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Living in the urban environment: a study on predictors of life satisfaction

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Abstract

The relationship between inhabitants and their place of residence is important for people quality of life and well-being. This relationship entails both empirical and political challenges. Empirical challenges pertain to the investigation of different dimensions affecting well-being, distinguishing among personal characteristics (i.e. gender, age, income, status, education, etc.), psychosocial dimensions (i.e. place attachment, sense of community, place identity, etc.) and contextual aspects (objective dimension such as place dimension, services development, etc.). Political challenges refer to the importance of connecting different levels of intervention, in line with the World Health Organization approach “Health in all Policies”.

On these grounds the study here presented aimed at investigating the best predictors of life satisfaction, considering both personal characteristics (i.e. gender, age, and income) and contextual psychosocial variables (i.e. place attachment and social identification with inhabitants). Participants were 251 community people (53.8% females) living in a big city in the North-West of Italy. Their mean age was 33.91 ($SD = 15.79$). Data were collected via a self-reported questionnaire, which took about 20 minutes to complete. Results showed that place attachment is the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction, followed by income and lower age, whereas social identification with inhabitants has no influence.

These findings are discussed from a psychosocial standpoint, considering also future challenges in public health involving urban environments.

Living in the urban environment: a study on predictors of life satisfaction

Introduction

The relationship between human beings and the urban environment is a topic increasing in relevance. Most of people in the world live in an urban context and, as many scholars assert, the more urbanism is developing, the more specific problems arise, such as insecurity, loneliness, and weak social ties. Studying the consequences the urban context has on wellbeing and quality of life is an ethical, political, and scientific imperative. Addressing these effects is also a relevant political challenge.

Political challenges refer to the importance of connecting different levels of intervention. Social and community psychology demonstrated how different variables affect people's ordinary life, i.e. at individual (Gattino, Rollero, & De Piccoli, in press), ideological (Rollero & Tartaglia, 2013; Rollero, Glick, & Tartaglia, 2014) and macro social level (Gattino & Tartaglia, 2015). Dealing with quality of life means to act in line with the World Health Organization approach "Health in all Policies". The Biopsychosocial Model (Engel, 1977) considers health as a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors following the World Health Organization (WHO) definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not just as the absence of disease. A very large amount of research has studied quality of life considering the complexity of its determinants (e.g. Cummins, 2005; De Piccoli, 2014; Dzuka, 2012; Rollero, 2013a; Sirgy, 2011; Tartaglia, 2013; Tartaglia, 2014).

In psychological literature, there are a number of ways to conceptualize and measure quality of life and well-being of individuals (for a review see Lent, 2004; Meléndez, Tomas, Oliver, & Navarro, 2009). In Diener's (2006) perspective, subjective well-being refers to all the various type of evaluations, both positive and negative, that people make of their lives. It is an umbrella term for the different valuations people make regarding their lives, the events happening to them, their

bodies and minds, and the circumstances in which they live. The cognitive component of subjective well-being has been defined as life satisfaction (Diener, 2006). The life satisfaction represents a broad, reflective appraisal the person makes of his or her life. The term life can be defined as all areas of a person's life at a particular point in time or as an integrative judgment about the person's life since birth, and this distinction is often left ambiguous in current measures (Diener, 2006). Overall, literature has focused on specific contextual factors that may affect life satisfaction and well-being, paying particular attention to the place of residence. The places affect human activities providing resources and setting limits, but also have psychological impact provoking relevant feelings and furnishing a base for cognitive elaboration.

The relationship between individuals and their environment has two linked but different aspects: an affective dimension, that is the emotional bond toward places (place attachment), and a cognitive dimension, related to the cognitions about the self as a member of a physical space (place identification) (Altman & Low, 1992; Hernández, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007; Rollero, 2013b; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010a). These concepts have been considered in relation to different territorial dimensions (i.e. the nation, the town, and the neighbourhood) (Lewicka, 2010). They involves different elements: the place, considering both the social relationship (bonding and bridging: Lewicka, 2011) and the physical characteristics; the personal characteristics of people living there; and the process involved, that is the affect, the cognition and the behaviour (Scannell, Gifford, 2010).

