Caring and Power-Sharing: How Dialogue Influences Community Sustainability

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Abstract: Dialogue is a concept replete with great potentiality for the re-orientating process towards the more inclusive transformation of society, which indeed the Covid-19 pandemic has made even more urgent. This study verifies this statement, while also identifying the specific factors which have had a meaningful impact upon the engagement of people, embedded in their various communities. The undertaken research shows that these factors –related to the agents' own role in the community, to their personal relationship with others and to their own perception of the general context– are interdependent and intersubjective. Indeed, feedback loops have emerged with an evident impact on the well-being of the community members and, therefore, of the community itself. The analysis of the data shows that a genuine dialogic culture, defined as a culture of acknowledging differences, embracing them with respectful openness and facilitating their expression through a non-hierarchical attitude, fosters positive feedback loops and, therefore, the development of sustainable communities. Communities, on the other hand, in which exclusion is tolerated place themselves in danger. The widespread reproduction of subtle discriminating practices, which were observed also in the framework of this study, remain thus alarming. Underlying the research design is indeed the formation process of international online communities in the context of an online simulation game. The crossmatching of the individual reflections of the members and the observation of their behaviour shows how their actions and interactions are entangled with handed down power structures, such as racism and sexism. Establishing an inclusive community implies therefore one fundamental condition: tackling the reproduction of power dynamics through conscious power-sharing.

Keywords: Power, Power-sharing, Care, Dialogue, Community, Team, Collaboration, Simulation game, Intersectionality, Gender, Diversity, Racism, Participation, Virtual collaboration, Social cohesion, Empowerment

Introduction

Just as molecules are formed from atoms by processes of self-organisation, so communities come into being when individuals join together. As the Latin noun *com-*

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munitas and its related verb *communicare* highlight, being part of a community is not detachable from participating to it. In Latin, *communitas* means community and at the same time active participation in the community, conviviality and friendliness, public spirit and a common living environment (Federici & Federici 2003, 9f.). Esposito (2004, 47, own translation) specifies that '[...] communitas refers to that relation which binds its (fellow) members by a promise of reciprocal gift exchange and thereby puts their individual identity at risk [...]'. This doesn't refer to the *do ut des* reciprocity of the market economy but rather to a reciprocity free of constraints. The Latin understanding of community as a group of people emerging and developing through participation in a convivial, friendly environment, permeated by public spirit, displays a consciousness of the role of reciprocity and trust at its conceptual core, as demonstrated by numerous scholars (Hobbes 1660, Durkheim 1903, Simmel 1950, Garfinkel 1967, Lane & Bachmann 1998, Stegbauer 2002).

The dynamic underlying the creation and the existence of such a community is described by the Latin verb *communicare*, which in its primary connotation means to impart and partake, to join and share, to unite and combine (Hau 2011) and only in its secondary connotation has a force closer to that of the present-day Latin-derived verbs such as *kommunizieren*, *comunicare* and *to communicate*, i.e 'to discuss, consult', 'to communicate with someone, to be in contact/relation with someone' (ibid.). Communication as understood today is a *conditio sine qua non*e of community formation and community persistence as it is the medium through which community members express themselves, get in relation with others and thus get involved, producing and reproducing community.

The sketched etymological analysis of *community* brings up elements which resonate with the semantic network around the concept of *dialogue*. Is this connection (still) real?

In order to answer this question, I conducted an online simulation game. The data allow me to investigate the factors relevant for the formation and persistence of communities. In order to do it in the most objective and unbiased way possible, I limit myself to using statements from members of an emerging online-community about the factors which motivate or demotivate them to engage in it. These factors are clustered and connections with theories of dialogue investigated. Following this, the focus is shifted to factors which prevent equal participation. A mixed-method approach allows key barriers manifesting in the simulation game to emerge.

The insights gained through the empirical analysis and its theoretical discussion can foster the conceptualisation of innovative strategies towards the development of inclusive communities and, on a larger scale, an inclusive society.

Research Design

The framework of this study is the simulation game 'Megacities' conceived by Jürgen Bolten (cf. Bolten & Berhault 2018) as a didactic tool to strengthen intercultural competence. The game is based on the following story: a wealthy senior citizen owns a wasteland of about 100 km² bordered by three cities with different characteristics. He is willing to give the wasteland to the cities, on condition that their consultants succeed in working out a common vision for the wasteland that benefits all three towns equally.

