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SOCIABLE SPACE AND SOCIAL POLICIES IN IRANIAN URBAN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Changes in the spatial arrangement and dominant social processes of urbanization over the past few decades in Iran have failed to allow communities to shape their social interactions. This paper is a synthesis of a quantitative and qualitative study of community responses aimed at creating good social spaces within local communities in Tehran. First, we identified Perceived Residential Environment Quality indicators (PREQ) as tools for determining the effects of environmental quality (EQ) of sociable spaces. Then key social governance-related concerns were studied on the basis of five questions including: Are the decision-making and regulatory processes open, rigorous and accountable? Is the environmental quality assessment process adequate? Does the government have the intention and capacity to monitor and enforce regulations? Has the interaction of community members in decisions been timely and have local actors been significantly involved? Have local governments been included in decision making? It is observed that community residents identified systematic gaps and problems in decision-making processes and sometimes even used them to advance individual interests, because they do not feel that they are dealt with justice and see the current laws as depriving them of access to more resources. In many cases, regulatory protections and assessments of social and environmental values lagged behind the physical construction. Administrative bureaucracies without creating a real participation have been increased. Overall, we argue that as a common ground, environmental activities can bring together people in the local community but when such functioning systems are put in place to ensure community engagement. So, despite extensive formal endorsement, they should

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provide for an effective as opposed to a symbolic involvement of stakeholders other than governmental authorities.

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The urban local community is a focus of intermediate level of analysis which provides space that allows us to observe the public and private processes and structures (Bonaiuto, Bonnes 1996). In Iran, the local community can be understood as the main cell of the traditional city, and it is usually a settlement of a particular ethnic group, race, religion or sect. The urban community under the influence of the tribal system, in the process of its formation, created collectivities referred to as the local community here. The need for internal solidarity, on the one hand, and the limitation of the self-sufficient group against others, on the other, justified the need for relative autonomy in the field of services and facilities of these communities. Socio-cultural solidarity created the attachment to the local community and the desire to follow individuals with common customs as well as feelings of differentiation towards other local community residents (Yarshater 1982; Zad 2013).

The dominant social relations are defined very delicately in the body of the local community, in the organization of accessibility and roads and the centre of the local community and other physical elements such as water reservoirs (*Ab anbar*), mosques, *Husseinieh*, *Sagha-Khane* and public bathrooms. The physical structure of the local community as a cultural crystallization of the socioeconomic conditions of the society has a certain degree of coherence and homogeneity. In other words, the aforementioned factors created the physical elements of the local community, and a set of elements in residential centres creates a local environment that reflects the interactions of residents in their everyday communication (Pakzad 2005).

With the entry of motor vehicles, the complexity of the division of labour and the migration from rural to urban areas, we are witnessing the transition of traditional systems to modern spaces in cities. The various changes of urban local communities in Iran can be examined from two perspectives: first, changes in the local community characteristics in terms of the ruling system and inner social changes that have been carried out by statesmen and national governments which has always been able to affect in different historical periods, and second, the effects of global and technological changes on Iranian local community. Accordingly, at the present time, the perception and definition of the urban local community as the smallest unit of urban division have fundamentally changed.

Thus, Tehran is currently divided into 376 urban local communities. Therefore, this term can be viewed from both historical and legal perspectives. Historically, the local community and its territory are defined by ethnic, racial,

religious and class ties. In legal terms, reviewing current laws indicates that the most important law in which the local community is defined is the administrative law that divides the country approved in 1984 by the Islamic Parliament of Iran. Urban local community areas follow these urban divisions. In large cities, some urban local communities constitute an urban region. Bagh-Shater is one of the few urban local communities in Tehran, which is consistent with both historical and legal criteria. It has also been an old local community comprising villages around Tehran and an urban local community according to new legal rules. Based on this, for a complete understanding, social interactions have been chosen in their new form. Prior research (Tehran Municipality 2015) shows that the local community creates continuous social interaction that impacts facilities and amenities, health and wellness, participation in urban affairs, building of shopping centres and public transportation, security and attachment within this local community. With the help of Perceived Residential Environment Quality indicators (PREQ), this present study examines the creation of continuous social interaction among the inhabitants of the Bagh-Shater local community.

