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The Influence of Situational Awareness on Social Cohesion in Neighborhoods with Social Difficulties

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Abstract

Since the nineties, interest in political and social environments has increased considerably. Several studies have found that the perception of people about their environment affects social cohesion, which has a significant impact on physical and mental health. The aim of this study is to verify the predictive role of satisfaction with the environment and perceptions of social problems on social cohesion in a sample of social housing tenants in Andalusia. A cross sectional study was conducted through questionnaires, with a final sample of 404 participants. The analysis of hierarchical and multiple linear regressions showed that the perception of context and satisfaction with social housing environment significantly predicted social cohesion, although differently for processes of attraction in the neighborhood, neighborhood perceptions and sense of community. The subjective experiences and perceptions of neighborhood residents appear to be important predictors of fundamental social processes such as social cohesion, which should be considered and studied with objective measures of the environment (e.g., unemployment levels or crime rates) in the study of social housing and the design of interventions aimed at social integration.

Keywords: social cohesion, environment perception, satisfaction with the environment, social housing

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Introduction

Housing policies have a long historical trajectory in the European regulatory framework, although each country has developed its own regulations based on their socio-historical development and economic resources (Eurofound, 2014). In the case of Spain, the right to housing is enshrined in Article 47 of the Constitution, which states that all Spaniards are entitled to enjoy decent and adequate housing. This law has resulted, among others, in promotions of social housing for people with serious socioeconomic gaps, which caused the so-called social neighborhoods to emerge in the landscape of Spanish cities. However, the economic and financial crisis and the brake of urban developments in the Spanish context since 2007 have led to a profound policy and legislative reorganization on social housing.

Parallel and from the nineties, interest in political and social environments has increased significantly (Arenas, Hidalgo, & Menéndez, 2009), since the characteristics of neighborhoods and communities where people live have proved important antecedents of physical and mental health (Gapen *et al.*, 2011). In the same vein, Barnes, Katz, Korbin and O'Brien (2006) state that the characteristics of the social environment are deeply associated with climate processes and existing family units. Properly designed and properly maintained social spaces promote social inclusion and citizenship, and contribute to social cohesion and residential satisfaction. By contrast, a space of poor quality (e.g., with architectural barriers, noise, dirt) increases the probability of occurrence of antisocial behavior (e.g., conflict among neighbors) (Vargas & Merino, 2012).

The study of these processes becomes more important in the case of public housing or social housing. In the particular case of Spain, this type of housing is for families with fewer resources, who are often more influenced by the characteristics of their neighborhoods and have fewer opportunities to find resources outside their community (Barnes *et al.*, 2006; Coulton & Korbin, 2007). The quality of the neighborhood where families spend their lives determines what happens inside the home and influences the welfare of its members. Therefore, social cohesion in neighborhoods (sense of community, attraction for the neighborhood and perceived relationship among neighbors) is one of life quality indicators (Buckner, 1988). Several studies have showed that the perception of people about their environment affects social cohesion, which has a significant impact on physical and mental health (Feldman & Steptoe, 2004; Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Höfelmann, Diez-Rouz Antunes, & Peres, 2013). Consequently, the aim of this study is to verify the predictive role of satisfaction with the environment and perceptions of social problems on social cohesion in a sample of social housing tenants in Andalusia.

Social housing. Today, social housing is an element of analysis by the European Union at the level of recommendations and guidelines, the importance of which was acknowledged in the Green Paper (Eurofound, 2014). Apart from the political perspective, social housing needs to be addressed from complementary perspectives such as the scientific, professional and academic. Emerging social and urban planning problems, segregated neighborhoods and urban conflicts have become the study of social housing for the Member States of the European Union (Eurofound, 2014). According to Anton Cortes, Martinez and Navarrete (2008), granted housing for economically disadvantaged groups is not enough. It is necessary to investigate the community processes involved in order to use improved housing as an opportunity for social integration.

