

**Dottorato di ricerca in
Sociologia, Culture e Organizzazioni**

**Ciclo XXIX
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano**

UNDERSTANDING COWORKING: BETWEEN TYPOLOGY AND CONTRADICTION

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Anno accademico 2016-2017

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Understanding coworking: between typology and contradiction

Introduction.....	7
CHAPTER 1: Coworking in theory. A systematic literature review	14
Introduction	15
1. Aims of the chapter.....	17
2. Literature review: features and objectives.....	18
3. Methods	19
3.1 Scoping and planning	19
3.2 Screening process.....	19
3.3 Analysis process.....	22
4. Findings	23
4.1 Descriptive and bibliometrics analysis	23
4.2 In depth content analysis.....	25
4.3 Shared interpretations of coworking.....	36
5. Field assumptions in the literature debate	44
Conclusions.....	46
CHAPTER 2: A theoretical lens to analyze and understand coworking	48
Introduction	49
1. Origins and development: a brief overview of CHAT	52
1.1 Philosophical roots	52

1.2 The five principles of Activity Theory.....	55
1.3 Toward a fourth generation of Activity Theory.....	56
2. Conceptual tools	57
2.1 Activity system and its object-oriented nature.....	58
2.2 Contradictions.....	60
2.3 Historicity.....	63
Conclusion	65
CHAPTER 3: The evolution of coworking. A historical analysis	67
Introduction	68
1. Conducting historical analysis	69
1.2 The objectives of the historical analysis.....	69
1.3 Data sources.....	70
1.4 Historical phases.....	74
2. Findings	76
2.1 Phase 1: before 2005.....	76
2.2 After 2005 until today.....	80
3. Discussion.....	90
3.1 Differentiation of coworking object and diversity of subjects involved.....	90
3.2 Challenges in historical development.....	94
3.3 Ideal models of coworking.....	97
3.4 Developmental tensions beyond the historical evolution.....	98
Conclusion.....	102

CHAPTER 4: A typology of coworking between structure and processes...	104
Introduction	105
1. Coworking classifications in literature	106
2. Coworking and sharing.....	108
3. Research methodology	114
3.1 Data collection.....	115
3.2 Data analysis.....	117
4. Results	118
4.1 Four coworking activity systems.....	122
4.2 Different interpretations of sharing.....	134
5. Discussion.....	139
Conclusion	144
CHAPTER 5: ‘Co’ of coworking as short for contradiction	146
Introduction	147
1. Research Methodology	148
1.1 Selection of cases.....	149
1.2 Data collection.....	150
1.3 Data analysis.....	153
2. Results	154
2.1 Description of the cases.....	154
2.2 Manifestations of contradictions.....	165
3. Discussion.....	183
Conclusion	192
CONCLUSIONS	195
REFERENCES.....	207

INTRODUCTION

General Background

In recent decades, globalization and technological changes have brought about important transformations in the labor market. These transformations have occurred in various forms and on various levels with the introduction of new forms of production (Benkler, 2006; Bowens, 2007; Botsman and Rogers, 2010; Benkler and Nissembaum, 2006; Schor, 2014) and new forms of organizing (Adler, 2006; Nardi, 2007; Engeström, 2009; Adler and Heckesher, 2009). These new forms emphasize the democratic and collaborative dimensions of labor, and they are based on simultaneous, multi-directional, and reciprocal work as opposed to forms that take place in organizations with an established division of labor, demarcated communities, and formal and informal sets of rules.

Coworking has been emerging in this current social and organizational scenario as a key component of the unfolding transformations. It started in the early years of the 2000s, emphasizing its collaborative potential in promoting social changes in the labor market and promoting values related to accessibility, openness, sustainability, community, and collaboration (Kwiatkowsky, 2011). The extensive popularity of coworking is due to the popularity of the so-called ‘coworking space,’ a new type of workplace in which different sorts of professionals (Gandini, 2015; Kojo and Nenonen, 2016) - heterogeneous by occupation, sector of work, organizational status, and affiliation (Parrino, 2013) - work alongside each other in the same place (Spinuzzi, 2012; Kojo and Nenonen, 2016; Parrino, 2013). During the last 12 years, we have witnessed the emergence of coworking spaces, their exponential increase, and worldwide acceptance. The first coworking space was established in 2005, and the number has grown from that beginning to 75 in 2007, 310 in 2009, 1130 in 2011, 3400 in 2013, and 7800 in 2015, and there are more than half a million members worldwide (Deskmag, 2015).

This thesis is focused on the analysis of the kinds of spaces that are defined as coworking spaces and that, generally speaking, are said to be focused on the promotion of a collaborative approach to work. This analysis excludes other kinds of spaces that have emerged over the years and can be compared with coworking spaces. In fact, such spaces

have been compared with coworking spaces in the literature (Moriset, 2012; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016) because they are neither private spaces (like home) nor the primary site of work (Oldenburg, 1989), and they tend to facilitate productive activities with other forms of interactions and relationships. However, in the current analysis, spaces have been excluded that fit in the following categories, i.e., *business incubators and accelerators* (focused on the assistance of professionals in the development of entrepreneurial businesses), *maker spaces* (based on production with a focus on the creation of material artifacts), *fablabs* (maker spaces with an emphasis on technological tools, such as 3D printers), and *serviced offices* (rented office space and facilities without any particular attention to the improvement of the collaborative environment). However, even though these spaces have different names, it is clear in the thesis that we are assisting the progressive hybridization of the different concepts (Butcher, 2016; Moriset, 2013). The idea of focusing specifically on coworking spaces resulted from the interest in analyzing the phenomenon that, in particular, formally stresses the dimensions of collaboration, sociality, and community as opposed to the traditional approach to productivity.

With its rapid growth, coworking has been attracting the interest of both professionals and academics. It is creating high expectations regarding its positive effects on social and economic development, and it is receiving attention for its potential to promote change in the labor market (Gandini, 2015, 2016; Butcher, 2016). In addition to the diffusion of coworking spaces around the world, the number of academic studies dealing with this topic is increasing significantly. Coworking has been studied in different countries, continents, and social environments from the perspectives of various disciplines, including psychology (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016), sociology (Gandini, 2015), economic planning (Avdikos and Kalogeresis, 2013), urban informatics (Bilandzic, 2013), management (Butcher, 2013; Capdevila, 2013; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac, 2016), design (Parrino, 2013), real estate (Green, 2014), urban studies (Groot, 2013), and engineering (Kojo and Neonen, 2016; Liimatainen, 2015). The potential of coworking has been identified at different levels in terms of its facilitation of social processes (Spinuzzi, 2012; Parrino, 2013; Rus and Orel, 2015), innovation and entrepreneurship (Capdevila, 2013, 2014), and its potential for promoting social change (Merkel, 2014).

Inside this framework, the aim of this work was to question and critically discuss various potentials and benefits of coworking. The author followed the intuition of some authors

who spoke about coworking as a “buzzword” (Gandini, 2015) or a “trendy word” (Moriset, 2014) by emphasizing the risk that some academics and scholars might define coworking as inevitably positive. Thus, by starting from the hypothesis that coworking has been described and considered from an overly optimistic perspective, this thesis was structured in such a way as to answer the following question, i.e., “*Can coworking be considered an innovative phenomenon that introduces new forms and collaborative logics of work and organizations?*”. In the dissertation, this question will be addressed by covering various aspects that represent the gaps that have been identified in the literature review. These gaps are related to the evolution of coworking and its stratification and differentiation over the years; the identification of plural manifestations of coworking; and the detection of tensions and contradictions that characterize the current state and orient the possible evolution of coworking.

Thus, by evaluating coworking from a critical perspective, the dissertation offers an articulated understanding of coworking and discusses the challenges and risks of coworking and its potential evolution. In order to provide a foundation for fruitful discussion of the logic of the thesis that can be supported by the theoretical framework, the idea of moving from the history of coworking to its classification and to its dynamic contradictions was implemented. This is a progressive and dialectical way to approach the phenomenon.

Theoretical Approach

My aim in this research is to approach the new and still-evolving topic of coworking by producing academic, discipline-based, and problem-driven information (Delbridge, 2014; Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013) that will be of use to professionals and practitioners (Burawoy, 2004; Gibbons et al., 1994).

In order to initiate and enhance the dialogue about this topic based on the existing literature, an attempt was made to problematize the topic (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011; Willis and Trondman, 2000) by emphasizing the gap between the positive, innovative effects of coworking and the need for a critical analysis of the phenomenon. Thus, I decided to use a theoretical framework that permits the production of information that can be of both pragmatic and theoretic relevance. Specifically, I used the theoretical approach described in Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Engstrom, 2000; Sannino,

Daniels, and Gutierrez, 2009) to study coworking and to enrich and challenge the available theoretical resources for understanding it. The basic reasons for this choice were related to the fact that Activity Theory understands phenomena as human and collective activities that are situated inside specific social contexts and characterized by peculiar historical and cultural dimensions. Thus, in this sense, the first reason was that Activity Theory permits one to understand the complexity of a phenomenon, such as coworking, by analyzing the intrinsic interrelation between the individual, organizational, and social dimensions that are involved in shaping coworking. The second reason was connected strictly to the relational, developmental, and dialectical perspectives of CHAT, which led to the identification of possible future courses of action. This approach is dialectical and developmental in the sense that CHAT provides a theoretical and methodological framework that is focused on understanding how phenomena evolve and are brought about through contradictions (Sannino et al., 2009).

The use of CHAT as the theoretical model can be justified because of the possibility it offers for a dynamic reading of the object under study, achieving a critical framing about its proximal development and evolution. Thus, in the thesis, coworking is interpreted as a collective activity. The hypothesis is that different interpretations of the object (that are conceptualized in Activity Theory as the sense-makers that help explain the phenomena) of coworking lead to different configurations of the activity and its components (including subjects, objects, instruments, community, division of labor, and rules). In addition, the evolution of the object of coworking leads to the emergence of structural tensions and local contradictions that are expressed in the coworking activity and that elucidate both the potentials and especially the risks in the future evolution of coworking. Thus, in the dissertation, I use exploratory research questions, a qualitative methodology in collecting and analyzing the data that were based on the experiences of different subjects involved in coworking. The theoretical interpretation of coworking as a collective activity (Engeström, 1987; Leont'ev, 1978) emphasizes the mediating role of social, cultural, and historical factors in the local and broader context. An Activity Theory perspective recognizes the inherent complexity of coworking and supports a critical stance that reveals the beneficial and constraining factors as well as the transformative or non-transformative nature of coworking.

General Aim

Given these premises, in the thesis, I problematize coworking using the Activity Theory approach in an effort to counter the optimistic views, which are emphasized in the existing literature. In the dissertation, I propose a sequential and mixed-methods research design that is aimed generally at improving the available information concerning coworking and enhancing our understanding of its implications, contradictions, potentials, and risks that coworking presents as a way of work and organization inside the current complex and quickly developing social and labour market.

Methodological Approach

In line with the theoretical framework, the methodology used in the thesis is based on a context-driven approach (Van Maanen, 2011) that permits the understanding of the evolutionary dynamics of coworking with a broadened view of its concrete manifestations. This is strictly connected to the relational nature of CHAT, by which information is strongly anchored to the situated contexts, i.e., CHAT provides conceptual tools that orient a qualitative investigation of the phenomena to produce relevant and contextualized information, by enhancing the dialogue with and between the different people involved (researchers, practitioners, and stakeholders) (Engestrom, 2000). More specifically, to describe the overall aim of the thesis, the study adopts some of the main conceptual tools of the Activity Theory, e.g., *object*: the object of coworking is analyzed in its historical evolution and its current state; *historicity*: a historical perspective is emphasized throughout this study because coworking is considered in its historical development and in the evolution of connected historical tensions; *contradictions*: the contradictions of coworking are investigated both in terms of historical tensions, which gave rise to changes and developments in coworking, and in terms of local contradictions that characterize different interpretations of coworking. To coherently describe the concerns of the methodology, the thesis includes (1) **an historical analysis** of the development of coworking with the aim of identifying the nature and evolution of the object of coworking and the development of different coworking organizations; (2) **a qualitative exploration** that is based on qualitative interviews with the founders and managers of coworking in different regions of Italy to identify the typology of coworking and the different types of activities involved that explain the stratification of coworking in its current state; and (3)

an in-depth qualitative analysis based on ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews of four coworking spaces in order to identify systemic contradictions. In summary, it is possible to say that the methodology used in the thesis is based on an abductive approach since the theoretical framework of CHAT is constantly put in dialogue and interaction with the data that progressively are collected in the empirical studies.

