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Enhancing classical methodological tools to foster participatory dimensions in local urban planning

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This paper reflects on ways of updating tools for engagement and enhancing citizens' participation in local urban planning and aims to reshape them according to theories that have emerged in recent decades on the conceptualization of such participation and on interdisciplinary methodologies. It does so in the context of a project investigating how local institutions try to produce new forms of engagement. The project was carried out in the Municipality of Peccioli, an ancient medieval village in Tuscany, Italy. We have revisited and combined some classical tools, such as documentary investigation, participant observation, focus groups and interviews, and proposed changes for capturing unexplored features, dimensions, and living experiences in the social body. The updating of classical methods aims to overcome existing power structures and to reshape the relationship between citizens and their local institutions, generating a more inclusive decision-making process.

1. Introduction

Growing numbers of citizens around the world are getting involved with institutions and professionals in shaping their surroundings. A wide spectrum of methods of community planning, typically based on spontaneous involvement of citizens, is available. For example, Wates (2006), producing a selection of the most effective methods for helping people to get involved in physical planning and design, identifies 53, from Planning for Real to Open Space workshop or Electronic Maps, which can be effective in their own right or in combination.

The methodological state of the art of community planning is evolving rapidly and new methods continue to be tested in order to better respond to specific circumstances and to suit local needs. This paper aims to update and expand, through a sociological lens, the toolkit of participatory methods, and to advance citizens' political participation studies in respect to methodological issues. The motivations for the present study are listed below.

First, many traditional methods need to be updated in light of digital technologies that have offered new affordances and opportunities, not only in terms of online participation (e.g., e-democracy platforms, social GIS applications, etc.), but also in terms of research tools. Such technologies enable the researcher, on one hand, to augment traditional offline field work with computer-generated information, and to offer citizens perceptually enriched experiences, and, on the other, to collect data in a more sophisticated way.

Second, methodological tools need to be reshaped with regard to the relationships that they afford with citizens engaged in participation processes. Traditional tools typically create a hierarchical and instrumental relationship, which operates in opposition to authentic democratic participation. Reshaping and innovating these tools therefore is necessary in order to avoid a contradictory strategy of participation at the empirical level.

Third, in order to include in the participatory process a full spectrum of the community, and to collect citizens' points of view according to the most typical socio-demographic variables (i.e.: age, gender, cultures, backgrounds), researchers should attempt to build a representative sample of the population.

Fourth, even in view of the pessimism articulated by some scholars (see for example Sunstein, 2001; Zollo & Quattrociocchi, 2018), we are more inclined to argue that citizens now have higher levels of education, are more informed and proactive, and show potential for a new maturity in relation to participatory processes, compared with those of the past (Fortunati, Taipale & de Luca, 2013). Methods to investigate citizens must begin from a recognition of the potential of this sociocultural change and must be updated accordingly.

As a methodological building piece, the paper will describe the potentialities of this methodological re-visitation and innovation through empirical examples related to a recent research project on citizenship participation in Peccioli, a village in Tuscany, and the surrounding administrative territory The project, commissioned by the local administration, aims to explore how public administration can enhance communication with citizens and strengthen political participation in civic life in the digital communication era. The Municipality of Peccioli asked a team of researchers from the University of Udine, joined after some months by a scholar from Dublin City University who acted as international observer, to organize a study to collect citizens' opinions, evaluations and suggestions on a series of projects related to their territory. The specific purpose was to launch a participatory process, shared between Peccioli's Council and its citizens, for the formulation of planning policies. The implementation of such a participatory process was prescribed by regional legislation.

The aim of our work was not to outline an ideal model of participation and communication for urban planning, but to improve tools fostering the awareness and inclusion of public policies in the light of the new possibilities offered by digital technologies. We share here the approach adopted for our research project in Peccioli, in order to contribute to the advancement of citizens' participation studies. The paper is structured as follows: in the following section, we elaborate the debate on citizen participation, demonstrating the need to rethink methods. Then we move to update classical methodological tools, such as analysis of official documents and journalistic production, participant observation, interviews and focus groups, in order to obtain more accurate data on political and civic participation in local communities. Finally, we

acknowledge the merits and limitations of these tools and, by extension, of the present research.

2. Discussing participation

Against a background of widespread perception of crisis in traditional channels of political intermediation, experimentation has flourished in participation practices capable of redrawing the boundaries of civic activism and the modalities of relationships between citizens, politics and administration. The theme of civic engagement has been injected into a plethora of progressive practices by citizens and their administrations, giving the lie to the common representation of public opinion as disappointed and distant from politics, apathetic and passive. In particular, two parallel phenomena have emerged. The first comes from bottom up, and is characterized by the diffusion of new citizen committees, associations, and other such entities. The second comes from above and is based on the adoption of participatory processes promoted by institutional actors and aimed, not only at the expression of collective opinions, but sometimes also at the active partaking of civil society in the political decision-making process. In pursuit of legitimation, local institutions have integrated their technical, administrative and political capacities with on-the-ground skills, practical knowledge and experiences, in a process that involves varieties of mutual learning and enrichment.

