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Community Participation within Migrant Community-Based Organizations in Northern Italy

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Glossary and Abbreviations

ACM	**Associazione Città Mondo**: Second-level organization established during the preparation of the 2015 Milan EXPO to bring together all migration-related organizations.
AD	**Adding Value**: The feeling of making a difference in the word.
CP	**Community Participation**: All volunteer activities that individuals conduct to improve their conditions while having an impact on their communities with others.
EU	**European Union:** Political and economic union of 27 member states that are located in Europe.
FV	**Feeling Valued**: The feeling of being valued and recognized by others.
MCBOs	**Migrant Community-Based Organizations**: Non-profit groups located within communities and founded by immigrants at all stages of immigration with the purpose of serving mainly immigrants.
PSOC	**Psychological Sense of Community**: The feeling that members have of belonging, of being important to one another and to the group. The shared belief that members will fulfill their needs by committing to be together.
SA	**Situational Analysis**: Theory-method package developed by Adele Clarke as part of the “interpretive turn” in qualitative research.
SG	**Social Generativity**: The human experience of contributing to and promoting one’s and others’ life.
SOM	**Sense of Mattering**: The feeling of being important, worthy and appreciated.

Abstract

Immigrants in Italy have lived under suboptimal conditions of justice since the unification of the country. In response to this challenging socio-political environment, they have connected within Migrant Community-Based Organizations (MCBOs), where they have enacted different forms of community participation. I suggest community participation as a strategy to promote social change and as a source to enhance the mental health among immigrants. Through this thesis I aim to solve three gaps of literature: (a) How do MCBOs navigate the socio-political climate? (b) What are the psychological processes and outcomes that characterize community participation among immigrants within MCBOs? and (c) What are the psychological mechanisms through which community participation fosters immigrants' subjective wellbeing? To answer these questions I conducted: (a) a qualitative study that adopts a critical situational analysis approach to understand the challenges that MCBOs face within the host society and to provide guidelines for action to address such challenges; (b) a qualitative study that uses the social generativity approach to identify the features of the community participation among immigrants and to investigate the psychological process and the positive outcomes that community participation within MCBOs fosters for immigrants; and (c) a quantitative study that analyzes sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as mediators of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing. The results of this multi-method project are presented in three empirical chapters. Finally, I outline some practical implications that are likely to support MCBOs towards building social changes and subjective wellbeing for immigrants in host societies.

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Motivation

I am an Italian-Mexican young woman, born and raised in Italy. My father is from Puebla (Mexico) while my mother is from Milan (Italy). My father and his sister were raised by a single mum—my grandmother—who pushed my father to study. After his master’s degree in Psychology, he decided to emigrate to Italy to acquire some life and professional experience. He joined an international volunteering program that let him participate in a family-based organization founded by parents of children with disabilities. That is where he met my mother, who was a young educator. He enrolled in an Italian university to have his degree recognized and later became a psychotherapist, while my mother founded a nonprofit organization providing jobs for people with disabilities. Our family was built on the immigration journey of my father and the prosocial activities of my parents, who were both sensitive to the struggles of unprivileged people. I spent my adolescence and college years engaging in national and international volunteering. During my bachelor’s and post-graduate degree I studied the effects of volunteering and later focused on the participation of young immigrants. Prof. Elena Marta and Prof. Daniela Marzana guided me and helped me understand the great potential of community participation. During the same years I also met the man who would later become my husband, a young Italian American, whose bilingual family made me want to recover my Latin American roots. This is where my history of privileged emigration began. After a semester spent at the La Sabana University in Colombia and after receiving my undergraduate Psychology degree from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Brescia, I decided to do an internship in Chile to improve my Spanish. In Santiago de Chile I met Peruvian organizations and saw their determination to uphold their rights and affirm their dignity within a setting that they perceived to be strongly discriminatory. I familiarized more with the liberation psychology approach (Martín-Baró, 1986) as it became directly applicable to what I was seeing. People of Peruvian origin were trying to "liberate" themselves from oppressive conditions as they were gaining autonomy, control and critical thinking (Garcia-Ramirez et al., 2011, 2014; Prilleltensky, 2008b) and were building resilient trajectories while proudly asserting their cultural origins. It was probably easier for me to realize that Chile was marked by critical conditions of social injustice because it was not my country. I was also an immigrant there or, as they would say in Chile, an *extranjera*—a word used to refer to people from Western countries. I learned first-hand the hardships of migration, but I also discovered a vibrant associative environment that I wanted to explore in my own city and country too. "What is happening there?" I wondered. When I returned to Italy in 2016, I felt to some extent more "conscientized"—to use an expression dear to Freire (1971, 1973)—than before. Immigrants were living through difficult times and the Security Decrees, which I discuss in Chapter I, would soon be approved. Hostility from the Italian population was paired with a policy that promoted "closed ports" and "externalization of borders". As a consequence, I wondered if there were immigrants in Italy who were trying to resist and change the perception people had of them from being passive recipients of welfare interventions to being protagonists of change and builders of an inclusive society. "Are there community-based organizations formed by immigrants here too? What are they like? What is their impact in terms of social change as well as in terms of personal outcomes? How are these outcomes produced?"—these were some of the questions I asked myself after my Chilean experience, which acted as a sort of "training". I spent the first year of my PhD reviewing the literature and arranging an agreement of co-supervision with the Faculty of Psychology of the Universidad de Sevilla

(Spain) and its research Center for Community Research and Action—CESPYD—run by Prof. Virginia Paloma. As a consequence of these first steps, the RIBALTA project came to life (see https://www.partecipazioneimmigrati.it/). "RIBALTA" is an Italian word that describes how things can be turned upside down and aims to shed a different light on immigrants' presence in Italy. The project consists of a multi-method research with qualitative and quantitative studies. I collected all the data in Italy and spend the last semester of my PhD in Seville refining qualitative results, running quantitative data analysis and writing my dissertation. This period was crucial for me. The opportunity to meet a new working environment allowed me to explore different ways of doing research, to be socially involved in the issues I was investigating and to work with others. The research group that welcomed me at CESPYD allowed me to listen to the experience of others professionals with different backgrounds who identified themselves within a critical community approach. Learning about their journey was inspiring and pushed me to be more critical in interpreting my results and translating my findings into concrete recommendations. The last part of this period in Seville was my participation as supporter in a mentoring intervention program addressed to enhance the immigrants and refugees' mental health and that was leaded by CESPYD in collaboration with a local organization. Following the implementation of this intervention helped me understand and, most importantly, emotionally feel the value of community participation among immigrants and their desire to provide their contribution to host societies.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation is structured along five chapters. In Chapter I, I review the state of the art, describing the links between the Italian closed migration policy and the rising of Migrant Community-Based Organizations (MCBOs). Next, I explore some issues on the effectiveness of MCBOs in fostering social change while I also highlight how community participation of immigrants is linked to many positive outcomes at individual level, including the enhancement of subjective wellbeing. I conclude presenting three pending questions that inform the objectives of the thesis. In Chapter II I present the challenges faced by MCBOs within the Italian socio-political climate and I provide some guidelines for action to support MCBOs. Chapter III presents how immigrants turn their suffering into generative social actions, such as community participation, that eventually enhances their personal growth. Chapter IV presents a conceptual framework supported by empirical data that identifies sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as the two main mediators of the relationship between immigrant community participation and subjective wellbeing. Finally, Chapter V provides some conclusive remarks on the results of all the studies, identifying general limitations and future lines of research along with practical implications that could support community psychologists and policymakers in their work to increase immigrant community participation, subjective wellbeing and social justice in host societies.

Following Jane Gilgun (2005) I will use the first person (both singular as plural) as "omitting the voices of authors […] perpetuates a form of silencing, which could not be further from the emancipatory spirit of constructivism" (p. 256) that guides my thesis. Every research is a subjective experience, culturally and socially produced within a certain time and space. According to Clarke and colleagues (2016) our task as researchers is to give voice to all the perspective that form the situations we investigate and where we are actors too. It is therefore critical that we make explicit our presence in our writings and our political role in social change as research can be "a transformative activity of reality that allows us to know reality not only for what it is, but also for what it is not, and this to the extent that we try to orient it toward what it should be" (Croce & Di Lernia, 2018, p. 88).

“La libertà non è star sopra un albero,
non è neanche avere un'opinione,
la libertà non è uno spazio libero,
libertà è partecipazione.”

Giorgio Gaber, La libertà

Te invito, sombra, al aire.
Sombra de veinte siglos,
a la verdad del aire,
del aire, aire, aire.
Sombra que nunca sales
de tu cueva, y al mundo
no devolviste el silbo
que al nacer te dio el aire,
del aire, aire, aire.
Sombra sin luz, minera
por las profundidades
de veinte tumbas, veinte
siglos huecos sin aire,
del aire, aire, aire.
¡Sombra, a los picos, sombra,
de la verdad del aire,
del aire, aire, aire!

Rafael Alberti, Invitación Al Aire

Chapter I

State of the Art

Immigrants living in Italy represent 8.5% of the total population, with 58.6% of them living in Northern Italy (Istat, 2021). Italian exclusionary migration policies (Ambrosini, 2013a; 2013b; Caneva, 2014) have affected immigrants' subjective wellbeing that has been found to be lower than that of Italians (Arpino & de Valk, 2018; Safi, 2010; Scacchi et al., 2010; Toselli, 2018; Vieno et al., 2009). Research that can identify key variables and pathways to enhancing immigrants' subjective wellbeing in host societies is needed. The Migration Health Report drafted by the International Organization for Migration highlights that "the lack of reliable evidence and data to guide decision-making [in migrant mental health] remains a major challenge" (IOM, 2021, p. 31). Community participation is one of the strategies for addressing health inequalities and this is why immigrant community participation is a key field where policies should be implemented. In this regard, my thesis focuses on the understudied topic of community participation that is carried out within Migrant Community-Based Organizations because "it is only through the participation and representation of grassroots communities in planning and implementing health programs that such programs are likely to have an impact" (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000, p. 256). These community settings are spaces where immigrants invest their time and energy to remember their roots, organize solidarity or voice societal concerns in the host society.

Following Martín-Baró's argument (1986) on the importance of recovering historical memory and redeeming the original experience of groups in order to give it back to them, in the first paragraph of this chapter I provide a brief history of migration policy in Italy and show how it has interconnected with the rise of community-based organizations led my immigrants. In the second paragraph I define community participation among immigrants according to a social and community psychology approach and I present the types of activities and communities where participation is carried out. In the third paragraph, I present what is known on this topic and what still needs to be understood. By highlighting the gaps in the literature, I conclude with a definition of the research aims of the RIBALTA project, that provides the structure of my dissertation.

1.1 Brief History: Migration Policy and Participation Among Immigrants in Italy

Italy was politically unified between 1861 and 1870, later than many other European countries. As result of this late unification "Italy has retained considerable economic, social and cultural heterogeneity" (Mantovan, 2013, p. 225). At that time the presence of "*stranieri*" ("foreigners", the term used the most in Italian legislation) was low and regulated by specific forms of surveillance. Between 1926-31, during the Fascist regime, a central office was created in order to register foreigners, who were obliged to have a visa and notify their arrival as well as their domicile (an obligation that is still valid today). Following the invasion of Ethiopia, measures were taken against "*meticciato*" (hybridization between different races) in 1936 and the first anti-Jewish laws were introduced in 1938. The clauses of the armistice between Italy and the Allies abolished the racial laws at the end of 1943.

In his book “History of Foreign Immigration in Italy: From 1945 to our days” Michele Colucci (2018) described how immigration in Italy evolved after the Second-War World. Italy had taken in some groups of displaced persons and refugees but, because it was mainly a country of emigration, it had no organic legislation for immigration. It is in the 1970s that the actual migratory flows began, with people coming from the former Italian colonies, countries in North Africa, the border areas of Friuli-Venezia Giulia and Western Sicily or with dissidents fleeing Latin American dictatorships. In the 1980s, the number of foreigners in Italy increased leading to the approval of the first immigration law (the Foschi Law) in 1986. According to Allievi (2010) this law revealed that immigrants exist only as workers with no specific needs. Colucci (2018) wrote that while in other European countries immigration became an issue, in Italy it remained somewhat “under the radar” because of two reasons: (a) it was not concentrated in very visible places; (b) the country’s attractiveness was misinterpreted by politics and mass media. The result was that immigration was depicted as a temporary phenomenon and was marked by a general “neutrality” (Valtolina, 2020).

According to Colucci (2018) the “turning point” came between 1989 and 1992 due to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the first mass anti-racist mobilizations, the flows from Albania, the increased number of refugees and the approval of two legislative novelties. The Martelli Decree (1989) introduced both an annual programming of the flow of non-European Union (EU) workers and stricter measures of control of entry and expulsion. The new Citizenship Act of 1992 enshrined the “ius sanguinis” (right of blood) that considered as an Italian citizen anyone who had at least one Italian parent, without distinction between people born in Italy and people born abroad.

Foreign citizens residing in Italy could (and still can) become Italians only by naturalization or marriage. A key episode in understanding this period is the killing of Jerry Masslo, a South African laborer who was murdered in August 1989 in Villa Literno, Campania. The legislative loopholes of the Italian system and the labor exploitation of immigrants without residence permits intertwined in his history. Back then, public opinion was not hostile to immigration and the convergence between the Catholic segments of society, associations and trade unions made the anti-racist movement strong. Mantovan (2013) suggested that, during these years, the first organizations made by immigrants were born supported "by the Italian authorities in order to mediate politically between the state and migrant groups" (p. 261-262). The first legal measures designed to boost and regulate migrant participation (such as national and regional councils for foreigners) and the allocation of funds to registered organizations were a stimulus for setting up these organizations. During these years the perception of immigration went from "unawareness" to "emergency" and finally a negative labeling arrives (Valtolina, 2020).

In 1998 the Turco-Napolitano law was approved. It "tried to reconcile the universalist (in terms of rights) and the solidarist approach […], on the one hand, with the need for law, order, and security […] on the other" (Allievi, 2010, p. 94). Although the law simplified access to basic health services even for so-called *clandestini* (i.e., immigrants who are rendered illegal by states, see Esposito et al., 2019), it also strengthened control and deportation policies in order to ensure the credibility and adherence to the EU Schengen agreements. Temporary stay and accommodation centers (*Centri di Permanenza temporanea,* CPT) were created to detain and identify undocumented immigrants whose immediate expulsion was not executable (Decree

286/1998). These migration-related detention centers were denounced as illegitimate by many activists, journalists, academics and members of civil-society organizations (Esposito et al., 2019). Immigrants saw their situation worsening from both a material and a symbolic point of view due to an increasingly hostile climate around them. Those participating in organizations realized that their power was “more fictious than real” (Mantovan, 2013, p. 264) and formed new community-based, informal and spontaneous organizations. These organizations abandoned strictly political objectives to become cultural, recreational or solidarity-based groups.

Between the end of the 1990s and the first decade of the years 2000s the number of foreigners residing in Italy grew and there was a “normalization” of immigration (Valtolina, 2020), which for the first time dominated political elections (Colucci, 2018). In 2002 the Bossi-Fini Law (Law 189/2002) was approved and included further restrictions not only for immigrants who wanted to enter but also for those who were already living in Italy reducing any kind of regularization. The enlargement of the EU to many Eastern European countries came with some concerns. Since the expulsion of EU citizens was no longer possible, in 2008-09 the Maroni Security Package was passed (Law 94/2009). It introduced the crime of illegal immigration, limited family reunification, adopted a series of interventions for public security and transformed the CPT into CIE (*Centri di Identificazione ed Espulsione*) in charge of forced deportation. In Italy, as in other European countries, the link between immigration and security became evident and the “immigrant-criminal” nexus led to a phase of “ambivalence” within public perception (Valtolina, 2020). Mantovan (2013) stated that at that time organizations led by immigrants sought to strengthen their social cohesion by getting increasingly closer to political activity.

Fast forward to the time of the present research, two Security Decrees (Law 113/2018 and Law 53/2019) were approved by the government coalition in Italy. They were the pinnacle of a restrictive migration policy. They narrowed opportunities for reception of immigrants and increased the years to obtain citizenship for those regularly present in the country. In 2020 some reforms (Law 130/2020) reenacted some permits previously abolished and created a new reception and integration system. The reform also introduced a ban on expulsion for those who have achieved a structured life in Italy (i.e., those who have reached a certain level of integration). Despite the undoubtedly positive aspects of this modification, other elements of change—including the reform of citizenship—were not accomplished. In the last years many community-based organizations were formed by children of immigrants born in Italy who tried to push their demands.

1.2 Immigrants Experiencing Discrimination and Inequity

According to community psychology wellbeing and social justice are interrelated (Arcidiacono & Prillentesky, 2010; Prillentesky, 2008a). This is why it is important to study the interaction between protective (e.g., knowing the language, having social support and access to services, finding job and experiencing multiculturalism) and risk factors (e.g., living isolated, experiencing poverty, having a precarious and unprotected job, being discriminated) that create specific living conditions for immigrants (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006; Lajevardi et al., 2020; Safi, 2010).

Institutional discrimination and anti-immigrant prejudice, as well as negative and conflict-centered narratives in the media have been detected among many European Union Member States (Eberl et al., 2018; ENAR, 2017). Discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin and skin color is perceived by 59% of population of European Union

(Eurobarometer, 2019). Specifically, in Italy, media propaganda has framed migration as a security issue and public-order problem that threatens nationals (Barretta, 2019; Mazzara et al., 2020). Discrimination against immigrants was found to be implemented by journalists, citizens’ committees, politicians and the police (Mantovan, 2018) and exclusion and barriers to have access to social benefits were reported (Ambrosini, 2013; 2016; Caneva, 2014). Today, immigrants living in Italy represent more than 5 million people (Istat, 2021). The majority of them is from Romania, Albania, Morocco, China, Ukraine, the Philippines and India and 58.6% of them live in Northern regions that also have the most exclusionary policies (Ambrosini, 2013a). Beyond people from the abovementioned countries, there is a large presence of immigrants from Egypt and Peru in Northwest Italy, and from Moldova in the Northeast Italy (Istat, 2021). Data suggests that immigrants in Italy—as in many other European countries—have fairly easy access to manual jobs (Fullin & Reyneri, 2011) that are usually not aligned with their education and do not provide protection and rights. In the last years, immigrants have also been facing an increased hostile attitude among Italians (Eurispes, 2020).

In addition, immigrants in Italy have been found to internalize the hegemonic negative framing of them by Italian media and public discourse (King & Mai, 2009), to feel lonely (Cela & Fokkema, 2014) and to experience less social support in comparison to Italians (Rania et al., 2015). Perceived discrimination has been reported at the workplace, during medical consultation, at banks or when searching for a house (Istat, 2012). It was found to have both a direct and indirect effect on immigrants’ psychological wellbeing and mental health status (Di Napoli et al., 2021; Giuliani et al., 2017). Finally, international literature suggested that discrimination and inequity have serious impacts not only on individuals but also on the whole society (e.g., lower social cohesion and social trust, economic losses due to underutilized labor; Esses, 2021).

