .05$] (Table 4).

Considering Social well-being, significant differences were found in the total score [$F(2,814) = 29.93; p < .001$] and in four subscales: Social integration [$F(2,806) = 22.02; p < .001$], Social contribution [$F(2,813) = 11.74; p < .001$], Social acceptance [$F(2,813) = 9.20; p < .001$] and Social coherence [$F(2,813) = 6.34; p < .01$] (Table 5). Social well-being is higher among members than among youth who never participated ($p < .05$); occasional participants hold an intermediate position, indicating that even an occasional experience may have a positive impact on most dimensions.

For leisure or recreational associations or groups significant differences according to organizational membership were found only in Empowerment [$F(2,812) = 9.81; p < .001$] indicating higher levels among members. No differences were found for Sense of community, whereas as regards Social well-being, a significant difference was found in the subscale Social contribution [$F(2,808) = 3.91; p < .05$]: members of associations significantly differ from non-involved youth ($p < .05$).

Impact of Organizational Membership on Social Well-Being: Regression Analysis and Test of the Mediation Role of Sense of Community and Empowerment

Empowerment, Sense of community and Social well-being appear positively and significantly correlated (Table 6).

Insert Table 4 about here

Regression analyses on volunteer and charity associations or groups, youth associations or groups and religious groups indicate that organizational membership, Empowerment and Sense of community are all significant predictors of Social well-being; moreover, the beta coefficient of organizational membership is reduced when the other two variables are entered

into the model. Globally considering, these results suggest that Sense of community and Empowerment partially mediate the relationships between organizational membership and Social well-being. The variance explained is, respectively, .20, .18 and .20. As regards Leisure or recreational associations or groups, organizational membership plays a limited role, and its impact disappears when the other two variables are considered. In this case, the relationship between organizational membership and Social well-being is totally indirect (Table 7).

Insert Table 5 about here

Finally, Table 8 presents the results of four multiple mediators models. In each model, the indirect effect of organizational membership (volunteer or charity groups; youth associations or groups; religious associations or groups; leisure and recreational associations or groups) on Social well-being was calculated through Empowerment and Sense of community.

Insert Table 6 about here

Results indicated that for volunteer or charity groups, youth associations or groups, and religious associations or groups, the effect was significant through both mediators (Empowerment and Sense of community). For leisure or recreational associations/groups, the indirect effect was significant only through Empowerment, but not through Sense of community.

Looking at the detailed values of the dichotomous variables D1 and D2,² we can conclude that for volunteer or charity groups, organizational membership, and even occasional participation (low involvement), showed a significant indirect effect (compared to no-involvement category) through both mediators. For youth associations or groups, organizational

² In the models, indicator coding is used for the categorical independent variable.

membership, and even occasional participation (low involvement) showed a significant effect through Sense of community, but only high levels of involvement showed a significant effect through Empowerment. For religious associations or groups, only high levels of involvement showed a significant indirect effect through the mediators (compared to no-involvement category). Finally, for leisure or recreational groups, organizational membership, and even occasional participation (low involvement) showed a significant indirect effect through Empowerment.

Discussion

The findings from this study provide further confirmation of the benefits of organizational membership for young people well-being; moreover, they significantly build on the previous research literature by adding new important information.

Firstly, results confirm the benefits of active participation in community and youth organizations during adolescence and young adulthood. Such benefits go beyond traditional outcomes considered in the civic and political socialization literature (e.g. Flanagan 2004; Youniss and Yates 1999) and in the Positive Youth Developmental literature (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Eccles and Barber 1999; Feldman and Matjasko 2005; Mahoney et al. 2002) by including Social well-being. The latter is an understudied dimension of positive psychological functioning, which complements traditional indicators (e.g., emotional and psychological functioning) (Keyes 2002). It offers an interesting and new perspective for understanding the outcomes of individuals' involvement in their community and society, beyond psychological and sociological indicators, which has been insufficiently investigated (e.g., Albanesi et al. 2007; Cicognani et al. 2008).

Secondly, the study confirmed that organizations are not homogeneous but different in the types of benefits that they can offer to young people; this emphasizes the need to devote more attention to the specific characteristics of organizations as ecological settings, (Hansen et al. 2003; Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2011; Larson and Verma 1999). Findings indicate that especially organizations having an explicit civic aim are useful to enhance Social well-being. The other types of organizations (e.g. leisure or recreational associations or groups) seem to be more useful to enhance other outcomes (e.g. skills building, empowerment). Further, the findings suggest that different levels or degrees of involvement may be necessary to generate positive outcomes: in particular, even occasional participation in volunteer or charity associations and youth associations seem to produce benefits, whereas for religious groups, a more assiduous and long-term participation seems necessary.