Table 1 – Methodological approach

	Method	Data	Aim
Historical Analysis	Historical analysis	Documents/papers/articles	Identifying the evolution of coworking and historical tensions
Qualitative Exploration	Qualitative interviews	24 interviews with coworking founders in Italy	Understanding the manifestations and related implications of coworking
In-depth Qualitative Analysis	Ethnographic observation	Ethnographic observations in four coworking spaces in Milan	Analyzing contradictions and possible directions for development

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into three main parts:

The first part (*chapter 1*) is dedicated to an analysis of the scientific literature on coworking. A systematic literature review was conducted to investigate the most important studies on coworking. Thus, the first chapter provides a quantitative and qualitative discussion of the main scientific contributions related to coworking, the definitions of coworking in the literature, and the assumptions that form the basis for debate.

The second part (*chapter 2*) explains the theoretical framework that was used to analyze coworking and that guides all the phases of the research as well as the concepts informing

the analysis. Thus, the second chapter introduces Cultural Historical Activity Theory, its philosophical basis, and its main conceptual tools. Also, the concepts that were used in the analysis are explained, including how they were used.

The third part is the empirical part, and it includes *Chapters Chapter 4* and *Chapter 5*. Chapter 3 presents the historical analysis of coworking and addresses how the phenomenon has evolved over the years, including the tensions that may have boosted its evolution. Chapter 4 focuses on the understanding of the multiple concrete manifestations of coworking. The study results in the identification of a typology of coworking based on four different types of coworking activities that are characterized by different structures and processes. Chapter 5 is oriented toward understanding the systemic contradictions of the types identified in the study presented in chapter 4. The identification of systemic contradictions allows us to understand how the historical tensions, out of which coworking emerged, are manifested in situated contexts and suggests possible directions for the future evolution or involution of coworking.

- Chapter 1 -

COWORKING IN THEORY: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

ABSTRACT

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of the scientific literature about coworking. A systematic literature review is adopted in order to investigate the most important studies about coworking. The chapter is organized as follows. Firstly, the method adopted for the literature review is described. Secondly, the results of the review are described: a quantitative/bibliometric description of the main contributions about coworking and a qualitative in depth analysis of selected papers on the basis of scientific criteria. The qualitative analysis is divided in three main parts: (1) a classification and discussion on the contents of the papers; (2) a discussion about the interpretations of coworking in literature; (3) a discussion about the assumptions at the basis of the debate about coworking in the literature. The literature review leads to the identification of interesting issues, which are presented in the conclusions of the chapter and which will guide the empirical studies of the thesis.

Introduction

Co-working is not a new word. Its traditional meaning in fact is generally associated with the practice of working together on the same task or piece of work with colleagues or clients (Buksh and Davidson, 2013; Fost, 2008). However, *coworking*, without the hyphen,¹ is an emergent usage that is generally traced back to San Francisco-based independent IT specialist Brad Neuberg, who decided to offer a spatial and social infrastructure to freelancers, entrepreneurs and other individual knowledge workers like himself (Neuberg, n.d.; Hunt, 2009). Today, coworking spaces are diffused all over the world. The Global Coworking Survey, realized in 2016 by Deskmag (www.deskmag.com), a well-reputed website specifically focused on the analysis of coworking, shows that the number of coworking spaces worldwide in 2016 was 11,300. This can be considered an exponential and continuous growth, comparing the data of 2016 with that of previous years (75 in 2007, 310 in 2009, 1130 in 2011, and 3400 in 2013, and 8700 in 2015).

In addition, coworking has been studied in different countries, continents, and milieus from different disciplinary perspectives, including psychology (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016), sociology (Butcher, 2013; Gandini, 2015), economic planning (Avdikos and Kalogeresis, 2017), urban informatics (Bilandzic, 2013), management (Capdevila, 2013; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac, 2016), design (Parrino, 2013), real estate (Green, 2014), urban studies (Groot 2013), and engineering (Kojo and Neonen, 2016; Liimatainen, 2015). From these studies, it is possible to identify three main aspects that may be used to distinguish the new meaning of coworking from the previous ones.

The first distinctive characteristic can be traced in the new working structures that characterize coworking, the so-called *coworking space*. The space represents a new

¹ The rise and diffusion of coworking have been accompanied by a debate around how to spell coworking. Different authors (Gandini, 2015; Capdevila, 2013; 2014) underline that coworking has to be spelled without the hyphen in order to differentiate it from the term co-working with the hyphen, and in general working together in the same place (Deskmag, 2011).

concept of workplace and is described in the literature as a workplace where different sorts of professionals (Gandini, 2015; Kojo and Nenonen, 2016), heterogeneous by occupation and/or sector of work, organizational status, and affiliation (Parrino, 2013), are co-located and share the same working environment by working alongside others, not necessarily on the same task, in the same space (Kojo and Nenonen, 2016; Parrino, 2013; Spinuzzi, 2012). As previously described, the first coworking space was founded by Neuberg in 2005. The space had the aim to integrate and merge the autonomy and freedom that characterize the freelancer's work and the social relations and organizational structure offered by a traditional company.

The second fundamental aspect is related to the *social processes* that coworking aims to activate. In literature, coworking has been described as oriented to the creation and promotion of collaboration (Capdevila, 2014; Spinuzzi, 2012), social relations (Parrino, 2013), and community (Adler, Kwon, and Heckscher, 2008). Thus, coworking appears to be a new interpretation of work able to give back value to social dimensions besides those of profit and business (Merkel, 2015).

The last aspect that seems to strongly connote coworking is that it is described as a response to structural changes in the labor market and in particular to the diffusion of the self-employed and freelance workforce (Uzzi, 1996; Connelly and Gallagher, 2004), the change in the nature of work mostly based on knowledge and creativity (Blackler, 1995; Alvesson, 2001), and the increased importance given to collaborative production and work (Moriset, 2014; Engestrom, 2004, Spinuzzi, 2012).

These three dimensions lead the scientific community, as well as the opinion leaders, to speak about a new meaning of coworking that they associate to a phenomenon that has been promoting changes in the ways people work and organize. A growing number of academic studies that deal with the topic of coworking have been exploring the nature and potential of coworking from different perspectives. However, the novelty and the constant advances associated with coworking make it a challenging task to provide a clear understanding of its characteristics and implications. As a result, the body of research on coworking uses diverse and not necessarily convergent understandings. This conceptual inconsistency hinders the collective understanding of coworking and makes determining a direction for future research problematic. Therefore, there is a need for a

more robust conceptualization of coworking in order to orient scholars in finding and evaluating future researches. The present chapter will provide a foundation for the PhD thesis by reviewing the scientific literature around coworking. The review and analysis of literature will allow consolidated interpretations of coworking, trace assumptions to be challenged, and will be used to formulate questions that will be explored in chapters 3, 4 and 5 and that permit to better answer the main research question.

1. Aims of the chapter

On the basis of these considerations, the present chapter intends to provide an overview of the scientific contributions in literature and discusses how the concept of coworking is addressed nowadays.

The main aims of the present work are those of:

- I. Mapping the scientific contributions about coworking in terms of time, disciplinary perspective, and focus;
- II. Providing an in depth analysis of selected contributions by identifying the various perspectives adopted in literature for the analysis of coworking and the main interpretations of coworking that are currently orienting the debate in the literature; and
- III. Problematizing and questioning the literature about coworking by identifying possible assumptions that characterize the debate.

The literature review provides a general and comprehensive understanding of coworking, by identifying its manifestations and implications at different levels, and suggests insights for future research about the topic. The first section describes the method of ‘systematic literature review’ (Tranfield et al., 2003) adopted for the analysis of the scientific contributions. The steps of the analysis are explained in detail. These steps are: *scoping and planning* (identification of the research questions), *screening process* (how and by which criteria the studies are selected), and *analysis process* (how the studies are analyzed).

Then the chapter is organized by following the aims of the literature review previously mentioned. The presentation of the results of the systematic literature review is divided into: (1) a descriptive and bibliometric analysis of the studies about the coworking

phenomenon; (2) a more in-depth qualitative analysis of selected studies based on specific criteria. In this section there are comments and discussions about the different perspectives adopted in the analysis of coworking and about the definitions of coworking provided in literature; and (3) a discussion about the main assumptions that are present in the scientific literature (throughout different fields).

Following the perspective proposed by Alvesson and Sandberg (2013), the systematic literature review aims to propose a problematization of the literature. As the authors underline, the intent is not only to fill a gap in literature, but to focus on an understanding of the main assumptions at the base of the literature itself. Such an approach enriches and builds upon already established contributions and theories in literature (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013).

The present chapter intends to challenge assumption present in the literature in order to identify interesting topics that will be investigated in the next chapters.

2. Literature review: features and objectives

The literature analysis has been realized with the method of systematic literature review (Tranfield et al., 2003). A systematic literature review provides a method for the review of the existing literature that is more rigorous compared to a narrative review. A systematic review is useful in reducing the author's biases and her/his pre-existing hypotheses. Undertaking systematic review is considered today an important scientific activity. In the last 15 years, the method of systematic review has been applied mostly in medical studies and more recently in research activities related to economics, sociology, and management (Tranfield et al., 2003). The traditional narrative literature review has been criticized for being mostly a descriptive account of a singular researcher whose criteria of inclusion of studies are usually affected by personal biases (Fink, 1998; Hart, 1998). The systematic review differs from the traditional narrative literature review since it is considered systematic, transparent, and replicable (Torgerson, Brooks, and Hall, 2006). It is considered *Systematic* since it describes the search process used to identify studies following a precise rationale based on the response to specific research questions, as well as the presentation of the results of the search and analysis of the studies. The method is *transparent* in that the criteria of

inclusion/exclusion of the studies in the review process are explicated and made clear to the readers. This method of review is also *replicable* as the criteria and the review steps are defined explicitly and can be adopted successively by another researcher who can update the analysis and integrate it with other findings (Cooper, 1998).

3. Methods

In the following sections the steps of the systematic review are explained in depth: (1) *scoping and planning* (definition of the research questions and planning of the research terms); (2) *screening process* (application of inclusion/exclusion criteria and identification of the studies to be reviewed and analyzed); and (3) *analysis process* (presentation of the method followed to analyze the studies).