Social Interaction in an Urban Local Community

Both social variables and community's physical characteristics trigger productive social interaction in an urban local community. Demographic and social characteristics affect how residents interact with each other and how they use common spaces within the neighbourhoods. Factors such as the characteristics of the respondent in the life cycle (including age, marital status and the presence of children at home), ownership status (owner or tenant), length of stay, education level and annual income and socio-demographic characteristics are associated with the quality of social interaction (Haggerty 1982). On the other hand, the spatial and physical characteristics of a neighbourhood can affect the pattern of social relations between neighbours. The location of the neighbourhood, its scale and proportions, and physical characteristics are examples of this. Some research considers how traditional local communities promote social interaction through such simple physical features as pedestrianization and the facilitation of outdoors activities (Jacobs 2016).

Jan Gehl (1986: 65) states that 'long-term activities occur in local streets in semi-private areas,' which he calls soft edges. Hence, physical features can, as elements of effective design of space, encourage social interactions or act as a factor in preventing such interactions. Physical features can encourage people to stay in a space and protect and care for the spaces collectively. Moreover, the longer people spend in their neighbourhood, the more they are excited about engaging in the neighbourhood activities (Keefer, Knack 2008). In this sense, 'good' places for interaction are spaces that make people from different areas and backgrounds want to be there. These spaces meet four basic characteristics (Holt et al. 2018): there has to be a reason for people to go there; there has to be a reason for people

to want to stay once they arrive; people in the space have to feel safe and comfortable; and the space has to be welcoming and accessible to everyone.

The social interaction process begins when actors are placed in a position of mutual accountability to each other and as long as this position remains, the interactive process continues and does not stop. People come to their community spaces to satisfy their need for social interaction (Marcus, Francis 1997). Our research is dedicated to a transformed traditional local community which has existed for ages and has gone through modernization. We intend to study how the creation of a new local community on the place of already existing one in Tehran has changed past social relationships. The Bagh-Shater local community is our case in point.

Study Area

Bagh-Shater is at the third zone of district one in Tehran. It is located between the Darband and Golab Darreh rivers (Fig. 1). It is surrounded by mountains in the north, and it ends with Darband road in the south. Bagh-Shater is an old community in the district. It takes up a total of about 24 hectares. The population growth rate shows the extremely high habitability of the area. The strengths of the social structure of the community include the strongly coherent social groups in the central and old parts, the formation of a council, reasonable cooperation among residents, high education rates, relatively high security, feelings of attachment among residents, and also the formation of neighbourhood units.

From an economic perspective, the placement of the community along the mountain routes in the north of Tehran and the very high value of land there are parts of its economy. However, the lack of land for providing necessary services, and the relatively weak economic strength of many of its residents are some of the problems of Bagh-Shater's economy. The current structure of the local community does not follow a systematic design. It seems more likely that the local community left from rural areas over time and has gradually grown and developed into its present form organically.

Bagh-Shater consists of two kinds of space: a traditional (organic) type and a new type. Traditional parts include unstructured spaces, which are gradually formed over time and are not purposefully designed. These areas lack any sort of planning and are shaped around the Bagh-Shater square (Fig. 1). The second type includes the outer areas of the local community that is based on an architectural plan and had a regular and geometric shape and did not follow its old centre-oriented development.

Perceived Residential Environment Quality

In order to investigate how social interaction occurs in modern local communities, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was used.

Some aspects of creating good places for interaction are related to environmental quality and others are related to social policy (Holt et al. 2018). We adopt a combination of methods to study and collect data to identify: what are the most important factors that motivate and shape sociable places? What are key community governance-related concerns on track to create an interactive space? In order to answer these questions, we analysed survey results (based on the PREQ Index), documents (policies and laws) and interviews.

The main aspects of the assessment of community spaces include the spatial dimension (architectural and urban planning features), human aspect (social relations and attachments) and functional aspects such as services and facilities (Amérigo 2002) which can be measured by PREQ. PREQ is used as an index for assessing the quality of the environment in urban local communities. To assess social policies promoting social interaction, we adopted the qualitative approach that investigate both regulations and opinions, as well as local activism (advocacy) regarding community spaces.

