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# Dimensions of Well-Being: A Cross-Cultural Study in European Neighborhoods

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People build their sense of well-being by responding to their objectively defined environment. The community environment and more specifically the neighborhood affects the subjective and psychological well being of the individuals. Neighboring refers to the residents' social interaction and mutual material and non material support. This chapter attempts to examine how the social, political, and economic aspect of community life is related to community well-being focusing on community satisfaction, informal social interaction, feeling safe, the residents' involvement in the community decision making process, the economic life, and the job opportunities and training of 705 participants in six European cultural settings: Dingle Partnership Area (DPA), Liverpool, *United Kingdom*; Bournazi, Athens, *Greece*; Westside, Galway, *Ireland*; Plateia Eleftherias, Patras, *Greece*; Knocknaheeny, Cork, *Ireland*; and Kontopefko, Athens, *Greece*. The overall picture as emerged by one-way analyses of variance and a posteriori *Scheffé* comparisons employed is defined by the clear statistical differences regarding the informal social interaction, community services satisfaction and income sufficiency and the more homogeneous conditions regarding the residents' feeling of safety, their involvement in the community decision making process and their job/training opportunities in the community. The neighborhood contextual effects on individuals' behavior and affect are complicated and ask for an integrated approach, as population stability and coherence as well as opportunities for interaction need to be addressed too.

The social change as related to social policy making has drawn gradually higher levels of attention over the past few decades. Researchers have found that social change and the individuals' quality of life are closely related (Land, 1975). Specifically, what they have come down to is that people do not build their sense of quality of life by responding to their objectively defined environment (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). They interpret the material and non material environment they live in. Based on these cognitions and premises they build their own world and obtain their sense of well-being which is a major parameter for people's quality of life (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976).

Well-being comprises subjective well-being and psychological well-being. Subjective well-being is defined by one's assessment of his/her quality of life, life satisfaction, and by one's positive and negative affect of his/her experience (Diener, 1984). Psychological well-being refers to one's sense of fulfillment in facing life challenges (Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002). Apart from heredity and personality, two more indicators of subjective well-being that have shown are mutable living conditions (Veenhoven, 1991) and currently accessible information (Schwarz & Strack, 1999). The Social Production Function theory (Ormel Lindenberg, Steverink, & Verbrugge, 1999) describes how environmental and personality factors affect well-being. It is apparent that the environment of the community that people live in is embedded in the factors affecting subjective well-being.

Community is defined as the geographical area, locality or neighborhood that includes a network of social interaction and support (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Community is not only a physical setting but also a social, economic, political, psychological and a cultural one (Prohansky, 1978). Community well-being refers to the satisfaction that the inhabitants draw

from their neighborhood, their perceived quality of life in it, the sense of community they maintain and the sense of effectiveness they perform in it (Farrel, Aubry, & Coulombe 2004). Sense of community and neighboring serve as mediators between neighborhood characteristics and the residents' well-being. Glynn (1986) states that "Neighborhood remains a significant contributor to the development and maintenance of sense of community" (p. 350). Sense of community is a psychological variable referring to beliefs and attitudes about neighbors and neighborhood. On the other hand, "neighboring" is a behavioral variable involving social interaction and the exchange of support between neighbors (Farrell et al., 2004). The need for a comprehensive profile of community well-being arises from the multiple nature of the problems themselves that many urban neighborhoods face. It has been shown that many factors can directly or indirectly affect community well-being and equally one aspect of community well-being can impact on another (Christakopoulou, Dawson & Gari, 2001).

Different aspects of community well-being serve as specific life domains offering satisfaction to the individuals (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999) in defining their subjective well-being in view of the bottom-up theories which assume that satisfaction in specific life domains constructs the overall subjective well-being (Schimmack, Diener, & Oishi, 2002). Human needs that fall in the field of social well-being and that demand satisfaction are the needs for safety/security, for material resources, for social integration, for social support, for affection, for belongingness (Ormel et al., 1999). The social integration into the local area is closely associated with the notion of the community attachment which is conceptualized through various dimensions of individuals' emotional ties and "community satisfaction" (Hummon, 1992).