3.1 Scoping and planning

Coworking has been attracting the attention of both the academic and non-academic world. However, the coworking literature is quite fragmented in terms of characterizing what coworking is, what it does and what needs it fulfills. Moreover, a shared understanding and conceptualization of coworking in the field of organizational sociology is still lacking. Thus the questions that guide the literature review in order to reach the aims listed before are the following:

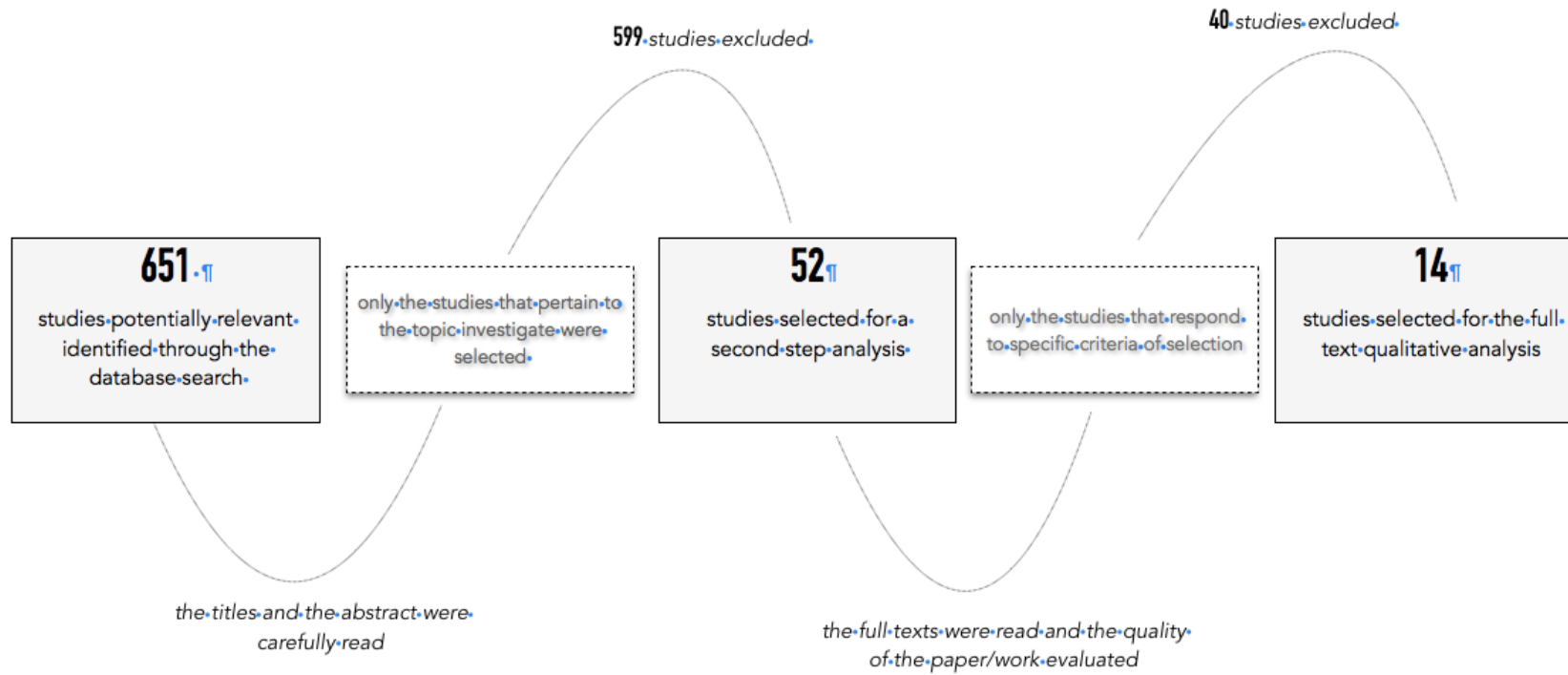
- What perspectives and approaches are used in the literature to analyze coworking?
- What are the main characteristics of coworking that emerge from the analysis?
- How is coworking currently interpreted and conceptualized?
- Which are the main assumptions at the basis of the debate about coworking?

The term coworking is not new, but today it is associated with an unprecedented phenomenon with new characteristics and implications. The current literature is based on an analysis of the emergent implications of coworking from different perspectives and at different levels. For this reason, the present review intends to extract from the various studies a comprehensive understanding of coworking and of the aspects involved that should be further investigated.

3.2 Screening process

The search process covered scientific databases and other open sources, beginning in January 2014, with the most recent update in December 2016. The scientific databases identified for the literature review were *SCOPUS*, *ISI*, and *Social Science Database*. In addition, *Researchgate* was used as a source for identifying conference papers and chapters of books. On the basis of the research questions, the key words selected for the search were as general as possible in order to include all the scientific contributions on the topic. To this aim, “coworking” was identified as the first key word to be adopted for the search. After analyzing the contributions identified with the term coworking, other words frequently used as synonyms for coworking were added as search key words. In fact, even if some studies and articles (Gandini, 2015; Hurry, 2012) tend to underline that the term coworking, without the hyphen, indicating an emergent meaning that differentiates it from *co-working*, with the hyphen, the initial search process demonstrates that most of the studies and research still use the term co-working also to indicate the emergent phenomenon. The key words “co-working” and “coworking space” were thus chosen for inclusion in the search string in order to collect the widest variety of possible perspectives related to this concept in terms of both disciplinary and temporary trends. The search and retrieval process was realized in the steps represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1.1. Steps of the systematic literature review



The described screening process is the result of periodic discussions and progressive improvements of inclusion/exclusion criteria. A first search step, using the key words “coworking,” “co-working,” and “coworking space,” yielded a large number of studies (n = 651) that could be potentially interesting, as their titles or abstracts included the key words. However, a careful reading of the titles and abstracts helped reduce the selections to studies that focused on the topic under investigation (n = 52). The terms in fact were associated with other issues not relevant to this study (e.g., collaboration between students in the educational field or to the cooperation and communication between doctors and patients in the field of medicine, etc.). For this reason, the studies that did not focus on the topic under investigation were excluded from the following in-depth analysis. The last step of screening was based on a reading of the full texts and an analysis of the quality of the studies on the basis of the reputation of the journal/editors and the number of citations (at least once). Finally, 14 core studies were identified and included for in-depth content analysis. The studies were selected based on the following criteria: the articles published in peer reviewed journals, or conference papers and chapters cited at least twice in other articles.

3.3 Analysis process

The analysis process included: (1) a descriptive bibliometric analysis of the 52 contributions focused on coworking, in order to understand the trend of the current research stream and map the existing studies on coworking; and (2) an in-depth analysis of the content of the full texts of 14 publications. The content analysis codes and categories were directly derived from the text data, and not guided by a predefined theory or relevant research findings.

4. Findings

In this section, the main results from the systematic literature review are presented and divided in three sections. In the first, a quantitative analysis of the literature is provided by synthesizing the number of publications about coworking, taking into account the year of publication and the focus of the works. In the second section, the content of the selected 14 studies is discussed and analyzed in detail. In the third section, a discussion about the assumptions is provided.

4.1 Descriptive and bibliometric analysis

As explained before, the search process was based on three steps. At first more than 600 studies were identified by using the key words “coworking” OR “co-working” OR “coworking space.” After a first analysis of the titles and abstracts, the works based on the topic of interest were reduced to 52. The analysis of these studies testified to an increasing interest in the topic of coworking, with a growing number of publications in the period between 2008 and 2016. In addition, the topic of coworking emerged as extremely multifaceted, since it involves different aspects with economic, social, and organizational implications. In this regard, the mapping of the studies was realized by taking into account the year of publication, the type of study (paper, conference paper, book, etc.) and the focus of the work (see Table 1). More specifically, through the analysis of the titles and the abstracts, four main categories of topics/issues discussed in the studies were identified:

- I. *Drivers of the coworking phenomenon*: some studies are focused on the identification of the trends, economic/social/demographic/organizational aspects that led to the rising and diffusion of coworking spaces in the world.
- II. *Innovation and entrepreneurship*: other contributions analyze how coworking spaces foster local innovation and entrepreneurship;
- III. *Internal dynamics*: another recurrent focus is the analysis of the dynamics that occur inside coworking spaces among the players involved (e.g., knowledge sharing, social support, learning, networking, etc.); and
- IV. *Mode of work, production, and organization*: this focus is connected to the analysis of coworking as a new way of working, producing, and organizing. In this sense, the studies investigate the specific features of coworking as a new mode of

production and work, as well as the organizational structure and characteristics of the coworking spaces.

Table 1.1 Number of publications per year/by topic

YEAR	PUBLICATIO NS total N°	Drivers of coworking N°	Innovation/ entrepreneurship N°	Internal dynamics N°	Mode of work/ production/org N°
2016	11	-	2	4	5
2015	16	3	7	4	2
2014	13	4	4	3	2
2013	6	2	1	2	1
2012	5	-	1	3	1
2011	1	1	-	-	-
TOTAL	52	10	15	16	11

Bibliometric analysis reveals an increasing interest of scholars in understanding and analyzing coworking from different perspectives. The first scientific publications appeared in 2011, and even if coworking can be considered relatively new, the scientific contributions have now reached a significant number. In particular, throughout the period 2011 through 2016, the analysis of innovation and new ways of production and organization were increasing, with the contributions that analyze the drivers of coworking being concentrated between 2011 and 2014. In addition, studies based on empirical research also have been increasing, while at the beginning most of the contributions were explorative theoretical studies, mostly addressing the characteristics of the social and economic scenarios that influenced the rise of coworking. However, the most interesting result of the descriptive analysis is connected with the content of the literature about coworking. Analysis of the literature indicates that the research on coworking is multifaceted and complex and reflects the articulated nature of coworking itself.

4.2 In-depth content analysis

Among the 52 potentially interesting studies about the topic under investigation, 14 were selected for an in-depth analysis of the full text content. In the table below (table 2), the papers included in the analysis are listed, and the year of publication, the title of the paper, the type of publication, the journal editor, the authors, topic and disciplinary field, are specified. The analysis of these studies had the final aim to identify conceptualizations and understandings of coworking. The analysis was realized through a conventional content analysis (Weber, 1990) in which coding categories were derived directly from the text data without a pre-defined theory.

Year	Title	Type of publication	Journal/editor	Author(s)	Topic	Disciplinary field
2016	“Coworking-spaces: how a phenomenon of the sharing economy builds a novel trend for the workplace and for entrepreneurship”	Scientific paper	Review of Managerial science	Bouncken, R. and Reuschl, A.J.	Entrepreneurship	Business and Management
2016	“Typologies of coworking spaces in Finland - What and How”	Scientific paper	Emerald	Kojo, I. and Nenonen, S.	Coworking space business model	Business and Management
2016	Coworking spaces: a source for social support for independent professionals	Scientific paper	Frontiers in Psychology	Gerdenitsch, C., Scheel, T.E., Andorfer, J. and Korunka, C.	Social support	Applied Psychology
2015	“Co-working and innovation: New concepts for academic libraries and learning centres”	Scientific paper	Emerald	Schopf, J., Roche, G. and Hubert, G.	Innovation (role of learning)	Social science
2015	Co-working spaces for promoting entrepreneurship in sparse regions: The case of South Wales	Scientific paper	Routledge	Fuzi, A.	Entrepreneurship	Management
2015	“Coworking, a community of work”	Scientific paper	Teorija in praksa	Rus, A. and Orel, M.	Community building	Social science

2015	“The rise of coworking spaces”	Scientific paper	Emesphera	Gandini, A.	Individual productivity, knowledge sharing	Theory and politics in organizations
2015	“Coworking in the city”	Scientific paper	Emesphera	Merkel, J.	Urban development	Theory and politics in organizations
2015	“Co-working spaces and the localised dynamics of innovation in Barcelona”	Scientific paper	International journal of Innovation Management	Capdevila, I.	Urban innovation	Business and management
2014	“Co-constructing a Sense of Community at Work: The Emergence of Community in Coworking Spaces”	Scientific Paper	Academy of Management	Garrett,L.E., Gretchen M. S. and Bacevice, P.	Community Building	Business and Management
2013	“Coworking, assessing the role of proximity in knowledge exchange”	Scientific Paper	Knowledge Management Research and Practice	Parrino, L.	Knowledge exchange	Design
2013	“Building new places of the creative economy. The rise of coworking spaces”	Conference Paper	Geography of Innovation International Conference	Moriset, B.	Urban innovation and creativity	Business and Management
2013	"The third wave of virtual work”	Scientific Paper	Harvard Business Review	Johns, T. and Gratton, L.	Economic and social changes	Business and Management
2012	“Working alone together. Coworking as emergent collaborative activity”	Scientific Paper	Business and Technical Communication	Spinuzzi, C.	Collaborative processes/configurations	Organizational Studies

Tab. 1.2. Papers classification (Title, type, editor, author, topic, discipline)

4.2.1 Perspectives around coworking

The selected studies on the topic of coworking, accordingly with the bibliometric analysis, show investigations of coworking that present diverse and plural focuses (Coleman, 1990). More specifically, the reading of the papers led to the identification of three main levels of analysis followed by the authors². These are:

- The *macro level* analysis, which stresses the social-political and economic contexts and the interaction between market and society in the analysis of coworking;
- The *meso level* analysis, which considers the coworking organization as the unit of analysis and studies the structure and model of the coworking space organization; and
- The *micro level* analysis, which has the individual as the unit of analysis and investigates the social practices shaped and embedded in the material and immaterial infrastructural contexts.

The levels identified in the in-depth reading are not disconnected by the topics traced in the bibliometric analysis. The latter in fact can be classified inside the levels. For instance the studies that are focused on the analysis of the drivers of coworking can be reconnected to the MACRO LEVEL, while the papers that analyze the processes of innovation in relation to coworking are within the MESO LEVEL, and at the MICRO LEVEL are the studies focused on internal dynamics. However, in the section below I present an in-depth discussion of the contributions selected.