The first consideration that emerges from the analysis of the literature is that participation and participatory democracy constitute a panorama of plural choices (Allegretti, 2010; Bobbio, 2006). Participation can be achieved through a variety of methods and tools, including action planning events, open space technology, consensus building, outreach, and deliberative polling. Current literature suggests that, while community planning approaches can vary in many ways, there are general principles which can be applied to most situations (Blatrix, 2007). As highlighted by Wates, "The approach adopted will be different for every community. There is rarely a quick fix or blueprint […] But there are principles, methods and scenarios which appear to be universally relevant and can be drawn on for inspiration and guidance" (2006, p. 6).

Existing theories suggest that there are different levels of public participation. A classical starting point to which many authors refer is the seminal typology suggested by Arnstein (1969), represented by a ladder with eight steps (Manipulation; Therapy; Informing; Consultation; Placation; Partnership; Delegated power; Citizen control), grouped into three macro-categories (Non-participation; Degrees of tokenism; Degree of citizen power). The ladder represents the schematic illustration of the complex social interactions that develop between community and administration in processes of use and transformation of the territory. Each step metaphorically corresponds to the extent of citizens' power in determining the plan, ranging from the lowest level, "Manipulation" by the power holders, to the highest level, "Citizen control", in which citizens are fully empowered to control decision making. The lower steps of the scale - those in which the administration at most strategically releases information about its actions to citizens with the aim of consolidating its power - are indicated as attempts to manipulate or allay public opinion. Only by climbing the ladder can citizens acquire effective power. According to Arnstein, in fact, in order to talk about participation, it is essential that the community plays an active part in decision-making. This means ensuring both transparency of information and an actual potential for citizens to affect change.

This model was modified by several authors, who have introduced innovative elements (Connor, 1988; Doolittle & Faul, 2013; Dorcey, Doney, & Rueggebert, 1994; Mostert, 2003; Weidemann & Femers, 1993; Wilcox, 1994). Although their ladders differ from one another, it is possible to distinguish three common threads. The first, the information level represents the indispensable entry point in real participation, the first step taken by an administration in the direction of a process of gradual change toward the introduction of more significant and complex mechanisms of active public involvement. Information is an important tool for generating civic awareness, understood as the ability to make responsible choices (Voogd & Woltjer, 1999). Every expression of participatory democracy requires at root a demanding commitment to information. In this regard, the choice of the most effective communication tools is mainly dictated by the actors involved in the participatory process (Schlossberg & Shuford, 2005) and, in order to ensure greater inclusion, it is essential to calibrate the content according to the characteristics of the recipients, their socio-cultural background and their information and training skills (Allegretti, 2010). As highlighted in audience studies (e.g. Morley, 1983), the individual interpretation of information provided is grafted onto varying cognitive skills and backgrounds, and can therefore lead to a different processing of the contents. This initial aspect may influence the subsequent course of the discussion and of the wider participatory process.

But information alone is not enough. From the comparative analysis of the debate, it emerges that a participatory process to be such must include interaction, mediation and negotiation between the government and the public. This second level, which can be labelled the advisory level, is strictly linked to the active listening to citizens (Sclavi, 2002), functional not only to the collection of data and information, but, above all, to the involvement of people as active subjects of knowledge and expertise. Active listening techniques can be interpreted as "proactive tools for decision making" and can manifest themselves through different forms of democratic interaction which can be light (e.g., brainstorming, outreach, focus group, survey, interview), structured (e.g. urban forum, charrettes) or permanent (e.g. neighborhood labs, urban center) (Creighton, 2005; Fera, 2008; Green & Haines, 2011). The main goal here is to identify the real needs of citizens in order to implement more appropriate interventions and solutions. In this way, they can provide input to a decision in the form of opinions or judgments from which subsequently policy might derive (Rowe & Frewer, 2000; Smith, 1983). Citizens' contributions can be influenced by several factors: individual (cognitive and personality) or social (economic and social conditions that lead the subjects to expose themselves more or less than others). For this reason, an efficient process should aim to include as many people as possible, and not only the associative entities present in the area (Allegretti, 2010). Above all, it should be able to offer an opportunity for

expression to the "silent majority", the one that usually does not participate, to bring out positions and ideas that differ from those already represented. In this way it would be possible to counterbalance the presence of the so called "high demander", those who may monopolize or manipulate the participation scene, thanks to the availability of time and resources (organizational, political, economic, cultural, etc.) or for personal reasons (Allegretti, 2002; Urbinati, 2014).