1.3 Community Participation Among Immigrants in Host Societies

Participation is a complex and debated concept for many disciplines (Cornwall, 2008). Some community psychologists conceptualize participation as the “behavioral component” of social capital (Perkins & Long, 2002, p. 292) which can be studied in its local and neighborhood dimension (Mannarini, 2004). Others emphasized its connection with power as it can be passive or active (Arnestein, 1969), also depending on the opportunity for action and reflection that comes with it (Mazzoni et al., 2014). Montero (2004) suggested that participation is strictly linked to the level of commitment by those who carry it out. Social psychologists have used the term ‘civic commitment/engagement’ or ‘social action’ (Adler & Goggin, 2005; Amnå, 2012; Pozzi et al., 2017) to refer to participation and have defined some of its features: (a) it is a “fundamental orientation towards reciprocity” (Amnå, 2012, p. 613); (b) it can have different forms which are all volunteer and collective activities that are performed by individuals in order for them to satisfy certain needs by actively participating with others (Pozzi et al., 2017); (c) it is a way “to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future” (Adler & Goggin, 2005, p. 241). In this dissertation, I define community participation (CP) as a wide range of volunteer activities that individuals conduct in order to improve their conditions by having an impact on their communities together with others.

Immigrants have been defined as those “who have changed residence across borders (and therefore) personal migration experience is the decisive criterion” (Vogel & Triandafyllidou, 2005, p. 5). Studies have often put the spotlight on the participation of immigrants from developing countries to countries with a very high Human Developmental Index (HDI), i.e., a summary measure of average achievement in life expectancy, education and gross national income (UNDP, 2018). For this reason, research on this topic took place mainly in Europe, Hong Kong, the United States, Canada, and Australia and usually focused on the participation of immigrants coming from South America, Eastern Europe, Africa and Eastern Asia (Bloemraad & Terriquez 2016; Guo, 2014; Kim et al., 2015; Kosic, 2007; Marzana, Alfieri, & Marta, 2020). Studies focused on the participation of the following immigrant groups: elders (Kim et al., 2011); adults (Handy & Greespan, 2009; Okamoto et al., 2020; Taurini et al., 2017); young people—who are usually children of immigrants (Alfieri et al., 2021; Levine, 2008; Marzana, Martinez-Damia et al., 2019; Stepick et al., 2008)—and refugees (Lindgren & Lipson, 2004; Stack & Iwasaki, 2009; Weng & Lee, 2015). For the review on CP among immigrants, I will only consider studies with first-generation immigrants (with no age limitation) leaving out studies on the so-called ‘second generation’ (i.e., people born in their country of residence from immigrant parents), and refugees.

Participation of immigrants is nowadays considered as a key aspect of health and inclusion practices and is becoming increasingly prominent in the legal and political debate around immigration in Europe. Between 1999 and 2004 the Treaty of Amsterdam laid down the Common basic principles for integration of people coming from countries outside EU. Interestingly, Italy was the first country to present two projects on integration and volunteering: “The diffuse representation: Forms of immigrants’ participation in collective life” by ONC-CNEL and Codres in 2000; and “The associations of foreign citizens in Italy” by Fondazione Corazzin of Venice in

2001. The first project aimed at analyzing the integration of immigrants through social structures that were representing their interests (business organizations, trade unions, neighborhood associations, health and educational institutions, sports, church activities and migrant organizations) in different Italian regions. The second project aimed to map out migrant organizations taking into account their geographical distribution as well as their composition and aim. Italian migration scholars officially joined a new field of investigation focusing, since the very beginning, on the potential that participation had to promote integration. Later on, between 2005 and 2010, the EU launched the Common Agenda for Integration. A key EU-funded initiative during that period was “POLITIS” (Building Europe with New Citizens? An Inquiry into the Civic Participation of Naturalized Citizens and Foreign Residents in 25 Countries), a project aiming to improve the understanding of the factors that promote or inhibit the participation of immigrants. The professionals working in the project conceptualized Active Civic Participation as something done by “people that give a voice to societal concerns” (Vogel & Triandafyllidou, 2005, p. 11). Because at that time political participation of immigrant people was already extensively studied (the first European projects date back to 1998, see also Jacobs & Tillie, 2004), they decided to add the word “active” in order to go beyond the simple voting and belonging to political parties. This was a big change in developing the concept of migrants as “active citizens”. After that, many projects focusing on participation were funded—always linking participation to integration—and an Expert Group on migration was formed. In November 2020, the European Commission launched its new Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027) which aimed to enhance migrant participation as one of key aspects to work on.

Recently, Klarenbeek & Weide (2020) argued that there are ambivalent attitudes toward the participation of immigrants in the European integration debate. They highlighted the “paradox of participation” to refer to the double aspect that immigrant participation has for host societies. On one hand, it is desirable in order to respect the values of democracy, on the other is a potential threat as changes that might come with it could be undesired. The authors suggested that immigrant participation serves only as a new way used by democracies to reinforce the status quo and to further subjugate immigrants, leaving them in the paradoxical position where they must demonstrate their abilities as well-functioning democratic citizens without expecting to be included as equal individuals. Within this conceptualization, participation is mainly approached from an integration perspective rather than as an issue of justice and equality within democratic societies. Although Klarenbeek and Weide’s research focused on political participation, the paradox of participation can apply to all community forms of participation and highlights how important it is to “unpack” participation every time we talk about it (Cornwall, 2008).

Just like for non-immigrants, the *types of activities* that immigrants can engage in are quite various. Previous research focused on culturally meaningful activities (Kim et al., 2015), sport and physical activities (Alfieri et al., 2021; O’Driscoll et al., 2014, Smith et al., 2019), volunteering (Guo, 2014; Marzana, Alfieri, Marta, & Paloma 2021; Khvorostianov, & Remennick, 2017), activism, advocacy and collective action (Aceros et al., 2021; Klandermans et al., 2008). Although some studies specifically focused on the political parties where immigrants can engage, we will not take these into account. In line with other authors (Wray-Lake et al. 2019), our definition of participation does not refer to political parties, because of the impossibility for immigrants to vote both locally and nationally in Italy without having acquired Italian citizenship. Our definition does not refer to religious involvement either because of the differences that the literature found between religious and secular participation (Borgonovi, 2008; Musick & Wilson, 2003).

Participation is intrinsically linked to “community” (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000). Communities can be territorial—based on a physical space—or relational—based on social ties (Gusfiled, 1975). Relational communities are “a lived experience, something that gives meaning to ourselves and gives us an understanding of others” (Kagan et al., 2011, p. 71). They also are groups of people “who share an identity […], a set of social representations which organizes the worldviews of community members and guides their interpretation of reality and their everyday practices […] and conditions and constraints of access to power both in terms of material resources and symbolic recognition” (Campbell & Jovchelovitch, 2000, p. 264). I will use the expression *community* participation to take into account that participation occurs in communities that are symbolic, territorial, organizational and emotional spaces (Campbell, 2000).

Regarding the *type of communities*, literature suggests that immigrants can participate in community-based organizations which are “non-profit groups located within communities that aim to improve community wellbeing” (Buckingham et al., 2021, p. 7). Based on the type of membership, immigrants can be involved in two main types of community-based organizations: mainstream/national/native or ethnic/migrant organizations (Marzana, Alfieri, & Marta, 2020; Pilati & Morales, 2016; Voicu & Rusu, 2012). The formers are established and run by nationals and include immigrants as a minority (Brettel, 2005). The latter are “founded by immigrants at all stages of immigration with the purpose of serving mainly the immigrant group itself" (Babis, 2016, p. 359) and have immigrants being significantly present in the board of directors. Following other scholars (Marzana, Martinez-Damia et al., 2020; Paloma et al., 2010), I will use the term Migrant Community-Based Organizations (MCBOs) to refer to community-based organizations formed by immigrants. Finally, MCBOs usually combine different aims and activities. Three aims are often at play: (a) cultural service aim, with activities aimed at remembering and spreading cultural knowledge through art, food, sport and other recreational activities; (b) social service aim, with activities aimed at helping immigrants in need or at mediating between them, consulates, and national institutions, through assistance with legal papers, healthcare, tax return, language schools; and (c) advocacy aim, with activities aimed at fighting for immigrant rights, through protest, demonstrations and collective actions. In the last case, MCBOs are considered political because they engage in resistance against oppressive social conditions, in promoting their rights and building a more just multicultural society (Marzana & Marta, 2012; Paloma & Manzano-Arrondo, 2011). MCBOs frequently have transitional ties and activities that can fall into one on the aforementioned aims, with the peculiarity of influencing not only the host countries but also the countries of origin (Brettel, 2005; Morad & Della Puppa 2019; Takle, 2012).

1.4 Available Evidence, Pending Questions and Research Objectives

At an organizational level, MCBOs have been depicted as creating parallel societies (Esser, 1986) that foster segregation from the local community (Papadopoulos et al., 2013), or as bridges between immigrants, the host society and countries of origin (Blanch, 2005). Much of the recent research has provided evidence on their positive role for both immigrants and the host society (Camozzi, 2011; Caselli, 2017; Guo, 2014; Handy & Greespan, 2009; Ramakrishnan & Viramontes, 2010; Sardinha, 2011). Their contributions in promoting intercultural dialogue, fighting prejudices and promoting inclusion among immigrants have been documented (Cappelletti & Valtolina, 2015; Marzana et al., 2019; 2020; Paloma et al., 2010). MCBOs represent spaces where social isolation that comes with immigration is destroyed, solidarity can be fostered and immigrants can find “the voice of familiarity and closeness, connection and encounter with the origin” (Sipi, 2000, p. 358). While recognizing the undoubted role of MCBOs in supporting immigrants upon their arrival, some authors have recommended paying attention to organizational practices (Guo & Musso, 2007) and structures (Maton, 2008) in order to understand the impact that they have in host societies. This means it should not be assumed that participation is successful in promoting social transformation, i.e., “changes in the dominant structural and cultural institutions of a society seeking more equitable and sustainable social arrangements that satisfy the basic needs of all people” (Montero, 2009, p. 73). While participation has undeniable potential, its effect on the conditions of injustice—which community psychologists often draw attention on (Montero, & Sonn, 2009; Prillentsky, 2014)—is not to be taken for granted. For this reason, the knowledge about the challenges that these organizations face to carry out their mission in host societies and how social policies can support them in their endeavors are very important. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research in this area and this reduces the possibility for MCBOs to have a greater social impact and to become agents of change within host societies (Maton, 2008).

At an individual level, the first empirical studies provided a comparison of CP among immigrants and among nationals (Couton & Gaudet, 2008; Nakhaie, 2008)—a research interest that is still present (Valentova & Alieva, 2018). Over time many started to look at factors promoting or hindering participation. Among enabling factors, some scholars listed some socio-demographic characteristics, such as high education, speaking the language of the new country (Wang & Handy, 2014; Okamoto et al., 2020), being male (Couton & Gaudet, 2008), having been in the host country for a long time (Handy & Greespan, 2009) and having spent more time in a participatory environment (Voicu & Rusu, 2012). Others highlighted that community participation can be trigged by feeling welcomed (Okamoto et al., 2020) as well as by grievances—especially feelings of procedural injustice (Klandermans et al, 2008) and suffering (Black & Rubistein, 2009)—and negative emotions (Albanesi et al., 2016). Others found that motivations to participate are partially similar for non-immigrants and immigrants, although ethno-cultural motivations (i.e., the desire to raise awareness and disseminate the culture of one’s ethnic group) and advocacy motivations (i.e., protecting rights and protecting the reputation of one’s ethnic group) are specific for immigrants (Alfieri, Marzana & Martinez-Damia, 2019). Barriers to immigrant participation found in the literature include structural and psychological obstacles: the lack of effectiveness and the competitiveness of organizations in addressing community issue (Gele & Harslof, 2012), the dominant negative master narratives between receiving and host countries, the deterrents created by national institutions (Martinez-Damia et al., 2021), the lack of ethno-cultural diversity within organizations (Salami et al., 2019), the difficulties balancing time and priorities, and poor health conditions (Alfieri et al., 2021). Invisible barriers such as historical trauma, discrimination, social disconnection, under valuated rights and mistrust towards organizations have been also detected (Gele & Harslof, 2012; Martinez-Damia et al., 2021).

Another corpus of research revolves around the effects of CP. At individual level, studies based on the acculturation perspective found that participation is linked to the development of a sense of belonging to a new society and to integration (Marzana, Alfieri & Marta, 2020; Marzana, Alfieri, Marta & Paloma, 2020). However, some authors have showed how the dominant perspective of acculturative integration has hidden inequalities in health across different life domains (Genkova et al., 2014) and this is why I will focus on wellbeing instead of integration (Paloma et al., 2016). CP among immigrants has also been connected to their ethnic identity (Pan, 2018), subjective wellbeing (Alfieri, Marzana & Cipresso, 2019; Kim et al., 2015; Liu, 2020; Taurini et al., 2017), resilience (Marzana, Martinez-Damia et al., 2020), and empowerment (Bloemraad & Terriquez, 2016). At community level, research supports the theory that when immigrants participate, they increase social and cultural capital (Handy & Greespan, 2009) and the psychological sense of community (Alfieri et al., 2021; Agyekum et al., 2021; Liu, 2020; Palmer et al., 2011; Salami et al., 2019). The fact that psychological sense of community was found to be a predictor of their subjective wellbeing (Ramos et al., 2017; 2020) suggests the importance of an ecological approach to immigrant health (Prilleltensky, 2008a).

Building on this literature review, Table 1 highlights the three gaps around which I develop the research objectives that will guide the following empirical chapters. The research objectives were developed starting from the organizational level that focused on MCBOs down to an individual level that focused on immigrants who participate within MCBOs. The first gap regards the challenges that MCBOs face when running their activities within host societies where suboptimal conditions of justice are present. What seems to be missing in many studies on MCBOs is an identification of the main challenges that they face. This lack reduces their possibility to have a social impact and become agents of sustainable change. What kinds of challenges are MCBOs encountering while trying to build immigrants' inclusion? Which guidelines for action can be offered to address such challenges? For this reason, Chapter II aims to analyze the main challenges that MCBOs settled in Milan (Northern Italy) experience and aims to provide some guidelines that can support them. The second gap is about the psychological processes that characterized the CP of immigrants within MCBOs. CP has been described by focusing on individual aspects (e.g., motivations, facilitators, barriers, effects), without taking into account its procedural nature and this did not shed light on how beneficial outcomes actually occur. For this reason, Chapter III aims to identify, from a social generativity perspective, the meaning and the entire psychological process that immigrants who participate within MCOBs experience. Finally, the third gap regards the undetected psychological mechanisms through which community participation operates in order to specifically promote the subjective wellbeing of immigrants. To date we know that immigrants who participate score higher in this variable, but how does this happen? Chapter IV aims to provide an answer by identifying mediators of this relationship. As said by Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000) "an understanding of these processes is essential if we are to understand the mechanisms through which community participation might serve as a health promotion strategy" (p. 261).

Table 1.

Theoretical Gaps, Research Objectives and Chapters of the Dissertation

Gaps of Literature	Research Objectives	Chapter
How do MCBOs navigate the socio-political climate?	(a) To analyze the main challenges that MCBO**s** settled in Milan face to build inclusion for immigrants (b) To offer specific guidelines for action to support MCBOs.	II
What are psychological processes that characterize the community participation among immigrants within MCBOs?	(a) To understand the generativity features of community participation among immigrants, detecting the role of suffering for community participation. (b) To identify the psychological process and the positive outcomes that community participation in MCBOs fosters.	III
What are the psychological mechanisms through which community participation promotes immigrant subjective wellbeing?	(a) To compare the degree of sense of mattering, psychological sense of community, and subjective wellbeing shown by immigrants according to their membership to a MCBO and their level of community participation. (b) To analyze the role played by sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as mediators of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing	IV

Chapter II

Challenges Faced by Migrant Community-Based Organizations in Milan

This chapter aims to answers the first empirical questions that were outlined at the end of Chapter I. In the first paragraph I describe the role that MCBOs play in host societies and review the existing literature so far about the difficulties that they often face. Later, I present the method carried out to collect and analyze data. Results will be then offered, organizing them in the main challenges perceived by MCBOs across the intra-organization, inter-organization and community spheres. Finally, I discuss contributions to the literature and offer some guidelines for action in order to support MCBOs in their endeavors to build fairer host societies.

2.1 The Role of Migrant Community-Based Organizations within Host Societies

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2017) stated that "EU Member States should encourage local and regional authorities to promote the participation of representative organizations of migrants in the design and implementation of integration measures in a meaningful way" (p. 8). Building partnerships is also encouraged to support the long-term integration of immigrants (European Commission, 2020).

Many scholars reported the MCBOs increase the cultural capital, sense of community, and multiculturalism in the receiving societies (Bloemraad & Terriquez, 2016; Guo, 2014; Handy & Greenspan, 2009). Moreover, they "can have benefits such as […] counteracting demeaning and exclusionary narratives" (Gigliotto et al., 2022, p. 85) and are important spaces for immigrants to resist injustice (Buckingham et al., 2021). For unprivileged individuals, MCBOs can be empowering community settings as they can influence on community betterment and social change (Maton, 2008).

MCBOs usually provide material (e.g., information, money and legal advice) and immaterial support (e.g., psychological assistance, trustworthy relations, and encouragement) to newly arrived migrants who can share concerns and network and fight for their rights in the receiving societies (Aceros et al., 2020; Bonnett, 1977; Marzana, Martinez-Damia et al., 2020; Paloma et al., 2010). They can also function as settings where cultural identities are protected, differences are negotiated and the personal wellbeing of their members is enhanced (Martinez-Damia et al., 2021; Marzana et al., 2019; Sonn, 2002; Taurini et al., 2017). In line with this, Marzana, Alfieri et al. (2020) found that immigrants who participate within community-based organizations are more integrated compared to those who do not participate. Nevertheless, the benefits for immigrants engaging in MCBOs depend on the challenges MCBOs face when conducting their activities.

2.2 Challenges of Migrant Community-Based Organizations to Build Inclusion

Some authors report that MCBOs are often ignored and excluded from negotiations with public institutions and argued that their political power and ability to advocate for immigrants' rights in host societies are limited (Kyrieri & Brasser, 2012; Papadopoulos et al., 2012; Sezgin, 2008). Different variables have been identified in the literature in order to explain why this happens.