Characteristics of neighborhoods and communities. On the processes associated with social housing, the characteristics of neighborhoods and communities where people reside have been shown as important elements that affect not only physical and mental health (Gapen *et al.*, 2011) but also to other elements of the community, such as social cohesion (Höfelmann *et al.*, 2013). Researchers and professionals from various fields (social work, sociology, psychology, epidemiology, etc.) give equal emphasis to the importance of neighborhood and community on quality of life, social cohesion and health, but they distinguish objective indicators (e.g., crime rates, population density, etc.) of individual perceptions of the context (e.g., sense of security, perceived social problems such as drugs or prostitution, etc.) (Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Höfelmann *et al.*, 2013; Wen, Hawkey, & Cacioppo, 2006).

Faced with objective measures of the environment, various authors state that the perception of the residents of the context in which they live seems to outweigh the “objective” characteristics thereof (Ellaway, MacIntyre, & Kearns, 2001; Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Höfelmann *et al.*, 2013; Ross & Miroskwy, 2001). Reviewing the literature shows that certain characteristics such as perceived social problems or access to the resources of the social area affect the quality of life and social cohesion (Cantillon, 2006; Gracia & Herrero, 2006). Gracia and Herrero (2006) indicate that a worse quality of the neighborhood is associated with lower levels of perceived social cohesion. The negative conditions in the community would prevent creating and accessing support resources generated in everyday interaction in a community, with all that this implies in terms of adjustment and comfort.

Social cohesion. Social cohesion can be understood as the area of social connections within the neighborhood and their support members and community organizations, one of the most relevant dimensions for the operation and welfare of the residents and their families (Barnes *et al.*, 2006). As for the neighborhood, there is a general consensus in understanding social cohesion as a set of inter-related processes as a major social process (Arenas *et al.*, 2009; Buckner, 1988; Wilkinson, 2007). Buckner (1988) proposes three dimensions that integrate social

cohesion: the sense of community, the feeling of attraction to the neighborhood and the quality of the relationship established between neighbors. The first refers to the feeling that one belongs and is a significant part of a larger community. Attraction to the neighborhood is related to liking for the neighborhood and the intention of staying there. Finally, the perceived relationship between neighbors or neighborhood perception refers to the degree to which a person feels and perceives that the neighborhood is a source of support, both for her and for the rest of the neighbors (Buckner, 1988).

Several investigations have linked social cohesion in neighborhoods with the mental health of the residents (depression, anxiety) (Fone *et al.*, 2014) or drug abuse (Kuipers, Poppei, Den Brink, Wingen, & Kunst, 2012) regardless of age (Takagi *et al.*, 2013.) and countries (Arenas *et al.*, 2009; Fone *et al.*, 2014; Kuipers *et al.*, 2012; Takagi *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, the relationship between perceived neighborhood and social cohesion has been proven in several studies (Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Höfelmann *et al.*, 2013; Kuipers *et al.*, 2012). A negative perception of the environment affects the processes of social cohesion, particularly through distrust of others. When people perceive the environment as dangerous and threatening and believe they have no resources, they are more distrustful and suspicious of others, preventing the creation of ties and attraction to neighbors and the neighborhood (Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Ross & Miroskwy, 2001). The lack of relationship involves fewer bonds of friendship in the area and a higher probability to experience less social support.

The study of these processes becomes more important in the case of social neighborhoods. Given the importance attached to social housing within the European Union and the characteristics of tenants occupying them (short income, high rates of unemployment, etc.), the study of social processes that help the housing improvement and social integration is particularly necessary. In this sense, the aim of this study is to test the predictive role of satisfaction with the environment and perceptions of social problems on social cohesion (sense of community, neighborhood attraction, relationship quality) in a sample of tenants of social housing in Andalusia.

Method

Design and participants

An ex post facto retrospective study of a single group with multiple measures (Montero & León, 2007) was conducted. The study population consisted of all social housing tenants in Andalusia. The final sample consisted of 404 participants (95.5% reliability level, 4.47% margin of error) distributed proportionally to the number of social housing developments included in the database of Housing and

Reform Agency of Andalusia (AVRA). The 56.44% of the participants were women, with a sample mean age of 46.47 years ($SD = 15.36$). 92.31% of participants reported being married and 46.40% were unemployed (seeking employment).