To be implemented, the advisory level requires an opening of the traditional process upstream, that is, a change in the institutional approach that embraces all those resources expressed by actors not conventionally in charge of technical planning, through targeted planning and communication techniques. Moreover, it implies also a rupture in the traditional methods of policy making that saw the citizens at the margins, and the overcoming of the limitations of representative democracy (Manin, 1997) and its integration with participatory democracy.

The last level is the deliberative level, in which inputs emerging from the advisory level are received and elaborated in order to arrive at a final decision, which should be as responsive as possible to citizens' expectations and shared directions. Involving citizens in decision making processes means making them protagonists, giving them the ability to influence, in a strong sense, not only their own community, but wider society. At this level, negotiation represents the crucial junction of the transition from the theoretical-speculative dimension to the possibility of effective intervention and positive compromise in the community's life (Crozier, 1970). Hence, this phase is perhaps the most delicate and controversial. In order to ensure that procedures follow a democratic path, decisions must be taken by a democratic top-level authority which takes charge, combining the decision-making skills that emerge from the processes of collective interaction with those of the institutions of representative democracy (Allegretti, 2010; Kelsen, 1985). Institutions, however, often show resistance to taking the path of participation or to subsequently incorporating, the directions that emerge from listening to citizens, not understanding that the credibility that public communication can obtain within participatory experiences depends above all on the effective commitment to open processes and to apply the results of the consultation to the policy making.

For each of the three levels identified, it is possible to recognize a specific condition of citizen participation, which marks a path of growth and learning by participating actors, who as informed citizens (at the information level) first became heard citizens (at the advisory level) and then evolve into responsible citizens (at the deliberative level).

Among the main benefits that a participatory approach allows it is worth noting the following:

- reducing the distance between professionals and citizens, breaking rigid patterns that traditionally characterize the apparatuses of production of goods and services, favoring innovation and increasing knowledge (Fung, 2004);
- promoting forms of negotiation, to broaden consensus on projects, to deal with problems in an integrated way, to co-distribute responsibility to citizens, thus avoiding errors linked to an authoritarian approach (Aoki, in press; Kotus, 2013);
- increasing the social capital of the local community, along with the sense of trust between citizens and institutions (Allegri, 2015).

However, some vulnerabilities emerge from the literature on participation, pointing to the need for more robust methods. Among the most serious are:

- limited and unrepresentative response: citizens may have little trust in institutions and fear that their inputs may make no difference. Furthermore, they may have too little time to participate in the process or may not be interested in joining (Victor, 2016; Walters, Aydelotte, & Miller, 2000). For these reasons, usually, some social categories are overrepresented while others (i.e.: women, elderly people, handicapped, immigrants), traditionally neglected by traditional urban planning, are often not represented at all (Bobbio, 2006; Martínez Palacios, 2016; Vargas Céspedes & Zamuer, 2006). Moreover, it is worth pointing out that the digitalization of participatory processes itself facilitates social exclusion, connected to the phenomena of digital divide and (non) media literacy (Nam, 2014); – uninformed response: sometimes the quality of the responses collected may be low because they are based on insufficient, incomplete or incorrect information and data (Victor, 2016). The public is perceived as "shortsighted, ill-informed, selfish and/or too emotional or lack a democratic attitude […] Moreover, politicians and professionals are not necessarily less shortsighted, selfish and emotional and more democratic." (Mostert, 2003, p. 184) (in this regard, see the "bounded rationality model" elaborated by Simon, 1947).
- reluctant institutions: sometimes governments give no serious follow-up to the participatory process, resulting in disappointment and lower public acceptance of decisions (Mostert, 2003; Roberts, 1995; Webler & Renn, 1995).

Our study is premised on the consideration of these weaknesses, which we have tried to overcome by updating and innovating the classical sociological methodological tools.

3. Methodological discussion

Within the Peccioli research project for studying citizens' participation we needed to reflect on and update the toolbox that researchers conventionally use in this kind of scenario. As outlined above, we determined that the first step to be taken was the updating of the methods we had decided to apply: analysis of official documents and journalistic production, participant observation, focus groups and interviews. This step was dictated by two elements: 1) the necessity to reshape the relationships that usually develop between the researcher and the participant on the base of the change of social relationships at general level, as we describe immediately below; and 2) the new opportunities and challenges that the massive use of new technologies of information and communication have opened up for citizens, as we argue later on. Methods come embedded with the theories that surround their creation and use. However, we argue that a kind of ossification has occurred in which methods have been applied in much the same way over

the past century. The old tools available may not be appropriate to investigating new issues or traditional issues that present different features, and do not support the emergence of new theories, which in turn do not resonate with the old methods. In part products of societies with low levels of education until after the post-war period, these methods had designed within them a hierarchical relationship between researcher and interviewee, in which the former was seen as the sole repository of true knowledge, with the latter cast as the keeper of precious but unelaborated data. Only the researcher knew the design of the study and its motivations, the final purposes of the research, and the uses of its outcome. The relationship was fundamentally instrumental in respect of interviewees, since the researcher had to answer only to the questions or demands of the scientific community.