These needs are met through the degree to which residents work together on common public problems and their participation in the political process (Cantillon, Davidson, & Schweitzer, 2003). Residents' involvement in the social life of the community is significant not only for their well-being but also for the quality of life and the preservation of the community itself (Ahlbrandt & Cunnigham cf. in Christakopoulou, Dawson, & Gari, 2001). Informal and formal social networks within local areas provide access to resources, to social and emotional support and to practical help for coping with personal, economic and social problems (Warren cf. in Christakopoulou, Dawson, & Gari, 2001). The research of Martinez, Black & Starr (2002) has also found significant negative associations between perceived crime and sense of community & between perceived crime and satisfaction with neighborhood. Taylor (1995) states that actual perceived measures of crime do not necessarily reduce social involvement in the neighborhood and in some cases may actually drive some residents to invest more in their neighborhood organizations. Woldoff (2002) stresses that informal social interactions may be independent of participation in neighborhood organizations. In other words, problem-solving may occur informally as when residents help each other or work together to deal with absentee landlords or vandalism. Alternatively, problem-solving may occur through a formal organization, as when residents attend block watch meetings. Participation in a variety of community organizations has also been shown to be related to sense of community (Farrell et al., 2004). The degree of residents' involvement in the decision making process ranges from receiving information about future developments in the area through being consulted on proposed changes to participating in decision making throughout the entire development process. Residents' involvement in planning and decision making is more likely to ensure project quality and sustainability and enhance the local quality of life (Helgeson, 2003; Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000).

This chapter focuses mainly on the social, political, and economic aspect of community life, in an effort to explore how community well-being is differentiated as related with: (1) community satisfaction in the six cultural settings; (2) informal social interaction in the six cultural settings (3) feeling safe in each cultural setting; (4) the residents' involvement in the community decision making process in each cultural setting; (5) the economic life in the six cultural settings; (6) job opportunities and training in each cultural setting; thus, an overall

profile of the six cultural communities regarding the *social aspect* –community satisfaction, safety and informal social interaction, and the *economic aspect* –decision making participation, income sufficiency and job opportunities, in association with the *emotional aspect* –attachment, was drawn.

## Method

### *Instrumentation*

The instrument used for this study was a questionnaire on community well-being (Christakopoulou, Dawson & Gari, 2001). Specifically, this questionnaire examines the local community as a “place to live”, as a “social community”, as an “economic community”, as a “political community”, as a “personal space” and as a “part of its city”. In particular, this chapter is based on the analysis of the data concerning the “social”, the “political-economic” aspect of the community. The social aspect explores the extent to which the residents (a) interact informally within the community, (b) are satisfied with the community services, and (c) feel safe within the community. The political-economic aspect explores the residents’ (a) views about the decision making that affects their area, (b) sense of income sufficiency, and (c) sense of job and job training opportunities availability. Test-retest correlations were high for all the scales and internal reliability was greater than .70 for each neighborhood separately regarding almost all the scales we employed except for the feeling of safety scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .68$ ). (Christakopoulou, Dawson & Gari, 2001).

In particular, the informal social interaction scale comprised four items and examined the frequency of residents’ talking outdoors, going out together socially, speaking on the phone, and visiting each other’s homes. The item responses were: 1 = never, 2 = once or twice a year, 3 = once a month, 4 = every 15 days, 5 = once or twice a week, 6 = 3-4 times a week and 7 = every day. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficients for all cultural settings ranged from .74 to .85.

The residents’ satisfaction with the quality of services and local facilities, was assessed with a scale (from 1 = “very dissatisfied” to 7 = “very satisfied”) of satisfaction with the public transportation of the area, the access to cultural facilities, the access to sports and leisure facilities, the access to shopping areas, the quality of schools, the quality of shopping, the places of worship, the child care facilities and the services for the elderly. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficients for all cultural settings ranged from .75 to .90.