Specifically, place attachment can be defined as the affective link that people establish with specific environments, where they have a propensity to remain and where they feel comfortable and safe (Hidalgo & Hernández, 2001; Mannarini, Tartaglia, Fedi, & Greganti, 2006). It encourages greater freedom of behaviour, exploration, confidence and affective responsiveness within the local community (Fried, 2000). Moreover, the place can be considered a social category and thus subject to the same rules as a social identification. Therefore, place identification expresses membership of a group of people who are defined by their location (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Indeed, it

applies specifically to the aspects of identity and those of the self-categorization on the basis of the membership to a locally defined group.

Literature shows that people's relation to their living environment is a key issue for their well-being (Rollero & De Piccoli 2010b; Rollero, Gattino, & De Piccoli, 2014), and for physical and mental health (Kawachi & Berkman 2003; Wen, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2006). This is especially true in the big cities and in general in the urban environment. Empirical studies shows that the feeling of being at home in the neighbourhood is closely connected with a sense of well-being (Moser & Ratiu, 2002), whereas the lack of environmental qualities may be a threat to quality of life (Uzzell & Moser, 2006). However, most studies have been focused only on the role of place attachment in predicting individuals' well-being. Since place identification expresses a significant aspect of identity connected to the local context, it should be important including this dimension in investigating the relationship between environmental bonds and well-being.

The current study

The present study aimed at investigating the best predictors of life satisfaction, considering both personal characteristics (i.e. gender, age, and income) and contextual psychosocial variables (i.e. place attachment and social identification with inhabitants). On the grounds of the above-described literature, we set two objectives:

1. Assessing the relative contribution of personal socio-demographic characteristics and psychosocial variables in explaining life satisfaction.
2. Comparing the effects of place attachment and social identification with inhabitants as predictors of life satisfaction.

Method

Data were collected via a self-reported questionnaire, which took about 20 minutes to complete. Participants were recruited among inhabitants of a middle-class neighborhood in Turin, a large city of about one million inhabitants in the North-West of Italy, via a convenience sampling. Although the sampling technique does present limitations in that it was not purely random, every attempt was made to access a wide range of respondents in terms of the age range considered, gender, educational level and occupational status. Anonymity of the respondents was assured.

Participants

The participants were 251 adults (53.8 % females). They aged from 19 to 74 (average age = 33.91; $SD = 15.79$). Most of them were unmarried (62%), 27.6% were married and 10.4% divorced or widowed. About the education, the majority was high school (60.8%) or college graduated (25.2%), whereas the others (14%) had a lower level of education. Half of the participants (50%) were workers, followed by students (41.9%), and retired or unemployed people (8.1%). Concerning the monthly income, 37% of participants declared a family income lower than 1200 Euros, 29.2% reported an income between 1200 and 2000 Euros, 20.1% between 2001 and 3000 Euros, and the remaining 13.7% more than 3000 Euros.

Measures

The variables used in our analysis were:

Life satisfaction. It was assessed using The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) composed by 5 items (e.g. “In most ways my life is close to my ideal”; “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing”) rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). The measure demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .90).

Place attachment. We used the Residential Attachment Scale (Bonaiuto, Fornara, Aiello, & Bonnes, 2002), a unifactorial Italian scale created to measure place attachment, made up of 8 items, referred

to the neighbourhood (e.g. “By now my neighbourhood is a part of me”; “For me leaving my neighbourhood would be really hard”). Items were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). The measure showed good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha =.89).

Social identification with inhabitants. It was investigated using the Identification with a Psychological Group Scale (Mael & Tetrick, 1992; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010a), an unifactorial scale used to assess the identification toward the social group of neighbours, made up of 10 items (e.g. “When someone criticizes my neighbours, I feel personally insulted”; “When I talk about my neighbours usually I say we and not they”). Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 4 (Strongly agree). The measure demonstrated good internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha =.87).

Socio-demographic items. We collected the following data: age, gender, marital status, educational level, employment status and income.

Data analysis

Besides descriptive statistics, to test the hypotheses we performed a multiple regression analysis. In this model life satisfaction was regressed onto demographic variables (gender, age, and income), place attachment and social identification with inhabitants. Statistical analyses were carried out using the SPSS 21.0 software.

Results

Table 1 shows descriptive statistics and correlations among life satisfaction, place attachment, and social identification with inhabitants. All the studied variables were positively correlated. The strongest relation was observed between place attachment and social identification with inhabitants.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the studied variables.