Some studies focused on the type and quality of relationships and contacts that MCBOs are able to establish with others social actors (Gigliotto et al., 2022; Kapur et al., 2017; Kyrieri & Basser, 2012; Ortiz, 1981). Based on this approach, MCBOs have lower level of social capital compared to others non-profit organizations (Papadopoulos et al., 2013). This is important because some studies—such as by Pilati's (2012) on Egyptian and Ecuadorian organizations settled in Italy—found that MCBOs can get some of their resources through the connections they have with national organizations. Scholars have also identified phenomena such as inferiorization, manipulation and culturalization (Gigliotto et al., 2022; Kyrieri & Basser, 2012). Inferiorization refers to MCBOs not feeling fully acknowledged and taken seriously by national organizations, while manipulation occurs when they are engaged in projects only for recruiting immigrants without participating in the design and management phases. Culturalization refers to "the imposition of certain culturally—or professionally—based practices that may not be shared by the participants" (Gigliotto et al., 2022, p. 83). In that perspective MCBOs are used instrumentally for the fulfilment of the objectives of other social actors without having real power within host societies, with the risk that they might perpetuate the status quo instead of fighting it (Paloma & Manzano-Arrondo, 2011).

Other studies focused on the fewer resources and opportunities MCBOs have compared to national organizations (Gleeson & Bloermraad, 2012). MCBOs mostly rely on volunteers, have less time for their activities, are more oriented to solve the everyday problems of immigrants (Papadopoulos et al., 2013) and experience higher instability in their activities (Kyrieri & Basser, 2012). Usually, MCBOs have also less opportunities to access venues as they face the hurdles of applying for funding (Gigliotto et al., 2022).

2.3 Research objectives

While some steps have been made to explain the hardships MCBOs face in having an impact and promoting immigrants' inclusion, more studies are required. Considering the challenging host context where MCBOs are often embedded, the research questions that moved us were: What are the challenges that MCBOs settled in the Metropolitan area of Milan are facing in order to be powerful community settings and therefore have an external impact in the host society? Which guidelines can be formulated to address such challenges?

2.4 Method

For these purposes, a qualitative methodology based on constructivist grounded theory (GT; Charmaz, 2014) and situational analysis (SA; Clarke et al., 2018) was used. In-depth interviews, observations and document analysis with fifteen MCBOs were carried out between October 2019 and July 2020.

2.4.1 Participants and Sampling Strategy

In Italy there are 1149 MCBOs. Lombardy—situated in Northern Italy—is one of the regions with the most MCBOs, 59.9% of which are in the city of Milan (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, 2021). Recruitment of MCBOs in the Metropolitan area of Milan started with a second-level organization called Associazione Città Mondo (ACM). ACM was established during the organization of the 2015 EXPO in Milan to bring together all migration-related organizations. Within ACM there are Italian non-profit organizations, businesses and MCBOs. We started our fieldwork in July 2019 by selecting from the ACM database the organizations that had been founded by immigrants and still had immigrants within the board of directors. A database was created with 33 MCBOs, which were categorized based on organization-specific markers: (a) year of foundation of the MCBO—an indicator of how many years the MCBO had been active; (b) geographical area of origin of members; (c) area of interest where activities were conducted such as social service (e.g., language courses, legal and health assistance), cultural service (e.g., preservation of cultural heritage and traditions though arts) and advocacy (e.g., campaigns for immigrants' rights); and (d) presence of Italian nationals among volunteers.

We contacted the identified MCBOs to outline the research. Eleven MCBOs could not be reached as they did not answer emails or phone calls, five did not want to take part in the research, eight were excluded because they were not constantly active, and nine were interested in the research. We were able to reach six more MCBOs through both the snowballing technique (i.e., new MCBOs were reported by those we had already been involved) and a new field research on MCBOs active in the city.

Fifteen MCBOs were involved in the research. All MCBOs were medium-small community-based organizations (i.e., the number of active volunteers ranged from 1 to 15) with members coming from developing countries. Two of them had been founded before 2000 (historical), seven between 2000 and 2010 (recent) and the remaining six after 2010 (new). Members came from different geographical areas (i.e., South America, Western Africa, Eastern Europe and Asia) and were involved mainly in social service activities. The majority of MCBOs did not have nationals as their volunteers and used Facebook as main communication channel. Table 2 shows the characteristics of MCBOs that participated in the study.

Table 2.

Characteristics of Migrant Community-Based Organizations included in the Study

MCBO	Data Source	Foundation	Geographic Area of Origin	Area of Interest	Presence of Italian Nationals
1	1 Interview (3/5/20), 1 observation (11/16/19)	Historical	South America	SS & A	No
2	2 Interviews (3/6/20; 6/13/20), Statute	Historical	Western Africa	SS	Yes
3	1 Interview (3/5/20), Statute	Recent	Eastern Europe	CS & SS	Yes
4	3 Interviews (1/23/20; 6/24/20; 6/25/20), 2 observations (11/7/19; 1/16/20)	Recent	South America	SS & A	Yes
5	2 Interviews (2/12/20; 6/17/20), Statute	Recent	South America	SS	Yes
6	1 Interview (2/13/20), 1 observation (12/8/19), Statute	Recent	Eastern Europe	SS	No
7	3 Interviews (2/14/20; 2/28/20; 3/10/20)	Recent	South America	SS	No
8	1 Interview (6/24/20)	Recent	Asia	SS	No
9	2 Interviews (6/22/20; 7/15/20), Statute	Recent	Asia	CS & SS	No
10	1 Interview (3/6/20), Statute	New	Eastern Europe	CS	Yes
11	2 Interviews (3/7/20; 3/10/20), Statute	New	Eastern Europe	CS	No
12	2 Interviews (6/11/20; 7/19/20)	New	Eastern Europe	CS & SS	No
13	3 Interviews (6/17/20; 6/18/20; 6/26/20), Statute	New	Eastern Europe	SS	No
14	2 Interviews (6/16/20; 6/24/20), Statute	New	Western Africa	SS	Yes
15	3 Interviews (7/24/20; 7/27/20; 7/29/20), Statute	New	Western Africa	SS & A	No

Note. A: Advocacy (e.g., campaigns for immigrants' rights); SS: Social service (e.g., language courses, legal and health assistance); CS: Cultural service (e.g., preservation of cultural heritage and traditions though arts).

2.4.2 Instruments and Data Collection

Interviews, document analysis and observation were used. The interview protocol was directed to twenty-nine leaders and members of MCBOs and included questions about the socio-political climate around immigration in the host country (e.g., What is the social and political climate around immigration like nowadays in Italy?); organizational changes over time (e.g., Which changes have your organization gone through during these years?); organizational successes (e.g., Which achievements did your organization reach?); and failures (e.g., Were there some things that you could not do? Why?). We also added a specific question about the impact of COVID-19. In addition, ten statutes of MCBOs—which highlight the main objectives and organizational structure of MCBOs—were provided by leaders and became part of the data corpus together with fieldnotes from unstructured participant observation taken during four public events run by three MCBOs between October and December 2019.

All participants signed an informed consent form that explained the study's aims and procedure and laid out their right to anonymity at all times. The research protocol was approved by the Ethical Institutional Board of the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore. Participants did not receive any economic reward.

2.4.3 Procedure and Data Analysis

The research team was made up of five people. Three researchers acted as supervisors, helping with the construction of the dataset of the MCBOs, the drafting of the interview protocol, and organizing frequent debriefing sessions. The other two researchers acted as field researchers. They got familiar with the culture of the MCBOs by attending some events, browsing Facebook pages and websites (if available), committing time to explain the aims of the research to leaders, and building trustworthy relationships with them. Between January and July 2020, the two field researchers interviewed leaders and members in Italian, Spanish or English according to participants' preferences. As the outbreak of the pandemic in Italy took place in

March 2020, and Lombardy—the region where Milan is—was the most affected region, data collection was moved online to closely examine the first challenges that had been identified through data analysis.

Data analysis started upon collection of data, as recommended in Grounded Theory and Situational Analysis (Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2005; Clarke et al., 2018). The data corpus was composed of interviews transcripts, statues and fieldnotes of observations. The field researchers first engaged separately in open coding and then, together, grouped the codes into categories, constantly redacting memos of their sessions. Based on the insights provided by participants and using an ecological framework (Suarez-Balcazar et al., 2020) we decided to present the identified challenges across three “spheres” that corresponded to difficulties within MCBOs (intra-organization sphere), between MCBOs and other social actors (inter-organizations sphere) and within host societies (community sphere). Rather than collapsing the codes into themes, this procedure allowed us to recognize the complexity that MCBOs simultaneously experience as minority actors across different spheres. In this process we took inspiration from Clarke’s positional map which are illustrations that have the goal of representing all the major positions articulated in data, operating as “a politics of the acknowledgment of presence instead of denial and repression of diversity” (Clarke et al., 2018, p. 174).

Leaders of the fifteen MCBOs involved in this study were invited to attend two online meetings to share preliminary results and interpretations, ensure credibility, raise awareness on their situation and promote collaboration among the MCBOs and the researchers. As a consequence, the findings showed below have been shared with and validated by the MCBOs involved in the research.

2.5 Results

We present the challenges identified by MCBOs across three spheres: intra-organization, inter-organization and community (see Table 3). Guidelines for action to address such challenges will be discussed in the next section.

Table 3.

Challenges and Guidelines of Action to Support MCBOs

Spheres	Challenges Experienced by MCBOs	Guidelines of Action to Support MCBOs
Intra-organizational	Having access to funding, qualified professionals and venue	Helping MCBOs obtain funding to hire qualified people
	Having engaged long-term volunteers	Promoting social marketing to attract volunteers and providing psychological support to them to avoid burnout
Inter-organizational	Managing competition among MCBOs	Encouraging collaboration between MCBOs for mutual support in common challenges
	Navigating the non-profit sector	Giving MCBOs tailor-made training on designing and managing projects
Community	Overcoming the fragmentation among MCBOs due to different sociopolitical narratives	Helping stress the social value of diversity within the immigrant community and giving visibility to the common ground among MCBOs
	Facing distrust and manipulation by the host society	Helping to increase the organizational prestige of the MCBOs with agreements with universities and national institutions and arising awareness among national organizations about power dynamics

2.5.1 Challenges within the Intra-Organizational Sphere: Surviving and Growing

At this level of analysis, we identified two main challenges: (a) having access to funding, qualified professionals, and venue; and (b) having engaged long-term volunteers.

As for the first one, MCBOs spoke about lacking internal competent staff to seize available opportunities, and how they have limited access to funding that would allow them to access qualified professionals for the design and implementation of projects:

> *"We are not sufficiently skilled to be able to apply (...) for funding that can help us stay afloat"* (Leader, MCBO 12).
>
> *You have to find the human resources who can conduct the best projects. Obviously, it's easier if you have the money and pay [project] designers who write a project. When you don't have them, you have to rely on what you have learned or on those who engage as volunteers. Finding qualified human resources is a challenge we try to overcome every day* (Leader, MCBO 5).

This also result in the hardship to find a venue where to run activities: "*We have the problem that we don't have the space, we don't have money. Meeting at the park is uncomfortable"* (Leader, MCBO 11); *"I have the organization's venue where my mother lives because I used to live there. We have never had a venue and we still don't have it"* (Leader, MCBO 7). Parks and private houses become long-standing solutions because of the lack of funds and possibility to be selected as part of calls for proposal:

> *We have tried several times to find a space. The biggest difficulty is paying the rent. We have had difficulties in finding a space that were, I won't say "free" because nothing is free, but at least at a low cost. Even that is difficult! We have tried with many calls for proposals from the municipality, the region, etc.* (Leader, MCBO 5).

The second aspect of this sphere refers to MCBOs' struggle to incorporate and maintain new volunteers. MCBOs encourage nationals as well as immigrants to become part of the board of directors but they do not have a lot of success: "*[immigrant* *people] came to the organization to solve some concrete, urgent problems, so many of them, after taking the residence permit, [they] got married, had children, had their own quiet life [and left]"* (Leader, MCBO 4); "*the organization does not have the human resources to do something more than what it already does. There is also the language problem because many of our compatriots have not learned Italian well enough to be able to express themselves"* (Member, MCBO11). For this reason, someone said "*"Now I want some Italians to join the association…Italian people can welcome in a better way (...). We must have Italians in the association because there are things that we are not able to do, for example writing a nice letter"* (Leader, MCBO 14);

Moreover, MCBOs find it hard to enhance migrant participation as immigrants need to shift their position from being helped to helping others:

> *Someone comes to the office because she/he needs something immediately, [for example] a set of information for the residence permit. [It is difficult for him/her to] understand that those at the office are people who commit their time in a voluntary way to help him/her. So, when you say "you could also do this yourself" they say "No, why should I deal with this?"* (Leader, MCBO 4).

Possible burnout may result from this situation as well as from the emotional distress that volunteer may experience as a result of working with immigrants in need: *"Helping others is what we want to do (...), helping people in need, but we are not always able to do so and I feel sorry"* (Leader, MCBO 12); "*It's a difficult task [being a volunteer] because sometimes people don't understand that you can't solve all their problems, they come here thinking that you should give them everything"* (Member, MCBO 7). Keeping motivation as well as constancy and proactivity is difficult:

"*Sometimes you wonder why you have to go on, why you have to do something if others don't"* (Leader, MCBO 5).

2.5.2 Challenges within the Inter-Organizational Sphere: Collaborating and Building Projects

This sphere concerns the relationships that MCBOs establish with other social actors and the problems they face while doing so. It is characterized by two main challenges: (a) managing competition among MCBOs; and (b) navigating the non-profit sector.

Competition is related to volunteers, projects and festivals because *"Social capital is not that large [...] [and therefore] each person is a treasure and every organization tries to get them"* (Member, MCBO 11).

> *We organize the "blouse festival", it belongs to us, alright? Okay, one year we organized it [but I told the president that] this didn't mean anything and the president told me back "why not? We have been organizing it for years! How does [another association] dare [organizing it]?"* (Leader, MCBO 3).

MCBOs express hardship in organizing migrant coalitions and networks to overcome competition among themselves: *"At the beginning we tried to involve a network of organizations, to collaborate with them. Then, we realized that organizations do not understand what it means to run a system, to be part of a network"* (Leader, MCBO 2). As a result, usually events are organized independently by each MCBO, with national organizations or with institutions from countries of origin.

MCBOs also struggle to navigate the functioning of the non-profit sector, where small and community-based MCBOs are usually less attractive than bigger and more organized national organizations that help immigrants: "*There is a lot of associationism in Milan, there are many people who want to design projects or shape them like yours"* (Leader, MCBO 5); "W*e have many projects in mind but as I told you the problem is that we do not know how to approach calls for proposals and all related things"* (Member, MCBO 7); *"Every time there is a rejection there is an explanation of why and we learn [...] maybe we are not able to demonstrate the worth of the project. I believe that many organizations have this problem"* (Leader, MCBO 13).

2.5.3 Challenges within the Community Sphere: Being Recognized as a Civil Society Actor

This sphere refers to MCBOs' struggle to build a reputation within the wider community. In particular, the main challenges related to this sphere were: (a) overcoming the fragmentation among MCBOs due to different sociopolitical narratives; and (b) facing distrust and manipulation by the host society.

As for fragmentation among MCBOs due to sociopolitical narratives, we identified three different narratives: blaming migrants, non-alteration, and barbarization. The narrative blaming migrants was based on the idea that "Italy cannot welcome everyone" and must establish criteria of access (e.g., migrants can be accepted as long as they escaped from wars while other migrants should be rejected):

> *Some ethnic groups behave according to the law and others don't, so I agree with stopping illegal immigrants...the latest migration law has some pros and cons. Italy is not a rubber ball that can expand, crime has increased, [life] is more dangerous.* (Leader, MCBO 11)

According to the non-alteration narrative, nothing has changed in Italy in recent years, other than the negative focus of mass media regarding migration:

> *I don't feel like saying this is a bad moment (. ...), let's say the context is difficult and has always been...unfortunately, today, we have the same problems as ten, five years ago. The law has not changed* (Leader, MCBO 5).

The barbarization narrative described Italy as closed, aggressive and progressively limiting rights. It is no longer important to "hide" racism as it has become a new socially accepted norm: *"Italian people look down on us because they are ignorant, they do not know who we are, they watch the TV where everyone says "he has disembarked" but I have not disembarked"* (Leader, MCBO 15).

Having different narratives is a challenge as it may cause MCBOs to be externally perceived as not cohesive and without a unified voice when requesting better conditions for immigrants living in the host country.

The second challenge of this sphere refers to distrust—by both immigrants and nationals—that sees immigrants as not "trustworthy". As one interviewee said: "*There is always someone who thinks you are making money through this organization and starts sending [negative] messages on WhatsApp*" (Member, MCBO 7).

> *In our countries of origin people don't trust anyone. No one trusts anyone, it's a strong psychological issue, so when people come to other places, they look for help. Many of them tell their true story, many of them invent things [...] some want to take advantage and when they do so they disappear* (Member, MCBO 7).

MCBOs also face manipulation as they often feel exploited by national organizations:

> *Another very sensitive point [...] is the exploitation—often for their own benefit—of migrant-structured realities such as associations, artistic groups and so on. It feels like it is nice [these organizations] exist only as long as there is a need for them.* (Leader, MCBO 6)

This is the reason why an interviewee reported that: "*[what we want is] getting at the same level. This is the work that I do and we also want to do as an association, because otherwise we won't get anywhere.*" (Leader, MCBO 3)

2.6 Discussion

This chapter argues that MCBOs can function as bridges in the inclusion of immigrants by mediating between them and the host society, facilitating intercultural relationships, and providing an opportunity to belong and to pursue community betterment (Marzana, Alfieri et al., 2020; Paloma et al., 2010). The results of this study highlight six main challenges across three different spheres: (a) intra-organization refers to surviving and growing (i.e., having access to funding, qualified professionals, and venue; having engaged and long-term volunteers); (b) inter-organization refers to collaborating and building projects (i.e., managing competition among MCBOs; navigating the non-profit sector); and (c) community refers to be recognized as a civil society actor (i.e., overcoming the fragmentation among MCBOs due to different sociopolitical narratives; facing distrust and manipulation by the host society). In Table 3 we provide an overview of these challenges as well as some guidelines for action to support MCBOs in overcoming the identified challenges.

The challenges identified within the intra-organization sphere (i.e., having access to funding, qualified professionals, and venue; having engaged and long-term volunteers) are in line with the results found by Papadopoulos et al. (2013) and Gleeson and Bloermraad (2012) indicating that MCBOs have lower level of social capital, lesser resources and opportunities compared to national organizations. We found that many MCBOs find attracting and maintaining volunteers hard and experience a lack of qualified professionals. Hout (2013) also reported that because funds are usually assigned to mainstream organizations, MCBOs struggle being selected under call for proposals. Moreover, as highlighted by Kyrieri and Basser (2012), MCBOs have high levels of instability in their activities. We found this may be due to emotional distress coming from the work that MCBOs conduct. This is problematic as the hardships in recruiting and maintaining volunteers may decrease the external impact of any community-based organizations, as suggested by Maton (2008). Moreover, it carries the risk to strongly rely only on the leader. As argued by Ortiz (1981) the retention of power and autonomy by the leadership of organizations may supersede the objective of promoting social change.