The residents’ feeling of safety was assessed with a scale of which the item responses ranged from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”, with “don’t know” as an additional option which was not selected according to the collected data. The items of the scale included were: walk alone in the street at night, walk alone in the street at daytime, be home alone at night, be home alone at daytime, leave the car in the street at night. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficients for all cultural settings ranged from .81 to .88.

The political aspect was represented by the decision making process scale which comprised four items. It assessed the respondents’ perceptions about the process of the decision making in their neighborhood: council takes notice of residents’ requests, local council informs residents, residents are able to be involved in decisions and residents can affect decisions. The item responses ranged from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”, with “don’t know” as an additional option. This “additional option” was regarded as missing value in the data analysis. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficients for all cultural settings ranged from .81 to .84.

Income sufficiency scale comprised three items which were: household income is enough to cover household expenses, it is difficult with household income to afford unexpectedly large bills, household income is enough for the lifestyle one enjoys. The item responses ranged from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 7 = “strongly agree”. Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  coefficients ranged from .80 to .82. Regarding job opportunities and job training availability the item responses were 1 = “very poor” to 5 = “very good”.

Finally, the residents' subjective feelings about their locality and also the personal and symbolic meaning that it has for them were measured by the attachment scale. Specifically, the incorporated place attachment scale comprised five items that assessed respondents' feelings about the area and specifically their emotional attachment, pride, sense of belonging, pleasure to be back in the area and desire to continue living there. The item responses ranged from 1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree". Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficients for all cultural settings ranged from .80 to .96.

### Sample

The questionnaire was administered in six cultural settings covering a range of environmental and socio-economic characteristics in terms of housing type & tenure, appearance of the area, availability of different services & facilities, household composition, employment status & average income in Greece, Ireland and the UK: (1) Bournazi, Athens, *Greece*, (2) Kontopefko, Athens, *Greece*, (3) Plateia Eleftherias, Patras, *Greece*, (4) Westside, Galway, *Ireland*, (5) Knocknaheeny, Cork, *Ireland* and (6) Dingle Partnership Area (DPA), Liverpool, *United Kingdom*.

The original English version of the questionnaire resulted through back translation procedures for the Greek version, which was administered in the neighborhoods in Greece. Trained interviewers collected the data by face to face interviews in the respondents' homes with the available adult of the household at the time of call (as many as four calls sometimes), preceded by a letter describing the purpose of the survey.

Overall, 705 interviews were conducted. 160 interviews were completed in Dingle Partnership Area (DPA), 133 in Westside, 109 in Knocknaheeny, 102 in Plateia Eleftherias, 115 in Bournazi and 86 in Kontopefko. The sample consisted of 39% men and 61% women. Their age ranged from 18 to 80 years (*Mean age*=43 years). 17% of the respondents were aged between 18 and 29 years old, 42% were aged between 30 and 44 years old, 26% were aged between 45 and 59 years old and 15% were 60 years old or more.

### Results

In order to identify the exact differences of informal social interaction among the different cultural settings an one-way analysis of variance design was employed. For this analysis,  $F_{5, 698}=26.52$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.16$ . Most of the 16% of the variance explained is mainly due to the Plateia Eleftherias statistically significant differences with approximately all other neighborhoods (Figure 1). A posteriori *Scheffé* multiple comparisons between neighborhood pairs showed that Plateia Eleftherias had the lowest score ( $Mn=2.56$ ) in comparison with DPA ( $Mn=4.52$ ) at the statistical level of 5%.

Another one-way analysis of variance design was employed to explore for differences in services satisfaction for the six different neighborhoods. For this analysis,  $F_{5, 699}=37.62$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.21$ . Most of the 21% of the variance explained was mainly due to the Bournazi ( $Mn=4.05$   $p<.05$ ) and Kontopefko ( $Mn=4.02$ ,  $p<.05$ ) area differences (lower means) with all other neighborhoods ranging from  $Mn=4.77$  ( $p<.05$ ) to  $Mn=5.34$  ( $p<.05$ ), that express satisfaction at quite high levels (in a scale from 1 to 7).