Variables and instruments

For this study, we used a questionnaire with the following instruments: socio-demographic characteristics, an environmental satisfaction questionnaire, a questionnaire on the perception of social problems and a *neighborhood* perception questionnaire.

Sociodemographic characteristics. To measure these features, we designed a questionnaire including aspects related to the tenant: gender, age, marital status, education level, number of members in the household, economic status, occupation and employment status. The development of this questionnaire took as reference the surveys of the Multiterritorial Information System of Andalusia (SIMA) and the National Institute of Survey (INE) of Spain.

Satisfaction with the environment. To measure this variable 10 items of the scale of satisfaction with housing and environment (Vázquez-Aguado *et al.*, 2014) were used. These 10 items are distributed in 3 dimensions: satisfaction with the appearance of the neighborhood (3 items, e.g., “sense of security in their neighborhood”), satisfaction with services (4 items, e.g., “health services”) and satisfaction with spaces (3 items, e.g., “water and sanitation”). The answers were given by a 10 point Likert scale, where 1 means “never” and 10 “Very often”. Higher scores indicate higher levels of satisfaction with the environment. Cronbach’s alpha coefficients obtained in this study were .71, .72 and .78 for satisfaction with appearance of the neighborhood, satisfaction with services and satisfaction with spaces, respectively.

Perception of social problems. To evaluate this variable, 12 items of the scale of perceived social problems (Vázquez-Aguado *et al.*, 2014) were used. The 14 items are grouped into three factors: drug as a social problem (4 items, e.g., “drug”), conflict in the neighborhood as a social problem (4 items, e.g., “problems of social coexistence”) and environment as a social problem (4 items, e.g., “problems with architectural barriers”). Participants were asked to express the frequency of the social problems indicated, using a 10 point Likert scale where 1 means “never” and 10 “very often”. Higher scores express higher perceptions of social problems in the neighborhood. The coefficients of internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha) obtained were .85 for drugs as a social problem, .73 for conflict as a social problem and .76 for the environment as a social problem.

Social cohesion. To measure this variable the Spanish version of Buckner’s (1988) scale of neighborhood cohesion was used. The 18 items of the scale are

grouped into three dimensions: attraction to the neighborhood (3 items, e.g., “in general, I like living in this neighborhood”), perceived neighborhood (6 items, e.g., “I usually visit my neighbors”) and sense of community (9 items, e.g., “I feel I belong to this neighborhood”). Participants are asked to value each item using a Likert scale from 0 “very bad” to 5 “Very good.” Higher scores express higher levels of social cohesion in the neighborhood. The reliability obtained as measured by Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was .63 for attraction to the neighborhood, .85 for perceived neighborhood and .93 for sense of community.

Procedure

Social housing promotion and participating tenants were selected by experts from the Agency for Housing and Reform of Andalusia (AVRA) according to a stratified sampling based on the size of the population where the promotion, the number of dwellings, the type of housing (single family or multi-family), tenure and functionality, depending on whether houses are located in areas of social or no difficulty. Data collection was conducted between October and December 2014 by three experts with a master’s degree in social sciences and experience in conducting surveys. The experts carried identification documents signed by the senior researcher of the project, specifying the goals of the sample and the confidentiality of the data. Prior to the collection of each sample, they showed and read the information in the document.

Data analysis

To achieve that end, we used the statistical package STATA v13. First, we calculated Harman’s test (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003) with all the items of the scales used to assess the possible impact of common method variance. The following descriptive statistics were calculated for the study variables: mean, standard deviation, skewness and kurtosis. Similarly, we calculated Pearson’s correlation coefficients and hierarchical multiple regression models.