² see Table 3 for verifying correspondence between authors and level of analysis

Macro level analysis

The studies selected that adopted a MACRO LEVEL lens for the analysis of coworking (n = 4) are mostly theoretical papers with the aim to position coworking inside an economic and social scenario. The macro level perspective was adopted more in the earlier research about coworking, when the empirical studies were still few. The contributions that were analyzed in-depth mainly focus on the social and economic transformations that drive the rise and diffusion of the coworking phenomenon. The final aim of these works is that of understanding the issues that coworking addresses. Following this perspective, the authors position coworking inside the digital economy (Johns and Gratton, 2013), the creative economy (Moriset, 2014), and the knowledge labour market (Gandini, 2015). The most important drivers of coworking are connected on one side to the rise and diffusion of ‘knowledge workers,’ independent professionals who work on project-based or short-term contracts and are not necessarily tied to one particular organization (Reed, 1996), as they are oriented to entrepreneurial experiences and self-employment (Horowitz and Rosati, 2014). The second driver is connected to the diffusion of digital technology (Castells, 2003), which has been strongly transforming the geography and the way of doing knowledge-based jobs (Moriset, 2014). The workplace for knowledge jobs is increasingly flexible, with workers being free to decide autonomously where and when to do their jobs (Johns and Gratton, 2013; Moriset, 2014). In particular, Johns and Gratton (2013) provide a history of the main changes that have brought about the rise of coworking. More specifically they speak about “three waves” of work virtualization, which correspond to as many “forms of virtual work”, which includes coworking, presented as the last step. The first wave is represented by the rise of what they called as “virtual freelancer”, a new type of workers who can autonomously manage the organization of their own work and can access professions without being employed; the second one includes the diffusion of the ‘virtual corporate colleagues,’ by providing the positive effect of increased flexibility of work (people who can contribute and collaborate from their own places); and the third wave, which are coworkers who appear as the consequence of a diffused and perceived need of workers to bring back the possibility of meeting in physical places in order to recreate a social context of cohesion and commitment.

This study and others (Johns and Gratton, 2013; Moriset, 2014; Gandini, 2015) underline not only the positive aspects that drive coworking but also the problematic

(we can say contradictory) nature of the scenario in which coworking is situated and from which it has been rising and diffusing. On the one hand, socio-economic changes led to positive transformations like the flexibility, autonomy, and full control of workers over their jobs. However, on the other hand, these transformations registered negative effects, like lack of a sense of community, scarce collaboration, and increased isolation of workers, who tend to do their jobs alone from home (Johns and Gratton, 2013; Gandini, 2015). In this regard, Gandini (2015) emphasizes also the double-sided nature of knowledge workers who are characterized by both precariousness and entrepreneurship that contradictorily coexist. Merkel (2015) underlines the criticalities beyond the concept of ‘freedom’ usually associated with independent professionals, whose work condition is often more associated with constraint than with voluntary choice. Johns and Gratton (2013) stress the aspect of isolation and lack of collaboration and sense of community, besides autonomy and flexibility.

Thus, we can say, as Johns and Gratton (2013) affirm, that it is from these contradictions that coworking has arisen, as a useful compromise between the autonomy and flexibility of knowledge workers and the feeling of being part of a (shared) working environment. Moriset (2014), in fact, compares coworking spaces to the third place described by Oldenburg (1989), a place that is neither the office nor the house, in which independent professionals can work by enhancing the opportunity for effective and productive encounters (what the author calls *serendipity* by coining the term from Merton and Barber, 2006). Merkel (2015), along the same line, describes coworking spaces as a solution or a strategy (created through a bottom up process) for responding to the changes brought by the labour market: the spaces in fact provide a place for mobile, project based, freelance, and self-employed workers. In their studies, the authors present the positive effect of the coworking phenomenon, which they describe as an effective way to manage and resolve these risks (autonomy vs. isolation, flexibility vs. precariousness), by providing spaces that are community based, low-cost and convenient (Johns and Gratton, 2013), functional to the circulation of information and the production of valuable professional outcomes (Gandini, 2015), and with strong local roots as they are connected to policies oriented to the creation of creative districts around urban environments (Moriset, 2014).

At the same time, Moriset (2014) and Gandini (2015) underline the risks connected with coworking that are hidden by the predominant enthusiastic approach toward coworking:

a ‘coworking bubble’ in which coworking reproduces its own contradictions of precariousness, low value and lack of innovation.

The macro level analysis sheds light on the criticalities that are at the basis of the coworking phenomenon and the connected risks. However the studies are mostly explorative (Merkel, 2015; Moriset, 2014) and theoretical (Gandini, 2015) with the primary aim of problematizing the social and economic scenario around coworking. In this sense, it would be interesting to explore further how the criticalities that they underline give rise to contradictions and how the latter are effectively and concretely reproduced and managed.

Meso level analysis

The studies positioned within the MESO LEVEL analysis (n = 4) are focused on the investigation of the coworking space as organizations. The aim of these contributions is to identify the distinctive features of coworking spaces by comparing or distinguishing them from other organizations.

According to the authors at the MACRO LEVEL analysis, the spaces are described as places where independent professionals use offices and work space for doing their everyday work. At the same time, the spaces are focused and oriented to the promotion and development of social relationships (Kojo and Nenonen, 2016), collaboration (Fuzi, 2015), community (Schopfel, Roche, and Hubert, 2014), and knowledge sharing (Schopfel, Roche, and Hubert, 2014). These processes, which are better investigated in the studies with a MICRO LEVEL perspective, are seen as the main characteristics on which the coworking organizations are based on. Generally speaking, Fuzi (2015) provides a description of the main features of the coworking spaces by differentiating them from other working places such as incubators/accelerators (that are strongly focused on the production of innovative business ideas or business models and offer services focused on business development like mentoring and coaching programs) and serviced offices (that provide office infrastructure and front-office support for clients). While coworking spaces provide offices and infrastructure, they are not strictly focused on the development of new business, but do provide a working environment to independent workers where people can develop social relations with other coworkers

and eventually collaborate and create business opportunities (Schopfel, Roche, and Hubert, 2015; Parrino, 2013).

More specifically, other authors identify the duality of network and community as the main distinctive characteristic of coworking spaces. Capdevila (2015) describes the spaces as microclusters because of two main features: the sense of community that rises thanks to professional interests that the workers share and to the cognitive proximity that facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration. The second feature is connected to the creation of knowledge at both the local and global level: coworking spaces are strongly linked both to the local environment (by organizing events with local organizations inside districts) and to other networks of coworking spaces and coworkers. In the author's view coworking spaces are places in which the micro businesses can interact, develop trust, and create communities.

Schopfel et al. (2016) interpret coworking space as an organizational model that can be integrated inside traditional organizations (in particular libraries and universities) in order to let them reach social responsibility. In their vision, the coworking model is based on the shift from individual (students) to a community of different subjects (students, staff, faculty, employee, entrepreneurs...) from individual learning to collective learning and networking; and from closed places to places open to society.

Rus and Orel (2015) also underline the duality of community and network and compare coworking space to what they call community of work. In their vision, a community of work aims to establish a collaborative network in order to promote information and knowledge exchange as well as collaboration. In this sense, the authors state that trust, solidarity, commitment, and mutuality (characteristics of the traditional communities) are in this case "organizational devices" that permit individuals to share and benefit from exchange of ideas, knowledge and information.

Besides these contributions, other authors have shed light on the heterogeneity of coworking organizations in terms of purpose, model, strategy, and structure. The spaces in fact differ from each other for various aspects, related to: the users (diverse professional sector or specific sector), the offered services (infrastructures but also social events, training, and coaching programs), the size (small, medium, and large), the internal rules, and organizational structure. Particularly Kojo and Nenonen (2016) propose a typology of coworking spaces based on two dimensions: business (profit or

non-profit) and level of accessibility (public, semi-public, or private). By crossing these two variables, the authors identify six types of spaces: public/non-profit spaces (public offices, free of charge); semi-public/non-profit (free of charge for specific targets; e.g., students or researchers); private/non-profit (incubators with a strong focus on the development of new business ideas); public/profit (coworking established in a public space, like a cafeteria, that is available for the purchase price of the cafeteria goods); semi-public/profit (coworking inside private spaces like hotels that require a preregistration and the payment is established according to use); and private/profit (where the minimum lease period is often from a month upward).

The contributions within the MESO LEVEL perspective shed light on two main aspects: the first one is related to the dual nature of coworking spaces that are described as oriented to organizations and based both on the development of business and work, as well as on the promotion of trust, cohesion, and community; the second aspect regards the heterogeneity of coworking spaces that present different characteristics in terms of organizational configurations and of processes of differentiation/integration. In this sense it should be interesting to further investigate the complexity and heterogeneity of coworking organizations and how the heterogeneity is connected with the dual nature of coworking.

Micro level analysis

The studies that adopt a MICRO LEVEL perspective (n = 6) are focused on the analysis of the individuals and the social processes that occur inside the coworking space, among the players involved at different levels. Compared to the contributions within the MACRO and MESO levels of analysis, the studies positioned inside the MICRO level are mostly based on empirical research (n = 3, qualitative; n = 1, quantitative) and case studies (n = 2). As with the MACRO and MESO perspectives, the MICRO analysis shows that the social features assume a relevant role inside the coworking phenomenon and represent the pivotal element on which the coworking spaces are constructed. The micro analysis sheds light on the fact that the coworking phenomenon appeared mostly in order to provide professionals opportunities through the creation of a social and organizational structure (the coworking space). Connected to this consideration, the authors within the MICRO perspective identify as a distinctive feature of coworking the

creation and promotion of interactions among professionals inside the space. As mentioned previously in the discussion of the MESO LEVEL perspective, the literature suggests that coworking spaces should be interpreted as places that freelancers and independent workers access with the purpose of fostering networking practices and social interaction (Capdevila, 2013). Coworking provides a solution to ‘professional isolation’ (Spinuzzi, 2012): sharing a common space provides community to those who otherwise would not enjoy relational support while working from home. Amongst other benefits (flexibility, being able to mingle and work with like-minded individuals, better work–life balance, greater job or career satisfaction), community, or a sense of belonging, is also found to be critical in stimulating business development (Spinuzzi, 2012).

Connected to this topic, most of the researches identify two distinct situations that characterize coworking spaces: (1) those that have a low level of interactions and are based on the co-presence in the same working environment of people who do at the same time different activities and tasks; and (2) spaces in which interactions are promoted as a social norm (Spinuzzi, 2012; Rus and Orel, 2015; Parrino, 2013; Merkel, 2015; Gerdenitsch, Scheel, Andorfer, and Korunka, 2016). In this regard, Spinuzzi (2012) describes two different types of configurations of the mutual expectations of the coworker on the interactions with the other members of the space. The first of these expectations sees coworkers as "good neighbors," working alone, focusing on their tasks. The second one describes coworkers as "good partners," actively working to strengthen the confidence necessary to establish formal working partnerships.

The interactions connected to coworking can assume different natures and can take various forms: collaboration (Spinuzzi, 2012), social support (Gerdenitsch, Scheel, Andorfer, and Korunka, 2016), or informal communication (Parrino, 2013). Some authors underline also how coworking spaces permit the creation of interactions not only among coworkers inside the space but also with other players outside. In this framework, knowledge exchange, which occurs in different forms through the activation of the interactions, seems to have a fundamental role for the promotion of local innovation interpreted as the production of new knowledge and new resources (Capdevila, 2014). More specifically, as Capdevila (2014) and Merkel (2015) state, coworking spaces may assume a role of intermediation between the “underground” (talented individuals) and “upperground” (institutions and organizations) by being a

node of connections where different players (individuals, organizations, institutions) establish informal interactions with each other and enter into contact with new knowledge and ideas.