For the exploration of possible differences of feeling safe in the six different cultural settings we employed the same ANOVA design. For this analysis,  $F_{5, 698}=4.28$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.03$ , explaining only 3% of the variance and mainly due to the statistical difference between Plateia Eleftherias ( $Mn=4.91$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and Westside ( $Mn=4.35$ ,  $p<.05$ ) which represented the two ends of the means range of the six cultural settings, showing that the residents of almost all the six neighborhoods feel safe without significant differences among them (Figure 1). In order to identify the exact differences of the decision making process among the different cultural settings an one-way analysis of variance design was employed. For this analysis,  $F_{5, 657}=3.90$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $\eta^2=.029$ , explaining only 3% of the variance with no major differences between the six neighborhoods. A posteriori *Scheffé* comparisons showed no statistical differences with

neighborhoods means ranging from  $Mn=3.28$  for Bournazi and  $Mn=3.87$  for Knocknaheeny indicating medium level of agreement as for the residents' participation in the decision making process at their local community (Figure 2).

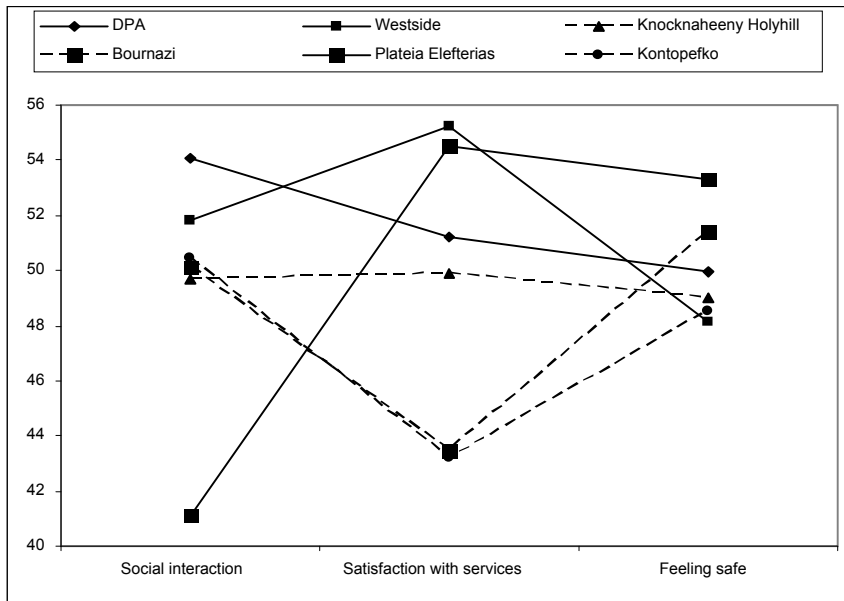


Figure 1. Mean T-scores for “social interaction”, “community services satisfaction” and “feeling of safety” by neighborhood.