The data gathering of the research was divided into two parts. First, for the assessment of the local quality environment, a PREQ questionnaire was used. The study population was the Bagh-Shater local community. To determine the sample size, we used Cochran's formula. The population of Bagh-Shater comprises around 9780 people and 2502 households (Statistical Centre of Iran 2016) – thus, 422 residents of the Bagh-Shater were selected as the sample. As far as possible, efforts were made to select high-precision contributors based on their socio-demographic (e.g., gender, age, etc.) characteristics. Then based

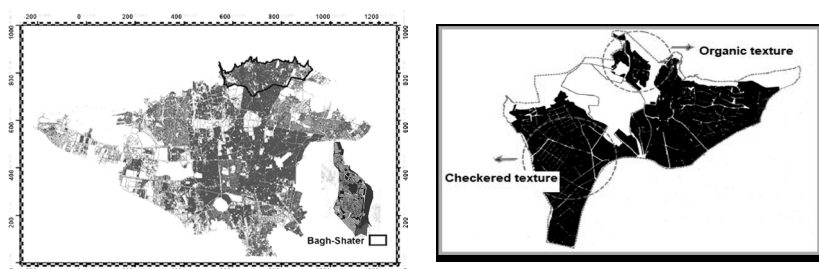


Figure 1. Location of Bagh-Shater in Tehran and its Textures

on Persian version of PREQ (Bonaiuto et al. 2015), the questionnaire was prepared. Twelve indicators of PREQ with a total of 158 items were created. The Likert-scale consists of seven-level assessments, from 'totally agree' to 'totally disagree.' And individual factors include gender, age, literacy rate, occupation and etc. The alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated to be 0.793, indicating the reliability of the measurement tool.

In the second part of data gathering, we organized in-depth interviews with key informants, both individual and group interviews. Our research is

grounded in 15 interviews with key informants intimately involved in the Urban Local Community councils. Interviewees included urban planners, academics and local council members. Also, were conducted group interviews with staff of five NGOs that are acting in Bagh-Shater. Each group interview was organized in a group of 6 people. The data was used to construct an image of social government policy issues, with a particular focus on social controversies and resistance in relation to social interaction in the local community. Then, researchers identified themes by comparing and contrasting the responses across the local community. Our purpose in this paper is to identify the shared factors that motivate and shape an effective social interaction in the local community.

Part One: What are the important factors that can facilitate social interaction?

PREQ has been understood as a multi-dimensional concept that can be measured through a list of questions in a survey. This tool is a set of measurements for gauging the quality of the perceived residential environment and the measurement scale of place attachment (Bonaiuto et al. 2003; Fornara et al. 2010). The initial version of the scale of PREQ is based on three criteria that reflect the three main aspects of neighbourhood assessment (spatial, human and functional). The initial quantitative analysis also showed a fourth aspect: the emphasis on contextual characteristics (e.g. neighbourhood life style, environmental health and pollution, maintenance and care), which were empirically confirmed (Bonaiuto et al. 1999). This new scale significantly improved the reliability and validity of the PREQ index.

In order to measure the effect of PREQ indicators on social interaction, multiple regression models were used (calculations are available from authors upon request). To determine the total amount of changes that occur in social interaction by PREQ variables, we made calculations presented in Table 1. It shows that nearly half of the variance of the social interaction is predicted by PREQ variables.

The comparison of indicators with each other shows that the effect of 6 variables (neighbourhood attachment, upkeep and care, organization of accessibility and roads, pace of life, green areas and recreational service) has a significant effect on social interaction. But the architectural and town-planning space, environmental health and welfare services variables, with a significant level of t-value above 5%, have not had an impact on social interaction. The upkeep and care variable with a 0.394 correlation coefficient showed the highest impact, followed by the attachment variable with a coefficient of 0.169; then urban road with a coefficient of 0.142; pace of life with a coefficient of 0.123; green areas with a coefficient of 0.112; and recreational services with a coefficient of 0.102. Accordingly, an increase in one of the standard deviations in the upkeep and care, neighbourhood attachment, and the organization of accessibility and roads variables, the rate of social interaction among the citizens will be increased by 0.395, 0.169 and 0.142, respectively.