In order to overcome these challenges, we suggest two main lines of action to be implemented by academics, policymakers, and/or community stakeholders in host societies: (a) helping MCBOs obtain funding to hire qualified people; and (b) promoting social marketing to attract volunteers and providing psychological support to them to avoid burnout and sustain their motivation. These actions would increase the social capital of MCBOs who will have professionals at their disposal to respond to more calls for proposals—and perhaps be granted a venue—and to build specific recruitment campaigns to present their activities to new potential volunteers—also by building a website. Volunteers of MCBOs might benefit from meeting regularly and therefore checking in on one another under the supervision of a professional. Providing emotional support to volunteers would decrease the risk of drop-out and turnover and would provide MCBOs with more stability in their mission and activities.

As for the challenges identified within the inter-organization sphere (i.e., managing competition among MCBOs; navigating the non-profit sector) we found that not only connecting *with* national organizations but also *among* MCBOs is difficult because of competition and hardships in navigating the non-profit sector. This phenomenon has also been highlighted by Gigliotto et al. (2022) who argued that "while collaboration could be fruitful, due to limited resources or administrative challenges there may be tensions arising among groups that struggle for representation in the institutional heritage discourse" (p. 88). This is why governments and other non-profit groups need to reach out to MCBOs to help them understand the mechanisms of the non-profit sector (Gleeson & Bloemraad, 2012). Martinez-Damia et al. (2021) also found that competition can be a barrier to attracting new immigrant volunteers, who may not know how to choose which MCBO will best fit their needs.

To support MCBOs overcome these challenges we suggest the implementation of two lines of action: (a) encouraging collaboration between MCBOs for mutual support in common challenges; and (b) giving MCBOs tailor-made training on designing and managing projects. These actions refer to the importance of building collaborative capacity, i.e., the conditions needed by organizations or networks to work together toward shared goals in order to create sustainable community changes (Goodman et al., 1998). Garcia-Ramirez et al. (2009) described how teams composed by academics and professionals from different organizations can reach successful results in the implementation of programs addressed to immigrants by building common resources and a sense of collective efficacy. While doing so, MCBOs should keep in mind that the sense of human commonality and the collective desire to change specific situations is the most important factor (Lai, 2010).

Regarding the challenges identified within the community sphere (i.e., overcoming the fragmentation among MCBOs due to different sociopolitical narratives; facing distrust and manipulation by the host society), we found some MCBOs align with mainstream narrative of blaming migrants while others are more critical and feel an atmosphere of barbarization. These differences may be responsible for the hardship of collaborating among MCBOs and organizing unified advocacy activities in the local community. The fragmentation that we have detected helps us avoid a stereotyped vision of MCBOs as a single unit and also recognize an intergroup competition based on the degree of privilege and critical awareness around the socio-political narrative that MCBOs assume. We also highlighted distrust and manipulation by national organizations as previously reported (Gigliotto et al., 2022; Kyrieri & Basser, 2012). Paloma and Manzano-Arrondo (2011) referred to these dynamics as tokenism and suggested that its main risk is to perpetuate the status quo. Pilati (2012) highlighted that MCBOs often struggle to mobilize because "in the Italian context, where the new multi-ethnic landscape is hardly recognized, the institutions seem to legitimate more the role of Italian organizations in the field of immigration" (p. 684).

To face these challenges, we suggest two main lines of action for supporting MCBOs in their endeavors: (a) helping stress the social value of diversity within the immigrant community and giving visibility to the common ground among them; and (b) helping to increase the organizational prestige of MCBOs through agreements with universities and national institutions, and raising awareness among national organizations on power dynamics. In this perspective, some seminars promoting respect, diversity and cultural humility among MCBOs and national organizations could be implemented. As described by Lai (2010), cultural performances serve as a common stage for public protests and as a “community-in-the-making that foregrounds and embraces differences in a shared condition” (p. 502). Partnerships with university could be useful to amplify the voice of MCBOs and create opportunities where they can be the ones launching initiatives and taking decisions.

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, the MCBOs included are limited to Northern Italy, so extending the findings to other MCBOs in other host countries needs to be tempered. Moreover, the city of Milan can be considered as more “welcoming” compared to the rest of Italy, so future comparative research may be conducted not only in other countries but within Italy as well. Secondly, because data collection strongly relies on in-depth interviews to leaders and members who were identified by leaders, challenges MCBOs may face are “top-down” and potentially biased by social desirability. Other methods (e.g., informal meetings, participant observations, analysis of statues) were employed to partly address this issue. Nevertheless, the relatively low number of ethnographic observations conducted due to the COVID-19 pandemic has to be noted. Thirdly, in this study we only included MCBOs that were still working in the city as it was very hard to engage with those that were not currently working or only performed a few activities. We therefore may have missed some important challenges experienced by these MCBOs. Moreover, starting our recruitment from an institutional network like the ACM may have narrowed the MCBOs engaged to the more “institutionalized” ones. We tried to overcome this issue by contacting new MCBOs who were not part of ACM in the first place. Finally, organizations may have unique experiences based on the country of origin of their members also because prejudice and stereotypes from locals change based on immigrants' origin. This is particularly important considering one of the challenges that we identified was precisely related to mistrust. Future research may further explore the diversity and specificity of challenges faced by MCBOs based on their cultural origin.

Chapter III

Community Participation among Immigrants: From Suffering to Personal Growth

In the previous chapter I presented some data showing the challenges that MCBOs face in front the socio-political climate and provided some guidelines to support MCBOS in having a generative impact in the host society. In this chapter I argue that the social generativity framework is a useful approach to study the immigrants' community participation at the individual level. After presenting this theoretical approach, which has previously been applied to studies on community participation among the general population and immigrants, I describe the research that I conducted with the same MCBOs based in Milan that participated in the research featured in Chapter II. The present chapter aims to understand the generativity features of the community participation among immigrants detecting the role of their suffering and to identify the psychological process and the positive outcomes that community participation in MCBOs foster. Results and a discussion will be provided.

3.1 A Social Generativity Approach to Community Participation

The concept of generativity was originally introduced in psychology as a midlife developmental task specific for adults and was mainly concerned with child rearing and parenting, i.e., biological generativity, as a way of contributing to the future (Erikson, 1968). Kotre (1984) expanded the Ericksonian definition of generativity, covering biological (e.g., having children), parental (e.g., raising children, passing down family traditions), technical (e.g., teaching skills), and cultural (e.g., creating something and passing it down to others) generativity. Next, Snarey (1993) brought together Kotre's technical and cultural generativity explaining that people who teach practical things (technical generativity) are also teaching the meaning behind them (cultural generativity). He coined the term "social generativity" (SG), which I use in this dissertation as a lens to look at community participation of immigrants.

SG can be analyzed through three main contributions: McAdams and de St. Aubin's model (1992), Dollahite and colleagues' core concepts (1998), and Kim and colleagues' review (2017) of generativity. Focusing on the rationales that foster concern for future generations, McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) proposed a model where cultural demand (e.g., societal opportunities and cultural expectations) and inner desire (e.g., symbolic immortality and communion) serve as external and internal motives to endorse a generative concern which becomes commitment and later action. They highlight how community participation—action—can result from a generative concern that can be defined as a motivational drive rooted in social responsibility, agency and the desire to transmit what is considered to have value to future generations. Dollahite and collegues (1998) proposed six core concepts which can help enhance generativity: holism (i.e., sustaining connections and relationships), temporality (i.e., facilitating growth and change), agency (i.e., encouraging choice and power), capability (i.e., focusing on strengths), spirituality (i.e., nurturing belief and hope) and morality (i.e., promoting responsibility). These authors pointed out that relationships with the social world are a key factor for generativity. On the same line, McAdams and Logan (2004) showed that culture shapes generativity, contributing to the idea that there are some conditions within communities that lead to generative actions. The most recent conceptualization of generativity was developed by Kim et al. (2017) who proposed a time perspective that looks at generativity "as a lifelong endeavor" (p. 3). They suggested that growth may be an important rationale for generativity, which was defined as the "the human experience of contributing to and promoting lives of others and oneself" (p. 8). The authors also proposed that wellbeing can be seen "as the pragmatic end" of generativity and some empirical studies found generativity to be related to wellbeing (Ackerman et al., 2000; McAdams et al., 2001; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; Huta & Zuroff, 2007).

The authors who used the SG framework to study community participation (Bond et al., 2008; Jones & McAdams, 2013; Okun & Michel, 2006; Peterson & Duncan, 1999; Snyder & Clary, 2004; Warburton & Gooch, 2007) and conceptualized SG as both a motivational drive rooted in social responsibility (Morselli & Passini, 2005) and a response to social concerns. Indeed, for her own survival, society needs people to take responsibility by participating in the community (Marta & Pozzi, 2014). In this regard, Peterson (2004) also highlighted that a generative society is able to balance the needs of unprivileged groups, among which there are immigrants. In this way the promotion of a healthy intergenerational social pact, where care and resources are transferred across groups, can be achieved.

3.2 Evidence on Social Generativity among Immigrants

Research on the community participation of immigrants within the social generativity framework is scarce. For this reason, I will present some studies on minority populations that often share with immigrants the condition of being unprivileged.

Bower and colleagues (2021) pointed out that discrimination fosters a generational legacy of resilience among older LGBT adults. Indeed, having experienced the HIV pandemic, participants became volunteers because of their hardship in self-acceptance, discrimination and lack of positive role models. They decided to engage in educating and encouraging prevention, or advocating for more inclusive social structures. On the same line, Black and Rubinstein (2009) found that suffering and empathy for others suffering can foster generativity for African elderly living in USA, who could identify with others' needs and build a process of redemption. The authors pointed out that "men chose love and tolerance rather than bitterness or, worse yet, apathy despite the persistence of discrimination" (p. 302). They also highlighted how self-examination is important to achieve this result and suggested that religious belief sooths people suffering, building hope in the next world where "we will all be one".

Studies on generativity among immigrants are also inconclusive. In contrast with the idea that suffering fosters generativity, De Medeiros et al. (2015) found that extreme experience of social suffering which was lived by immigrant women moving from the former Soviet Union to the United States, prevented these women from being generative among their descendants. In their case, suffering combined with the feeling of being irrelevant suppressed generative impulses. They detected some episodes of "generativity in the moment"—a term that "describes the small ways in which [participants] try to invest themselves into the very near future in their small communities" (p. 535), through informal helping—which, however, had no generative component for participants. In this regard, Kim et al. (2017) pointed out the importance to study the "perception of generativity", i.e., how "objective" generative behaviors are perceived by those who exhibit them. Recently, scholars described generative paths through which immigrants tried to matter and contribute to society despite social injustice. For example, Kim and colleagues (2015) reported that older Korean immigrants living in the United States which were involved into culturally meaningful activities had an interest in leaving a legacy and "demonstrated the value of being useful and contributing to others" (p. 7). In addition, Sabir and colleagues (2017) described a personalized generativity that took place for older African Americans—who moved from the South to the North of United Stated during the Great Migration—thanks to meaningful work and volunteering.

What emerged from this literature is a fragmentated picture of community participation as the behavioral expression of SG. SG has been related to social responsibility, relationships, and transmission of what is considered to have value (Dollahite et al., 1998; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). It has been studied as the motivational drive for community participation mainly among the general population and has not been sufficiently used to inform the whole process of community participation or to specifically target immigrants. While the literature on minorities expanded conceptualization of SG emphasizing its relation with discrimination and belonging, suffering still plays a controversial role, and community participation should be explored understanding the generative perception of immigrants who participate.

4.4 **Research Objectives**

Based on Kim and colleagues' (2017) redefinition of generativity and on the psychosocial approach to this construct (Marta & Pozzi, 2014; Morelli & Passini, 2005, Snyder & Clary, 2004), the objectives of the study were to identify: (a) the generativity features of community participation among immigrants, detecting the role of suffering in their community participation; (b) the psychological process and positive outcomes that community participation in MCBOs foster.

4.4 **Method**

The present study is based on the data collected in the study presented in the Chapter II. Focusing on the individual level, I will present data on participant as individuals and not as organizations.

3.4.1 Participants and Sample Strategy

As part of the research 15 leaders and 14 members from the MCBOs described in the Chapter II were involved. The inclusion criteria were: (a) to be born in another country and to have left the country at eighteen or more; (b) to have lived in Italy for at least 2 years; (c) to be leader or member of a MCBO settled in the Metropolitan Area of Milan; (d) to have been actively involved in the organization (in charge of some organizational aspects, participating and supporting events and activities) for at least 3 months; (e) to be willing to participate in the research; (f) to speak Italian, Spanish or English (the languages spoken by the team). Two young participants had been living in Italy since they were children (as children of immigrants). We decided to exclude them from the data analysis because our research interest focused only on first-generation immigrants (cf. Chapter I). The majority of participants were female, with Italian citizenship and a high educational level. Participants came from different geographical area: South America, Eastern Europa, Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. The vast majority all of participants had a past history of participation in their country of origin. The average age of the sample was 45 years (age ranged from 30 to 71) and the average time spent in Italy was 18 (ranging from 2 to 33 years). More demographic information is shown in Table 4. All participants signed an informed consent and do not receive any reward.

Table 4.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

ID	Gender	Role	Age	Legal document	Education level	Years in Italy	Country of origin
1	Female	Leader	50	Citizenship	Degree	30	Peru
2	Female	Leader	46	Apply for citizenship	Degree	16	Ecuador
3	Male	Leader	34	Citizenship	Degree	16	Albania
4	Female	Leader	50	Citizenship	Degree	22	Venezuela
5	Female	Member	45	Citizenship	High-school	17	Venezuela
6	Female	Leader	67	Citizenship	Master	25	Argentina
7	Female	Member	52	Long residence permit	Master	18	Romania
8	Male	Leader	51	Long residence permit	High-school	31	Senegal
9	Female	Leader	60	Citizenship	High-school	16	Ukraine
10	Female	Member	33	Citizenship	Degree	19	Ukraine
11	Female	Member	39	Citizenship	High-school	10	Chile
12	Female	Member	43	Family permit	Degree	5	Senegal
13	Female	Leader	55	Apply for citizenship	Degree	15	Moldova
14	Female	Leader	50	Citizenship	High-school	30	Somalia
15	Female	Member	71	Long residence permit	Middle-school	32	Ecuador
16	Female	Member	50	Citizenship	Professional degree	30	Somalia
17	Female	Leader	47	Long residence permit	Degree	16	Bulgaria
18	Female	Member	50	Citizenship	Professional degree	20	Moldova
19	Male	Leader	51	Long residence permit	Master	33	India
20	Female	Leader	59	Citizenship	Degree	32	Philippine
21	Female	Member	37	Long residence permit	Degree	12	Bulgaria
22	Female	Member	31	No valid documentation	High-school	13	Peru
23	Male	Member	34	Asylum permit	High-school	2	Peru
24	Male	Member	27	Student visa	Degree	4	India
25	Male	Member	32	Work permit	High-school	8	Senegal
26	Male	Member	28	Work permit	High-school	6	Senegal
27	Male	Leader	30	Long residence permit	Elementary	8	Senegal

3.4.2 Instruments

For this study, we asked questions about immigrants' personal journey, life and community participation. Specifically, we explored five areas: (a) migration history (e.g., when did you arrive? Why did you come to Italy? With whom?); (b) participation within the organization (e.g., can you tell me about your participation? Since when have you been in this organization? What do you do?); (c) experiences that immigrants live during their participation (e.g., what are the things that you do here that are important for your life? Which relations do you have with the other members of the organization?); (d) relation with the country of origin (e.g., what is your relationship with your country of origin? How has it changed since you have joined this organization?); and (e) personal positive changes (e.g., in what ways has participation changed your life? How has participation changed you?).

3.4.3 Procedure and Data Analysis

We contacted MCBOs as described in the Chapter II. Indeed, for this study we interviewed the same participants we had involved to study organizations. We carried out one interview to investigate both levels (organizational and individual) asking leaders and members to participate in the research. Participants' right to anonymity was safeguarded at all stages. We decided to interview both members and leaders as the former were providing useful information to identify the psychological mechanisms that MCBOs were promoting. Indeed, members were less accustomed to being interviewed and gave more spontaneous and less socially desirable responses compared to leaders.

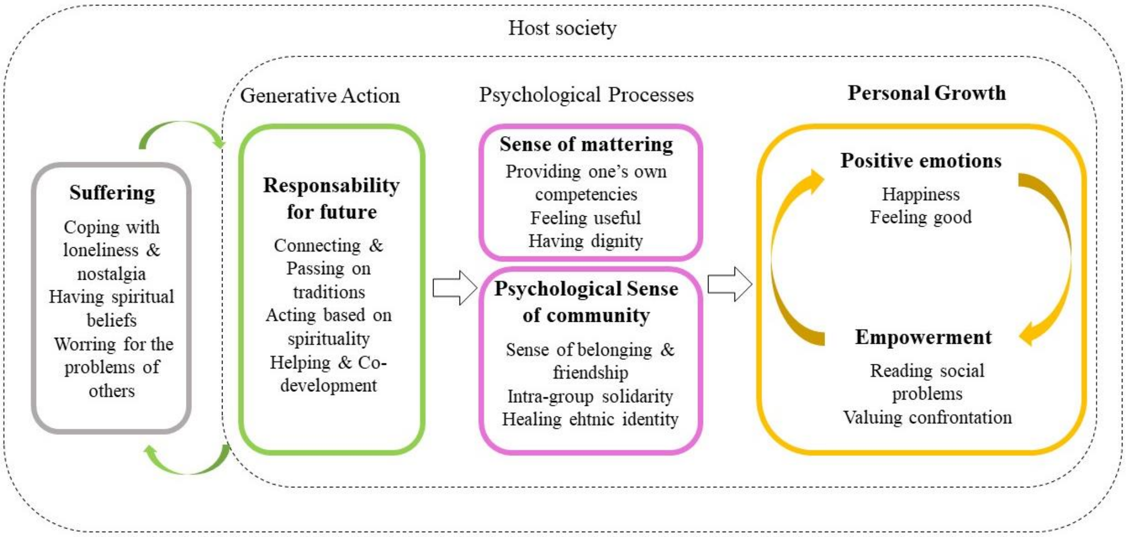
The research team conducting the analysis consisted of five people. The analysis that we carried out was based on a reflective theoretical thematic analysis (Braun &

Clarke, 2019; 2006) based on specific research questions related to immigrants' experiences of community participation from a SG approach. Another field researcher and I read and re-read the interviews (i.e., phase of familiarizing) focusing only on the experience of community participation. We separately ran open coding (Saldana, 2006) using Nvivo software (i.e., phase of generating). Then, we revised codes together in order to find an accordance, consistently writing down memos of our sessions in a collaborative way (i.e., phase of searching themes). We came up with provisional themes, i.e., patterns of shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). We revised them after reviewing the literature on generativity again (i.e., refining themes), focus our attention on suffering, responsibility, transmission of values, future orientation and relevancy. The other three researchers acted as supervisors of data analysis providing feedbacks during frequent debriefing sessions and helping build the conceptual framework that I will present (i.e., phase of writing the report).