Thirdly, the study significantly contributes to the analysis of mediation processes capable to explain the benefits produced by organizational membership. In so doing, it follows the call of some researchers to pay greater attention to the nature of the activities and experiences taking place within organizations, in order to identify the conditions that make participation useful e “good” (Ferreira et al. 2012). In this respect, the findings indicate that volunteer, youth and religious associations increase Social well-being also by increasing Sense of community and Empowerment (Flanagan et al. 1998; Zimmermann and Rappaport 1988). Leisure or recreational organizations do not directly affect Social well-being but only through their impact on Empowerment; these types of associations have no influence on young people’s Sense of community.

Other interesting findings emerge considering age and gender differences that appear consistent with previous studies. In particular, with age, levels of Empowerment and Social well-being increase, even though the latter only among male youth. On the contrary, Sense of community

tends to decrease from middle to late adolescence/young adulthood; such decline can be explained by developmental factors and age-related transitions which make the territorial community increasingly unsatisfactory in meeting young people's emerging needs (e.g., school transitions requiring to move to different places) (Chiessi et al. 2010). As regards gender, male youth tend to report higher scores of SOC than females, a finding already confirmed in the literature that could be explained by the greater tendency, by males, versus females, to explore and familiarize themselves with the territorial community and construct significant relationships and connections with other people. Family socialization influences might play a role in such processes, to the extent that parents actively encourage males to make experiences and tend to be more protective toward females (Cicognani et al. 2012).

Some limitations of this study should be mentioned. The reliance on quantitative measures of participation to classify participants into groups may be insufficient to capture a phenomenon that in everyday experience and in youth's perceptions is more complex and fluid; therefore, qualitative data would be useful to provide additional support of the findings. Also, a more thorough examination of the nature of the activities and social relationships and dynamics that characterize the organizations considered, is needed in order to shed more light on the processes generating positive versus negative outcomes. As emphasized by some authors (Ferreira et al. 2012), we should not assume that youth participation in organizations is always good; however, we do have indications on some conditions that make participation with adults positive for youth development and well-being (cf. Wong et al. 2010). Finally, further research should be devoted to understand the conditions that make youth participation sustainable over time, and support long-term engagement within different types of organizations. Our data suggest that occasional participation may be fruitful, but support the idea that long-term participation is

more beneficial. Qualitative studies could provide information on this particular issue that would be difficult to gather with quantitative measures.

In conclusion, this study provided evidence on the usefulness of further investigating the role of Sense of community and Empowerment as additional mediation variables in the explanation of the benefits of organizational membership. Moreover, the findings build on previous evidence (Albanesi et al. 2007; Cicognani et al. 2008) that indicates the usefulness of including Social well-being as significant outcome of participation.

Acknowledgments.

This research was supported by a grant received from the European Commission, 7th Framework Programme, FP7-SSH-2007-1, Grant Agreement No: 225282, Processes Influencing Democratic Ownership and Participation (PIDOP), awarded to the University of Surrey (UK), University of Liège (Belgium), Masaryk University (Czech Republic), University of Jena (Germany), University of Bologna (Italy), University of Porto (Portugal), Örebro University (Sweden), Ankara University (Turkey), and Queen's University Belfast (UK).

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Table 1 Organizational membership (% of “high involvement” and “occasional involvement”):

Descriptive statistics

	Total sample		Males		Females		Adolescents		Young adults	
	<i>High inv.</i> % (n)	<i>Occasional inv.</i> % (n)	<i>High inv.</i> % (n)	<i>Occasional inv.</i> % (n)	<i>High inv.</i> % (n)	<i>Occasional inv.</i> % (n)	<i>High inv.</i> % (n)	<i>Occasional inv.</i> % (n)	<i>High inv.</i> % (n)	<i>Occasional inv.</i> % (n)
Volunteering or charity groups	12.8 (104)	34.8 (283)	12.3 (50)	29.6 (120)	13.2 (54)	40.0*** (163)	8.3 (26)	35.7 (112)	15.6 (78)	34.2*** (171)
Youth associations or groups	13.2 (107)	38.1 (310)	13.0 (53)	40.0 (163)	13.3 (54)	36.2 (147)	12.1 (38)	38.3 (120)	13.8 (69)	38.0 (190)
Religious associations or groups	15.6 (128)	22.3 (183)	15.4 (63)	19.6 (80)	15.7 (65)	24.0 (103)	16.0 (50)	19.9 (62)	15.3 (68)	23.8 (121)
Leisure or recreational associations or groups	28.2 (230)	42.2 (344)	32.6 (133)	40.0 (163)	23.8 (97)	44.4* (181)	29.7 (97)	41.9 (131)	27.2 (137)	42.3 (213)

NOTE. The % of “No involvement” are not reported

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

Table 2 Descriptive statistics for Empowerment, Sense of community and Social well-being