Thus, social change and the consequent changes in theory prompted the next step, which was to modify and adapt methods to new conditions. We argue that researchers cannot advance knowledge on citizenship and produce new theory without updating methodology and restructuring its tools. The first significant social change that presents itself, which has been extensively theorized, and which has immediate implications for methodology, relates to the new roles that people as ICT users and citizens have in society (Bakardjieva, 2010). While on a generalized, macro level, Habermas' (2006) pessimism regarding communication, in particular via ICT, cannot be discounted, in specific sets of circumstances new platforms for the many-to-many sharing of information and ideas are relevant. Through new technologies, more citizens have appropriated spaces and opportunities to express their opinions, information, knowledge and emotions and to become proactive agents of the digital era. This phenomenon prompted Toffler (1980) to coin the term "prosumer". Bruns (2008) further developed this idea by proposing the more appropriate term of "prod-user". Such activity, it could be argued, can represent a digital manifestation of the informal talk and casual exchange that Habermas envisages.

This shift calls for a substantial transformation in the relationship between researchers and the interviewees. Not only must the structure of the relationship become more equal and horizontal, but the mechanisms of producing new knowledge inside the scientific process need to be rethought and updated. Research can no longer treat the participant in an instrumental manner: in front of the researcher now is seated a person who can understand not only the questions but also the design and motivations of the study, and so can contribute to the improvement of the research. This same interviewee very often also is interested to know the results of the inquiry in which s/he has participated, so that the researcher may need to come back to the participant after the study is finished in order to present its outcome.

Another aspect that updating methods addresses is to respond to what may seem a whirlwind of change, in the sense that fragmentation of knowledge requires researchers to cross boundaries between disciplines. On this topic, an excellent contribution is given by Osborne (2015). Outlining the development of the concept of transdisciplinary, and how it is differentiated from the notions of multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity, Osborne identifies its most important cultural (post national) and theoretical trajectories, with contributions from disciplines as diverse as philosophy, STS, feminist theory, and gender studies. Although scholars widely share awareness of the need to cross boundaries at theoretical level, the consequences have been less clear for methodology. Transdisciplinary knowledge cannot be produced without transdisciplinary methods. Discussion of multi-method research usually takes place inside a discipline attempting to obtain stronger results (Brewer & Hunter, 2006). Until recently, projects producing a set of multidisciplinary methods have been rare. One instance worth recalling is the work of Randolph (2008) on technology in education, which applies methods from media studies, sociology, psychology, and other disciplines.

In the research in Peccioli we considered that the second step to be taken was to introduce methodological tools in participation studies that could effectively capture the contributions of all citizens' groups, not only of groups of experts or stakeholders. To do so, we decided to hybridize qualitative with quantitative methods, by coupling the criteria required by the survey and the representative sampling techniques, with those of interviews. This is important because processes that base themselves in spontaneous engagement of participants paradoxically often risk introducing forms of exclusion of a large cohort of citizens.

Thus, our project in Peccioli had the objective of elaborating a widely transdisciplinary approach to methods, drawing from disparate disciplines such as education, history, media studies, business studies, medicine, political science, sociology, visual studies, and others, and merging them to generate new insights. Generally, the need to produce integrated knowledge can be met by adopting older tools, ranging from archival work to focus groups, and updating them. In our study, we focused on four methods: analysis of official documents and journalistic production, participant observation, interview and focus groups. The discussion of methods that follows is aimed at building the case for methodological innovation. For reasons of space, we do not include close detail of the structures and content of these tools. These will be discussed in a future article reporting the project.

4. Close reading of official documents

Our starting point in attempting to get to the heart of the debate on methodology is the classical tool of the analysis of official documents, which in the case of our study are municipal council resolutions, along with print and online local newspapers (i.e., Il Tirreno, La Nazione, Quinewsvaldera.it, Pisanotizie.it, Pisatoday.it), and several books about the village of Peccioli published over the last twenty years (Delai, 2009; Pierotti, Preiti, & Fantacone, 2003; Sbrana & Gandolfo, 2012; Scotini, 2003). We also have taken into consideration some sources that are less "official" but remain important for our study, such as blogs, Facebook pages and public discussion websites. We argue that, as in other international projects such as, for example, Savini (2010), Saurugger (2010), Granier and Kudo (2016) and Aoki (in press), this should always be the starting point, but that this method should be reshaped.