Results

Preliminary analysis. Before verifying the proposed objectives, several tests were conducted to monitor the effect of common method variance (CMV). Since all data were collected by self-report measures and at the same time, the common variance associated with the method may overestimate or underestimate the relationships between variables (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). Harman’s one-factor test was conducted to test the possible effect of common variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). All items in the scales of satisfaction with the environment, perception

of social problems and social cohesion underwent exploratory factor analysis using the principal components method (PCM) with varimax rotation and forcing extraction to a single factor. If there was a problem of common method variance, the extracted factor should account for over 50% of the extracted variance. The results of factor analysis showed a factor that accounted for 27.48%, so while the effect of the common variance may not be entirely discarded, it does not seem to affect significantly the relations among the variables studied (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003).

Descriptive and correlations. Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, skewness, kurtosis and correlations of the variables of the study and the reliability of the scales. Correlation analyzes showed that, of the three dimensions of satisfaction with the environment, satisfaction with the appearance of the neighborhood correlated positively and significantly ($p < .01$) with attraction to the neighborhood ($r = .26$), with perception of the neighborhood ($r = .26$) and the sense of community ($r = .32$). By contrast, perception of social problems (drugs, conflict, environment) was significantly associated ($p < .05$) with the dimensions of social cohesion, with a range of Pearson's coefficients from $-.15$ to $-.28$, except in the case of the relationship between drugs as a social problem and perception of the neighborhood ($r = -.11$, $p = .07$).

Models of hierarchical multiple linear regressions. To check predictive role of satisfaction with the environment and perceptions of social problems on neighborhood social cohesion, we used models of hierarchical multiple linear regression (see Table 2). Before conducting the analysis, we verified that the assumptions of normality and multicollinearity (Cohen, 1988) were not violated.

Attraction to the neighborhood. In the first model (Model 1) we introduced the three dimensions of satisfaction with the environment as predictors of attraction to the neighborhood. The total variance explained by Model 1 was 7.56% ($F(3,294) = 8.01$, $p < .01$). Satisfaction with the appearance appeared as the only significant predictor of attraction to the neighborhood ($\beta = .29$, $p < .01$).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations of all study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Satisfaction with appearance	1								
2. Satisfaction with services	.52*	1							
3. Satisfaction with spaces	.52*	.58*	1						
4. Drugs as social problem	-.17*	-.06	.02	1					
5. Conflict as social problem	-.31*	-.08	-.06	.59*	1				
6. Environment as social problem	-.24*	-.21*	-.33*	.40*	.58*	1			
7. Attraction-to-neighborhood	.26*	.13	.08	-.28*	-.26*	-.15*	1		
8. Neighboring	.26*	.12	.01	-.11*	-.21*	-.17*	.43*	1	
9. Sense of community	.31*	.10	-.05	-.19*	-.26*	-.15*	.48*	.88*	1
Mean	5.60	5.82	6.43	4.52	2.98	4.23	3.50	2.87	3.01
Standard Deviation	2.93	2.41	3.15	3.47	2.81	3.14	0.99	1.51	1.56
Skewness	-0.18	-0.94	-0.48	0.12	0.82	0.45	-0.41	-0.18	-0.24
Kurtosis	2.01	3.22	1.99	1.61	2.80	2.01	3.20	1.84	1.83

* $p < .01$

Table 2. Hierarchical regression results for neighborhood cohesion

	Attraction-to-neighborhood			Neighbouring			Sense of community		
	B	Beta	t	B	Beta	t	B	Beta	t
Step 1									
- Constant	3.01			2.42			2.52		
- Satisfaction with appearance	0.10	.29**	4.32	0.17	.33**	4.74	0.25	.45**	6.68
- Satisfaction with services	0.02	.05	0.72	0.01	.02	0.30	0.01	.02	0.21
- Satisfaction with spaces	-0.04	-.13	-1.91	-0.08	-.19**	-2.66	-0.14	-.30**	-4.30
Step 2									
- Constant	3.68			3.82			3.88		
- Satisfaction with appearance	0.09	.25**	2.95	0.15	.28**	3.31	0.17	.31**	3.75
- Satisfaction with services	-0.05	-.11	-1.30	-0.04	-.07	-0.76	-0.04	-.07	-0.81
- Satisfaction with spaces	0.01	.01	0.17	-0.12	-.26**	-3.05	-0.12	-.25**	-2.95
- Drugs as social problem	-0.07	-.22**	-2.70	-0.02	-.04	-0.44	-0.06	-.14	-1.73
- Conflict as social problem	-0.04	-.12	-1.25	-0.09	-.17	-1.77	-0.11	-.21*	-2.22
- Environment as social problem	0.02	.05	0.62	-0.04	-.09	-1.10	0.02	.03	0.41
	$R^2 = .16$			$R^2 = .17$			$R^2 = .23$		