	Total sample		Males		Females		Adolescents		Young adults	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Empowerment</i>	3.64	.90	3.69	.92	3.59	.89	3.55	.91	3.69	.89*
<i>Sense of community</i>	2.75	.72	2.82	.67	2.67	.75*	2.87	.74	2.67	.69***
SCC	2.47	.84	2.55	.82	2.39	.85*	2.52	.87	2.43	.81
SCG	2.66	1.08	2.83	1.04	2.50	1.08***	2.89	1.09	2.52	1.03***
SB	3.04	1.00	3.17	.98	2.92	1.00**	3.20	1.00	2.94	.98***
I	3.03	.86	2.98	.86	3.07	.86	2.95	.87	3.07	.85
NS	2.53	.93	2.59	.91	2.47	.94	2.75	.92	2.39	.90***
<i>Social well-being</i>	2.68	.83	2.71	.86	2.66	.81	2.57	.84	2.75	.82**
Social integration	3.19	1.57	2.93	1.57	3.43	1.58***	2.96	1.60	3.32	1.57**
Social contribution	3.27	1.40	3.39	1.47	3.16	1.32*	2.91	1.42	3.49	1.34***
Social acceptance	2.51	1.16	2.65	1.20	2.37	1.10	2.49	1.20	2.52	1.13**
Social coherence	2.49	1.17	2.56	1.21	2.41	1.12	2.46	1.14	2.50	1.17
Social actualization	1.98	1.04	2.02	1.12	1.93	.97	2.04	1.05	1.94	1.03

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

Table 3 Empowerment, Sense of community and Social well-being. Differences by organizational membership.

Organizational membership	Empowerment <i>M</i> (SD)	Sense of community <i>M</i> (SD)	Social well-being <i>M</i> (SD)
Volunteering or charity groups			
No	3.48 (.90)a	2.68 (.70)a	2.50 (.81)a
Occasional involvement	3.74 (.86)b	2.81 (.75)b	2.83 (.84)b
High involvement	4.04 (.87)c	2.89 (.70)b	3.04 (.75)b
Youth associations or groups			
No	3.54 (.90)a	2.67(.71)a	2.51(.81)a
Occasional involvement	3.65 (.88)a	2.78(.71)ab	2.83 (.84)b
High involvement	3.94(.91)b	2.95(.74)b	2.91 (.81)b
Religious associations or groups			
No	3.57 (.91)a	2.71 (.71)a	2.54 (.80)a
Occasional involvement	3.64 (.87)ab	2.72 (.70)a	2.82 (.84)b
High involvement	3.89 (.89)b	2.94 (.74)b	3.06 (.80)c
Leisure or recreational associations or groups			
No	3.48 (.95)a	2.71 (.71)	2.60 (.85)
Occasional involvement	3.62 (.86)a	2.76 (.73)	2.70 (.85)
High involvement	3.84 (.89)b	2.80 (.71)	2.76 (.79)

NOTE. Post-hoc test: Bonferroni; means with the same letter do not significantly differ.

Table 4 Correlations between empowerment, sense of community and social well-being.

	2.	3.
1. Empowerment	.24 ***	.31 ***
2. Sense of community	-	.34 ***
3. Social well-being		-

*** $p < .001$

Table 5 Regression analyses (beta values)

	Volunteering or charity groups		Youth associations or groups		Religious associations or groups		Leisure or recreational associations or groups	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Organizational membership	.24***	.16***	.19***	.13***	.24***	.18***	.07*	.02
Empowerment		.21***		.23***		.22***		.24***
SoC		.27***		.27***		.26***		.28***
<i>F</i>	48.66***	66.35***	31.56***	61.21***	48.21***	67.73***	3.94*	54.84***
<i>R</i> ²	.06	.20	.04	.18	.05	.20	.00	.17

Table 6 Results of the mediation models

Independent variable (X)	through Mediators	Effect	SE	CI	
				Lower	Upper
Volunteering or charity groups					
D1	Empowerment	.0533 *	.0164	.0262	.0919
D2		.1087 *	.0270	.0615	.1684
D1	SoC	.0513 *	.0192	.0166	.0924
D2		.0772 *	.0270	.0296	.1361
Youth associations or groups					
D1	Empowerment	.0243	.0153	-.0021	.0592
D2		.0839 *	.0259	.0406	.1439
D1	SoC	.0335 *	.0176	.0014	.0706
D2		.0925 *	.0288	.0421	.1573
Religious associations or groups					
D1	Empowerment	.0154	.0156	-.0132	.0481
D2		.0645 *	.0212	.0267	.1104
D1	SoC	.0077	.0193	-.0299	.0464
D2		.0753 *	.0259	.0301	.1318
Leisure or recreational associations or groups					
D1	Empowerment	.0321 *	.0174	.0003	.0700
D2		.0786 *	.0221	.0398	.1289
D1	SoC	.0148	.0201	-.0232	.0562
D2		.0242	.0224	-.0163	.0720

NOTE. * Significant indirect effects. Covariates: age, gender. Number of samples used for indirect effect confidence intervals: 5000. Indicator coding is used for categorical X. D1: 1 = Low involvement; D2: 1 = High involvement.