Each of the three teams participating in the simulation game must choose first the town they wish to represent, negotiate with each other in case they choose the same one, and then, starting from the key element given, draw up its profile. On this basis they work with the other teams (in the game representatives of the other two cities) to develop a concept for the wasteland which, on the one hand, is in line with the interests of the different cities, but which, on the other, satisfies the holistic orientation of the owner, the potential donor of the wasteland.

The simulation game is organised in six rounds of about three hours each. In these rounds there are phases in small teams (both city-based groups and mixed groups) and in plenary. These are complemented by individual reflection phases between the sessions. There are four kinds of tasks which must be solved: framework construction (e.g. drawing up the main rules of their town); game tasks (e.g. creating the logo for the wasteland); organisation tasks (e.g. decisions about the working language); reflection tasks (e.g. evaluation of their own experience and learning process).

In order to realise this study, which is part of the ReDICo (Researching Digital Interculturality Co-operatively) research project funded by the German Ministry of Education and Research, I organised two games running in parallel. Both took place from May to July 2021 on the Zoom platform for video conferencing and webinars. In the first game, 14 students participated: 7 from the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences (hereafter Hamburg), 5 from the Friedrich Schiller University Jena (hereafter Jena) and two from the University of Applied Sciences Utrecht (hereafter Utrecht). In the second game 12 students played: 5 from Hamburg, four from Jena and three from the University of Udine (hereafter Udine). The teams were organised on the basis of the University the participants study at, though the students didn't know each other beforehand and went therefore through two phases of community-building: first of all inside their own city, secondly among the whole online-community. The first game was played in English, the second one in German. Each game was facilitated by a moderator who organised the materials and prepared the ses-

sions. Both facilitators stepped back during the game to give the participants the possibility to take over the facilitation themselves.

The corpus which I analyse for this paper consists of the reflection sheets which the students filled in individually after every session as well as the recordings of the two games in their entirety. I also draw material from an interview I held with a student who was present during the first sessions though not really participating.

Recording the interactions taking place in the plenary and in the various break-out rooms made necessary my presence and that of one of my research assistants. All assistants introduced themselves at the beginning of the game and otherwise were present with camera and microphone off, although we were all visibly present as a black tile with our name. In order to research the corpus from a neutral position, I did not take any active role in the simulation game. I also attended all rounds of both games with camera off, except for the greetings at the beginning and at the end of each session, as well as at the very start of each of the two games, when I explained my research interest and give the participants all relevant information on data protection. All necessary permissions to record and use the recordings and the reflection sheets written by the participants for scientific and didactic purposes were collected.

Even though simulation games maximise the ecological validity of the study as they create situations which are similar to real life while having control over environment and control variables (Ćwil 2021), a clear limitation is set by the consciousness of the participants of being recorded and feeling observed by me or my research assistants while interacting. Both points were flagged by some participants.

For my analysis of the data in this study I adopted mainly a qualitative approach, although as participation is something which can also be measured quantitatively, I used the program 'Gender Avenger' to verify the presence of intersectional patterns. This program provides timers to measure manually (without voice detectors) the time in which a man is speaking and the time in which a person of another gender is speaking, while also giving the possibility of distinguishing speakers who are white or of colour. On the basis of my qualitative observation of the corpus, I selected representative samples to be analysed quantitatively, for each game of around 30 minutes.

The qualitative analysis is developed according to Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967, 1998) which states that theories are not to be introduced to the object under investigation but discovered in engagement with the field and the empirical data encountered (Glaser & Strauss 1998, 39). Although it is possible to select constructs from the literature and examine them in more detail in the research, freedom

of hypothesis and theory is important for the analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1998, 39, Eisenhardt 1989, 536). In line with these precepts of Grounded Theory, I first analyse the statements of the students which refer to the factors with a positive/negative impact on their participation and afterwards I check whether or not the dialogue is in keeping with these statements.

Key factors for well-being in the community

The analysis of the data shows that there is a tight link between feeling comfortable in the community and participating to it. There is a range of key factors which regulate the choice of engaging in the community, that is of being a real part of it. I present these using excerpts chosen from the reflection sheets and statements in the reflection rounds and in the interview.

The perception of being seen, heard, and taken seriously (here: **acknowledgement**), emerging from the interpretation of the communicative behaviour of the others has a strong influence on the well-being of the individual in a group.