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Then, Model 2 was analyzed incorporating the dimensions of perceived problems as a predictor variable. Satisfaction with the environment was introduced in the first step and the perception of social problems was added in the second step. The total variance explained was 15.61% ($F(6,191) = 5.89, p < .01$). The inclusion of perceived social problems led to a change of 8.1% ($F(3,191) = 3.31, p < .05$). The following statistically significant predictors were observed: satisfaction with appearance ($\beta = .25, p < .01$) and drugs as a social problem ($\beta = -.22, p < .01$).

Perceived neighborhood. The introduction of the three dimensions of satisfaction with the environment in Model 1 8.87% explained variance of perceived neighborhood, $F(3,284) = 9.21, p < .01$. They emerged as predictors of satisfaction with appearance ($\beta = .33, p < .01$) and satisfaction with spaces ($\beta = -.19, p < .01$). The inclusion in Model 2 of perceived social problems entailed an increase of 8.3% ($F(3,189) = 3.42, p < .05$), with a total explained variance of 17.13% ($F(6,189) = 6.51, p < .01$). Satisfaction with appearance ($\beta = .28, p < .01$) and satisfaction with spaces ($\beta = -.26, p < .01$) reappeared as significant predictors of perceived neighborhood.

Sense of community. In the first model (Model 1) we introduced the three dimensions of satisfaction with the environment as predictors of attraction to the neighborhood. The total variance explained by Model 1 was 16.89% ($F(3,271) = 18.36, p < .01$). Satisfaction with appearance and satisfaction with spaces appeared as significant predictors of sense of community ($\beta = .45$ and $\beta = -.30, p < .01$, respectively).

Next, Model 2 was analyzed by adding the dimensions of perceived social problems as a predictor variable. Satisfaction with the environment was introduced in the first step and perceived social problems were added in the second step. The total variance explained was 23.41% ($F(6,183) = 9.32, p < .01$). The inclusion of perceived social problems led to a change of 6.5% ($F(3,183) = -0.31, p = 1.00$). The following statistically significant predictors were observed: satisfaction with appearance ($\beta = .31, p < .01$), satisfaction with spaces ($\beta = -.25, p < .01$) and conflict as a social problem ($\beta = -.21, p < .05$).

Discussion

Social housing policy in Europe is facing major challenges that necessarily pass through incorporating a social perspective (scientific, professional and academic) to its study. The emerging social and urban planning problems, which have created segregated neighborhoods and/or urban conflicts, are common concerns to the authorities of the Member States of the EU (Eurofound, 2014). Consequently, the study of social processes in social housing affecting cohesion becomes essential to achieve social interventions and networking that enable

social integration. Social housing not only meets a basic need, but also has a social function of support and identity. Neighborhood quality affects the daily lives of residents and their families, creating feelings of community identity and perceptions of social support (Barnes *et al.*, 2006; Coulton & Korbin, 2007).

In this context, the aim of this study was to test the predictive role of satisfaction with the environment and perceptions of social problems on social cohesion in a sample of residents of social neighborhoods in Andalusia. The results confirm that the perception of context and satisfaction with social housing environment significantly predicts social cohesion, although differently for the processes of attraction to the neighborhood, neighborhood perception and sense of community.