Close reading is the primary hybridization with a qualitative method used in history and humanities studies. It means, first, to observe facts and details on a text as a whole or to focus on

a particular passage. All structural elements, rhetorical features, cultural references, or only selected features of the text – for instance, similarities and dissimilarities, or particular historical references – may be observed. Second, close reading requires the interpretation of these observations.

We propose to apply this as the main method for studying official texts, along with content analysis, a social science method that is arguably quantitative in nature, yielding numerical data. Harnessing these two methods combines the strengths of quantitative and qualitative modes while helping address some of the weaknesses of each (Abulof, 2015). Other strengths, however, can be added: one is to read the documents in the context of their local culture, as insiders. Institutional documents may present a general aim to serve their communities and regions, for example, and this will be much the same across countries in spite of language differences. But local history, surrounding social relations, and political conditions can give different meanings to the same words in each context. Finally, this reading should be aware of the fact that there is often a profound difference between formal and informal knowledge, and thus matching and comparing them may be the only strategy that comes close to the truth. Blending traditional and digital methods brings further advantages. Media studies has developed the analysis of large bodies of media texts (Voth et al., 2013), a technique also useful for studying institutional texts. In research, "digital" recently has come to refer to the use of software to process massive online content from social media sites, but that processing must differ if the researcher approaches documents first in context. In this use, digital methods become extensions of the initial close reading and are applied as needed where the repository of materials is large, such as in the case of municipality websites and online material.

For example, the study of citizenship in Peccioli started by examining the municipal and related texts outlined above, by identifying keywords and reading relevant documents closely, adopting standard techniques for small organizations and using digital searching. In this framework, as an outcome of close reading and content analysis, we produced, as is common practice, a leaflet on the history of Peccioli and on the political as well as innovative identity of Peccioli's citizens entitled "We, Peccioli. The future starts here". But, in contrast to the typical path, we submitted the text to the citizens as an "open work", that is, one that would reach its conclusion after incorporating their comments, corrections, criticisms and suggestions. The reasoning here is that, beyond digital techniques, there is a need for an awareness that knowledge derived from examination of written declarations should be problematized in the light of the gap between the written and the real. The written is immaterial dead labor and is impaired in that it is fixed rather than open to change. It presents strong resistance to the flexibility and the dynamism that everyday life imposes. Moreover, history often is written by the winners or by those who write within their value and vision and may not be so inclusive of the points of view and experiences of citizens' lifeworld.

Recognizing this problem, the "open work" of the researchers' analysis has been submitted immediately to citizens' judgment and agency, offered in the form of a pamphlet when they came to be interviewed. Citizens were asked to read the pamphlet and signal to researchers any mistakes or inaccuracies that they could identify in the narrative describing the historical and political life and situation of their village. This participation ultimately will enable the inclusion in the analysis of official documents and media not only the professional knowledge of experts but also the lay, embodied knowledge of citizens.

In conclusion, this open work solution has the merit of including citizens' perspectives in the narrative account of their village or community, thus intensifying their participation in the elaboration of their common identity and history. It therefore represents a significant advance on the conventional leaflet and proposes a vision of responsible and self-reflective participation.

5. From participant observation to reciprocal observation

Another tool that we sought to update in the research project was the classical "participant observation" of the main public events in Peccioli. We analyze here the reshaping of this tool because it is often a key part of the methodological scaffolding used by researchers. Our study adopted this tool for capturing systematically the ideas, attitudes and practices of the citizenship in the village. First, researchers attended public meetings of the municipal council as well as specific meetings that the mayor organized with stakeholders of the village and its surroundings to discuss the main changes proposed in the Municipality's urban planning documents. According to Jorgensen (1989), participant observation is particularly appropriate for analyzing processes, relationships among people and events, and socio-cultural contexts. It is especially useful during the preliminary stages of scientific inquiry to learn about the activities of people in their natural setting (Lazarsfeld, 1972) and is effective for descriptive studies, exploratory studies and studies aimed at developing theoretical interpretations (Jorgensen, 1989). It provides direct experiential and observational access to the interactions and the meanings of human existence as viewed from the standpoint of insiders (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). It consists of strategies, principles, procedures and techniques of research mainly based on "active looking, improving memory, informal interviewing, writing detailed field notes, and perhaps most importantly, patience" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p. vii). The method requires that the researcher becomes directly involved in the day-to-day or routine activities as a participant in people's lives, learning through exposure. Researchers' involvement may be overt (with the knowledge of the insiders) – as in the case in the present study – covert (without the knowledge of insiders), or insiders selectively can be provided with information about the researcher's interests and purposes (Adler, Adler, & Rochford, 1986). Usually, field relations are less interactive and predominantly unidirectional: through participation, the researcher is able to observe and experience the meanings and interactions of people in the field, but the inverse does not occur. In order to update this methodological tool, we adopted a "reciprocal observation", making the relationship with the observed more interactive and bidirectional. We observed with the awareness of being in turn observed by citizens, and this dynamic relationship allowed us to have a stronger, more