3.5 Results

Results highlighted seven themes: suffering, responsibility for future, sense of mattering, psychological sense of community, positive emotions and empowerment that fuel personal growth. These themes were connected to form the conceptual framework showed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework from a SG Approach: A Journey from Suffering to Personal Growth through Community Participation


Host society
Generative Action
Psychological Processes
Personal Growth
Suffering
Coping with loneliness & nostalgia
Having spiritual beliefs
Worring for the problems of others
Responsability for future
Connecting & Passing on traditions
Acting based on spirituality
Helping & Co-development
Sense of mattering
Providing one's own competencies
Feeling useful
Having dignity
Psychological Sense of community
Sense of belonging & friendship
Intra-group solidarity
Healing ehtnic identity
Positive emotions
Happiness
Feeling good
Empowerment
Reading social problems
Valuing confrontation

3.5.1 Themes Identified from Narratives

Suffering. Participants expressed an ambivalence due the constant need to manage the past and the present between "being in Italy" and "remembering the country of origin". When thinking about the past they expressed nostalgia for their country of origin as a result of an existing positive ethnic bond: *"I feel nostalgia, a typical feeling for anyone who lives abroad. You start missing the habits, the traditions"* (Leader, ID 17). They showed a deep connection with their ethnic origin: *"these roots make you a real person* (. ...). *You can't go to another country and forget everything you've lived, because you'd be nobody [if you do so]"* (Member, ID 4). When thinking about their arrival, they reported feeling lonely in Italy: *"when you make the choice of going to a country that is not your own, the first thing you miss are your affections"* (Leader, ID 2). For some, making something out of suffering was linked to believing in an afterlife:

> *I believe in death, because it's very important what there is after life, that's what we have to worry about (...) you have to trust where you headed based on what you have done, you know? And when you do the right things, then you sleep well, peacefully. If I do a bad thing when I sleep, I can't get any sleep at night*. (Leader, ID 27)

Finally, when thinking about the present they expressed their own fatigue, their concern for others and for the injustice they experience in Italy: *"when a person comes and tells me about a problem there is a lot of empathy, because I have been there. I know what it's like to go to the police station trembling with the fear that they will turn you down"* (Leader, ID 2). Immigrants live a spatial and temporal ambivalence which generates a type of suffering that, instead of suppressing their generative drive, becomes its main lever.

Responsibility for future. MCBOs provided an opportunity for taking action through community participation. Social responsibility is something that was learned through family and cultural education: *"because it is already in my blood and in my culture to be a humanitarian, to help others, it is how my parents raised me"* (Leader, ID 20). Helping is perceived both as "natural" (i.e., being a deep part of oneself) and as a "duty" that stems from being aware of social problems and feeling the need to do something to solve them. The MCBO becomes the place where people can take action: *"everyone has to participate in the development of his country, whether he is a migrant or a local, and we have the responsibility to participate"* (Member, ID 11).

> *It's like going to work, it is a duty because I get paid there. Being part of this association is a duty for me because I know something and I can pass [this knowledge] to other people and then I am very glad to do that.* (Member, ID 25)

Community participation provides a space where people can manage nostalgia in an active way: *"there are certain things that migrants miss and [so they] fall into depression. And I didn't want to fall into depression"* (Leader, ID 4); "*the association gave me back the affections I was missing, the friends who were there"* (Leader, ID 2). Within MCBO it was also possible to keep traditions alive and reconnect with cultural roots so these can be celebrated and passed on to future generations: "*We do many typical workshops to pass our culture down to our children who grew up here, but we also feel a little at home while carrying out these traditions"* (Leader, ID 17); *"it is an encounter between us, between our roots and we preserve, let's says we continue to preserve the roots of our country"* (Leader, ID 4); *"I like it when we are together and, I don't know…we perhaps carry on our cultures and traditions and pass them on to those who will come after us"* (Member, ID 21). Moreover, spiritual beliefs could take a concrete form through participation:

> *I believe in karma, if you do something now it will surely come back to you someday, so this belief makes me involved in the association, in taking part in people's pain, maybe if I do something good in this human life, it will come back to me someday, maybe in this human life or maybe in the next life, maybe I will be an animal in the next life, but it will all come back to me*. (Member, ID 24)

Finally, participants reported that they could handle their concerns on the suffering of others by improving the living conditions of immigrants in Italy and designing co-developments projects in their countries of origin: *"you feel like you've left a piece of yourself there and you feel this urge to give something back there (. ...) We've done a lot here and we want to try to give back to our country"* (Leader, ID 2); "*I think when a community knows what their country of origin is going through, we* *cannot stand by"* (Leader, ID 4). Suffering is addressed with responsibility so that it becomes a push that reinforces participation every day and allows for commitment that is sustained over time.

Sense of mattering. The first psychological process that participants shared was feeling valued by others, as one interview said: *"I feel I am also acknowledged for my work even if I am not on a stage [during a speech] and I feel I am doing something useful"* (Member, ID 7); *"I found being recognized as a co*-*development actor very nice, it's a personal benefit"* (Leader, ID 8). Participation is also an opportunity for contributing as volunteers who offer their competences *"I can transmit something to others (...), it's always one helping the other.... always based on our capabilities"* (Member, ID 23). Feeling useful becomes a central issue in their lives as it is difficult to find other spaces for relevance: *"[the MCBO] has allowed me to do something that I have inside me, to be useful to people, to work in the social field and for the community"* (Member, ID 12); *"I think that the association gave me a lot, but I contributed a lot too"* (Leader, ID 2). Moreover, participation has made it possible for some to achieve their dreams, have dignity and respect:

> *I get to live my dream, the things I wanted to do in Bulgaria I managed to do here, singing and dancing, I succeeded here and now I have this opportunity and for me it is very important, I am living my dreams.* (Member, ID 24)
>
> *The association gives you dignity, it is a place where you regain dignity. Because you stop being just an immigrant, you become a person, and this is the most difficult thing, and you become a person also to eyes of the others. It dignifies you (...). I only stayed in Italy because at a certain point the association gave me back my dignity"* (Leader, ID 1)

Psychological Sense of community. The second psychological process that participants reported refers to being part of the community-based organizations, being supported, and healing their ethnic identities. They said that *"relationships are created and you feel less alone"* (Leader, ID 17) and reported a strong sense of belonging and friendship. They have established deep relationships with other members and feeling part of something: *"fortunately I have met beautiful people with whom I have established a friendship, almost a kinship"* (Member, ID 18); "*we are friends, we dine together, a phone call is enough to understand each other, because we trust each other (...) it is thrilling, to be part of something"* (Member, ID 7). Their psychological sense of community was also built on intragroup solidarity, i.e., unconditional help and support: *"if there's a chance to help another person you do it, without asking for anything in return because you were also helped and that's the way this chain works"* (Member, ID 23). This allows participants to see the members of the MCBOs as a family: *"we become a small family and we help each other also in other areas of life, even looking for an accommodation or a simple hello"* (Leader, ID 17). As in all families, sometimes you ask and sometimes you give, creating a virtuous circle of reciprocity which can also foster participation in the first place: *"I jumped in because... I don't know, like, I reciprocated even the help that they had given me and I didn't expect help by the way"* (Member, ID 22). Or:

> *Before, when I was a student, I used to get support from people to do things, to go somewhere, also financial aid and other things [I used to get] from seniors [of the MCBO]. But now it is the opposite thing [...] I am in the position to give it back.* (Leader, ID 19)

Finally, within MCBOs was possible to heal ethnic identity, which is about being able to connect more with the culture of the country of origin through the activities of the MCBO. For some participants, this meant forming relationships with people from their country of origin they had never had before:

> *Well, to tell you the truth before this whole story led me to associationism I did not have any relationship with my compatriots, they were very sporadic, so yes [thought the MCBO] I was able to know my community and I did not know it was so vast.* (Member, ID 11)

For others, participation allowed to continue to cultivate relationships with compatriots in the host country and to restore relationships with people who were still living in the country of origin:

> *For me it means being more Ecuadorian when we are there together and sharing (…) because practically the association is Ecuadorian and for me being part of this association means being there together, we speak the same language, we do activities or other stuff... it is a beautiful thing.* (Member, ID 15)
>
> *The [international] projects we do now are with the same people I worked with before [in my country of origin]. So, it's not as if something was broken, but rather as if I joined the association [here] to go back there [in my country of origin].* (Leader, ID 2)

As reflected in this last quote, community participation brings the emotional experience of going back home as reported by others: *"it basically makes us feel like home, it brings us closer to Bulgaria"* (Member, ID 21); *"Feeling much closer to your homeland…if it wasn't for this association [I would not feel this] (. ...) [The MCBO] helped me feel at home here*" (Leader, ID 17).

Positive emotions. Participants felt that their participation gives them happiness and good vibes. There is pleasure, satisfaction and pride associated with participation. For instance, they feel positive emotions for the help given, the skills achieved, their social role and their relationships: *"I feel so much positive energy coming back to me"* (Leader, ID 2); *"I feel full and happy when I help people, I have a healthy soul, it makes me happy to help people"* (Member, ID 11); *"sometimes I see a group of, say, five people hanging out, and they are hanging out thanks to me. Before they didn't know each other, do you see? So, it makes me very happy and makes me very proud"* (Leader, ID 27).

Empowerment. Participants also talked about the value of confrontation: *"Now I accept other people's opinion and I am able to discuss about certain topics, even if they don't share my ideas"* (Member, ID 21), and referred to awareness of social problems and social dynamics acquired thanks to their participation:

> *It helped me...also to assess my history, to understand things that had happened in my country of origin and I did not understand why (...) I grew from a point of view of content (...) I began to think, to study, to reflect.* (Leader, ID 1)
>
> *(It gave me a) way of thinking, a way of being close to people in need, because when I go to my country of origin I do some steps back, when I go back, I see only future commitments, [for example] people can live with two pieces of clothes and a slice of bread there (. ...). Here you don't see those things, with the association you do things and you realize the real problems.* (Member, ID 16)

Personal growth. Finally, while narrating the positive outcomes of their participation, participants also reported feeling enriched, having grown, being in some way “more” than before. Positive emotions and empowerment seem to reinforce one another to build personal growth on both the personal and the relational sphere. Within the personal sphere growth is described in terms of developing skills, self-awareness, a different perspective on oneself and the surrounding environment: *“I’ve become much more patient and altruistic (...) personally I’m filled with everything we’ve done (. ...), I’ve grown, it’s become my universe, my life”* (Leader, ID 20*); “It has helped me build my character”* (Member, ID 10); *“I'm learning so many things. I don’t know anything but I’m slowly learning to believe in myself, to understand life and myself, that to face life you don’t have to study, you’ve got to have the heart to go on*” (Leader, ID 27). Relational growth indicates both the numerical growth of relationships and the diversity of people met thanks to the MCBO. This is particularly important for immigrants who need to build a new social network in the new country: “*now I know a lot of people from different countries and I like that so much, they call me and they are nice, they invite me”* (Member, ID 11), “*I participated in many activities that allowed me to be in contact with people who have different experiences and that gave me something more”* (Member, ID 12). Participants also referred to the opportunity of meeting institutions and people of higher status: *“These relationships are both informal and formal because in addition to the members of the group you also have the opportunity to meet new associations, local authorities and local politicians”* (Member, ID 18); *“[the relationships established] are endless, from institutions, to the university, to partners, to participants, they are endless both at the professional level and as friendships, human relationships”* (Leader, ID 3).

3.6 Discussion

The use of the theoretical framework of SG to understand the experience of participation of migrant people was extremely useful as it allowed to consider at the same time temporal, spatial and intersubjective aspects that participations activate. Regarding the first objective (i.e., to explore the generativity features of immigrant community participation within MCBOs and the role of suffering) of this study, results show an active and proactive coping of suffering that we labelled as "generative" because it is a concern that leads to a generative action. This is also in line with the study by Black and Rubinstein (2009) who, in tracing the life trajectories of a number of Africans who volunteered and participated in their neighborhood, found that volunteering fosters a "redemption from suffering". Specifically, we highlighted that participation among immigrants is deeply rooted in responsibly to both act in front of others' suffering and imagine a better future for themselves and their community nearby and far away. Orientation to future is what characterized generativity in comparison, for instance, to volunteering, which is usually more concerned with the present (Snyder & Clary, 2004). Dollahite and colleagues (1998) linked orientation to the future with the concept of spirituality, which we also found. They suggested that nurturing generative beliefs and discouraging hopelessness are a way of building generativity. We can imagine that for those who are animated by spiritual beliefs, hope for the future also relies on this, as found in another research (Bower et al., 2021). Specifically, Black and Rubinstein (2009) claimed that "hope did not permit passivity, but a social and religious consciousness" (p.302) and reported that immigrants chose love and tolerance over hate while keeping their anger alive in order to monitor potential future oppression. Studies on community participation found that "increased empathy, including shared suffering, is part of community so that feelings of being understood may also positively contribute to the psychological functioning of volunteers" (Omoto & Snyder, 2002, p. 857). The spatial perspective is a novelty in social generativity conceptualizations, that are traditionally focused on temporal aspects. Within this new perspective, participation takes place mainly in the host country, although initiated or desired co-development projects indicate that participation often extends involvement to the countries of origin. Vaquera and Aranda (2011) found that transnational activities (such as visiting the home country and owning a business in the home country) are related to subjective wellbeing among immigrants. Based on their result, we can look at community participation as another potential type of transnational activity that fosters immigrant wellbeing.

With regard to the second objective (i.e., the psychological process and positive outcomes that community participation in MCBOs fosters) we found two psychological processes that lead to personal growth. The first is sense of mattering. Participation makes it possible to feel useful and able to make contributions that cannot be made elsewhere. Being important to others is fundamental in the case of immigrant people, who often lose their role, struggle to adapt to a new culture and lifestyle and experience a sense of irrelevancy that may suppress their generativity (de Medeiros et al., 2015). The results of this study support findings by Sabir et al. (2017), i.e., "the need to make a personally meaningful societal contribution persists even under challenging conditions" (p. 32). This outcome highlights that symbolic immortality and fear of death may not be key motivators for participation in case of unprivileged groups that are mainly concerned about the need to matter and the fear of not mattering in the new society (Flett & Heisel, 2020). The second process fostered in MCBO is the creation of a psychological sense of community among members. Members care for each other, share traditions and stories of their home countries, develop friendships and for once feel like they belong. This highlights the importance of considering the group dynamics of community participation (Gray & Stevenson, 2020). Additionally, it becomes clear how these settings have the potential of helping redefine the meaning of cultural origins within a new country. Other studies have found that shared emotional connections–one of the dimensions of the sense of community–are strictly related to ethnic and national identity (Sonn, 2002). MCBOs have generative cultures as they do not close to the others but are able to look outwards (Kotre, 2004; Smith et al., 2017). This way they sustain generative connections (i.e., holism for Dollahite and colleagues) and lend themselves for hybridization also with the new culture of the host country. The most important outcome related to community participation among immigrants is the acquisition of a sense of growth, which is rooted in both positive emotions and empowerment. This is in line with the findings of Bond et al. (2008) who investigated leadership among women in a small town in the USA and found what they call “rewards”. The authors referred to communal awards to indicate the interpersonal relationships earned through participation and to agentic rewards to indicate a growth on a personal level that is expressed in taking opportunities and feeling enriched.

These results highlight how generativity is a characteristic of relational spaces (in this case MCBOs) that allows for the re-elaboration of suffering that would otherwise turn into distress. As a result, literature on SG takes a step forward paying greater attention to the relational processes in which this type of generativity is expressed and to the positive role that suffering can play when connected to social responsibility, opportunity for agency and the desire for intergenerational continuity within community-based settings. This combination enables a process of self-care thanks to the culture present in MCBOs. We can argue that the MCBOs from our research are generative communities as they present some characteristics of the model elaborated by Smith and colleagues (2017). Indeed, they are guided by a sense of belonging, the creation of strong ties (psychological sense of community), the valorization of the contribution brought by everyone (sense of mattering) while allowing for the development of a sense of possibility (hope). This result highlights the possible mechanisms through which participation influences the personal growth of immigrants. This is the line of research that I will try to test in the next chapter.

This study is not without limitations. First of all, it was challenging to explore the subjective experiences of participants due to the length of the interview. We indeed decided to include in the same track both the organizational aspects analyzed in the Chapter II and the individual aspects assessed in the present chapter. We opted for this organization following a request made by participants. Sustaining interviews that last more than an hour can be very tiring and this had repercussions on the depth of some interviews. Nevertheless, this undoubtedly allowed us to have more narratives available, which are key tools for investigating generativity (McAdams et al., 1997). Another major limitation is the failure to involve people from North Africa despite the fact that, according to sources from 2020—the year when the research was conducted—the Moroccan and Egyptian population represented almost 18% of the population residing in Milan (Istat, 2021). People from North Africa are distinctively Muslim for the most part. Many studies reported the presence of an anti-Muslim prejudice (Ogan et al., 2014; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008) and discrimination (Di Stasio et al., 2021) and more radical authors explicitly talked about a structured anti-Muslim racism in Europe (Fekete, 2004). As Sonn said (2002) “individuals and groups are positioned as resourceful and agentic not just as passive recipients of acculturative forces. The centrality of community structures in impacting social and psychological processes are acknowledged so to the fact that nature and meaning of sense of community will be different for different groups” (p. 217). We can imagine that the subjective experience that immigrant people have in Muslim organizations based in Milan may have peculiarities that we could not explore. Nevertheless, a recent systematic review (Benito-Ballesteros & De la Osa Subtil, 2020) of generativity indicated that cultural differences in expressing generativity per se do not affect the basic psychological mechanisms of generativity that correspond to what we identified as sense of mattering and psychological sense of community.

Chapter IV

How Community Participation Enhances Subjective Wellbeing Among Immigrants: An Analysis of Mediators

In the previous chapter I presented a conceptual framework within a SG approach, highlighting how immigrant community participation is rooted in suffering and creates experiences of personal growth. In this chapter I argue that community participation can also promote immigrant subjective wellbeing and is a key factor to reduce the existing gap on subjective wellbeing between immigrants and locals. After providing explanations on the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing for the broad population, I suggest possible explicative mechanisms based on the qualitative results from Chapter III and current international research. The aim of this quantitative study is to provide some evidence of the benefits of membership to and active participation in a MCBO and to test two potential mediators of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing.