Another aspect that emerges from the research at the MICRO level is the role of the coworking managers/operators and the strategies they use for the activation of the interactions (Merkel, 2015; Capdevila, 2014). Some authors identify co-location as a sufficient lever for self-managed autonomous communities where natural relationships emerge in bottom-up ways (Merkel, 2015; Parrino, 2013). However, other researchers underline the facilitation of internal interactions and relationships between coworkers and with organizations external to the space as the main objective of the coworking spaces and the most important task of the coworking managers (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Parrino, 2015). These contributions highlight that the simple “co-location” of professionals who work inside the same working environment and are focused on different tasks and objectives is not sufficient in promoting interactions and consequently collaboration (Spinuzzi, 2012), innovation (Capdevila, 2014), and community (Rus and Orel, 2016). Particularly, Merkel (2015) identifies two different profiles of the coworking manager: the “service provider,” who is concentrated on work aspects and on the promotion of a good and positive working environment by providing attendant services; and the “visionary,” who is more concentrated on the promotion and enhancement of communication and collaboration among the coworkers inside the space. The strategies that the coworking managers/operators can adopt are different and, as Capdevila (2014) shows, they refer to how they use physical spaces (location, distribution of material assets, size etc.), projects (where coworkers and also other external organizations can work collaboratively), and events (focused on work but also social events intended for internal coworkers but that can be opened to the public). All these contributions start from the consideration that coworking spaces are mostly oriented to the promotion of social interactions and demonstrate that the managerial strategies that are focused on this aspect bring advantages at different levels including increasing workers’ performances, activation of new businesses, and creation of new professional opportunities. However, most of the contributions start from the taken-for-granted idea that coworking is by definition based on principles like collaboration, community, openness, and accessibility (Spinuzzi, 2012), and that it does not critically explain how, when, where, and why these processes are activated.

4.3 Shared interpretations of coworking

The in-depth reading of the selected papers and their categorization within the three different levels of analysis underlined some shared and distinctive interpretations of coworking as well as some aspects that need to be further investigated and clarified. To this aim the literature review continued with an analysis of the various definitions of ‘coworking’ and ‘coworking space’ (see Table 3) in order to shed light on the authors’ interpretations. The definitions are reported in Table 3 where they are positioned at the different levels of analysis previously identified (MICRO, MESO, MACRO), and discussed following.

Year	Author(s)	Methodology	Macro	Meso	Micro	Definition of Coworking	Definition of Coworking Space
2016	Bouncken, R. and Reuschl, A.J.	Theoretical		X		Coworking allows autonomy and dynamic combinations of task-related and leisure targets as well as combinations of social and economic targets	Coworking space provides their individual or institutional users a flexible and highly autonomous use of both office and social space that eases the direct personal interaction among the coworking-users for social, learning, cultural and business related interests .
2016	Kojo, I. and Nenonen, S.	Qualitative research - Interviews and analysis of the websites of 15 coworking spaces in Finland		X		Independent work in shared facilities	[<i>coworkign spaces are</i>] Shared offices where a group of individuals with more or less heterogeneous backgrounds co-locate themselves in the same work environment
2016	Gerdenitsch, C., Scheel, T.E., Andorfer, J. and Korunka, C.	Quantitative research - 2 studies based on questionnaire			X	-	Coworking spaces are social environments that can provide possibilities for social support with coworkers as a new source of social support
2015	Schopfel, J., Roche, G. and Hubert, G.	Theoretical		X		-	Coworking spaces can be defined by four characteristics: Socio professional (coworking spaces allow information to flow more smoothly and stimulate creativity. Besides resource sharing, they often highlight exchange and their human and accessible aspect); Economics (coworking spaces represent a cost-reduction for users); Culture (coworking spaces are part of a cultural movement with a community working on collaborative projects. Collaboration is not an end itself but a way of functioning); Space (coworking spaces are physical sites where it is possible to meet, exchange, work and collaborate in virtual world).
2015	Fuzi, A.	Case study		X		-	Coworking spaces are collaborative work environments providing support (emotional, professional, financial), shared flexible facilities , and access to a broad network of professionals and entrepreneurs starting and growing businesses while working alone together.

2015	Rus, A. and Orel, M.	Case study			X	Coworking intends to provide a new type of coworking space and organizational arrangements suited to the needs of the creative class	Coworking spaces are a response to the latent demand [<i>of the creative class to refuse to work in bureaucracy that stifles innovation and creativity and to maintain independence</i>] for shared working spaces which brings independent creatives together but lets them work alone. What resonates with the creative class is the community of work , a term that we propose because it conveys the ideal of a social structure that facilitates uninhibited sharing of information and knowledge.
2015	Gandini, A.	Theoretical	X			-	Coworking spaces are shared workplaces utilized by different sorts of knowledge professionals , mostly freelancers, working in various degrees of specialization in the vast domain of the knowledge industry . Practically conceived as office-renting facilities where workers hire a desk and a wi-fi connection these are, more importantly, places where independent professionals live their daily routines side-by-side with professional peers largely working in the same sector, a circumstance which has huge implications on the nature of their job, the relevance of social relations across their own professional networks and their existence as productive workers in the knowledge economy
2015	Merkel, J.	Qualitative research- 25 semi-structured interviews with coworking operators		X	X	Coworking is a new social practice that characterizes new ways of organizing labour and enables mutual support amongst freelancers and self employed persons	
2015	Capdevila, I.	Qualitative research - semistructured interviews and direct observations			X	-	Coworking spaces are localized spaces where independent professionals work sharing resources and are open to share their knowledge with the rest of the community. Coworking spaces act as intermediaries between creative individuals (the underground) and innovative firms (the upper ground) contributing to the interaction between collocated actors through the articulation of places, spaces, projects and events.

2014	Garrett, L.E., Gretchen M. S. and Bacevice, P.	Theoretical	X		X	The coworking movement developed to provide community and a collaborative working environment for independent and remote workers. It's a trend some established companies are learning from.	Community work refers to a moment-by-moment practices by which a sense of community is constituted. This differs from traditional views of community – building as an organized social event process defined explicitly to unify the membership around a common goal or set of values [...] community work allows others to be mindful of what kind of community they want to become a part of and to participate in constructing that kind of community
2013	Parrino, L.	Case study			X	The term coworking refers to a range of types of spaces, differing according to institutional purposes, adherence to values and movements, coworker employment, level of relations with other spaces and other aspects	Coworking spaces are defined on the basis of three main traits: the co-location of various coworkers within the same work environment; the presence of workers heterogeneous by occupation and/or sector on which they operate and/or organizational status and affiliation (freelancers in the strict sense, microbusiness, employees or self-employed workers); the presence (or not) of activities and tools designed to stimulate the emergence of relationships and collaboration among workers
2013	Moriset, B.	Theoretical	X			-	Coworking spaces are regarded as “ serendipity accelerators ” designed to host creative people and entrepreneurs who endeavor to break isolation and to find a convivial environment that favors meetings and collaboration
2013	Johns, T. and Gratton, L.	Theoretical	X			Coworking is the third wave of virtual work	Coworking spaces are to knowledge work what bike-share programs are to transportations: a community-based, low cost, convenient and eco-friendly solution
2012	Spinuzzi, C.	Qualitative research - semi structured interviews and online conversations analysis			X		Coworking spaces are open plan office environments in which professionals work alongside other unaffiliated professionals for a fee

Tab. 1.3. Papers classification – coworking definition

This analysis identified some recurrent dimensions in the understanding of coworking. The first one is the idea of coworking as a trend and important player concerning the new forms of work and organization including both knowledge work (Gandini, 2015) and creative work (Johns and Gratton, 2013; Rus and Orel, 2016). The definitions collected in Table 3 underline that coworking is a new way of interpreting and organizing work, characterized by valorization of social and collaborative dimensions besides those of production. Coworking is in fact described as: a social practice by which people organize work on the basis of mutual support (Merkel, 2015); a way to provide community and a collaborative working environment for independent and remote workers (Garrett et al., 2014); a collaborative activity that includes configurations of both good-neighbours (work alone by focusing on different tasks) and good-partners (formal work collaborations), as well as other possible configurations based on network activities inside a specific space (Spinuzzi, 2012).

In this framework, coworking spaces are conceived as organizations characterized by the co-location of different professionals who share the same place for work. This aspect seems to influence, for some authors (Bouncken and Reuschl, 2016; Kojo and Nenonen, 2016; Fuzi, 2016; Rus and Orel, 2015; Gandini, 2015) the activation of other social dynamics like those of social support (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016), collaboration (Spinuzzi, 2012; Capdevila, 2013), and innovation (Capdevila, 2013). On the basis of these premises the coworking space has been associated with different forms of organizations where aspects like collaboration, relations, and networking are components of the value proposition and are promoted and facilitated by the proprietors of the spaces. As previously indicated coworking spaces are described as microclusters (Capdevila, 2013), an intermediate organizational form where inter-firm collaboration is promoted; as organizing platforms (Parrino, 2013) these spaces are based on the co-location of heterogeneous workers, where there can be (or not) activities that stimulate relationships and collaboration among coworkers. Moriset (2014) defines coworking spaces as hybrid places (not home nor office) designed to host professionals who work in the creative field and who endeavor to break isolation and try to find collaborations. In addition, other authors (Rus and Orel, 2016; Garrett et al., 2014) compare coworking to a community, and in particular, to what they define as *a community of work*, a specific type of community that involves dimensions of sharing, belonging, reciprocity, and trust—but also openness to other professionals through the activation of networks. The creation of network is also at the basis of the definition of Gandini (2015), who states that coworking is a particular form of organizing work (that in his work of 2016

he defines as *freelance mode of organization*) where knowledge workers can improve their professional reputation, thus increasing their network.

From these definitions of coworking spaces it is possible to trace two cross-aspects that combine the interpretations. The first one is that coworking is first of all, sharing a space, but at the same time it is something more that involves social participation and collaborative activities (this is considered a distinctive aspect of coworking, in respect to other spaces like serviced offices³). The second aspect regards the fact that whether they are conceptualized as communities, networks, hybrid arrangements, or microclusters; coworking spaces are interpreted as a “third way” of organizing, in which such third-way workplaces are not dominated by the logic of hierarchies or markets.

At the same time, within these shared interpretations it is possible to trace aspects that need to be further investigated in order to arrive at a clear and coherent understanding of coworking.

The analysis in fact permitted three main considerations, which are strictly interconnected and intertwined. The first concerns the diffused *simplistic* approach that mostly regards the conceptualization of coworking. Such an approach refers to two main trends. Firstly, as shown in Table 2, most of the authors provide a definition of coworking that connects and overlaps with coworking spaces. This is the case, for example, of Rus and Orel (2015), who state, “*Coworking intends to provide a new type of coworking space and organizational arrangements suited to the needs of the creative class,*” or of Kojo and Nenonen (2016), who define coworking as “*Independent work in shared facilities,*” as well as Parrino (2013), for whom “*coworking refers to a range of types of spaces that differ for institutional purposes, values, types of coworkers and level of relations promoted.*” These definitions fail in that they reduce the concept of coworking to its sole material manifestations and to an on-off state based on the presence of the coworking space infrastructures. Other interpretations, on the contrary, connect coworking to entities and concepts like: movement (Garrett, Gretchen, and Bacevice, 2014; Merkel, 2015) and community (Rus and Orel, 2015). However they do not explain in which sense coworking can be connected to concepts like community

³ Serviced office are based on a business model similar to that of coworking spaces, since it consists in the sharing of places and facilities (printing, copying, kitchen equipment, cleaning, maintenance). However serviced offices attempt to replicate the structure and style of formal organizations and are not focused on the promotion of social dynamics between professionals.

(Tonnies, 1887; Durkheim, 1897; Adler, 2006) and movement (Diani, 1992; Goodwin and Jasper, 2009) or for which characteristics and features they can be assimilated (as well as differentiated) into these concepts.