As for attraction to the neighborhood, satisfaction with appearance (security, cleaning, etc.) and perception of the area associated with drug use (consumption, drug sale, alcoholism...) were significant predictors of attraction to the neighborhood. Attraction to the neighborhood is clearly related to the physical appearance of the environments where the study participants live. People like to live in clean spaces allowing for a pleasant stroll, and granting a sense of security. By contrast, drug or alcohol consumption in the street and their associated waste generates a feeling of unhealthy environment, making it less attractive and consequently decreasing the intention to inhabit it. These results are consistent with those observed in several studies (Cantillon, 2006; Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Gracia & Herrero, 2006; Höfelmann *et al.*, 2013; Ross & Miroskwy, 2001), in which characteristics of the environment such as perception of social problems were negatively related to quality of life and social cohesion.

Regarding perception of the neighborhood, satisfaction with the appearance of the neighborhood appears as a significant and positive predictor of perceived neighborhood. Safe environments help establish relationships with others, increasing social and support networks and favouring high levels of social cohesion (Arenas *et al.*, 2009; Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Gracia & Herrero, 2006; Höfelmann *et al.*, 2013). However, satisfaction with services appears (e.g., lighting systems, green spaces, lighting) as a negative predictor of perceived neighborhood. Although this result seems contradictory, it could be regarded as a community response to dissatisfaction with services considered as basic. This dissatisfaction with basic services (sewer, electricity, water) can mobilize residents to take joint action to claim them, which would increase relations between neighbors, who would consider one another as “allies” and supports for improving the neighborhood. That is, the community and the neighborhood are a source of support for solving the problems of context such as the lack of space.

Finally, the sense of community was predicted significantly and positively by satisfaction with appearance, and negatively by satisfaction with spaces and the perception of conflict (coexistence problems, conflicts in the neighborhood community, absenteeism) environment social housing. Satisfaction with the

appearance of the neighborhood (safe versus dangerous) affects identification with the community. Similarly, if you perceive the existence of conflicts within the community (with neighbors, coexistence problems in the neighborhood), people tend to distance themselves from the neighborhood and no longer get involved or identify with the place where they live (“I am not like them “) (Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Höfelmann *et al.*, 2013). A low satisfaction with basic services would be related to a greater identification with the community in the sense that it mobilizes people and creates support networks that seek a common goal, i.e., improvement of basic lighting, sanitation and water supply.

This study has a number of limitations that should be considered. First, the cross-sectional design precludes drawing causal conclusions from the relationships between variables (León & Montero, 2003), although this study assumes the perception of social problems and satisfaction with the environment as antecedents of social cohesion. However, a review of existing scientific literature allows establishing this relation between perception of the environment and social cohesion (Arenas *et al.*, 2009; Feldman & Steptoe, 2004; Gapen *et al.*, 2011; Höfelmann *et al.*, 2013). A second limitation has to do with the fact that all variables have been assessed by self-report measures, which increases the risk of common method variance. The results of the Harman test showed that such variance does not appear to significantly affect the results, but may not be entirely ruled their influence. On the other hand, survey design is particularly sensitive to certain biases such as social desirability bias in responses (Navas, 2002).

Future studies should analyze the relationship between the perception of context and empowerment as processes that affect social cohesion. Certain problems in the environment activate empowerment processes, resulting in higher levels of identification with the community, better relationships between neighbors and greater perceived support among them. It would also be desirable to replicate this study with samples from other parts of Spain for social housing tenants.

Conclusion

The subjective experiences and perceptions of neighborhood residents appear to be important predictors of fundamental social processes such as social cohesion, which should be considered and studied with objective measures of the environment (e.g., levels unemployment or crime rates) in the study of social housing and the design of interventions aimed at social integration. Satisfaction with the appearance of the neighborhood (sense of security, cleaning, public spaces) and perceived problems associated with drugs and social conflict appear to be critical determinants of social cohesion and, ultimately, of the quality of life of the residents of social neighborhoods. Finally, dissatisfaction with certain elements

of the environment (lighting, supply networks) could favor certain processes of empowerment that would lead to high levels of social cohesion.

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