Table 1

Impact of PREQ indicators in social interaction

model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	sig
	B	Std.Error	Beta		
fixed	10.355	0.7548		14.018	0.00
architectural and town planning space	0.078	0.036	0.08	1.412	0.0632
organization of accessibility and roads	1.148	0.091	0.142	12.162	0.00
green areas	0.105	0.111	0.112	10.710	0.001
pace of life	0.097	0.038	0.123	11.122	0.000
environment health	0.023	0.043	0.006	0.542	0.0514
upkeep and care	0.714	0.048	0.394	16.879	0.00
neighbourhood attachment	0.304	0.077	0.169	14.101	0.000
welfare services	-0.033	0.117	-0.026	1.062	0.185
recreational service	0.950	0.123	0.102	8.259	0.003

Part Two: key social governance-related concerns

In part two, according to five mentioned above questions, key social governance-related concerns were studied. In that, interpretations were derived from the policies, semi-structured interviews and group interviews, and analysed with a thematic coding during the study.

Are the decision-making and regulatory processes open, rigorous and accountable?

When you want to create good places for interaction, you need social policies that facilitate such interactions. Firstly, we want to know whether or not the processes of decision making are open, rigorous and accountable. But even before that, we analysed key community management-related concerns. In Iran, municipalities are local executive bodies that are governed by a mayor. The task of this organization is to manage their part of the city. One of the unique features of municipalities is the cooperation at the level of city councils. One of the reasons for forming city councils is to provide effective oversight of the administration of city affairs. In fact, the councils have a critical voice, but they cannot impose any obligations. Having

a critical voice but without the power to impose any obligations have led to widespread and systematic corruption and inefficient bureaucracy. It should also be noted that the link between the people and the council representatives is not correctly defined, and as soon as candidates are elected, they lose contact with citizens.

In recent approaches to urban planning, goals are not just physical improvements and designs; instead, urban planning serves as a community-based and policy-oriented process. But these new approaches are not necessarily implemented elsewhere. Thus, we still observe old-fashioned physical planning, not community-based and policy-oriented development in Bagh-Shater. Therefore, as instructions for preparing urban plans changed to a community-based and policy-oriented approach, decision-making and regulatory processes were still not open, rigid, and responsive.

Moreover, fundamental gaps are observed in the planning process. Public sector policies and decisions do not have any practical orientation. Decision-makers continue allocating budget resources and designing regulations and policies through abusive relations. In general, most decision-making processes are exposed to constant pressures from the powerful, and in most cases, these processes run in their favour. As for community orientation, the decision-making and monitoring processes have been complicated for ordinary people and social and environmental activists in the neighbourhoods: instead of contributing to decision-making, they would often face administrative and political deadlocks.

Is the environmental quality assessment process adequate?

Our analysis shows that community resistance and ignoring the rules increase rapidly when environmental assessment processes are limited, weakened, or abolished. It also seems that the vast majority of development and building activities, including those that have the most impact on local environment, are done without any environmental assessment. Given the many development permits issued by the municipality, it appears that the activities can potentially have direct consequences for the ecosystem. Moreover, the developments occur without the necessary assessment of environmental impact and hazards, and these hazards, as a significant issue, have raised concerns for neighbourhood residents and will cause problems in the future. Given that the value of land in this community is very high, there have been cases where city officials have issued high-density residential and commercial permits without informing community residents, and it has caused dissatisfaction among the residents. Nevertheless, their protests and dissatisfaction in this regard have not disrupted the process of such constructions. They only see a set of rapid positive and negative changes around them.

Does the government have the intention and capacity to monitor and enforce regulations?

There are problems with the implementation of the decision-making process and regulation by the government. Among these problems are the lack of accurate information about local communities and the absence of a body or organization

that collects social, environmental and other data. Sometimes, shortcomings and legal inconsistencies regarding the development plans result in no real work done. Sometimes some of the rules governing planning are faced with overlaps, contradictions and legal loopholes, which lead to extra-legal developments. Another problem in the monitoring and enforcement of regulations is centralization of development plans. The way projects are financed is strongly supported and strengthening this centralization of our political and legal system. As a result, it is less likely that these development plans are designed and implemented based on real needs of people living in the community and on the resources and potentials of the neighbourhoods.