The second consideration is connected to the *fragmentation* of the interpretations that are strictly dependent from the author's discipline. As shown in Table 3, the definitions are generally focused on single and isolated aspects and processes (e.g., social support, collaboration, co-location, knowledge work, acceleration, etc.). If this trend on one side reflects the complexity of coworking, on the other side none of the understandings are able to explain in depth how and by which conditions coworking as well as coworking spaces assume specific characteristics, roles, and functions. Thus, for example, coworking spaces are defined as shared offices (Gandini, 2015; Kojo and Nenonen), but also as social environments oriented to the promotion of social support (Gardenitsch, Scheel, Andorfer, and Korunka, 2016), collaborative work environments (Fuzi, 2015), localized spaces, intermediaries between creative individuals and firms (Capdevila, 2015), and serendipity accelerators (Moriset, 2014). Similarly, coworking is defined as a new way of work, a new way of production based on collaboration, as an expression of the digital economy, and an expression of the collaborative economy. It is not still clear how these definitions are connected to each other within a comprehensive conceptualization. However, researchers' disciplinary backgrounds deeply affect the interpretations they give coworking as well as coworking spaces. For instance, Capdevila (2013) is interested in innovation, thus he seeks innovation-and creativity-related aspects of coworking. Fuzi et al. are more focused on revenue models. Gardenitsch et al. (2016), as psychologists, are most interested in coworking as a source of social support for otherwise isolated workers. Moriset (2014) and Gandini (2015) are more interested in political-economic critique of the precarity of work. Kojo and Nenonen (2016), as engineers, are focused on the analysis of business models. These disciplinary perspectives lead to different understandings of coworking and coworking spaces. Each defines coworking in a way that allows them to focus on their chosen aspect as a core aspect of coworking.

The third consideration, as discussed in previous paragraphs, is related to the diffused and predominant *enthusiastic* approach to the study of coworking. Some authors speak about coworking as a “buzzword” (Gandini, 2015) or a “trendy word” (Moriset, 2014) and underline the risk of a diffused tendency of some academics and scholars to define coworking as a general phenomenon considered as inevitably positive, by promoting

collaboration (Spinuzzi, 2012; Parrino, 2013), autonomy (Bouncken and Reuschl, 2016), accessibility (Schopfel, Roche, and Hubert, 2015), and innovation (Capdevila, 2015). However, the predominant trend in literature is a lack of problematization of coworking, by adopting a diffuse but inevitably positive interpretation of coworking. In the scientific contributions, coworking and coworking spaces are considered for example as creative and energetic places (Fuzi, 2016), collaborative environments (Capdevila, 2013; Merkel, 2014; Spinuzzi, 2012) where knowledge exchange (Parrino, 2013), learning, and social support (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Parrino, 2013) are promoted. This results in a more idealistic and less realistic analysis of the coworking phenomenon.

4.4 Field assumptions in the literature debate about coworking

Davis (1971) explained that what makes a theory notable is that it challenges assumptions that are at the basis of the existing theories. This perspective was followed by various authors in the social sciences (e.g., Astley, 1985; Bartunek, Rynes, and Ireland, 2006; Black, 2000; Campbell, Daft, and Hulin, 1982; Daft, 1983; Daft and Lewin, 1990; Davis, 1999; Hargens, 2000; Lundberg, 1976; Miner, 1984; Mohr, 1982; Weick, 1989, 2001; Wicker, 1985). In particular, Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) propose a different perspective for literature analysis and the identification of “interesting” research questions. The traditional and most diffuse method for generating research questions has been called *gap spotting* (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013). Gap spotting involves identifying an inadequately addressed question or issue in a body of research and then moving to fill it.. With this aim literature reviews tend to unproblematize the literature by addressing the gap to which other authors have not paid enough attention. As previously demonstrated, this approach leads to fragmented theorization because concepts and theories are not further developed or questioned. On the contrary, the problematization of the existing literature for generating research questions pushes the boundaries of already influential theories by going into more depth. In line with this perspective, the systematic literature review identified assumptions that characterize the literature about coworking. Thus, I identified what Alvesson and Sandberg (2013) call *field assumption* (taken for granted aspects about a specific subject, shared across different disciplines and theoretical schools).

From the analysis of the interpretations previously described it emerges that coworking is generally considered a new way of working and organizing that permits independent professionals to overcome criticalities and risks that characterize the labor market, like isolation and precariousness. Social participation is seen as the main lever through which professionals are able to solve those criticalities. In this sense coworking spaces are described as new types of organizations where independent professionals besides the pursuit of individual interests, share values of collaboration, community, accessibility, openness, and sustainability (Kwiatkowsky, 2011). Coworking often has been characterized by its proponents as being connected to collaboration, community, social support, etc., suggesting that it promises positive personal relationships while obscuring the difficulties and exploitations of postmodernist workplaces (Butcher, 2013; 2016). Whereas some authors differentiate between coworking spaces that are focused on the promotion and enhancement of social processes and those that are not (Merkel, 2015;

Spinuzzi, 2012), other authors (Capdevila, 2013; 2014) describe different forms of collaboration that are activated inside the coworking spaces by identifying the positive effects.

This shared interpretation is based on the taken-for-granted idea that coworking responds to the need of independent professionals and self-employed workers to regain a social structure for creating the best conditions to accomplish their work. In this sense coworking is considered homogeneous concerning the need or-issue it fulfills, and the main attempt of the authors is that of exploring the social dimensions that characterize coworking spaces, trying to shedding light on the connected positive effects.

Developing these views, the hypothesis at the basis of my thesis is that since its inception in 2005, coworking has evolved and articulated by responding to different needs- and issues, giving rise to different forms of coworking spaces and applying to quite different conditions over the years. In this sense it would be interesting not only to investigate which forms of collaboration and other social processes are activated within coworking spaces, but to understand how these processes are connected to different kinds of coworking spaces that address different needs/issues. In addition, in order to upset the enthusiastic view about coworking, in the present work I adopt a critical approach for the analysis of the evolution of coworking and coworking spaces in order to understand which contradictions that characterize the current social scenario and labor market are reproduced and/or overcome.

These considerations have brought to the interest to investigate the following aspects: the evolution of coworking, in order to shed light on the criticalities and contradictions that some authors (Gandini, 2014; Johns and Gratton, 2013; Moriset, 2013) had already started to outline; the plural current interpretations of coworking that lead to the implementation of different organizational configurations and that can explain the various processes identified in literature associated to coworking; the contradictions that characterize these manifestations in order to avoid the taken for granted idea that coworking is oriented to values of accessibility, openness, sustainability, community, and collaboration (Capdevila, 2015; Gandini, 2015; Rus & Orel, 2016).

Conclusion

As pointed out in the previous paragraphs, *coworking* is not a new word, but today it signifies an emergent phenomenon with a different meaning from the traditional ones.

Coworking has been spreading and attracting the attention of professionals, who tend increasingly to use coworking spaces and to be active players in different ways in the diffusion of the phenomenon. In the same line, academics have been producing studies and research in order to understand and define coworking. In order to lay the groundwork for scientific research on the concept of coworking, this chapter provides a systematic review of the literature about coworking (as an emergent phenomenon). Even though the contributions in the literature are still few, the increasing interest of academics towards coworking is confirmed by the growing number of studies indexed with the term coworking in the last 5 years and the various disciplines that approach the study of coworking by adopting different perspectives.

The in-depth qualitative analysis of the selected papers shows that the present literature is based on three main levels of analysis:

- the macro level, which is oriented to identify the drivers of the coworking phenomenon and the social and economic scenario in which it is positioned;
- the meso level, which analyzes the organizational and social structures that characterize coworking spaces by identifying the main features and characteristics; and
- the micro level, which focuses on the analysis of the social processes among the coworking players inside and outside the coworking space.

This multilevel analysis sheds light on the complexity of coworking. However, the review underpins the fact that a comprehensive understanding of coworking is still lacking, as it is associated with an on-off status that regards the presence or not of coworking spaces. Moreover, the conceptualizations of coworking depend on the authors' knowledge anchorages and disciplinary traditions. This has led to isolated interpretations of coworking that regard specific aspects of coworking and do not provide a comprehensive conceptualization able to connect the aspects described in the various definitions. In addition, most of the contributions in the literature generally avoid a problematization of coworking by considering only its positive effects.

The literature analysis highlighted the assumptions to be challenged. These regard the fact that coworking is not considered a dynamic phenomenon in evolution that has been stratifying and differentiating over the years. This does not adequately explain and contextualize the underlined differences in the social processes activated and in the organizational models of the coworking spaces. Understanding the issues addressed by coworking would permit researchers both to frame and contextualize the heterogeneity of coworking manifestations and to problematize the predominant enthusiastic view about coworking.

On the basis of this analysis of the literature, in the next chapters (n°3-4-5) I will try to clarify: the evolution and stratification of coworking over the years; the different manifestations and configurations of coworking; the contradictions that characterize coworking and that can put into discussion the optimistic view previously presented.

- Chapter 2 -

A THEORETICAL LENS TO ANALYZE AND UNDERSTAND COWORKING

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the theoretical approach (Cultural Historical Activity Theory) and the connected concepts that guided the phases of the research and that inform the analysis of the collected data. For what concern the structure of the chapter, in the introduction I explain the reasons why I decided to use Cultural Historical Activity Theory. Following the principles and philosophical basis of the theory are described. Then the principal conceptual tools that I adopted in the research are analyzed in detail, and finally in the conclusions I explain how I concretely use the theory in the different steps of the empirical studies.

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I showed that the research and analysis about coworking focuses on different aspects by adopting theoretical perspectives strictly connected to the disciplinary focus of the authors. This has led to different and almost fragmented understanding of the phenomenon. In my case, I decided to adopt the theoretical framework of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), also known as Activity Theory (AT), which in my opinion supports a comprehensive reading of the phenomenon (Engeström, 1987; Sannino, Daniels and Gutierrez, 2009; Engestrom, 2015).

The decision to adopt this perspective is connected to three main reasons: theoretical (interdisciplinary stance) and methodological (practical stance), and personal (subjective stance).

The interdisciplinary stance: The first reason is strictly connected to the intrinsic characteristic of CHAT as a useful theoretical approach. The strengths of CHAT can be traced to its historical roots and its strong cross-disciplinary theoretical perspectives (Sannino, 2011; Sannino, and Sutter, 2011). Activity Theory represents a reference theory in different disciplines, from organizational studies, to education, sociology, psychology, and linguistics where individual and social levels are interlinked and intertwined (Engeström, 1999b; Kuutti, 1996). The interdisciplinary nature is connected to the comprehensiveness of CHAT through which phenomena can be understood as human and collective activities, situated inside specific social contexts characterized by peculiar historical and cultural dimensions. In this sense, this theoretical approach can be used to analyze phenomena by focusing at the individual level, as well as at the collective and social ones, by understanding the intrinsic interrelation between the various levels. In my specific case, this characteristic is functional to better grasp and analyze the (not yet fully understood) complexity of coworking. This interdisciplinary approach in particular is significant because of its multifaceted configurations and manifestations that involve individual, organizational, and social dimensions. Thus, the multiple and unfolding development of coworking, requires proper theoretical lenses

able to deal with these different coexistent dimensions and overcome the current fragmentation in the analysis of the phenomenon.

Practical stance: The second reason is strictly connected to the relational, developmental and dialectical perspectives of CHAT which lead to the identification of possible future courses of action. Dialectical and developmental in the sense that CHAT provides a theoretical and methodological framework that is focused on the understanding of how phenomena evolve and bring about through contradictions (Sannino et al., 2009). Contradictions are in fact, as we will see in the next section of the chapter, the conceptual tool through which it is possible to understand the dynamics and developmental trajectories of the phenomena. This peculiarity of CHAT is consistent with the overall contribution that the thesis makes moving toward the understanding of the evolution, the identification of dialectical inner contradictions and of future potentials of coworking (Spinuzzi, 2012; 2017). This is strictly connected to the relational nature of CHAT by which knowledge is strongly anchored to the situated contexts: CHAT provides conceptual tools that orient a qualitative investigation of the phenomena to produce relevant and contextualized knowledge, by enhancing the dialogue with and between the different players involved (researchers, practitioners and stakeholders) (Engestrom, 2000). This is in line with the approach of the research presented in the thesis, that is based on situated knowledge co-constructed in dialogue with the subjects involved in coworking.

Subjective stance: The third reason is a personal reason and strictly connected to the previously described interdisciplinary nature of AT that well fits with my formative and professional path. During my studies (master's degree and PhD), I have had the opportunity to acquire knowledge and do scientific research both in the field of organizational studies, as well as in the field of sociology. Focusing on collective activity as situated in social context, AT, as reviewed in the next paragraphs, can give value to such a position on the "boundary" between two disciplines and can integrate knowledge from the two disciplines. These elements informed my decision to adopt this theoretical approach that could give me the opportunity to enhance and integrate the various aspects of my formative and professional background.