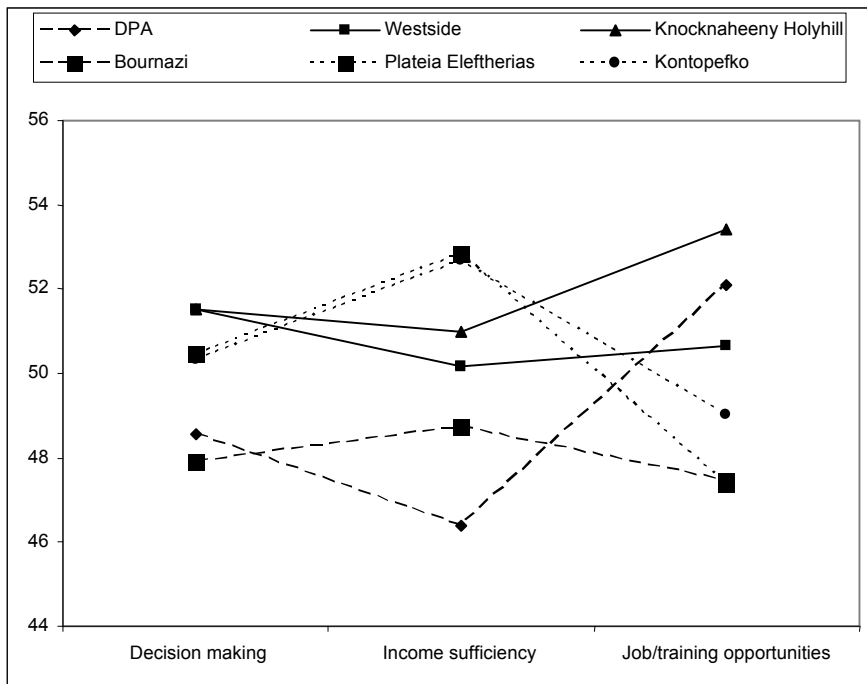
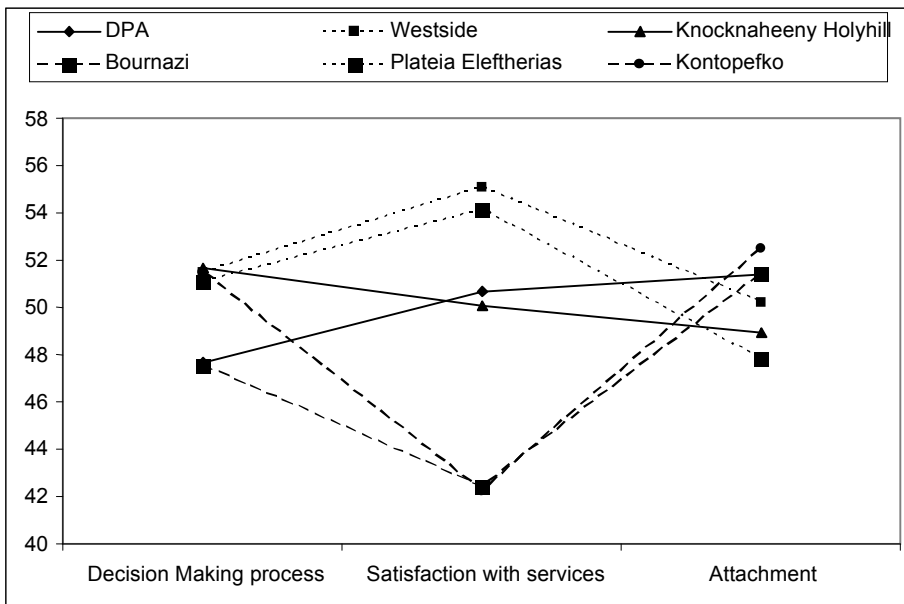


Figure 2. Mean T-scores for “decision making”, “income sufficiency” and “job/training opportunities” by neighborhood.

For the exploration of how the income sufficiency covering the residents' financial needs was differentiated across the six areas, a one-way analysis of variance design was once again employed:  $F_{5, 694}=11.24$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.08$ . Most of the variance explained was due to the differences between DPA ( $Mn=2.68$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and Bournazi ( $Mn=3.12$ ,  $p<.05$ ) on the one hand, and Plateia Eleftherias ( $Mn=3.83$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and Kontopefko ( $Mn=3.89$ ,  $p<.05$ ) on the other as shown by the a posteriori *Scheffé* comparisons employed with the former feeling that their income sufficiency is rather not adequate for their needs whereas the latter feel that their income sufficiency is rather adequate for their needs (Figure 2).

The mean differences of job opportunities and training in the six different cultural settings were compared through the same analysis of variance design:  $F_{5, 650}= 6.18$ ,  $p<.001$ ,  $\eta^2=.045$ . Most of the variance explained was due to the differences between Knocknaheeny ( $Mn=2.64$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and the Greek neighborhoods (of which the means ranged from 2.09 to 2.21,  $p<.05$ ) with no major differences between the six neighborhoods (Figure 2) as shown by the a posteriori *Scheffé* comparisons.