reflexive position in the fieldwork. In the context of this peer observation, we could record the gaze on us of the people in Peccioli and collect their comments, impressions and feedback, both during the informational interview and the videos recorded (see the following sections). Furthermore, reciprocal observation allowed citizens to become more familiar with the analysis that we were carrying out and provided both them and us with the opportunity to mutually enhance our understanding.

Given that the practice (and the quality) of participant observation fundamentally depends upon the skill of the researcher to observe and document, and to interpret what has been observed, it inevitably involves a wide variety of non-rational, extra-scientific factors (for example, the skill to develop relationships with people or to read and interpret what s/he observes) (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). To counter this problem, we incorporated rigorous techniques for recording (both audio and video) public meetings and collecting more objective data from the fieldwork. In particular, during the public assemblies, we used two high-quality digital stereo recorders and two mini-cameras[1] positioned inside the meeting rooms to simultaneously record from different perspectives, that of the mayor and other members of the Municipal Council, and that of the participating citizens or stakeholders. This visual approach offers a richer understanding of the social context and its participants and has allowed us to better analyze the interactions between participants, including their postures, gestures and expressions (Heath, Hindmarsh, & Luff, 2010).

Using camcorders as a data capture tool has various benefits from a methodological point of view (Harris, 2016). First, videos allow us to obtain more complete and accurate information than that collected through traditional research tools, and to conduct a microanalysis of a series of behaviors and details that otherwise would probably have eluded us. Second, the use of multiple cameras allowed us to record a single situation from several perspectives. This has contributed to gathering more complete and effective field information and, at the same time, to modifying the way in which the observer regards the subject of study (Knoblauch, Schnettler, Raab, & Soeffner, 2006). Finally, video recording gives us the opportunity to make repeatable otherwise uniquely one-off situations, episodes or phenomena, such as meetings. Video recordings can therefore be a useful tool for qualitative research and constitute an advanced tool for keeping notes (Shrum, Duque, & Brown, 2005). Recorded videos were analyzed through a specific grid which we created and organized into meaningful categories with the purpose of collecting more objective, complete and detailed data on the interactions and behaviors adopted by the participants (e.g. non-verbal communication, gestures, expressions, face cues, duration of the speech, etc.). This methodological approach enabled us, and any researcher who were to adopt it, to render the observational process itself less dependent on the individual researcher or the institution, and to incorporate in the observation the views of citizens. With this new approach to observation, citizens have had the opportunity to transform themselves from object of study to a co-subject of study.

6. The informational interview as a hybrid tool

In order to improve the substantial quality of citizens' participation and to ameliorate the risk of "uninformed participation", we introduced a transdisciplinary, hybridized form of interview. This was because, as well as seeking information from participants, we were aware that there was a need to give information to them. Our point of departure was an awareness that usually it is not possible to rely on solid knowledge among participants of proposed projects. The results of information from media or from word of mouth turned out to be vague and imprecise. Furthermore, theories on limited rationality point out how citizens deal with politics in a fragmentary and often superficial way (Giacomini, 2016, 2017). Thus, we needed to build coherent and solid information about the Municipality's projects during the interview, before asking people for their evaluation. We also introduced a visual tool, with the purpose of supporting interviewers in explaining the projects. In addition to the verbal illustration and description of proposed public works, the interviewers used digital tablets to show the rendering of the projects and illustrate how the village could be transformed over time by the proposals. This visual support, giving concrete expression to abstract proposals, has proven particularly useful in helping interviewees to focus better on each project and in increasing their ability to digest the information.

We have borrowed the method of the "informational interview" from the business domain, where it is used by an employment professional to learn about a potential job seeker and evaluate if his/her professional potential fits the organization's culture. During this kind of interview, the job seeker usually receives details on career opportunities and on the nature of the company or industry, asking general questions of someone who has some first-hand knowledge (Bolles, 2013). It is worth noting that the format is not a conventional job interview: the objective is not to find an employment opening, rather it is to talk with people currently working in the field, in order to gain a deeper understanding of an occupation or company, in a non-threatening forum for discussion as the two sides learn about each other. This methodological tool transmigrates well to the field of political and civic participation, where we reshaped it significantly so that it would fit our research purposes.