In addition to the reasons previously highlighted, the decision to adopt the CHAT theoretical approach is also connected with the research questions that emerged from the systematic literature review presented in the previous chapter. Through the investigation of the assumptions (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013) at the basis of the various contributions about coworking, I identified some important aspects that in my perspective need to be investigated in order to reach a clearer understanding of coworking: an analysis of the evolution of coworking, depicting its historical development; an investigation of the multifaceted nature of its unfolding manifestations; and the main contradictions, tensions, and potential transformative trajectories of the phenomenon. In addition, the main features of CHAT's approach (historical evolution; collective, multi-vocal, and plural manifestation of the activities; and contradictions as source of change and development) reasonably fit the principal traits of coworking as they emerge from the literature review (incoming manifestations and expressions of new ways of production; embedded in specific socio-cultural environments; open to potential and future evolution in order to anticipate a new framework of interaction between society, market, and labor).

Despite the predominant enthusiastic perspective that guides a large number of studies about coworking, AT allows identification also of the tensions and contradictions of the coworking phenomenon and a better understanding of its potentialities and risks.

Eventually the reason for the assumption of CHAT as theoretical model for analyzing coworking can be synthesized in the possibility it offers for a dynamic reading of the object under study, achieving a critical framing about its proximal development and evolution.

Finally one of the first, most cited, and in my opinion most solid studies about coworking (Spinuzzi, 2012) based its reflection and empirical research on the theoretical lenses of CHAT. This aspect represents to me a strength for my research, as I can continue the analysis of coworking starting from already solid consideration both at the methodological and theoretical levels.

This chapter is dedicated to the introduction of the Cultural Historical Activity Theory and the explanation of the main principles and theoretical concepts that guided me in my research. More specifically, in the first section I will introduce the historical roots of AT and its main evolutionary steps that led to the current cross-disciplinary AT. In the

second part of the chapter I will focus on the concepts of the theory I used in my research, without covering all the AT concepts. Finally, in the conclusions, I will explain how I use the theoretical lens of AT specifically in the analysis of the coworking phenomenon and how AT guided me in the various steps of the research and how it informed the analysis of the data collected in the empirical studies

1. Origins and development: a brief overview of Cultural Historical Activity Theory

Cultural Historical Activity Theory is a theory with a long tradition that has been influenced by numerous disciplines. In this section I will provide a description of the main roots of the theory as well as of the most important steps in its evolution. In doing so I will refer in particular to the useful historical analysis provided by Engeström (1996), who describes the development of AT in three different generations, that in my opinion explains well the principles of AT.

1.1 Philosophical roots and three generations of CHAT

The main philosophical roots of the Cultural Historical Activity Theory, also known as Activity Theory, can be traced in German philosophy and in different works of various thinkers (Baruch Spinoza, 1632–1677 ; Immanuel Kant, 1724–1804 ; Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, 1770-1831; Karl Marx, 1818–1883) who introduced philosophical concepts that influence the foundational concepts of the theory. Using these sources, Il'enkov (1977) posits a materialistic ontology and the role of contradictions as a source of development. In his view, materialistic ontology underlines the dialectical relations between elements that might be heuristically isolated, but none of which can be understood or theorized apart from the others. Similarly, contradictions are seen as essential in logical thinking and as a source of development and systematic understanding of interdependent relations of phenomena (Engeström, 1987; Il'enkov, 1977). Engeström (1996), one of the leading researchers in the area of AT, interpreted the evolution of CHAT in three main generations. These generations reflect the development of the theory as based largely on different understandings of *activity* (Engeström, 1996).

The first generation is connected to Vygotsky's concept of mediation and elaboration of the mediated action triangle (Vygotsky, 1987). This conceptualization has its origins in

the idea of Russian psychologists who in the 1920s sought to develop an understanding of mind and society that in their vision was not based on the dichotomy of individuals and society that have characterized mainstream Western thought (Blackler, 1995). In fact, Vygotsky considered the individuals and the environment as parts of a unified complex system that represents the essential relationship between an individual's consciousness and the person's interaction with cultural, historical, and institutional settings (Cole, 1985). In particular, Vygotsky—against the stimulus-reaction predominant approach in contemporary psychology—introduced the concept of *mediated action* to explain this relationship as mediated by artifacts, tools, and social others. Mediated action is conventionally represented in the triangular model with the triad subject, object, and mediating artifact. Vygotsky's conceptualization was largely revolutionary at that time, because he was the first to introduce the idea that it was no longer possible to understand individuals without considering their cultural means, and at the same time that it was impossible to study society without understanding the individual's agency (Engeström, 2010). Despite these revolutionary concepts, however, the limitation of the first generation was that the triad as a unit of analysis was focused only at the individual level.

The second generation of AT tried to overcome the limitation by differentiating between individual actions and collective activity. This phase is attributed to Leontiev (Leontiev, 1978), who proposed a classification of activity based on three levels: activity, actions, and operations. Activity is collective and socially constructed during time, oriented to a motive, and each motive is an object (material or ideal) that responds to a need. Actions are individual processes, consciously planned, that occur in limited time span, subordinated to the activity, and governed by specific goals. Finally, actions are realized through operations that are not oriented by goals but that provide means for the realization and adjustment of actions in specific situations and under particular conditions. With the famous example of a “primeval collective hunt”⁴ Leontiev illustrates these three levels of activity to show that individual actions (of the single hunters) are not meaningful themselves unless they are considered part of the wider activity (hunting) in which they are inserted. However the theory does not fully explain

⁴ In Leontiev's vision hunting is a guided by the basic motive of satisfying hunger. The forms by which hunting is shaped have a cultural specificity. In some cultures it corresponds to a collective activity where by the members of the community are assigned different responsibilities: clapping, shouting, playing drums, butchering, etc. These actions are accomplished through the mediation of artifacts like spears, bows, arrows, drums, hands, voices. In this sense the hunt is an activity that can only be realized in the concrete actions of the hunters under specific conditions. The meaning of the single actions can be understood only if it is connected to the motive of the activity.

the way by which the actions are transformed into shared collective objects (Engeström, 1999). Therefore, Engeström (1987) proposed his activity system model as the basic unit of analysis, starting from the classification proposed by Leontiev and expanding Vygotsky's model.

In this model, activity is considered at a collective level and other components are introduced: rules, community, and division of labor (Engeström, 1999). This third generation of the activity system model provides hints for understanding how collective subjects (groups, organizations, societies, etc.) are embedded in their socio-cultural contexts. In other words, Engeström illustrated the basic unit of analysis, an activity system, that represents an evolution of the triangle proposed by Vygotsky (triadic view) and tried to move away from the previous conceptualizations that were too focused on the single individual. In this version the individual action is positioned inside a context where power relations and rules influence the subject's action. In this way Engeström introduced the socio-historical aspect (rules, community and division of labor) that were not addressed by Vygotsky and Leontiev (Engeström, 1999): What first were emerging mediators, in this model have become determining factors (Sannino, 2011). In the second generation the focus was on the relations that occur among the different elements of the activity system that are inherently related to the socio-economic structures of a given culture. In this regard, Engeström, in *Learning by Expanding* (1987), used Marx's interpretation to develop further the model by introducing into the representation the inner relations of production, consumption, exchange, and distribution. The introduction of these aspects permits analysis of the relations among the different components of the triangle: The individual produces goods that can respond to specific needs. These goods are distributed and exchanged on the basis of a set of norms that characterize a specific community. In consumption the subject is positioned at the core of the relations of production, distribution, and exchange, as the good becomes the direct object (Sannino, 2011).

Starting from here, the third generation of activity theory attends to the social transformation and the social structure of the world. Inside this perspective the idea is that are not only the individuals to be modified through mediated activities, but also the environment. With the third generation, Engeström intended to develop conceptual tools to detect and analyze dialogues, multiple perspective, and networks of different activity systems in interaction (Engeström, 2001; Engeström, 2009a). In this sense the third generation of activity theory permitted going beyond the limits of a single activity

system and considered as unit of analysis at least two activity systems in mutual interaction that give rise to multiple perspectives and voices, dialogues, networks, and collaborations, as well as boundary-crossings between activity systems (Tuomi-Gröhn and Engeström, 2003). The third generation activity system model has been largely adopted as a theoretical framework and conceptual tool in different disciplines and fields, from education, to sociology and organizational studies, and medicine.

1.2 The five principles of Activity Theory

Activity Theory has been described (Engeström, 2010) according to five principles that are useful to understand the fundative characteristics of the theory.

The first principle regards considerations about the unit of analysis: a collective, artifact-mediated, and object-oriented activity system in network relation with at least one other activity system is taken as the prime unit of analysis. An activity system manifests and reproduces itself inside human actions and operations and for this reason can be understood only against the background of entire activity systems.

The second principle underlines the multi-vocal nature of the activity system. The latter is in fact characterized by multiple participants who carry their own histories and interpretations, with the activity system itself reflecting different layers of history in its artifacts, rules, and conventions. The plurality and multi-vocality is multiplied inside networks of activity systems and can represent a source of trouble and also of innovation and change.

The third principle is related to the concept of historicity: The activity system can be understood only in relation to its history through which it is transformed and shaped. In this sense it becomes crucial to analyze the history of the activity system in order to understand it. In particular Engeström suggests that history has to be studied both as local history of the activity's object as well as history of the theoretical ideas and tools adopted to shape the activity system itself.

The fourth principle underlines the role of contradictions that pervade all the elements of the activity systems and the relations between them. Contradictions are not the same as problems or conflicts but are 'historically accumulated tensions' that can characterize the single elements of the activity as well as the relations within and between the activity systems. The analysis of contradictions in the perspective of cultural historical

activity theory is crucial because contradictions are considered the principal source of change and innovation and in this sense the lever of the historical evolution of the activity systems.

The fifth and last principle underlines the transformative nature of activity systems: Contradictions bring qualitative changes when some participant recognizes them and starts to question the established norms of the activity. A qualitative transformation occurs when the object of the activity is re-conceptualized in a wider horizon of possibilities that were not present in the previous mode of the activity system.

1.3 Toward a fourth generation of Activity Theory

More recently Engeström addressed the need for a fourth generation of AT. Engeström's (1987) model of an activity system has become the principal third generation model for the analysis of individuals, groups, organizations, etc. However, the recent rise of new forms of activities characterized by social and participatory practices led CHAT theorists to rethink the activity system model. The rise of new forms of production that stress the role of networks (Castells, 1996), collaboration (Schor, 2014; Kostakis et al. 2014; Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006), and the socialized production of value (Adler and Heckescher, 2006; Benkler, 2006) have become a key focus for CHAT theorists. In the literature, different authors have emphasized the shift from craft and mass production to emergent forms that are more decentralized, with distributed authority among all the participants. They are characterized by flexible boundaries and never-ending mutual exchange between producers, consumers, and products/services. These forms of production are more open by providing accessibility to services and goods produced and are based on network where independent nodes can act autonomously and can maintain relationships on their own.

Inside this framework some theorists of CHAT perspective have been focusing on the analysis and understanding of the activities that emerge inside this socio-economic context. In particular the focus is put on the new forms of organizing society and work (Nardi, 2007; Blunden, 2009; Spinuzzi, 2012; Adler, 2006; Kaatrakoski and Lahikainen, 2016) as well as on the transformative agency and learning processes that characterize the socio-organizational contexts (e.g., social movements, communities, social enterprises, etc.) (Sannino, 2015; Kaatrakoski, Littlejohn, and Hood, 2016; Sannino, Engeström and Lemos; 2015).