4.1 The Gap in Subjective Wellbeing between Immigrants and Locals

Research conducted in Europe and North America found that immigrants usually experience lower levels of subjective wellbeing compared to locals (Hendriks, 2015). Other studies found similar results and stressed that the gap in subjective wellbeing between immigrants and locals does not often disappear in later immigrant generations or with a longer stay (Arpino & Valk, 2018; Safi, 2010). In this chapter, subjective wellbeing is defined as a multidimensional construct based on the satisfaction of subjective needs across different domains, namely the personal sphere, relationships with important people in one’s life as well as relationships with the community of residence, main occupation, overall health, emotional life and financial situation (Prilleltensky, 2012).

One of the variables that were linked to subjective wellbeing in the general population is community participation (Cicognani et al., 2008; Ding et al., 2015; Jenkinson et al., 2013; Mellor et al., 2009; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001; Wilson & Musick, 1999). Research–namely research on volunteering–found that community participation “is particularly beneficial for younger and lower income groups” (Lawton et al., 2021, p. 615) and for those less well integrated (Piliavin & Siegl, 2007), suggesting that immigrants may benefit more from community participation than non-immigrants (Morrow-Howell et al., 2009). Although research recognizes the role of community participation in promoting immigrant subjective wellbeing (Chu et al., 2018; Paloma et al., 2021), the link between community participation and positive mental health outcomes among the immigrant population has been understudied in the literature. However, it can provide new insights to ensure equity around subjective wellbeing among immigrants and nationals in receiving societies.

4.2 Community Participation and Subjective Wellbeing among Immigrants

Research on the relation between community participation and wellbeing among the general population has been carried out worldwide (e.g., Cicognani et al., 2008; Ding et al., 2015; Gil-Lacruz et al., 2019; Kahana et al., 2013; Klar & Kasser, 2009; Mellor et al., 2009) and found a positive correlation between these two variables.

In the case of immigrant population, research on community participation has firstly focused on integration rather than subjective wellbeing. Handy and Greespan (2009) were the first scholars to investigate participation of immigrants in ethnic religious congregations in Canada. They reported enhanced social, cultural, ethnic and human capital as the main benefit of participation, which provides a steppingstone for the integration of immigrants into the host society. Marzana, Alfieri, Marta and Paloma (2020) later found that young immigrants who participate in the community through political, civic, recreational or social activities had higher levels of national and ethnic identity (i.e., bicultural identity, an indicator of integration) compared to those who did not participate. According to some qualitative studies, community participation improves bicultural competences and social relationships with hosting communities and compatriots while building the ability to resist to unjust social conditions (Aceros et al., 2021; Marzana, Martinez-Damia et al., 2020; Paloma et al., 2010; Taurini et al., 2017). To the best of our knowledge, only two studies have focused specifically on the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing in immigrants. Paloma et al. (2014) found that the subjective wellbeing of immigrants settled in Spain is influenced by the use of active coping strategies such as believing in social change and being able to influence the environment. In the same vein, Alfieri, Marzana and Cipresso (2019) reported that immigrants settled in Italy who participated in the community have higher levels of subjective wellbeing compared to those who did not. Therefore, while current research has grasped some connections between these two variables, evidence is still scarce as regards the immigrant population.

4.3 Mediators between Community Participation and Subjective Wellbeing

Although many authors support the idea that community participation may benefit subjective wellbeing, the mechanisms remain unclear also in the case of the general population. Literature suggests sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as two key potential mediators of this relationship (Piliavin & Siegl, 2007, 2015; Snyder & Omoto, 2000; Wray-Lake et al., 2019).

Sense of mattering can be defined as the feeling of considering oneself as an important, worthy and appreciated person (Prilleltensky, 2020; Schlossberg, 1989). Prilleltensky (2014) identified two main dimensions within the sense of mattering construct: recognition and impact. While recognition refers to *feeling valued* by the others, impact indicates the sense of *adding value*, i.e., “our sense of agency [and] that what we do makes a difference in the world” (Prilleltensky, 2014, p. 151). While both of these dimensions are important, individuals are more likely to report “adding value” than “feeling valued” in different life domains such as the personal sphere, relationships, work and community (Scarpa et al., 2022).

As for the first dimension of sense of mattering, i.e., feeling valued, Piliavin and Siegl (2007) found that volunteering—which is a form of community participation—increases psychological wellbeing “in part because it leads people to feel that they have an important role in society and that their existence is important” (p. 460). Feeling valued has been empirically correlated to wellbeing of adolescents (Marshall, 2004; Rayle, 2005), young adults (Matera et al., 2020) and the elderly (Dixon, 2007; Flett & Heisel, 2020). This relationship has also been found for unprivileged groups such as adults with HIV or mental illness (Matera et al., 2020; Pernice et al., 2017), and rural or black adolescents (Jones, 2018; Schimidt et al., 2020).

As for the second dimension of sense of mattering, i.e., adding value, we follow the connection established by other scholars (e.g., Adams & Marshall, 1996; Costin & Vignoles, 2020) between adding value and social generativity. Social generativity (Snarey, 1993) has been linked to social responsibility and the desire to transmit what is considered as having value to future generations (Dollahite et al., 1998; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). It is conceptually similar to the adding-value dimension in the community as both are about doing and acting in the word (Prillentsky, 2020; Scarpa et al., 2022). Studies have found that social generativity predicts subjective wellbeing in the general population (Ackerman et al., 2000; Huta & Zuroff, 2007). In the case of immigrants, some qualitative studies reported that immigrants who participate feel useful to others, suggesting that community participation may enhance this dimension of sense of mattering that refers to having an impact (Kim et al., 2015; Kosic, 2007; Marzana, Martinez-Damia et al., 2020).

The psychological sense of community has been defined as feeling that members belong to a community where they influence one another, integrate and fulfill their needs, and share an emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Talò and colleagues (2014) linked it to community participation while Gray and Stevenson (2020) reported that volunteers in social organizations share group identity, feelings of belonging and reciprocity—all aspects related to the psychological sense of community. In the case of immigrants, community participation was indicated as central as it fosters the creation of safe settings where immigrants feel they belonged (Guo, 2014), are seen as human beings, are accepted (Sonn & Fisher, 1996), and create extended families where reciprocity is practiced (Handy & Greespan, 2009; Marzana, Martinez-Damia et al., 2020). In addition, as seen in the previous chapters, the MCBOs where immigrants are involved can help them resist injustice (Buckingham et al., 2021) as settings where they can share oppressive experiences, bolster collective dignity and take action to transform their realities (Aceros et al., 2021; Paloma et al., 2010). As a result, immigrants who participate report higher levels of psychological sense of community in comparison with those who do not (Alfieri et al., 2021; Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2013). Research has also linked psychological sense of community to subjective wellbeing in both minority groups (Kenyon & Carter, 2011; Terry et al., 2019) and immigrants (Garcia-Cid et al., 2020; Marzana, Alfieri & Marta, 2020; Ramos et al., 2020). Specifically, shared emotional connection—one of the four dimensions of psychological sense of community—was found to be the strongest predictor of immigrant subjective wellbeing (Ramos et al., 2017; Sonn, 2002). Finally, recent literature on the general population reported that psychological sense of community can serve as both partial and total mediator between community participation and subjective wellbeing (Albanesi et al., 2007; Cicognani et al., 2008; Mazzoni et al., 2014), and similar results were also recently found for immigrants living in Canada (Liu, 2020).

4.4 Research Objectives

While important progress has been made in explaining how community participation promotes subjective wellbeing (see Piliavin & Siegl, 2015), further studies are still needed namely on immigrants and the overlooked role of sense of mattering. Based on the aforementioned insights, the present cross-sectional study aims to: (a) compare the degree of sense of mattering, psychological sense of community, and subjective wellbeing showed by immigrants according to their membership to a MCBO and their level of community participation; and (b) analyze the role played by sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as mediators of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing among the immigrant population residing in Northern Italy.

4.5 Method

4.5.1 Participants

A total of 308 participants participated in the study, 45.1% of them were member of an MCBO and 54.9% were not. The average age was 43.5 years (*SD*=13.07) and 55.2% were women. All participants came from developing countries and were first-generation immigrants who, at the moment of the study, were residing in Italy. The region of origin of the participants was Latin America (39.6%), Sub-Saharan Africa (24.7%), Eastern Europe (14.9%), Maghreb and Middle East (10.7%) and Asia (5.2%). In terms of educational background of participants, 7.5% of the sample had no education, 2.6% had attended primary education, 14% middle-level education, 25.3% high school education, and 30.8% undergraduate or graduate education. Most of the participants (74.4%) had been residing in Italy for more than 5 years. As regards legal status, the majority of the sample had the Italian citizenship (28.2%), a long-term residence permit (18.2%) or a work residence permit (14.3%). A description of the sample by MCBO membership can be found in Table 5.

Table 5.

Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Sample According to Membership to a MCBO

		MCBO Membership	
		Non-Member (n=169)	Member (n=139)
Sex	Male	39.6 %	41.7%
	Female	56.2 %	54.0%

	Not specified	4.1 %	4.3%
Age	Young adulthood (18-34)	33.7%	11.5%
	Adulthood (35-54)	33.7%	46.8%
	Midlife (55-64)	13.0%	18.0%
	Old age (over 65)	1.8%	3.6%
	Not specified	17.8%	20.1%
Origin	Asia	7.1%	2.9%
	Eastern Europe	18.3%	10.8%
	Latin America	41.4%	38.1%
	Maghreb and Middle East	12.4%	8.6%
	Sub-Saharan Africa	16.6%	34.5%
	Not specified	4.1%	5.0%
Time in the country	Less than a year	1.8%	0.7%
	Between 1 to 3 years	11.2%	5.8%
	Between 3 to 5 years	14.2%	7.9%
	More than 5 years	68.6%	81.3%
	Not specified	4.1%	4.3%
Educational background	None	9.5%	5.0%
	Primary School	4.1%	0.7%
	Middle School	11.2%	17.3%
	High School	23.7%	27.3%
	Undergraduate-Graduate	33.7%	27.3%
	Other	1.8%	3.6%
	Not specified	16.0%	18.7%
Legal status	No valid documentation	4.1%	3.6%
	International protection permit	9.4%	5.8%
	Family reunion permit	6.5%	6.5%
	Study or tourism permit	4.1%	1.4%
	Work residence permit	16.0%	12.2%
	Long-term residence permit	17.2%	19.4%
	Italian citizenship	25.4%	31.7%
	Not specified	17.2%	19.4%

Ethical approval for the research was previously obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (protocol number: 14-21).

All participants agreed to participate in the study on a voluntary basis. They had no financial incentive to participate.

4.5.2 Instruments

Community participation. Membership to a MCBO was measured through the ad hoc question: ‘Do you belong to a migrant organization?’(Yes/no). This question came with a definition of MCBO. For participants who reported to be members of a MCBO, 5 additional close-ended items were administered: (a) How long have you been part of the organization? (Less than one year, from 1 to 3 years, from 3 to 5 years, more than 5 years); (b) Do you consider yourself an active member of the organization? (Yes/no); (c) Did you contribute to starting this organization? (Yes/no) (d) In the last 12 months, have you been a member of the organization’s board of directors? (Yes/no); (e) What is your level of active engagement in the organization? (Low, medium, high). The score of this indicator had a range of 0 to 5 points, obtained by the proportional sum of each of the five items and it allowed to estimate the level of community participation of each participant (i.e., no, low, medium, and high).

Sense of mattering: Feeling valued. The first dimension of sense of mattering was measured through the Italian version of the Mattering to Others Questionnaire (Matera et al., 2017), an adaptation of the original scale of Marshall (2001). This unidimensional scale contains 11 items ranging from 1 (*not so much*) to 5 (*very much*) (e.g., ‘I am needed by other people’; ‘Other people give me credit when I do well’). The scale has two versions for application: family and friends. For this study, we used only one version referring to close relationships to reduce the duration of the assessment. The scale showed adequate reliability (α = .90).

Sense of mattering: Adding value. The second dimension of sense of mattering was measured through the Social Generativity Scale (Morselli & Passini, 2015). Following the path drawn by Reece and colleagues (2021) we use social generativity as the action-oriented view of adding value, which refers to the intentional impact of one’s actions that provides benefit to the community. The Social Generativity Scale is a unidimensional scale composed of 6 response items with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale aims to assess concerns for future generations and the contribution of current actions to the future of the community (e.g., ‘I carry out activities in order to ensure a better world for future generations’; ‘I think that I am responsible for ensuring a state of wellbeing for future generations’). The reliability of the scale was appropriate in the study (α = .85).

Psychological Sense of Community. The Multidimensional Territorial Sense of Community Scale (MTSOCS; Prezza et al., 2009) was used. This scale is composed of 19 items with a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The scale has 5 first-order factors: membership (e.g., ‘I feel like I belong here.’), shared influence (e.g., ‘If there is a serious problem in this community, the people who live here can get it solved’), help in case of need (e.g., ‘Many people in this community are available to give help if somebody needs it.’), social climate (e.g., ‘I have good friends in this community.’) and bonds and needs fulfilment (e.g., ‘If I need help this community has many excellent services to meet my needs.’). The scale showed good internal consistency (α = .90).

Subjective Wellbeing. To measure subjective wellbeing, the Italian version of the ICOPPE scale (Di Martino et al., 2018) was used. The scale adapts the original 21 items of the ICOPPE (Prilleltensky et al., 2015) to assess overall wellbeing and wellbeing in six life domains (interpersonal, community, occupational, physical, psychological, and economic wellbeing). As example, the overall wellbeing was measured through the item: When it comes to the best possible life for you, on which number do you stand now? In the original version of ICOPPE each domain is measured with three items: present, past, and future. In this study, only items in the present were considered to optimize the duration of the assessment and reduce participant fatigue. For each item, respondents were required to rate themselves on a scale between 0 and 10. The overall reliability of the scale was adequate for the study ($\alpha = .85$).

4.5.3 Procedure and Data Analysis

The study was conducted in Northern Italy between February and June 2021. We contacted MCBOs that were based in the Milan Metropolitan area and had previously participated in the qualitative studies described in Chapter II and Chapter III. We asked for their support and, in the meantime, spent some time presenting the study to new non-profit organizations settled in Northern Italy to build trust and receive feedback from them. A total of 30 MCBOs and four Italian non-profit entities (that provide immigrants with assistance on work, health, legal documentation and language) collaborated in the study by presenting the research to their members, helping them complete the questionnaire or providing contacts of potential participants. We also used the snowball sampling as a complementary selection strategy, asking each participant to forward the questionnaire to a friend. The study was computer-based and used the Qualtrics surveys manager due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The questionnaires took 30 minutes approximately. First, participants were asked to sign the informed consent form. Next, they were asked to provide some sociodemographic data and characteristics of their community participation. Next, sense of mattering, psychological sense of community and subjective wellbeing measures were obtained. Multilingual versions were provided and the questionnaires were completed in Italian (67.9%), English (12.4%), Spanish (11%) and French (3.1%). Valid scales were searched in each language and a back translation was conducted with bilingual experts in cases where no adapted version was found. Following the recommendation by Maya-Jariego (2011) we paid attention to the conceptual, linguistic and scalar equivalence of the scales.

SPSS Statistics (version 26) and AMOS Graphics (version 25) were used for the analyses. Different chi-square tests were carried out to verify whether the groups were homogeneous with regard to sex, age, origin, educational background, legal status and time in the country. The results obtained by the chi-square tests showed that groups were homogeneous according to sex ($\chi2 = .16$, $p>.05$), educational background ($\chi2 = 9.78$, $p>.05$), time in the country ($\chi2 = 7.58$, $p>.05$) and legal status ($\chi2 = 5.61$, $p>.05$). However, homogeneity between age groups could not be assured as there were significant differences between the percentage of young adulthood who were members of an organization (11.5%) with regard to non-members (33.7%). Similarly, there was heterogeneity between groups of origin: significant differences were observed between in the percentage of Sub-Saharan participants who were members of a MCBO (34.5%) with respect to non-members (16.6%). Next, one-way ANOVA was tested using Snedecor's *F* statistic and Bonferroni's *post hoc* test to identify possible differences between sense of community, psychological sense of community and subjective wellbeing according to the MCBO membership and level of community participation. Secondly, bivariate correlations between sense of mattering (feeling valued and adding value), psychological sense of community, subjective wellbeing, and community participation scores were analyzed. Finally, a regression study of community participation on subjective wellbeing was carried out based on three theoretical models with the following mediators: (1) feeling valued, adding value and psychological sense of community; (2) feeling valued and psychological sense of community; (3) adding value and psychological sense of community. For this purpose, we performed a logistic regression path analysis using a modeling IT tool (PROCESS) and a maximum likelihood estimation procedure.

4.6 Results

4.6.1 Objective 1

Our first objective was to analyze the degree of sense of mattering, psychological sense of community, and subjective wellbeing showed by immigrants according to their membership to a MCBO and level of community participation. As shown in Table 6, one-way ANOVA tests confirmed that the means of the two dimensions of sense of mattering (feeling valued and adding value), psychological sense of community, and subjective wellbeing were significantly higher for members, at a 99% confidence level (p<.01). In other words, immigrants who belong to a MCBO showed higher levels of both indicators of sense of mattering, psychological sense of community and subjective wellbeing.

Table 6.

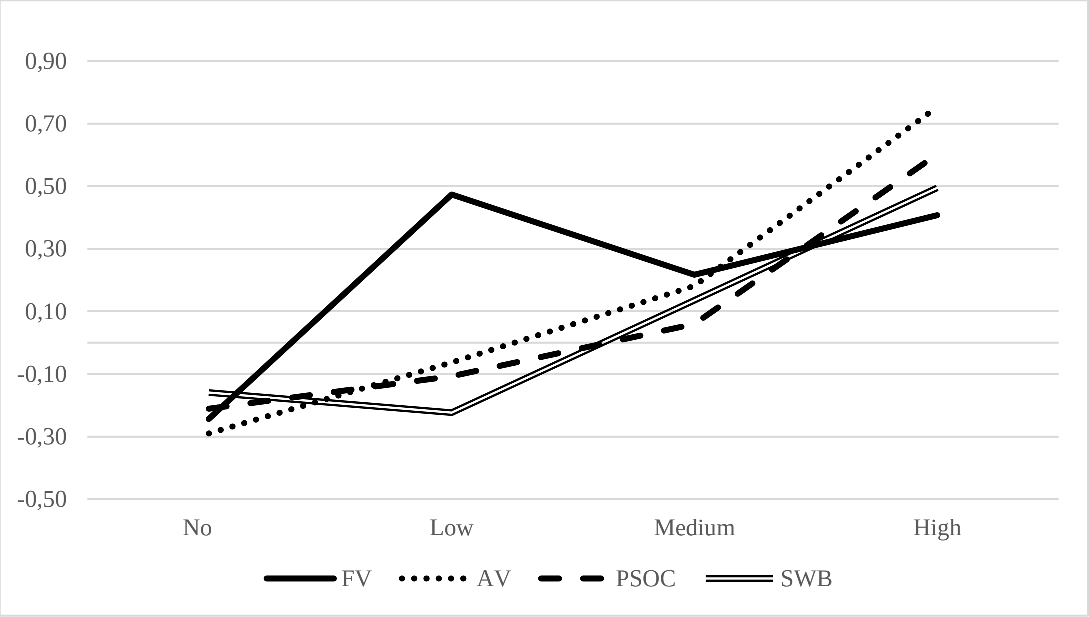
One-way ANOVA of Feeling Valued, Adding Value, Psychological Sense of Community, and Subjective Wellbeing according to MCBO Membership

	Non-Member			Member			
	n	*M*	*SD*	*n*	*M*	*SD*	Significance
FV	151	34.24	7.88	107	38.62	5.93	*F*= 23.54; *p*<.01
AV	145	22.41	5.10	109	25.73	3.97	*F*= 31.89; *p*<.01
PSOC	134	63.57	13.82	103	70.98	11.41	*F*= 14.53; *p*<.01
SWB	154	46.88	12.08	112	51.47	11.78	*F*= 9.56; *p*<.01

Note: AD: Adding Value; FV: Feeling Valued; PSOC: Psychological sense of community; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing.