> 'I was surprised that the other groups liked our proposal for the logo and that made me happy.'

While appreciation strengthens positive feelings, the feeling of not being listened to, understood or one's own effort not being considered has a clear demotivating effect.

> 'While we were presenting our ideas for the Wasteland, ((name)) interrupted us sharply and said that if we continue like this, we won't get the wasteland. That frustrated my group very much, above all because, in my understanding, after much discussion, we went in the right direction.'

> '[...] It also bothered me that a member of the press team took over the tasks of the communication team and constantly interrupted me.'

As this last example shows, acknowledgement is tightly related with the role of the person in the group and in general the need to feel useful (here: **own role**), as the following excerpt demonstrates:

> 'It was nice that the Idea Management group was able to split up with the other groups to continue participating in the design process. So I was able to help a little bit with the design of the billboard.'

Complementary to the need to feel useful by playing a certain role, is the need to feel competent (here: **competence**). Its lack might create frustration and eventually embarrassment:

> 'I can't understand everything and that annoyed me.'

> 'Due to our language barriers, we experienced some difficulty and sometimes embarrassment in the negotiation process with the other teams.'

In order to be able to engage in the community, playing their own role, possibly in a successful way, it is favourable to feel **in control** of the situation, that is to understand what is happening:

> 'Today everything was fine, but in general I'm a bit nervous because I can't always understand everything that is said.'

or why a certain task must be solved:

> 'I was confused as I couldn't understand why so much emphasis was placed on which city with which characteristics and which budget we should choose, when that's not really the point.'

or in general what to expect:

> 'Of course, we were a bit nervous at the beginning because we didn't know what to expect.'

The feeling of having things under control allows people (to at least try) to act in an adequate way and depends on the level of **familiarity** people feel with the others:

> 'You could already tell that everyone had slightly different ideas, sometimes even opposing opinions. In the beginning, this slowed down our progress a bit, but after a while we found good compromises. I think we can now better assess the attitudes and ideas of the others and weigh up our own ideas better.'

This feeling of familiarity is given if the members of the group are already known or if they are considered similar to themselves. If that is not the case, even if all human beings share many similarities, a tension emerges: trust must be instilled and the need for safety satisfied.

'Before we mixed up the groups, I was kind of scared about how the new situation was going to be, but it worked out pretty well, so I guess I realised again that it's important to leave my comfort zone.'

The following statement exemplifies the surprise people experienced noticing that the members they do not know yet are not so different from them:

'Performing tasks in the newly formed groups was unproblematic, even though it was the first time we worked directly with them. [...] Stepping out of the well-rehearsed groups into new ones is a good change and was good for the game.'

An interesting aspect very clearly articulated in the following statement, is that familiarity develops through spending time together:

'Overall, the cooperation with the other residents was much more familiar and fluid compared to last week. While at the beginning everything was still very unfamiliar and many were shy, at the end everyone was able to communicate with each other without any worries: we were no longer three individuals but one big group. Personally, I was very satisfied in this last round with the cooperation in my own group as well as in the cooperation with the other groups.'

The emergence of a community means creating familiarity, on the one hand by developing a common culture through frequent interaction, on the other by strengthening the relationships among its members. These two aspects are reflected also in the following statement:

'In my opinion, in the last phase, the communication between the residents of the cities was a bit easier, more direct and open, because by now we knew each other better and knew how to behave towards the others.'

However, to build relationships time is needed and short contacts with repeatedly new people can be challenging, as this experience shows:

'Today I didn't like so much that we were divided into different small groups several times. I think small groups are a good solution to help people express themselves and speak more, but I would have preferred to stay in the same small group all the time instead of changing it.'

Communication becomes easier and more spontaneous the more acquainted people are, as this observation shows:

> 'In our own group, a kind of normality actually developed after the first session. [...] Nevertheless, there was a bit of a tendency to talk a bit more with one's own team partners in the mixed groups than with those from the other groups.'

As said, familiarity implies building relationships among the members of the community. Therefore, **caring** is an important attitude to facilitate contact among people and to foster positive relationships:

> 'I wished that more was done, that a pleasant climate was created and that everyone felt cared. Certainly the main problem was that it was online and you couldn't get to know the other participants before, during and after the lessons, which would have done a lot for the group community.'