When the planners are private developers or businesses, the municipality can provide incentives to persuade them to build spaces that are designed to support interaction. Because of such incentives, the developers and municipalities may create a partnership between them and build such places that are likely to satisfy the needs of local communities. This rarely happens when a more centralized system governs development of urban spaces.

Has the participation of community members in decisions been timely and have local actors been significantly involved?

Local actors will become significantly involved when the local government is accountable for its actions, and there is a dynamic relationship between the involvement of the people in determining their destinies and the accountability of the government. For this, though, mechanisms are required to facilitate the active cooperation of the government with the public. Local institutions may become such facilitators. However, they can also be deficient and grow efficiency in contact with democracy over time. Hence, local actors and government reach an understanding over development plans only if they witness the improvement of common decision-making conditions manifest in democratic institutions. Given the political system in Iran, the local actors of Bagh-Shater have the least impact on the community development planning.

Have local governments been included in decision making?

In the case analysed, local communities consider the City Council and municipalities as essential defenders of their social interests. Our research shows that communities can accept these collective bodies as representative of their interests. The local knowledge and expertise of these bodies can predict community responses to various proposals and can be useful for reducing resistance. Local governments have relative independence in managing local affairs, but they do not have full autonomy to the extent that they can make important decisions. Most obstacles of city councils and municipalities to be more effective are related to insufficient funding.

In general, despite their short lifespan, public institutions in Bagh-Shater are faced with a few major structural problems: unstable funding; lack of

political will on the part of the government to delegate authority; inconsistency between government and local bodies on the responsibilities of city administration; and populism in the council election process. Also, there are more powerful stakeholders than municipal authorities who disrupt the planning process based on community needs such as developers. Any resistance to them would depend on the authority of public institutions and the community planning and decision-making system.

Conclusion

Changes in the spatial arrangement and the dominant social processes over the past few decades of urbanization in Tehran have not caused local urban communities to disrupt previous patterns of social interactions. In the past, Tehranians grew up and lived their lives in local communities that were different from where they live now. Then, their communities meant what they had always known – families and neighbours, familiar places, daily rhythms, social systems and customs they understood. But recently, because of emigration and greater physical and social mobility, many Tehranians find themselves in places far from home, living in communities defined not by common acquaintance, knowledge and culture, but by geography or economics. Rather than knowing their neighbours from childhood, they may not know their neighbours at all. How is commonality of these spaces still created in the new circumstances?

We observed that local people and even sometimes local experts did not have the chance to identify key problems with the new projects and building regulations and good and bad projects were often approved or even operated regardless of the opinion of local community and municipal authorities. As a result, communities felt that the government was failing to properly assess and manage projects related to their space. Furthermore, engagement with local people was inadequate, even cursory in their opinion, or in some cases, meetings were systematically undermined. As a result, there is a feeling of unfairness, powerlessness, disempowerment and the impression of an undemocratic process.

Because of a lack of procedural fairness, the community in our study distrusts that the government will support their interests in a fair way. Instead, local residents were disappointed and disenfranchised to the point of feeling disconnected from the rest of their neighbourhood. Most people living Bagh-Shater neighbourhood felt this way: *'I have many friends and relatives who are similar to my lifestyle and culture but none of them are living in my community, so sometimes I feel like I'm living in isolation. I'd really like to live a community that is trusting and supportive.'* Certainly, communities are less likely to participate in processes they perceive to be unfair. When people do not experience justice and see the law depriving them of access to more resources, competition for more resources through extra-legal processes is common. Many construction violations are due to this process.

We argue that the purpose of local community management should be decentralization, environmental localization and community participation, and when this is implemented successfully, it can play an important role in boosting social interaction. When these ideas are implemented only symbolically and do not create real participation, administrative bureaucracy only increases. On this basis, the following should be taken into consideration: development planning and space management must engage local community and use local residents' capabilities; different dimensions of local space management and its conservation should be codified; citizen supervision over management activities of local community should increase; social and cultural councils of the local community should be formed and a database of local residents' expert skills for solving spatial issues should be established.

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