We also analyzed the trends of sense of mattering (feeling valued and adding value), psychological sense of community and subjective wellbeing according to the level of community participation of participants (see Figure 2). The results show a moderately positive trend in three variables as the level of community participation increases. Specifically, no community participation showed the lowest scores of adding value, psychological sense of community and subjective wellbeing with mean scores of 22.73 (z= -.29), 64.26 (z= -.21), and 47.89 (z = -.16) respectively. On the other hand, immigrants with high participation showed the highest scores of adding value, psychological sense of community, and subjective wellbeing with means scores of 27.46 (z= .75), 75.37 (z = .60), and 55.07 (z= .49) respectively. However, a dissimilar pattern was found for the dimension of feeling valued. As it happened with the rest of the previous variables, the lowest value was recorded when immigrants did not carry out any community participation (34.24, *z*= -.24). However, in this case, the highest score was observed when immigrants had a low level of community participation (39.58, *z*=.47)—unlike the rest of the variables, where the highest scores were found when immigrants had a high level of community participation.

Figure 2. Trend graph of feeling valued (FV), adding value (AV), psychological sense of community (PSOC) and subjective wellbeing (SWB) with normalized scores by level of community participation



Complementarily, the scores on the four variables analyzed according to the level of community participation were compared in multiple post hoc analyses, as shown in Table 7. The results showed significant differences between different levels of community participation for all variables. Specifically, on feeling valued there were significant differences between *no-medium*, *no-high*, *low-high* and *medium-high* groups. On adding value there were significant differences when comparing the *no participation* group with the rest. For psychological sense of community, there were significant differences between the *no-high* and *low-high* groups. Finally, on subjective wellbeing there were significant differences between the *no-high* and *low-high* groups.

Table 7.

One-way ANOVA of Feeling Valued, Adding Value, Psychological Sense of Community, and Subjective Wellbeing according to Level of Community Participation

	Level of Community Participation				*ANOVA*
	No	Low	Medium	High	
	M (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	*M* (*SD*)	
FV	34.24 (7.88)	39.58 (6.91)	37.67 (6.19)	39.09 (5.24)	*F* (3,254) = 8.26; *p* = .000
AV	22.45 (5.07)	23.52 (4.77)	24.73 (3.94)	27.54 (2.71)	*F* (3,246) = 15.79; *p* = .000
PSOC	64.47 (13.90)	65.95 (12.03)	68.14 (9.55)	75.30 (11.10)	*F* (3,229) = 8.59; *p* = .000
SWB	47.03 (12.05)	46.10 (13.39)	50.46 (12.39)	54.76 (9.48)	*F* (3,256) = 5.56; *p* = .001

Note. AD: Adding Value; FV: Feeling Valued; PSOC: Psychological sense of community; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing.

4.6.2 Objective 2

Our second objective was to analyze the role played by sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as mediators of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing among the immigrant population. To that end, bivariate correlations of community participation, feeling valued, adding value, psychological sense of community, and subjective wellbeing were first analyzed in Table 8. The results were significant in three of the four the associations analyzed. As for subjective wellbeing, associations were moderate with adding value (.31, p<.01) and psychological sense of community (.46, p<.01), and weak with community participation (.24, p<.05). In addition, community participation had moderate associations with adding value (.40, p<.01) and psychological sense of community (.32, p<.01). Adding value and psychological sense of community were moderately associated (.25, p<.01). Feeling valued was the only variable that did not correlate with community participation (.05, p>.05). Nevertheless, feeling valued showed weak associations with psychological sense of community (.29, p<.05), and moderate associations with adding value (.32, p<.05) and subjective wellbeing (.39, p<.05).

Table 8.

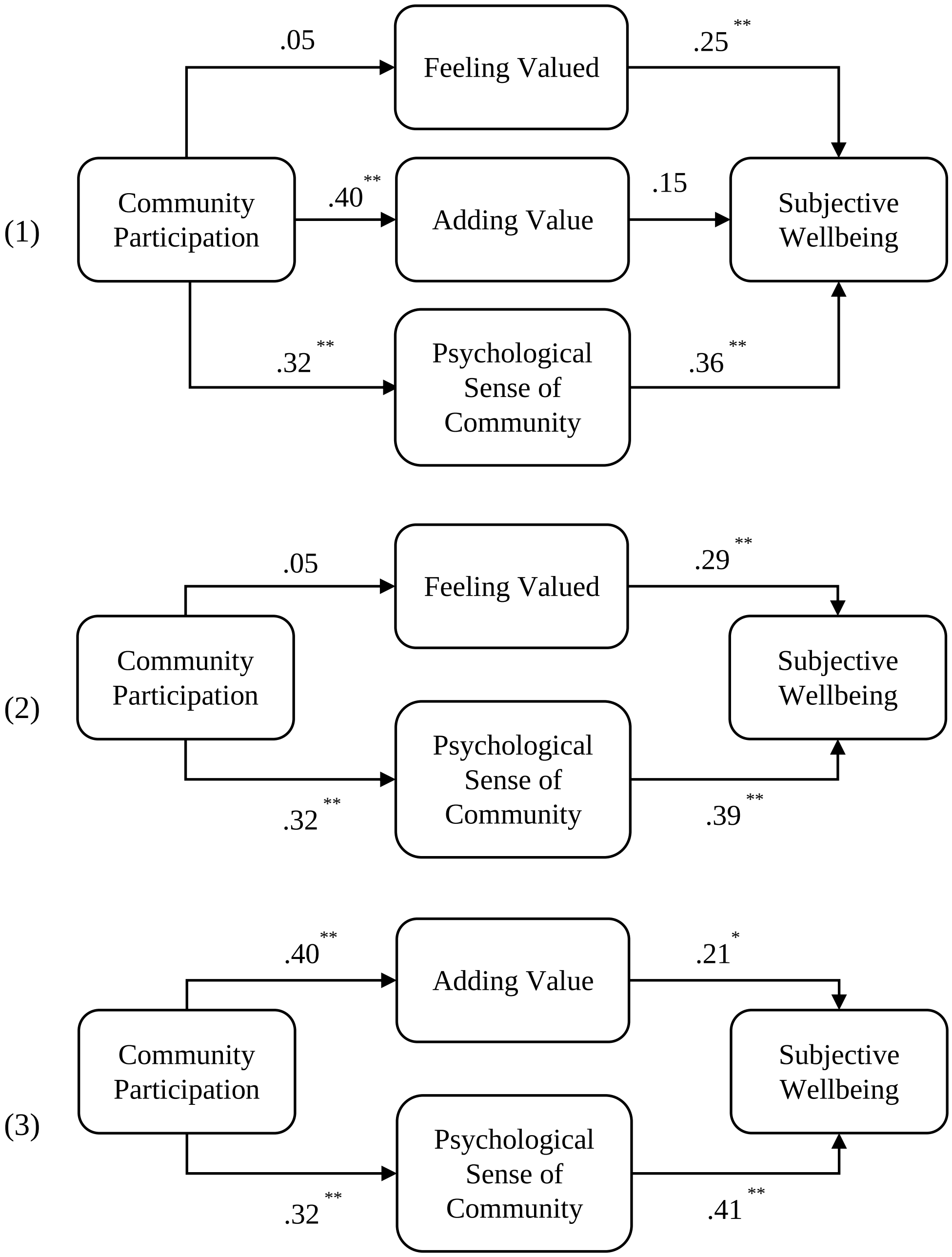
Correlation Matrix of Community Participation, Feeling Valued, Adding Value, Psychological Sense of Community, and Subjective Wellbeing among Participants who are members of MCBO

Variable	*n*	*M*	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5
1. CP	110	4.60	1.31	1	-	-	-	-
2. FV	110	38.60	6.38	.05	1	-	-	-
3. AV	110	25.76	3.97	.40**	.32**	1	-	-
4. PSOC	110	71.19	11.40	.32**	.29**	.25**	1	-
5. SWB	110	51.29	11.67	.24**	.39**	.31**	.46**	1

Note. AD: Adding value; CP: Community Participation; FV: Feeling valued; PSOC: Psychological Sense of Community; SWB: Subjective Wellbeing. *p<.05. **p<.01.

Three mediation models were then evaluated. The models are shown in Figure 3, together with their standardized regression coefficients. Model 1 and 2 failed to explain the relationships proposed but are showed anyways because we consider them relevant to refine our results conceptually. More specifically, Model 1, which considered three mediators (feeling valued, adding value and psychological sense of community) did not show significant coefficients in all cases. The relationship between community participation and feeling valued was not significant (.05, p>.05). Similarly, feeling valued was also not significantly related to subjective wellbeing (.15, p>.05). For its part, Model 2, which considered two mediators (feeling valued and psychological sense of community) showed once again that community participation was not associated with feeling valued (.15, p>.05). Finally, Model 3, which considered two mediators (adding value and psychological sense of community) was the only one where all coefficients were significant.

Figure 3. Standardized estimates for proposed regression mediation models.


(1)
Community Participation
.05
Feeling Valued
.25**
.40**
Adding Value
.15
Subjective Wellbeing
.32**
Psychological Sense of Community
.36**
(2)
Community Participation
.05
Feeling Valued
.29**
Subjective Wellbeing
Psychological Sense of Community
.32**
.39**
(3)
Community Participation
.40**
Adding Value
.21*
Subjective Wellbeing
Psychological Sense of Community
.32**
.41**

*: p<.05; **: p<.01

Model fit indexes are shown in Table 9. In this case too, Model 3 was the only good fit to the data. The chi-square coefficient was within the correct range, with a non-significant value between 2 and 3. ($\chi2$ = 2.42, p = .30). NFI (.96), TLI (.98) and CFI (.99) coefficients are close to 1. In addition, both RMSEA (.044) and SRMR (.048) have values below .05. This evidence indicates a model of optimal fit. The model explained 23.3% of the variance of subjective wellbeing. In this model, the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing is only indirectly established through two mediators that are adding value and psychological sense of community.

Table 9.

Fit Statistics for Proposed Regression Mediation Models

	Model fit indexes								
	df	*Chi-square*	Significance	NFI	TLI	CFI	SRMR	*RMSEA*	*R square*
Model 1: FV, AV and PSOC	4	22.5	.000	.76	.48	.78	.119	.21	.239
Model 2: FV and PSOC	2	11.33	.003	.81	.47	.82	.099	.21	.237
Model 3: AV and PSOC	2	2.42	.298	.96	.98	.99	.044	.04	.233

Note. AD: Adding Value; FV: Feeling Valued; PSOC: Psychological Sense of Community

4.7 Discussion

In this study we analyzed the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing, focusing on the sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as mediators. Our first objective was to compare immigrants who are members of a MCBO with those who are not across subjective wellbeing, sense of mattering and psychological sense of community. In this sense, our study found a higher level of subjective wellbeing among immigrants who are members of a MCBO compared to those who are not. This finding is in line with previous studies (Alfieri, Marzana & Cipresso, 2019) and highlights the potential role that MCBOs have in reducing the existing gap between immigrants' and locals' wellbeing. In particular, our results indicate that membership to a MCBO is linked to an improvement in all domains of subjective wellbeing in immigrants' lives (interpersonal, psychological, physical, communitarian, occupational and economical). Thus, we can argue that MCBOs work as multiservice spaces where immigrants can be welcomed as "whole" persons and where their different needs can be met. In addition, we found that a higher level of community participation leads to a higher level of subjective wellbeing. This is in line with previous research where active volunteering appears to have a more significant effect on wellbeing than inactive volunteering (Huang, 2019) and where a more continuous and frequent volunteering improves subjective wellbeing (Appau & Churchill, 2019; Morrow-Howell et al., 2009; Piliavin & Siegl, 2007).

We found that sense of mattering is higher for those who are member of a MCBO. Thus, we can argue that MCBOs are spaces where people can feel important and enact their social responsibility. Regarding feeling valued, becoming members of a MCBO seems to be the most important aspect for immigrants as in these spaces they can be appreciated and recognized. As for adding value, immigrants' community participation provides an opportunity for bringing a contribution to the world. Indeed, the more immigrants engage in their MCBO the more they perceive to have an impact. We can imagine that immigrants can play a positive role not only for other immigrants but also for the wider community in which they operate by increasing their level of community participation.

We also found that immigrants who belong to a MCBO show greater psychological sense of community compared to immigrants who are not members. This is in line with the contribution by Ding and colleagues (2015), who argued that social connectedness is an important aspect of community participation, and with previous literature on participation of immigrants (Alfieri, Marzana & Cipresso, 2015; Hombrados-Mendieta et al., 2013). MCBOs appear to facilitate the sense of belonging towards the local territory, supporting what has been previously suggested by other colleagues (Marzana, Alfieri, & Marta, 2019; Paloma et al., 2010; Sonn, 2002; Taurini et al., 2017). These results minimize the risk that this kind of community-based organizations might marginalize and create parallel societies (Esser, 1986; Papadopoulos et al., 2021) On the contrary, it is through culturally safe environments, such as MCBOs, that immigrants can gradually feel that they belong in the new society while maintaining and honoring their cultural heritage.

Our second objective was to analyze the role played by sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as mediators of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing. In this sense, we found that adding value and psychological sense of community serve as mediators of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing. This model indicates that active participation increases immigrants' adding value and psychological sense of community that, in turn, increase their subjective wellbeing. It is noteworthy that only adding value and not feeling valued mediate the relationship. This supports the idea that immigrants are more rewarded when they feel useful and have an impact in their new society, instead of being helped and receive a recognition. It suggests that we need to move towards innovative social practices and policies of giving (and not receiving), as discussed in Chapter V. This result can be discussed considering that immigrants in Italy are described by social media in a very negative way (We-Word, 2021). Participation would therefore provide immigrants with the opportunity for re-framing themselves as valuable social actors rather than vulnerable, passive and negative subjects. Results also explain how participation allows immigrants to develop a sense of belonging to the new society. In summary, MCBOs both provide immigrants with an “operative” way to contribute to the local community and help them feel like they are part of it. This enhances the subjective wellbeing of immigrants who actively participate in host societies.

This study is not without limitations. First, since we adopted a correlational design, causal inferences cannot be made. Therefore, it might be possible that community participation is also promoted by sense of mattering and psychological sense of community as others have found (Ramos et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the analysis performed in this study by Structural Equation Modeling is a suitable alternative for formulating causal hypotheses in the social sciences, where it is common to not meet laboratory experimental conditions (Medrano & Muñoz-Navarro, 2017). Second, the sample of the model was limited to Northern Italy and was not representative of the immigrant population. Maya-Jariego (2011) said that problems of representativeness with migrant sample largely derive from concentrating on subgroups of the population that are most accessible to researchers. He suggested building trust with communities before starting the sampling, using some community members to present the research, and to ensure the diversification of the sample to address the issue of representativeness. We followed his suggestions in order to overcome this challenge by building close collaborations with MCBOs and Italian non-profit entities that had access to different and diverse profiles of immigrants. Third, we lack data on the subjective wellbeing of Italians in order to really understand if immigrant participation reduces the gap in wellbeing between them and the Italian-born local population. Forth, we used two scales that come from different traditions in literature to measure the two dimensions of sense of mattering. Albeit the social generativity scale to measure adding value is the novelty aspect in this study, it would be interesting to use other measures in future research. For example, Scarpa and colleagues (2022) have recently published the validation of a Mattering Scale that measure feeling valued and adding value across different domains of life. It would be interesting to explore if the lack of significance of feeling valued as a mediator of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing is due to measurement issues. Finally, we tested only two possible mediators of the relationship between community participation and subjective wellbeing, while research on the general population also identified perceived control and optimism (Mellor et al., 2008), service self-efficacy and meaning in life (Fenn et al., 2021) as possible mediators.

Despite these limitations our research provides, for the first time, evidence that community participation enhances immigrant subjective wellbeing through sense of mattering and psychological sense of community. Practical implications of the results will be presented in Chapter V.

Chapter V

Conclusions

The goal of this last chapter is to describe my positionality during the research process and provide some integrative results of the three empirical studies of the RIBALTA project while also pointing out some critical points. Later, starting from the limitations of the present research, I outline how research on community participation of immigrants could develop in the future and what the practical implications of results are for practitioners who wish to support the work of MCBOs in the non-profit sector.

5.1 Reflexivity, Integrated Results and Critical Points

In the words of Miller (2004) “if we regard the data we collect as reflecting, at least to some extent, the unique features of the relational context in which our research is conducted, then it becomes apparent that a discussion of these issues is not merely desirable, but essential for any critical evaluation of our findings” (p. 226). Against this background, reflexivity is explaining the reasons for research and intervention positioning oneself as a person and as a researcher (Montero, 2004). As a consequence, I consider important to describe how my research journey intertwines with the research findings.