Being involved in good relationships (here: **relatedness**) makes people feel part of the community and comfortable to join and share as well as foster decision-making processes.

> 'You got to know the team members of the other groups a bit more over time and also exchanged something on an informal level. This loosened up the atmosphere.'

Building positive relationships strengthens community and helps to build **public spirit**, understood here as a sense of unity on one hand:

> 'By mixing the teams, there was a shift and considerations were henceforth made jointly as a team.'

and a sense of shared responsibility on the other hand:

> 'The missing participants unfortunately did not always ask what was discussed.'

Public Spirit is not about homogenisation but more about recognition and appreciation of differences. The perception of the **openness** of others towards oneself or others has a clear impact on the well-being of its members as well as on the persistence of a community. As the following assertion testifies, there is a need for sensibility, flexibility and readiness to compromise:

> 'Today, I rather developed competences: respectful interaction with each other and discussion culture. Weighing the pros and cons of different opinions respectfully and coming to a compromise.'

This difference is though not just a challenge to cope with but a chance to take:

> 'So, I can just speak for myself (short laugh). But I've just realised, hum, again, that sometimes, it's like, I have an idea in mind, and I think that might be the best solution and then somebody else comes up with a completely new point and I realise that the idea of the other person is way better. So, I've just realised all over again that it's, hum, sometimes really way easier and more productive to work in a group and also, hum, I really like that we mixed up hum, the cities in the beginning 'cos, uh, at the end, because there was even more impact. So, yeah, I guess it's (...) just, yeah, the more voices the better, I guess. Yeah, that's a learning that I experienced [...].'

Even those who decided to stay in their language group for more sessions were very satisfied, once they separated and mixed with the others:

> 'The situation which broadened my knowledge/perspective is when I was the only Italian in the group.'

Equality and equity foster participation, creating space for all perspectives:

> 'This process was very calm and orderly. We agreed that for the time being there would be no team leader if there was no need for one, so that we could communicate with each other as equals as possible and make all decisions democratically and together. Everyone participated equally and no one pushed themselves to the fore. All in all, there was also a rather relaxed atmosphere, even though we all didn't really know each other. The digital format didn't really detract from that either'

Equality is tightly linked to **fairness**; its lack fosters the development of a feeling of frustration. Both don't just foster public spirit but reflect its presence or absence, in particular, showing if responsibility is really shared:

> 'I personally found the work in the communication team quite difficult. I had the feeling that we had the most work of all. Especially when we were supposed to lead through the discussions and no reaction was shown by the other participants, it was not so nice.'

The perceived **engagement** of the others is in general a further factor with an important impact on the well-being of the individuals in the community. Engagement expresses itself in active participation, though a lack of active participation does not

necessarily result from a lack of engagement. However, if it is interpreted as such, it demotivates people from engaging.

> 'It was a pity that some people took very little part in the discussion. I actually started the meeting with a lot of enthusiasm, but unfortunately lost it in the course of the meeting.'

The key factors which have been presented so far influence the level of engagement of the members of a community as they have an impact on the way they feel in that social context. However, there are also factors which do not refer to the social relationship among the members but also have an important impact on participation. These factors relate to the **efficiency** of the community organisation and its communication flows.

> 'Unmotivatedness or insecurity? I couldn't quite tell. But I had the feeling that due to the bumpy organisation the motivation of all participants was getting less and less.'

In the analysed corpus, efficiency has been praised or lack of efficiency has been pointed out in relation to the definition of common goals, of the division of roles and tasks, of the decision-making process and the strategic management of complexity as well as to the facilitation of communication processes.

The last factor which the data brought to light is embedded in the social dimension though at the same time reflects also in the organisational one: it is the flow, the vibes, the energy, the mood, the rhythm spreading in the community through paraverbal and nonverbal communication elements, sped up by mirror neurons, and shaping its **atmosphere**.

> 'Unfortunately, ((name))'s moderation seemed very monotonous to me. I am sure that ((name)) is very trained in communication and knows how to talk in a non-judgemental way, with I-messages, listening to all, etc. And certainly, that is the right way to go into a crisis conversation, but perhaps a more natural and animating way of speaking would have provided more motivation in the simulation game.'