Having already mentioned the results of the one-way ANOVAs regarding decision making and services satisfaction, another one-way analysis of variance design was employed in order to identify any differences of attachment among the six cultural settings. For this analysis,  $F_{5, 693}=4.41$ ,  $p<.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .031$ , explaining only 3% of the variance with no major differences between the six neighborhoods (Figure 3). A posteriori *Scheffé* comparisons employed shown that the greatest difference was identified between Plateia Eleftherias ( $Mn=4.64$ ,  $p<.05$ ) on the one hand and DPA ( $Mn=5.33$ ,  $p<.05$ ) and Kontopefko ( $Mn=5.49$ ,  $p<.05$ ) on the other. Plateia Eleftherias residents feel somewhat attached to their neighborhood while the residents of DPA and Kontopefko feel a bit more attached to their place of living.



**Figure 3.** Mean T-scores for “decision making”, “community services satisfaction” and “attachment” by neighborhood.

### Discussion

Two main aspects of the community well-being were explored: the social aspect by assessing the residents' social interaction, community services satisfaction and feeling of safety,

and the political-economic aspect by assessing the residents' involvement in the community decision making process, income sufficiency and job/training opportunities in their community, and both aspects in close relation with emotional ties with local area expressed through the notion of attachment. The overall picture is defined by the clear statistical differences regarding the informal social interaction, community services satisfaction and income sufficiency and the more homogeneous conditions regarding the residents' feeling of safety, their involvement in the community decision making process and their job/training opportunities in the community.

As for the social interaction Dingle Partnership Area, UK and Plateia Eleftherias, Greece showed the highest mean differences. This is explained by the fact that the British neighborhood has a much more homogeneous and stable population (89% live in the area for more than 10 years and 11% less than 10 years) than the Greek one (60% lives in the area for more than 10 years and 40% less than 10 years). This finding was expected since heterogeneous neighborhoods may inhibit interaction and the opportunities to establish linkages, while in areas with permanent residents for a great number of years informal social networks are flourished (Froland et al. 1981).

As for the community services satisfaction, Bournazi and Kontopefko residents, in comparison with residents of all the rest neighborhoods, seem to be less satisfied with the local services and facilities, such as public transportation, access to cultural and leisure facilities, shopping areas, etc. This finding may be related to a variety of difficulties that these two Greek local areas have to confront with: the Kontopefko area, although is a quiet, almost rich area, its residents confront with a number of problems, since it is a relatively new inhabited, off center located area with lack of a network in public transportation, sports and shopping. On the other hand, the Bournazi residents confront with different categories of difficulties since their neighborhood has become a rapidly developing area but with insufficiency in the local sewage system and limited access to child care services and services for the elderly.

As for the income sufficiency, the residents of Bournazi and Dingle feel that they earn a household income that just covers the household expenses and the lifestyle they enjoy, but the difference with the rest of the neighborhoods was not monumental. Another important finding is that the six cultural settings residents do not differ substantially in regard to their feeling of safety in their community during day and night, feeling rather safe in their community. Moreover, they do not seem to differ as far as the offered job and training opportunities are concerned, thinking that they are rather poor. This is a "warning" for policy makers since well being is influenced by the materialistic expectations –which are formed due to low socio-economic level and which lead to low level of subjective and psychological well-being (Helgesson, 2003), as well as to the individuals' involvement in any decision process that concerns them (Street & Quadagno, 2004).

Regarding the social aspect of the community well-being of the neighborhoods, two different patterns of community areas well-being aspects seemed to be revealed by means comparisons: the first pattern includes Bournazi, Kontopefko and Knocknaheeny Holyhill and the second one incorporates Plateia Eleftherias, DPA, and Westside. It was not a clear cut distinction and further exploration of the data is necessary. However, it seems that the Greek cultural settings form practically the first pattern whereas the British and the Irish neighborhoods form the second one. Given that no statistically significant differences were found as for the safety feeling of the residents, the first pattern is indicated by lower scores in social interaction and community satisfaction, while the second is indicated by the higher scores in social interaction and community services satisfaction. As supported by the relative international literature, in the more individualistic countries more social interactions take place compared to the more collectivistic ones (Kafetsios, 2006; Wheeler et al., 1989). Consequently, DPA performs the highest scores in social interaction followed by the two Irish and the two Greek neighborhoods, while Plateia Eleftherias showed the lowest scores. It is the only neighborhood where the majority of residents (Nomikou & Zafiropoulou, 1988) not only have

moved as refugees from Asia seashores in Aegean Sea and Black Sea areas, since 1922-1926, but also a large percentage have moved to the area during the last few years (40%).