Through the study described in Chapter II I got in touch with MCBOs settled in Milan. When I started to know them and collect some data, I thought that I would find unanimous condemnation from MCBOs on the national and international hostile climate towards immigrants. I was very surprised to find different narratives. MCBOs are often perceived as a single entity instead of a group of individuals with different ideas, experiences and desires which combine within an organized context that is different from other organized contexts. By attending their events (when it was still possible), talking with leaders, peeking into their websites and studying their networks and the topics they worked on I realized that I also had mistakenly assumed MCBOs were homogenous and how many different challenges they were facing. Adele Clarke's SA (Clarke et al., 2018) was a helpful tool to avoid simplification and embrace complexity. SA was developed within the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1994; Charmaz, 2014) and built on the awareness that knowledge is socially and culturally produced. It was a strategy for not silencing divergent perspectives and maintaining a scientific yet partial approach (Martín-Baró, 1986). Following others (Evans et al., 2007; Paloma et al., 2010), I used different sources with the main purpose to tackle down the main challenges perceived by MCBOs. I uploaded transcripts, statues and fieldnotes of participant observations on Nvivo as part of the same data corpus. The coding procedures mainly rely on interviews. Statues were useful in order to understand the type of organizational structure as well collaborations the MCBOs were built on, while the fieldnotes were useful to mainly understand the challenges that MCBOs encounter within the community sphere, specifically the different socio-political narratives that they were engaging with. Using different data sources also made it possible to ensure what Prilleltensky (2008b) calls "epistemic psychopolitical validity", i.e., "accounting for power dynamics operating at psychological and political levels in efforts to understand phenomena of interest" (p. 199).

By recognizing the challenges that MCBOs face, I learned that the work that these organizations do (beyond the service they offer) is always aimed at improving the quality of life of immigrants, even though this does not directly involve a promotion of social justice, because of the hardship to be recognized as a civil society actor. Indeed, individuals, organizations, and contexts must move in synergy to achieve the common goal of an inclusive and fairer society (Prilleltensky, 2012). Community participation carried out in MCBOs can be an effective tool to counterbalance the disadvantaged conditions that immigrants usually face in new societies and to promote immigrant inclusion (Marzana, Martinez-Damia et al., 2020). Nevertheless, MCBOs will be successful in improving immigrants' living conditions only when the challenges that they currently face are recognized and overcome. When MCBOs are able to connect their struggles to bigger societal problems (such as distrust), they may push for social change. By doing so, they would act as a "school of democracy" (Dodge & Ospina, 2016) where members are transformed into active citizens who critically evaluate injustice and mobilize resources to radically change the existing socio-political landscape. Against the identified challenges, guidelines of actions that academics, policymakers, community stakeholders, and/or third sector professionals can implement to support MCBOs in their work to include immigrants in multicultural settings and improve the entire community were also outlined. Only by addressing the challenges that are experienced by MCBOs it will be possible to achieve what FRA (2017) is calling for, i.e., promoting the participation of MCBOs in designing and implementing of measures for the actual inclusion of immigrants in European countries. If this does not happen MCBOs may act as "places of evaporation of politics" (Hamidi, 2003) because the commitment of immigrant members does not involve changing the system where they live but it only involves surviving it.

After exploring the challenges of MCBOs within the Italian socio-political situation I focused my attention on the individual level, i.e., the community participation among immigrants. The study presented in Chapter III addressed community participation from a social generativity approach and had the merit of highlighting the generative potential of suffering for building personal growth. The findings showed that community participation within MCBOs allow immigrants to bring their own contribution, feel useful (sense of mattering) and build relationships of trust, belonging and support (psychological sense of community). While participating immigrants experience a process of self-care—based on positive emotions and empowerment—that leads them to personal growth. These results were decisive when planning the quantitative study described in Chapter IV and ensured that the constructs that I was investigating were relevant to immigrants, thus decreasing the measurement risks associated with doing quantitative research with this population (Maya-Jariego, 2011). Collecting quantitative data was very challenging both because of the instrument adopted and the pandemic. The questionnaire is indeed an unfamiliar tool to most immigrants and, although it was made available in several languages, this unfamiliarity did not change. The pandemic exacerbated the situation by obliging us to collect data almost exclusively online. I closed data collection after five months of phone calls with organization leaders, zoom meetings and sleepless nights for fear of not reaching the target number of participants indicated by the G power software as necessary for the analysis. I went to Seville with a sense of relief but also with great doubts on the usefulness of the study. The results outlined in Chapter IV made me changed my mind as they allowed for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which community participation affects subjective wellbeing. The study provides, for the first time, evidence that community participation enhances immigrant subjective wellbeing through two paths: adding value—a dimension of sense of mattering—and psychological sense of community. Recent contributions pointed out the importance of the societal and communitarian aspects of sense of mattering (Scarpa et al., 2022; Schimidt et al., 2020). Scarpa et al. (2021) recently found that sense of mattering mediates the relationship between fairness and wellbeing and argued that "practitioners should also keep in mind that it is not enough to make people feel valued. They also need to create opportunities for citizens to add value through work, study, or volunteer opportunities" (p. 11).

A critical interpretation of all the findings (Kegan et al., 2011) would have been impossible without two key factors. One was the trust-building promoted by the research team. At the beginning I was met with resistance and was rejected by many MCBOs that were exhausted to be used by researches without receiving any benefits from their participation. Closeness is not atypical in research with immigrant population (Maya-Jariego, 2011) that may develop "a self-protective insularity" in response to their experiences of marginalization and oppression (Miller, 2004). Time allowed leaders and members of MCBOs to open up to us, albeit for different reasons. Some reasons were instrumental as we, by representing the university, also represented the opportunity for smaller organizations to acquire visibility or demand the expertise they needed. Other reasons, however, were more personal and included the desire to tell personal stories and show the meaning behind their social commitment, along with the pleasure of being interesting for others. In many cases my cultural origins were great facilitators in the relationship with participants, who opened up very quickly for the simple reason that they felt that, somehow, we had similar references. These processes ensured a "relational validity" (Marta, 2009; Miller, 2004) which concerns precisely the quality of the relationships established with research participants.

Another key factor for interpreting results was the research group I could count on. Working as a team, with very different thoughts, positions and experiences, allowed me to manage the complexity of the research. The regular dialogue with my directors as well as with participants is what guided the theoretical and methodological choices.

Richness of data came with major challenges, the first being combining theory, practice, and ethics. Martín-Baró (1986) argued that the task of research is not theoretical but practical as it should aim at producing useful knowledge to change the conditions of social injustice of some unprivileged and excluded groups. Montero (2006) summarizes it as "*Hacer para transformar*". More recently, Prilleltensky (2012) spoke of "transformative psychopolitical validity" referring to the changes that investigations and interventions promote "toward liberation at personal, interpersonal, and structural domains" (p. 200). As a researcher, I tried to do so by adopting a critical approach to the analysis and thinking what I could do, from my position, for the MCBOs that I involved. When sharing the results with the presidents and chairpersons of MCBOs I tried, for example, to promote dialogue and creation of alliances on specific issues among the MCBOs, supporting "forms of reconciliation and negotiation between the different constructions of reality by the various social actors" (Arcidiacono, 2009, p. 118). Then, in response to some participants' request, the website of the RIBALTA project was created to acknowledge their commitment and positive contribution to the Italian society and their collaboration with the university. Finally, I tried to overcome the identified challenges by providing guidelines that supported the work of MCBOs and the mental health of immigrants.

5.2 Limitations and Future research

The first general limitation of the research is that it was carried out only in Northern Italy, mainly in Milan, which can be considered as a more “welcoming” geographical area—albeit not in all regions and cities—compared to other territories. This is why a future line of research could be to study MCBOs and immigrant community participation in other Italian cities. It is crucial to consider the local dimension where MCBOs operate as this has an impact on their dynamics and objectives. We know there are great territorial differences in Italy. While Milan can be considered the hub of MCBOs—it hosts 59.9% of MCBOs from the whole region of Lombardy—the Southern and the Islands areas do not seem to offer a space where immigrants can speak and act—only 10% of all MCBOs are registered in this area, which includes nine regions (Centro Studi e Ricerche IDIOS, 2021). Based on these details alone it is possible to predict that the social reality where MCBOs operate is very different and it would be interesting to see which challenges change and which do not. Likewise, it would be interesting to understand if in Southern Italy—an area where interpersonal relations are usually more collective—the suffering of immigrants takes different forms and generates different paths due to a lower possibility to participate within MCBOs.

The second general limitation relates to the non-homogeneity of data that I was able to acquire regarding the MCBOs that were involved in the research. Indeed, for some MCBOs I could rely on more than one interview, on the statue and even on a participant observation while for other MCBOs information was much more narrowed. Albeit, I try to give space to all the perspectives, even when minor, this imbalance of data could have caused that some MCBO had a stronger impact in the interpretation of data we do have.

The third general limitation refers to the specific focus that I assumed choosing to study community participation within MCBOs. Immigrants also participate to a wide range of national organizations. This type of participation should be compared with the one within MCBOs. How do the experiences lived by immigrants differ? Are there same similarities? A study we run some years ago (Marzana et al., 2019) highlighted that when immigrants participated in an organization that was built by locals, they experienced different changes at the individual level in comparison to immigrants who participated in organizations run by other immigrants. More studies are needed to understand how contextual and structural characteristics of MCBOs can impact the experience of immigrants, in terms of psychological processes and outcomes. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore whether mediation mechanisms between community participation and subjective wellbeing also characterize informal self-help groups of immigrants as opposed to formal organizations. Contrasting results were found on organized vs. informal participation among the general population. Some studies demonstrated that organized participation leads to higher levels of wellbeing (measured as self-reported health and happiness) compared to informal helping and other forms of altruistic behaviors (Borgonovi, 2008). Other studies found that formal organizations may induce feelings of psychological distance compared to informal volunteering, thus reducing the impact of community participation on subjective wellbeing (Appau & Churchill, 2019). Today there are many new forms of community participation based on online tools. WhatsApp, Facebook and Telegram are all new instruments that immigrants use to organize themselves and respond to their needs (Mansouri & Kirpitchenko, 2016). Future studies should focus on the psychological processes of this type of community participation among immigrants and on the outcomes for immigrant members who join these settings.

Another general limitation is the higher variability of activities carried out by MCBOs. Research on the general population showed that activities related to social awareness (e.g., human rights, environmental and animal conservation) have a negative impact on happiness, that religion-based activities improve life satisfaction (Gil-Lacruz et al., 2019), that activities related to culture, sports, or leisure foster psychological and social but not emotional wellbeing (Chan & Mak, 2020), and that advocacy and political activities predicts lower levels of mental health (Ding et al., 2015). Chapter I highlighted that the literature tends to distinguish between participation in religious and secular organizations and this is why we did not include MCBOs with faith-based activities. However, some of our qualitative results on community participation seem to blur this formal difference, highlighting how the dimension of spirituality is also present in secular organizations and can therefore be partially shared by religious ones. Some efforts were made to distinguish the effects of type of activities on the immigrant population (Alfieri et al., 2021; Marzana, Alfieri, Marta & Paloma, 2020) but more comparative research is needed.

Finally, the research was impacted by the outbreak of the pandemic that, however, has only tangentially informed the present research. Nevertheless, the pandemic had a great impact on the subjective wellbeing of immigrants (Garrido et al., 2022) and also impacted their community participation. Indeed, a general regularization of irregular immigrants was announced after qualitative data collection leading to protests as well as to the formation of committees (e.g., *Non possiamo più aspettare*) and networks of legal centers managed both by Italian organizations and MCBOs. Organizations working on immigration have joined forces to support immigrant citizens in their regularization. These movements have partly disrupted the previous dynamics highlighting the positions of organizations and setting up actual collaborations. A future interesting line of research should identify the problems that national organizations face when collaborating with MCBOs. In Chapter II I outlined the importance to build collaborative capacity. This refers to create conditions needed to work together toward shared goals not only among MCBOs but also with national organizations. Indeed, as suggested by Paloma and Manzano-Arrondo (2011) "the need for social transformation requires the involvement of both immigrant and local populations" (p. 314). Therefore, more studies that identify how generative relationships can be created and supported are needed.

To conclude, I feel it is important to reflect on the sense of mattering and how we conceptualize and measure it. The choice was to link it to social generativity due to the affinity found with the dimension of "impact/adding value" (Prilleltensky, 2014, 2020). I believe that mattering is a concept that lends itself well to the study of immigrant participation not only because the voluntary actions of MCBOs members increase their feeling of contributing to others but also due to the political and media narrative around immigrants in Italy. Indeed, I believe that immigrants are negatively visible rather than invisible, which is a key factor to understand why generative concerns channeled by participation have an impact on immigrant subjective wellbeing. A recent piece of research highlighted the importance of the construct of societal mattering, defined as perceiving that we are important to society and that we play a significant role in shaping the world where we live (Schimidt et al., 2020). For this reason, a promising new line of research in the field of today's migration could focus on exploring how immigrants feel valued at societal level—and not only the interpersonal level that we explored—and namely how this can be high and yet negative.

5.3 Practical Implications

Because there is the risk that MCBOs end up maintaining a status quo (Paloma & Manzano-Arrondo, 2011) characterized by suboptimal conditions of justice and vulnerable conditions of injustice (Prilleltensky, 2012), more efforts should be made to support their potential to be empowering community settings that promote both social change and wellbeing for immigrants (Maton, 2008; Paloma et al., 2010). MCBOs provide immigrants the opportunity to handle their suffering, build personal growth and enhance their subjective wellbeing by bringing their contribution to the host society and connecting with others within the local territory. Based on the results of the three empirical studies, there are many applications at community/local, organizational and policy levels.

Based on the results of the first study, more intercultural competence and equity should be promoted at community and local level. Indeed, because MCBOs reported to often feel unrecognized as civil society actors, training about respect, diversity and cultural humility among national organizations is crucial. It is also important to develop MCBOs' critical awareness on the socio-political climate they face in the host country. Indeed, some MCBOs may have a poor critical thinking that can work to support the status quo undermining their promotion of social change. It is equally important to amplify the voice of MCBOs and create opportunities where they can be actors with real power. This is why enhancing their prestige through collaboration with universities and research centers is important. Moreover, a website can help MCBOs to be more visible and “have a voice”. Nevertheless, among MCBOs that participated in the research only one out of three had a clear website that described their aims and activities. This is an obstacle that should be addressed as power also depends on whether people recognize what organizations do. Another way for immigrants to be “heard” is through political participation. Community psychologists should pay greater attention not only to new immigrants but also to the old ones, i.e., those who have lived in the country for a long time but are still denied certain rights. The right to vote in local elections is one of the most salient ones, as it is enshrined in the Strasbourg Convention (February,1992), in the 2003 Resolution approved by the European Parliament on (January, 2003, Chapter V, p. 136) as well as in the Charter of Human Rights in the Cities (May, 2000), and is recognized in many other EU Member states. However, this right is still denied in Italy despite several local initiatives. Community psychologists can highlight the effects that lack of access to this right can have and advocate for its full enjoyment. Having the right to vote is another way for immigrants to be recognized as legitimated social actors.

At the organizational level, we suggested that another possible action to be implemented to support MCBOs could be building common resources, a sense of collective identity and efficacy. As Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000) said “participation is a process that depends upon, and in turn, helps to construct identities. Participating is an action organically linked to the awareness a social group possesses of who it is, what it wants and how it projects itself in a future time horizon in which its identity can be perpetuated, renegotiated and, if desired, changed” (p. 265).

Community psychologists can help build empowered collective identities among MCBOs that have different positions while strengthening a sense of “shared reality” and, therefore, collaborations on common goals. Moreover, assisting and supervising coalitions between MCBOs and national organizations helping to manage asymmetrical power dynamics should be part of community psychologists’ agenda.

Based on the results on the second study, we know more about the suffering of immigrants in host societies. Participants described how community participation was a mean for them to turn this potential risk factor into a generative action based on their feeling of responsibility towards others. MCBOs are spaces of “self-care” as they provide the opportunity for immigrants to feel useful and part of a group. This way they foster personal growth among immigrants. Community psychologists should support early recruitment of immigrants to prevent distress and a worsening of mental health conditions. Moreover, they can stress the importance to maintain and organize—specifically after the pandemic—community moments such as celebrations, fixed appointments and rituals which are important to promote the psychological sense of community within MCBOs. Indeed, these moments allow members to share joys and problems, plan new activities and feel part of something thus fueling their subjective wellbeing (as found in the third study). In this perspective, it is essential to provide physical spaces for MCBOs. This can help MCBOs build a psychological sense of community between members and local people who live in the same area. Campbell and Jovchelovitch (2000) highlighted that “it is not sufficient to say that grassroots participation is central to the construction of communities and improved health outcomes. It is necessary to ask questions about the conditions under which participation is enacted. These questions point to the power differentials between different social actors and to how they may have unequal access to the material and symbolic resources most likely to equip them in forcefully negotiating projects and worldviews in the public sphere" (p. 266). Even though calls for proposals promoted by public authorities and private actors are open to all organizations, it should be acknowledged that those formed by immigrants have more barriers when accessing them, including greater hardships with bureaucracy and planning. This creates a condition of procedural injustice (Prilleltensky, 2012) which needs to be reduced, for instance by providing tailor-made actions to build resources for MCBOs.

Finally, results of the third study also highlighted that people who actively participate show greater subjective wellbeing than people who just belong without being active. It is therefore important to involve people who turn to MCBOs for services by inviting them to learn more on the organizations' activities and showing them how they can provide their own contribution, whatever that might be. Internal communications can be of great help–newsletters and instant messaging (WhatsApp, Telegram) are channels that could be used to encourage members to bring their ideas. Invitations should also be extended to people outside the organizations, for instance through social media or a clear message on the website. This way MCBOs will allow immigrants to increase their wellbeing by adding value to the host society. It is also important for MCBOs to create specific campaigns that involve immigrants to make them an active part of the organization. When looking at the media channels and website of MCBOs, only three organizations explicitly called upon immigrants and Italians to get involved. This is an obstacle in promoting the active participation of immigrants who may not know that they can actually provide their contribution.

Based on the aforementioned results, we suggest that social policies promote the community participation of immigrants as a way of supporting their positive mental health, thus bridging the gap between immigrants and locals in terms of subjective wellbeing. In particular, there is the need for a new approach that counters the traditional and dominant view where immigrants are seen as passive actors whose needs should be covered and where dependent relationships are established with the community actors of host societies. Schimidt and colleagues (2020) argued that when people "are treated as autonomous individuals and are involved in decision-making processes and civic activities in their community, they are more likely to believe that their thoughts and actions are important to society and that they have an impact on society" (p. 15). Social policies should then move beyond the welfarist perspective, where immigrants only "receive", to embrace also an active perspective where immigrants are allowed to "give". Our findings suggest the need to shift towards social policies and interventions of "giving" that allow immigrants to add value, feel useful and active and ultimately see themselves as part of the new society. This would nurture a "politics of generativity" (Peterson, 2004) where leaders and professionals believe in humans and have faith in people's potential to thrive, removing all type of barriers to participation.

This thesis has tried to provide reliable evidence to guide decision-making in migrant mental health, which was one of the major challenges identified in the Migration Health Report (IOM, 2021). Results suggest that MCBOs have a positive impact for immigrants, developing a feeling of personal growth and wellbeing but they also show that MCBOs face many challenges which should be addressed in order to support a "We Culture" (Prilleltensky, 2020), i.e., a culture that seek a balance among personal wellbeing (liberty), relational wellbeing (fraternity) and communal wellbeing (equality).

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