Unlike interviews commonly used in social sciences, this adapted information interview is more peer-based and highly interactive, since it first provides information to interviewees and in turn asks them for information. The interviewer's role is conceptualized as more complex and multifaceted, and the interaction makes the relationship between interviewee and interviewer more equal, allowing researchers to seek a deeply informed opinion from citizens. In this operation, researchers first illustrated and explained in sequence the Municipality's proposed works, and then asked citizens to express their views on them. For the presentation of projects, the researchers

[1] i.e.: Tascam DR-40 and Sony action cam HDR AS20 (dimensions: 4.7 cm × 8.2 cm × 2.54 cm).

followed a written text, based on the information received from the Municipality, so that all citizens were exposed to identical material. This made it possible – at least in part – to avoid collecting opinions not based on an informed knowledge. The use of knowledge of facts, as opposed to limited personal experience, in this way is vital not only in order to respond adequately to the questions of the interviewer and to enter into a critical dialogue with the material proposed by the researcher, but also, more generally, to facilitate the citizen's responsible evaluation of community proposals.

The person-to-person interviews also were designed as in-depth interviews (Banaka, 1971). Thus, the information interview was hybridized with the in-depth interview, since we augmented responses with notes on the non-verbal language expressed by participants as well as on their emotion, and on the overall thrust of the interview. This method reflects the reality that, in processing their responses, people combine giving information with the expression of their own feelings and with their personal narratives. Additionally, in order to attempt to capture all perspectives in the participation process, we decided to select the sample of potential interviewees with the classical technique of sampling coming from survey. This allowed us to design a sample, which was representative of the population investigated.

Respondents were randomly extracted from the registry of resident population and chosen following a probabilistic stratified sampling with proportional allocation. The strata were based on specific criteria, such as gender, generations (Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, X Generation and Y Generation), and place of residence. The Municipality of Peccioli has an area of 92.60 km^2 and includes a territory rich in rural landscapes with 8 villages: Peccioli (2715 inhabitants), Fabbrica (735), Ghizzano (349), Legoli (259), Montecchio (152), Montelopio (46), Libbiano (17), and Cedri (15). Libbiano and Cedri were excluded, due to their low number of inhabitants. The total number of strata was 2 (gender) × 4 (generations) × 6 (places of residence) = 48. Due to the stratified sample with proportional allocation, it was possible to divide the population into homogeneous strata following this procedure: in each stratum, the size of the random sample was proportional to the size of the stratum. If we indicate with N the population size, with H the number of strata, Nh the size of the h-th stratum, nh the sample size in the h-th stratum, and with n the total sample size, then

$$n_h = n\frac{N^h}{N},\ h = 1, 2, \ldots H,\ \sum_{h=1}^{H} n_h = n$$

The main aim of this sampling technique is to reduce selection bias. Stratifying the target population helps ensure a sample that reflects the population being studied. This is achieved if the researcher is able to identify every element of the target population, classify each of them into a single stratum, and extracting the list of interviewees from an exhaustive list, which is in our case the municipal registry. This procedure enabled us to study traits and characteristics of each subgroup (Corbetta, 2014).

This implementation was the only way to ensure that all citizens across the territory had the same probability of selection, with such accuracy vital to ensuring an accurate representation of opinions. For practical and logistical reasons, we conducted informational interviews with citizens from Peccioli and Fabbrica, while we chose to organize focus groups with the citizens residing in the Municipality's smaller villages.

Finally, the transdisciplinary interview, in addition to being supported, as discussed, by rigorous sampling, also was constituted in part by a questionnaire with closed questions and in part by a semi-structured interview with open questions. In particular, the interview consisted of three parts: 1) a section regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents (i.e.: age, gender, marital status, education, etc.); 2) a section regarding the projects that the Municipality of Peccioli proposed, based both on closed and open questions; and 3) a concluding section concerning citizens' opinions on council policies, as well as their needs and perceptions. The multi-dimensional nature of the interview that we applied in this study has produced a more informed and inclusive participation of citizens.

7. Flexible focus groups

In this section, we report how we reshaped the tool of the focus group in the light of the recent theoretical debate on leadership that can contribute much to deepen citizens' participation process. Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 2010) is a concept emanating from the psychology of work, and is based on ten characteristics: listening, empathy, care, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, administration, engagement, and community building. This approach also is appropriate for local contexts, since it is fully open to public participation and is highly interactive. Servant leadership also is a good strategy for flexibly managing focus groups, along with lessons from consciousness groups used in feminist research (Madriz, 2000). The focused group interview is in itself one of the most dynamic research methods. It grew from social psychology of the early twentieth century in the work of Merton (1987) and Lewin and Lewin (1948). Although originating as a micro-sociological method, it quickly turned into the "focus group" familiar from marketing research, and consequently embodying instrumental assumptions. Focus groups emerged to address average people assumed to be "ingenuous participants". It seemed desirable to extract their knowledge about a certain subject, but usually without their knowing the full purpose and meaning of the exercise.