Regarding the political-economic community well-being aspect of the neighborhoods three patterns were formed according to the differences across means. The first included Bournazi and DPA, the second included Plateia Eleftherias and Kontopefko, and the third Westside and Knocknaheeny Holyhill. This was also a not clear cut distinction. However, the first pattern was indicated by the lowest scores in decision making, lowest scores in income sufficiency and low in job/training opportunities. The second one was indicated by moderate scores in decision making, highest scores in income sufficiency and lowest in job/training opportunities. Finally, the third one was indicated by highest scores in decision making, moderate scores in income sufficiency and high in job/training opportunities. However, we need to bear in mind that the findings after the one-way analyses of variance for the three variables did not actually show tremendous statistical differences among the six cultural settings with the mean scores hosted at the negative end of the scales. This "social looseness", the inability of local communities to realize the common values of their residents or solve commonly experienced problems (Kornhauser, 1978) is evident in all six cultural settings. This finding is in line with the findings of other researchers (Cantillon et al., 2003; Shinn & Toohey, 2003) that it is the density, quantity and quality of relations among local neighborhood residents, and organizations and institutions existed in the community that create and maintain safe and supportive neighborhood environments (Cantillon, 2006). Further, as suggested by Farrel et al. (2004), the distinction of urban and suburban communities is no longer related to the residents' experiencing quality of life and self efficacy in their neighborhoods. It is the residents' perceptions and assumptions of their community conditions that give them evidence of the disinvestment both by the city government and the local residents (Haney, 2006; Rohe & Basolo, 1997).

In regard to the residents' involvement in their community decision making process, their community services satisfaction and their attachment to their place of living, three clear patterns were revealed. The first included Bournazi and Kontopefko, the second DPA and Knocknaheeny, and the third Westside and Plateia Eleftherias, and this was a clear cut distinction. Given that no major statistical differences in decision making process were found, the first pattern was indicated by the lowest scores in community services satisfaction and the highest scores in place attachment. Some specific objective positive characteristics of the local surrounding of Kontopefko as a social context (Cuba & Hummon, 1993) may offer an explanation for the high level of attachment, e.g., it is an area with mostly owner occupied housing tenure and low rates of unemployment, local features that may raise residents' attachment with the area close to their home, despite the already mentioned low satisfaction with the local services and facilities. Also Bournazi is a traditional area where longer term residents experience greater sense of community and therefore attachment to the place they have been living in (Farrel et al., 2004). The second pattern of well-being was indicated by moderate scores in community services satisfaction and moderate scores in place attachment. This may be associated with high residents' investment in their community that may be a specific cultural feature of the specific areas of the UK and Ireland. They are both communities of small size, of 5,000 residents for Knocknaheeny and 13,777 residents for Dingle. Finally, the third pattern was indicated by highest scores in community services satisfaction and low in place attachment. Both Plateia Eleftherias in Greece and Westside in Ireland are provided with high density housing in blocks of flats. Plateia Eleftherias additionally is a community of large size –of 25,000 residents– and mainly provided with old buildings and bad quality of housing, features that correlate negatively with community attachment and positively with individual distrust and social isolation (Wasserman, 1982). They are both areas also with large rates of unemployment, especially for Westside (75%), low educational achievement and rising levels of crime.



### Conclusion

Brown's (1995) statement "little is understood about the neighborhood contextual effects on human behavior and affective states" is still valid. An integrated approach on the matter is expected to give substantial information on how residents experience their place of living-environment and people. Matters such as stability of population, opportunities for residents' interaction, feeling of safety and involvement in the decision making process of the local community and more importantly individual level variables as well as the internalized community effects by the local residents, constitute a solid base for the right and fruitful political decisions to be made.

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