Matching empirical results with dialogue theoretical framework

By clustering the key factors emerging from the analysis of the perceptions of the Megacities community members, the following feelings surface as factors fostering engagement, and thus active membership, of people in their communities:

1. feeling comfortable with their own role and feeling competent;

2. feeling in control of the situation, feeling familiar with others and the context;

3. feeling acknowledged, appreciated, and not ignored but rather cared for, at best in the context of positive social relationships;

4. feeling an open attitude to who and what is not familiar (yet): one's own attitude, the attitude of others towards oneself and the general attitude;

5. feeling that participation is not regulated by hierarchy but by fairness and equity, in general and related to oneself: the feeling of having equal dignity and right to participate as others;

6. feeling of being a member of a united community in which members share responsibilities and engage together to reach common goals;

7. feeling that the resources flowing in the community are not wasted, but mobilised in an efficient way, at best in a (re)charging atmosphere.

These feelings are interwoven with each other, provoking positive or negative feedback loops which increase or decrease the motivation to be part of and engage in the community. Furthermore, it must be considered that these feelings are experienced in a group context and therefore, even if they are experienced individually, they are often shared: the community members are *per definitionem* all embedded in the same social context in which, through actions and interactions, a community culture develops. It is therefore probable that similar individual feedback loops take place at the same time. Considering the observed facts, that the degree of engagement perceived in the group influences the engagement of individual members, it can be stated that feedback loops are inter-subjective chain-reaction phenomena which can become dynamics on a large scale with an existential impact for the community.

It is therefore of vital importance to understand the kind of culture which should be fostered in communities, in order to create a context in which positive feedback loops easily develop. Do the clustered factors evoke a *culture of dialogue*?

A multidisciplinary review of the literature around the concept of dialogue[2] shows that at its core is an open, acknowledging attitude towards difference, that is the pe-

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[2] The term 'dialogue' underlies a basic distinction between a concrete meaning of dialogue as a synchronous verbal exchange and an abstract one of dialogue as an attitude, a vision, an ideal (Conti 2012, 104).

culiarity of every person or perspective. The willingness to experience this implies the wish to let it be expressed and the necessity of creating a context in which everyone has the best chance of expressing themselves and being perceived (Conti 2012, 107-133). The relational space of the dialogic encounter is the 'sphere of the between' (Buber 1947), where people are not side by side but meet with each other through a dialogic relation, as Daniely (2015, 77) describes:

'a present and holistic relation, which consists of openness, listening, devotion and responsiveness [...] one turns to the other as a whole, tunes in to the other whole heartedly, and opens up when encountering him. His/Her appeal is free of image and impression calculations, it is direct, immediate and personal.'

Observing the seven clusters emerging from the corpus, no point can be found which contrasts with the dialogic framework and indeed most of the factors identified reflect it in an evident way. The need for acknowledgement, appreciation and care confirms the 'sphere of the between' as an ideal for human encounters (cluster 2). It reflects in it also the desire of union, in which members share responsibilities and engage with each other to reach common goals (cluster 6).

Connected to this, but a point in itself, is the open attitude towards the unknown and the different (cluster 4). It is not surprising that this core characteristic of dialogue is a key factor that emerged in the empirical study presented here, as a lack of openness is frightening because it produces exclusion. Moreover, openness towards newness and otherness is a condition for enriching oneself through new knowledge and new relationships. Considering that there is no familiarity which was not once unfamiliar, the contradiction between the appreciation of openness to newness and otherness and the need to feel in control of the situation and feel familiar with others and the context (cluster 3) is just apparent: these are two sides of the same coin.

The quality of the *human relations* inside the community has a decisive impact on the well-being of individuals in their community: feeling acknowledged, appreciated and cared for allows participation, though a condition for this is the freedom from limiting hierarchies, as postulated in the dialogic theory (e.g. Habermas 1971) as well as observed by Megacities-members (cluster 5).

The two clusters which are not directly related to the dialogic framework, are in harmony with it or even support it: the first (cluster 1) puts in evidence the importance of fostering a system in which people can feel self-confident, as self-confidence is a condition to open up and getting involved in the community. The other (cluster 7) relates to the importance of protecting the system from avoidable losses which would entail a dissipation of energies.

While the empirical findings on the key needs of individuals as members of a community match the dialogic framework, a core challenge to the realisation of community must also be recognised: power asymmetries.

