

Collaborative mapping to investigate the relationship between places and happiness

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Abstract:

Why are we happy in some places and not happy in others? What relationship do we create with the places that make us happy? In its recent studies, positive psychology views happiness as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.” (Lyubomirsky, 2007), thus composed of an emotional and a cognitive dimension. The emotional aspect is the one we intend to investigate in the geographical perspective as it comes from experience. In fact, emotions are a fundamental element for understanding reality, they are a constitutive and intrinsic component of it. “Emotions are a vital ingredient in the very composition of the world as something more than a concatenation of causes and affects, as those places, people and incidents, that become meaningful to us, that we care about, fear, disdain, miss, hate, and sometimes, inexplicably, love” (Smith et al, 2009, p. 3). Emotions are also considered capable of perceiving value, able to distinguish what is important to us, to our lives, to our well-being (Nussbaum, 2009, p. 171) and the “emotional” dimension that is produced by city users in in everyday life may be linked to the wider context of subjective evaluation of quality of life (Capineri et al., 2018, p. 274). This is why there are no geographies without emotions (Puttilli, Santangelo, 2018, p. 229). Emotions, with thoughts, shape human experiences (Tuan, 1977, p. 8) that arise from the relationship between us and the world, between us and the places we inhabit. Place in fact has its own material, physical dimension, commensurable with other places, but it also has deeply immaterial, qualitative and immeasurable ones, which makes it meaningful to man and his culture (Mangani, 2007, p.33). This dimension is considered the substance of space, that is, the set of non-spatial features of spatial realities (Lévy, 2014, p. 66). The place is a portion of specific space, distinguishable from others because it has its own qualities that contribute to configure it as unique and to make it recognizable. What characterizes a place can be traced back to the bond that is established between an individual or a community and that specific portion of space, which is recognized as important and to which are attributed peculiar values and characteristics (Tuan, 1977, p. 136).

In order to investigate the characteristics of this experience, a participatory approach is adopted, specifically adopting a collaborative mapping (Burini, 2016; Dodge, Kitchin, 2013), in an attempt to represent the social values of the territory and focusing on the specificities of the relationship between inhabitants and the place where their experience is positive. Specifically, the mapping involves filling out a questionnaire divided into three different sections. The first is dedicated to profiling the participant, asking for age, gender, and occupation. It is also asked from which province he/she is answering the questionnaire, since this was submitted in different areas of Europe (in particular in the province of Bergamo, Olomouc and Vienna), to analyzing if there are and what are, differences in the perceptions of the inhabitants in different territories. The second part of the questionnaire is the choice of the place that makes one happy and is asked for a description of that place and to look for it on the map, through the typing of a complete string identifying the place. Finally, the third part is dedicated to the investigation of the relationship that exists with the place that has been chosen: the frequency with which the participant visits the place that makes him happy; the functionality performed by this place, why people go to the place indicated (Dematteis, Lanza, 2014, p. 80); what kind of bond connects the respondent with the place he or she has indicated (Turco, 2012, p. 78) and with whom they frequent the place indicated (Tuan, 1977, p. 59). These questions are aimed at investigating the different dimensions that delineate the bond between inhabitant and place, namely the relational, emotional, temporal and functional dimensions. The last two questions of the questionnaire refer to the time of pandemic and environmental crisis: it is asked how much the two years of the pandemic have affected the relationship with the indicated place, specifically we suggest some reasons why this relationship may have changed. The last question addresses changes to this place, asking the user if they are aware of any changes to the place in recent times.

The inhabitants' consultation period began in March 2022, and initial results show that the favorite typologies of places are neighborhoods or urban areas (31%), predominantly cities with high cultural value, such as some Italian art cities; landscapes for 25% and 14% public spaces, identifiable mainly as squares. Only 23% of the respondents say they visit the happy place during the daily life, 12% on weekends, the others go there on vacations or occasionally. The response shows us that in most cases happy places do not belong to the answerer's daily life, but, it is extraneous to it, and instead belongs to other contexts of life. This is substantiated by the fact that respondents indicate that they visit the happy place in their leisure time, for relationships with friends and family, and in the practice of sports activities. It is very interesting to verify that the bond between inhabitant and place is enhanced mainly by memories of past experiences, the beauty of cultural heritage and the importance of natural heritage, but also by the emotional bond and sense of care for the indicated places.

The use of the map supported not only the localization of places, but also, thanks to cartographic self-reference, revealed how different territorial contexts express places of well-being in different typologies, i.e., in territories with high environmental value the places indicated are mainly landscapes, while in urban contexts public spaces and monumental buildings are noted. Green areas are shown to be spread throughout the territory and are mainly identified as urban parks or urban protected areas. These early results can point the way to understanding why residents are happy in certain places in order to design and enhance more and more happy places to promote high-quality living.

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