	1	2	3
Life satisfaction (1)		.37**	.25**
Place attachment (2)			.52**
Social identification with inhabitants (3)			
Mean	4.28	3.64	2.20
<i>SD</i>	1.31	1.18	.64

** $p < .01$.

In the regression model the dependent variable was life satisfaction (Table 2). The model accounted for a significant amount of variance of Satisfaction with Life (adjusted $R^2 = .24$). Among socio-demographic variables, only gender played no significant role. Increasing age leads to less satisfaction, whereas income positively affected the dependent variable. Social identification with inhabitants did not result as a significant predictor. On the contrary, place attachment not only increased life satisfaction, but also was the most effective of the independent variables.

Table 2. Multiple regression analysis predicting life satisfaction.

Predictor	β	t
Gender (0=male, 1=female)	.00	.05
Age	-.15*	-2.33
Income	.26***	4.27
Place attachment	.34***	4.89
Social identification with inhabitants	.12	1.64

* $p < .05$ *** $p < .001$

R^2 Adj. = .24

F (5, 216) = 14.36 $p < .001$.

Discussion

The present study aimed at investigating the predictors of life satisfaction for people living in the urban environment. The place of residence, specifically the neighbourhood for the inhabitants of big cities, is still, in the globalised world, a relevant point of reference (Tartaglia, 2009). Several studies showed how the relation with place of residence may affect the people's quality of life (Kawachi & Berkman 2003; Rollero & De Piccoli 2010b; Wen et al. 2006). For these reasons, we have investigated as predictors of life satisfaction both personal characteristics classically associated to high-level life conditions, and contextual psychosocial variables assessing the quality of the relation with the neighbourhood of residence. As expected, age and income were significant predictors of life satisfaction. The increasing age reduced life satisfaction whereas income increased it. Nevertheless, the most powerful predictor of satisfaction with life was place attachment, with a very relevant impact (more than twice than age). This result stresses the importance of the affective tie with the living environment also in the urban context. In line with the World Health Organization approach "Health in all Policies", present findings demonstrate once more the key role played by the context in fostering well-being and psychological health. Based on the idea that the origins of disease are often outside the health sector, as classically understood (Annett & Nickson, 1991), interest is growing in developing an environmental analysis focused on the impact of place on health and well-being (Atkinson, Fuller, & Painter, 2012; Macintyre & Ellaway, 2000; Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010a). The importance of territorial communities – or at least some aspects of them – for quality of life of individuals has to be an important subject of study and interest for both researchers and public healthcare providers. Indeed, this perspective could be of great interest for policy-makers in the field of social and health service management, because if it is clear that individuals' life satisfaction differs according to the characteristics and dimensions of the environment, this could affect the organization of health and social services, so that health policies can be tailored to specific needs and life situations (Fassio, Rollero, & De Piccoli, 2013).

The second aim of the study was to clarify the role of different psychosocial variables assessing the quality of the relation between participants and the neighbourhood: i.e. the affective tie with the

place (place attachment) and the identification with the social group of residents (identification with inhabitants). Both variables were strongly correlated with satisfaction with life and between them. Yet, the regression analysis allowed showing that just place attachment had a significant impact on satisfaction with life, whereas the identification with the inhabitants had no direct influence. From a theoretical point of view, the cognitive (i.e. identification) and the affective dimensions (i.e. place attachment) reflect the multiple ways that people experience their environment both as a place and as a social group of inhabitants. In other words, place attachment and identification are part of the same overarching self-in-place psychological framework with emotional and cognitive aspects all contributing to the individuals' bonding to an environment (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010a). These two constructs provided similar outcomes for what concerns the perception of the environment (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010a). However, the present study demonstrates they lead to distinct results when life satisfaction is considered. We can argue that the affective bond with the environment is more relevant than the cognitive dimension for individuals' well-being. Nevertheless, further research is needed to explore this issue.

The ecological approach considers the interdependence between individuals and contextual systems where people live in. To promote well-being, such contexts have to allow structural conditions to foster healthy lifestyles (Amerio, 2000; Bertini, 2012; Zani & Cicognani, 2000). According to Annett and Nickson (1991), the origins of disease are outside the health sector: for this reason, it is necessary considering the psychosocial processes linking the human beings to their environment and affecting wellbeing and quality of life.

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