Key barriers to equal participation

As the key factors displayed above show, the experience of the single members in their community depends on the quality of their relationships in the community, which flow into their willingness, on one hand, and possibility, on the other, to participate. Fundamental variables are the members themselves with their own specific needs, interests, abilities, personalities, knowledge, past experiences, but also appearance, socio-demographic characteristics, belongings… Who they are and how they are perceived influence the participation of individual members of the community and regulate the emergence of power relations within it. In this section I present the factors which act as fulcrums of division in the community I have observed.

First, the data reflect the presence of the 'matrix of domination', as Collins (1990) names the intersecting relations of oppression (in this case: **sexism and racism**) pervading society. The analysis shows that while among white people there is just a small difference between genders in relation to talking time – men speak slightly more than women – an evident difference is observed in relation to the talking time taken by white and by members of colour, as the following typical situation exemplifies:

At a break-out room the members of a team had to read the task for the day and discuss if they understood everything. In a five-minute discussion, the white male of the group (A) spoke 98% of the time while his female classmates of colour as well as his male classmate of colour spoke 2% of the time. With a super positive attitude that included phrases like 'I think we can handle this, right?!', and right after: 'We can handle everything, we are the best team!', the student described the task, what he thought they could do and presented his ideas and then asked the others if they agreed. While some of the other participants responded affirmatively with words, others simply nodded. Also, the facilitator had asked the students to decide which team could moderate the following sessions. A thought that they could take that role and asked the other students in his group if they agree. Again, most of them just nodded. One female student of colour asked him if the moderation would be done only by one of them (meaning him) or by all. The dialogue was as follows:

> A.: What about the moderation? Would you like to do it today?
> ((Silence))
> A.: Ok, everyone is happy about it?
> ((Silence))
> A.: Good.

> B.: I'm really excited.
>
> A.: Yeaaah! ((laughing)). It's a nice day, the sun is shining, be happy, be motivated! So, what's the final result? What do you think? Moderation yes? Or no? Would you like to do it next time?
>
> B.: But how is it going to work? Hum, should we *all* talk or moderate the whole session or just one of us?
>
> A.: I don't know, I don't know. I th- (.) Yeah (...) I really don't know I th-I think it wou-would be possible if-if everyone could do it like, it's only the moderation. Like, OK, now you can say something to it, what's your opinion on it. I think it's not a big deal, I would say ((B looks down while he speaks)) Okay, so: yes? Let's say yes? (.) It's a never mind. It doesn't matter to you all, right? Yeah? ((laughing)) Everyone is so motivated today! ((ironically)) Let's go guys, eh!

A informed the facilitator that his group would take over the moderation and he himself moderated the session.

The analysis of the game in German made another barrier evident: language skills. The only person on the Jena team in the German game who was not a native speaker was a woman and PoC. She said in the interview with me, before definitively leaving the game after being ignored for two sessions:

> 'To be honest, I still have this complex also because of my language, because of my pronunciation, because I have an accent and I'm still afraid to say something wrong. […] I want to think carefully about what I say, I don't want to say something stupid. […] When everyone speaks in English, I feel better, I don't feel insecure, I can express myself, contribute my ideas, I feel on the same level. Even if everyone says that I've learned super German in 5 years, I'm still somehow so afraid to be active and speak.'

The other participants in the game played in German who were not German native speakers were three women from Udine, who had, despite their good language proficiency, difficulties in expressing themselves in the plenary:

> 'Communication is sometimes difficult because sometimes the voices of the group members overlap, because they speak quickly, and we don't have a sufficient level of language. I try to understand what is being said, but I don't always manage. […] Due to our language barrier, we experienced the negotiation process with the other teams with some difficulty and sometimes embarrassment.'

In order to display the (un)balanced participation I shall briefly describe an emblematic situation, inserting the results of measurements of the speaking time.

In the fourth round, the German-speaking group had to jointly discuss the development plan while responding to the wealthy senior citizen's feedback to their first proposal. The moderator asked them to discuss among themselves how they would proceed from now on, whether they would do it in separate groups or together. A female student from Hamburg took over the moderation. In 30 minutes of conversation, with some interventions by the original moderator, the fluent German-speaking women used altogether ten minutes of speaking time, the men about 5 minutes while the non-native Italian women only 7 seconds.