Like other methods of its era, the focus group is hierarchical. The design of the research, comprising its rationale, conceptual background, research questions, and expected outcomes, is in the hands of the researcher. Participants usually are given questions with little context. The researcher holds power, while respondents are placed on a lower plane, enjoying peer relationships with other participants, but not with the researcher. Along with other issues, the relations that form the focus group tend to encourage power micro-politics and elicit socially desirable responses. A principal feature of focus group research has been groups' tendency to find a middle ground and to explore the normative (Smithson, 2000), and citizenship as conceived here is among the most normative aspects of identity.

Focus group research has yet to adapt to emerging theory. In contrast to consumer research, as discussed above,

new theories explore power and the empowering of users, who now have taken up roles as designers and producers of content. Although originally explored as an aspect of the Internet, such new roles have emerged across other new technologies (Glotz, Berschi, & Locke, 2005). The user of new media, far from being cast as a recipient reacting to messages distributed from center to periphery, now is seen as a co-constructor (Oudshoorn & Pinch, 2003), who generates messages, settings, and terms of digital interaction.

The focus group is ripe for updating in order to treat participants as intelligent and aware of technologies. Instead of being simply ingenuous, participants can be artful peers, whose interactive involvement produces a kind of group canniness or genius. As "implicit or tacit experts", not mere respondents, they can participate in knowledge creation under conditions of full information and autonomy. Focus groups are an especially good platform for introducing greater autonomy. Researchers who are at the same time mentors and teachers are accustomed to leading group discussion, at universities but also in smaller settings. From the perspective of participants, those with less mentoring or digital experience might find a study using innovative, inclusive techniques of value for themselves and their organizations.

The focus group redesigned as a peer-to-peer process is more democratic, in line with the sensibility of the "prod-user" of digital media, and thus more effective. It can find greater access to collective intelligence by involving participants in a co-constructed discussion. The process can be empowering for participants, and the researchers can improve their knowledge along with participants, all involved in experiential learning in an open and aware process of knowledge sharing. Re-elaborating this method means that the research process can avoid re-introducing elements of alienation, instrumentality, and hierarchy that people are working to overcome in their everyday lives. Furthermore, the specific contribution to research that focus groups can offer is that the synergy and dynamism generated within homogeneous collectives often can take the interpretive process beyond the bounds of individual memory and expression to build original and shared perspectives.

In particular, we applied the tool in 6 of the Municipality's 8 villages: Ghizzano (2 focus groups), Legoli (2 focus groups), Montecchio (2 focus groups), Montelopio, Libbiano and Cedri (1 focus group).

The methodological strategy described so far is capable of being applied by any social scientist carrying out research on the field of citizens' participation by using the research tool of the focus group. This strategy harmonizes the spirit of the tool with that of the topic investigated (participation) by avoiding contradictions between them, thus improving the effect of citizens' participation.

8. Discussion and final remarks

This study shows that, by using transdisciplinary methods and by updating classical methodological tools, it is possible to investigate from a sociological point of view the difficult and complex theme of citizens' political participation and civic engagement in a more effective way. In general, this discourse points up how necessary and, we hope, possible it is to improve our methodological toolbox with the purpose of making them more appropriate to the topic of citizens' participation. New theories need to be incorporated inside methodological approaches and tools and methods have to be updated to reflect current possibilities of inquiry. In particular, the theory of potential prod-users and with it the recognition of the agency of participants should become the premise from which to reconstruct many methodological tools. Further momentum toward improving the quality of future studies might come from the adoption of a transdisciplinary approach, both at the level of conceptual integration across disciplines and at methodological level.

We have illustrated and discussed here how the updated methodological tools described can improve participation studies by making citizens' participation more responsible, informed, and substantial, and more inclusive and empowering of citizens.

This is valid for any type of social or political study, but it is especially urgent for studies and projects on citizenship, since this field of research faces several areas that urgently need to be illuminated.

It is hoped that this research will help in the formulation of local policies to deal with urban development in a harmonious, shared and democratic way, on the premise that there is a willingness on the part of planning authorities to let themselves be influenced by research outcomes.

To conclude, two main recommendations to advance citizens' participation research spring from this study: first, in the light of new technologies, new theories, and the new status of citizens, it is necessary to update the methodological tools that are currently used in this field; second, it is important to make use of a representative sample of the population of citizens to be included in participation processes. Absent the adoption of this approach, there is a risk of reproducing, creating and embedding forms of social exclusion within the participation process itself.

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