While language proficiency represents in this case study a strong barrier to participation, there are **unique skills**, that is skills which just some of the members have and therefore enable their participation. Indeed, participation doesn't flow just through communication but also through other kinds of actions which allow them to solve tasks useful for the community, as the following excerpt exemplifies:

> C: 'So, we do not have so much time left. So, would we like to start and actually create the new logo?'
> D: 'Ah, yeah!'
> C: 'Can you do it, E, because you've shared, hum, the screen?'
> E: 'Yeah, just don't know (.) don't know what to do at the moment.'
> D: 'Well, I have one site that I used for the logo, is really nice. It's called Canva with a C.'
> E: 'Ok, if you have it then maybe you share the screen and you do it?'
> D: 'Yeah, well, I don't have the logos, so...'
> E: 'Since we do have to create a new one, I think it doesn't matter, you can see them here.'

Having all the **information** needed or, to say it more precisely, feeling as though one has all the information needed, is a further factor which gives people the courage to participate actively in the process, as explained by the student who was present although not engaging actively when I asked her why:

> '[..] at the beginning, since I was not there, they explained to me in the group, a bit rough but... Now now (.) on Monday was my first participation in the game, at the beginning I didn't know what it was about but slowly I understood (.) maybe a little bit because of this I was not there at the beginning, I lacked information.'

Last but not least, **personality** itself makes it more or less challenging to take power in a certain context to display one's own agency. The corpus highlights two aspects: first whether people are more introverted or extroverted, and second how they deal with unfamiliarity.

> 'Mmh, to be honest, it's something new for me. I haven't done anything like this before. I find it interesting, I'm usually not that active either, out of my personality, I prefer to listen than to talk.'

The factors presented intersect with each other and depending on the context they have a major or minor impact on the participation of the various members. Indeed, these factors make it more or less difficult for each one of them *to feel* the power allocated to them – in the context of a community based on equality – and *to use* it. Two key challenges must be overcome: one is the inheritance of possible disempowering experiences of this person in the past, while the other is the willingness of others to share power with them.

Conclusions

This study aimed to obtain insights about the factors which motivate and demotivate individuals to engage in communities. The data have shown that a condition for engagement is people's sense of well-being in the community. Their well-being itself depends on how comfortable people feel with their role in the group (own role, competence), in the relations with the others (acknowledgement, familiarity, caring, relatedness, openness, equality, fairness) and in relation to the process (in control, efficiency, energy). Positive relationships within the community spread a feeling of being part of it (public spirit) which itself strengthens participation.

These key factors, found to be perfectly in line with the dialogic framework, have been clustered in seven main needs whose degree of satisfaction influences the well-being of an individual in a community. They are linked to one another and reinforce each other, either in a positive feedback loop or in a negative one. The positive feedback loop fosters the well-being of the members of a community and therefore the community well-being itself, the negative one fosters instead negative feelings which adversely affect community cohesion and therefore put its existence at risk. Indeed, these feedback loops are a source and become symptoms of the community culture, which can be more or less favourable to its existence. The positive feedback loop reflects the presence in the community of a dialogic culture, that is a culture of acknowledging differences, embracing them with respectful openness and facilitating their expression through a non-hierarchical attitude (cf. Conti 2012).

The data have shown that implementing a culture of dialogue is a task which is as vital as it is challenging. An important challenge is the development of an open attitude towards difference and newness, above all, as it tends to be overestimated. Openness requires the courage to *dare* to step out of the realm of the familiar, though who dares is rewarded with the access to the chances linked to it. A specific focus has been put on another central challenge to the implementation of a dialogic attitude, that is, on the factors which create power asymmetries, preventing equal participation among community members. In the Megacities community the following intersecting elements played a gate-keeping role: gender, 'race', language proficiency, further specific skills, information, and personality. Indeed, not everyone had the same power to claim the power theoretically allocated to them. *Sharing power* needs on the one hand for people who have power to *care about* others, fostering their participation and not ignoring them, and *care for* the others, empowering them; on the other hand, sharing power requires that the ones who for any reason have a reduced access to it *dare* to claim it. Awareness on this matter is therefore essential.

The empirical study object of this paper confirms what in the ancient world was already clear, confirming its validity also in our own times: a convivial, friendly environment, permeated by public spirit, fosters the engagement of individuals in the sustainable development of their community. Acknowledgement of the others despite and because of their peculiarities, daring to open up to them, caring about and for them, and sharing power with them is not a matter of benevolence or pietism, but rather a condition for the development of a sustainable community. A system which tolerates exclusion contributes therefore to its own self-destruction.

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