If on one side the CHAT is interested in enriching inter-disciplinary empirical research about these topic, on the other side a theoretical reflection about the identification and conceptualization of a new unit of analysis is going on. Engeström a few years ago underlined that activities, which emerge according to the principles of the new forms of production, are more difficult to encapsulate in the activity system unit of analysis that characterized the third generation of activity theory, because their objects are harder to define. He stated,

The boundaries and structures of activity systems seem to fade away. Processes become simultaneous, multidirectional, and often reciprocal. The density and crisscrossing of processes makes the distinction between processes and structure somewhat obsolete. The movements of information create textures that are constantly changing but not arbitrary or momentary (Engeström, 2009, p. 309)

If in the third generation unit of analysis the activity systems were too well bounded, inside these new modes of production the activities are characterized by simultaneous and reciprocal processes and the boundaries between the activity systems are more flexible and open. For this reason different authors (Bodker, 2009; Lompscher, 2006; Daniels et al., 2010; Sannino et al., 2009; Spinuzzi, 2011;) have been working on the conceptualization of a fourth generation of CHAT and on the identification of a fourth generation unit of analysis that will focus not only on the activity systems but also on the processes that go on within and between the internetworked activity systems (Engeström, 2009). However at the moment the conceptualization is still at the beginning and the fourth generation of CHAT is far from a consolidated entity. In this sense researches that are focused on the further understanding of new ways of work, production and consumption inside the new scenario previously described, can represent a source for the development of this conceptualization.

2. Conceptual tools

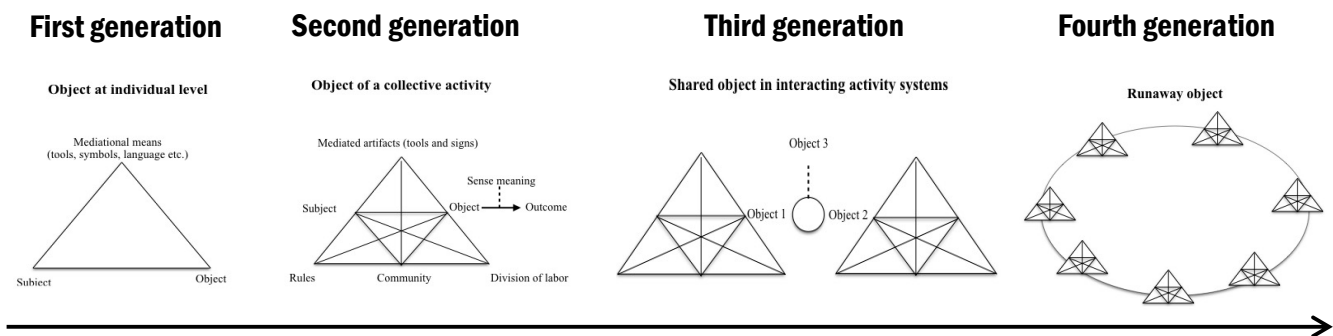
After the brief overview of the developments of the theory, from its origins up to date, in this section I will provide a description of the theoretical concepts of AT that guided the different phases of the research, from the data collection, to the progressive selection of participants and the data analysis.

2.1 The activity system and its object - oriented nature

As it emerged from the analysis of the four generations of the theory, *activity system* is the most fundamental concept of CHAT. It represents in fact the unit of analysis of the theory. It is graphically represented as a triangle diagram that changed during the different re-conceptualizations of activity theory. More specifically, the activity system represents a collective activity in which the *subject* (collective individuals, groups, organizations, or societies) acts on an *object* and transforms it, through the use of *mediating artifacts*, in order to achieve a specific outcome. Rules, community, and division of labor are the socio/historical aspects that mediate the activity. The community corresponds to the social group with which the subject identifies itself while participating in the activity. The rules are formal and informal regulations that influence the activity by regulating the interactions with other community members. Division of labor regulates the way in which the community relates to the object. In the various evolutions of AT, the components of the triangle have been progressively expanded and enriched. At first (in Vygotsky's conceptualization), the triangle represented the human action mediated by cultural artifacts, while in the second generation (based on Leontiev's conceptualization) Engeström expanded the unit in order to investigate collective activities inside specific socio-cultural contexts. In this phase the triangle includes social/collective elements (community, rules, division of labor) and emphasizes the interactions between the same. Finally in the third generation the unit of analysis further expanded and the attention was focused on at least two activity systems in interaction. In this phase, CHAT theorists were interested in social transformations and in the analysis and understanding of dialogues, networks, and multiple perspectives of activity systems. The reflection about activity system as unit of analysis cannot disregard the understanding of the *object* as the fundamental element of the triangle and the object-oriented nature of the activity. In social studies, different authors underline the fundamental role of objects in human actions (Knorr Cetina, 1997; Latour, 1996; 2005), by affirming that human social practices are not merely constellations of intersubjectivity, they are also constellations of "interobjectivity" (Latour 1996, p. 234). In the same line in AT the role of object is considered pivotal in every collective activity, but the meaning of object in AT moves away from the other conceptualizations. The object is what gives sense and meaning to the activity system. In this theoretical approach, *object* is not a general term to name material things. It refers to a historically and social constructed object that orients the activity. The object is the element of the activity system that explains the reciprocal interdependence

between the individuals and the external world: When the object meets an individual's needs, motivation emerges and leads to the activity. In this sense the activity is moved by the needs and oriented to a specific object. In order to better understand the meaning and function of the object, it is useful to recall the distinction made by Leontiev about the two concepts *objekt* and *predmet* (Kaptelinin, 2005). The first one denotes the material reality, a thing that has an independent existence. The second is a term used to indicate the content or target of a thought. This distinction helps to understand Adler (2005), when he underlines that "*The object [of an activity] is simultaneously an independently existing, recalcitrant, material reality and a goal or purpose or ideas that (individuals) have in mind*" (Adler, 2005, p.404).). The twofold nature derives from a central thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (1978) to integrate into the concept both the practical activity object (*Objekt*) and the object of thought (*Gegenstand*). This in order to go beyond the problems of idealism and of materialism (First Thesis on Feuerbach [Marx & Engels, 1970]). This dual essence of the object, that is at the same time the raw material that the subject transforms and the sense-maker that gives meaning to the various entities and phenomena, sheds light also on the dynamic and contradictory nature of the phenomena under investigation (Kaptelinin, 2005). Different authors (Spinuzzi, 2017; Kaptelinin, 2005; Engeström, 2009; Engeström, Engeström, & Vähäaho, 1999) underline the importance of the analysis of the object and of its historical development in order to understand the complex social phenomena, by tracing the voices and multiple perspectives that contribute to the formation and development of the object itself. An activity system is defined by its object, and the object attempts to cyclically pulse and transform (Spinuzzi, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2017). In this sense, the reconstruction of the historical developments of the object gives coherence to different aspects that appear to be disconnected. The object in fact is emphasized in literature as a conceptual tool useful to interpret empirical data that seem to be fragmented and confusing. The understanding of the nature of the activities' object acquires more and more importance in the current socio-cultural scenario. In fact, as shown in Figure 1, in mass production the object of activity was characterized by concrete raw material objects, the object is constructed on the multiple interactions between subjects and on the multiple boundary crossing between interrelated activities. We can say that inside the current social scenario, the object is harder to grasp and define, but at the same time, it is impossible to understand social phenomena without giving them coherence through the analysis of the object itself.

Fig. 2.1: Activity Systems and the object



Engeström (2009), in one of his first reflections about the necessity to expand the unit of analysis of AT and the possible conceptualization of a fourth generation of activity theory, spoke about the so-called *runaway object*. The runaway object is connected to disruptive and big phenomena (that can be positive or negative) like financial crisis, global warming, technological innovation, etc. that involve a large number of individuals. Engeström suggests that inside these phenomena the object of activities has a runaway character. This means that it is difficult to predict since it starts as small problem or innovation and can expand to a global scale of influence; it is also connected to a large number of activity systems and is usually contested, since it generates opposition and controversy. Engeström underlines that the analysis of concept formation around the runaway object is largely important: indeed it requires proper observation and analysis on how people understand, negotiate, act, and give sense to the object itself, through constant processes of conversation, discussion, and trial and error experimentation—opening new possible ways and paths in order to achieve their goals and manage unexpected problems.

The concept of activity system as object-oriented seems to be actionable and relevant in order to better define and understand the unfolding process that drives the manifestations and evolution of coworking.

2.2 Contradictions

Another key concept inside the Cultural Historical Activity Theory is represented by the *dialectical contradictions*. These are defined as inherent to all activity systems and represent the explanation of historically accumulated structural tensions both within and

between activity systems (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, 2001; Il'enkov, 1982). Contradictions are key concepts inside CHAT since they illuminate the richness and diversity of each activity system as well as its possible trajectories of development and shifts (Groleau et al., 2011; Holland and Reeves, 1996). Engeström claims the central role of contradictions as sources of change and development inside the five main principles that characterize CHAT, by defining them as the “driving force of change in activity” (Engeström, 2010). More specifically, contradictions are propositions that reflect the fundamental tensions that happen at different levels: within each element of an activity system; between the different elements of the activity system; between different activity systems, and between different developmental phases of a single activity system (Bonneau, 2013). The contradictions are constituted by a tension between two mutually exclusive and apparently incompatible alternatives (Engeström and Sannino, 2011; Putnam, 1986). They are characterized by specific features that differentiate them from other general concepts. However, the concept of contradiction is not well theoretically defined in the literature: most authors (Osono et al., 2008; Smith and Tushman, 2005) depicted it “ahistorically,” as a natural and universal consequence of organizing, without embedding the contradiction inside the socio-cultural scenario within which subjects operate. In addition, contradictions are usually described simply as competing priorities that need to be combined or balanced (Engeström and Sannino, 2011). Instead of considering only external (to the systems) oppositions (Hargrave and Van de Ven, 2009),—the Cultural Historical Activity Theory tries to overcome the simplistic reductionism of the concept and speaks about “inner” contradictions, considering the concrete historical system within which the contradictions take shape.

Following this perspective, contradictions can be defined as:

- (1) philosophical concepts that should not be equated with general problems, criticalities, inconsistency, conflicts, etc. The latter in fact may better be conceived as manifestations of contradictions instead as contradictions themselves (Engeström and Sannino, 2011). This means that we have no direct access to contradictions, but we can address their manifestation through the words and actions of the subjects involved in activities;
- (2) historical, because contradictions are intrinsically connected to the evolution of the activity systems inside a specific socio-cultural scenario. Thus, the contradictions have to be understood and traced in the concrete historical development of the system within which the contradiction takes shape (Engeström and Sannino, 2011);

(3) dialectical, since contradictions develop and change within systems in movement through the time: We have to go beyond the principle of non-contradiction seeking for the historical and contextualized manifestations of the element of dialectical contradiction within specific moving structures and specific situations; and

(4) source of development and change: the disturbances generated by the contradictions open up opportunities for new and not-taken-for-granted solutions that can lead to changes in the system (Engestrom, 2005) .

Inside this perspective, CHAT theorists distinguish between different types of contradictions, which can be traced in four levels and four kinds of discursive manifestations of contradictions (Engeström and Sannino, 2011).

The first level is represented by the *primary contradiction*. The primary contradiction is based on the Marxian “dual existence” of use value and exchange value (Engeström, 1987; Engeström, 2005; Bonneau, 2013). The tension between exchange value and use value characterize each element of the triangle of activity. The idea of primary contradiction stems from the Marxist dialectics and nature of contradiction (Marx, 1990) by which every commodity is characterized by an exchange value (because it is produced to be exchanged for profit) and a use value (because it is produced in order to satisfy and respond to social needs). According to CHAT, the primary contradiction exists in all activity systems—at least inside capitalist societies— cannot be eliminated, and manifests itself in secondary contradictions. The latter express tensions between the various elements of the activity system. The *secondary contradictions*, unlike the primary contradictions, can be resolved by introducing new elements into the activity system in order to reconfigure it.

With the introduction of new elements inside the activity systems, *tertiary contradictions* can arise between “a culturally more advanced form of central activity into the dominant form of the central activity” (Engeström, 1987, chap. 2). An example of tertiary contradiction is when new technologies are introduced inside an organization or in education. This can create disruptions and problems at different levels, in the system of rules, or in the communication between the subjects involved, etc.

Finally, the *quaternary contradictions* can arise between the central and the neighboring activity systems. The transformation in the object of the central activity system can lead to tensions in the system’s relations with the other activity systems that relate to the object.

Because the contradictions are rooted in history and derive from the different evolution of the activity systems, none of the contradictions can be identified directly but need to be analyzed through their manifestations, which correspond to concrete articulations of the contradictions themselves (Engeström and Sannino, 2011; Foot, 2011). In particular, Engeström and Sannino (2011) identified four main manifestations of contradictions: conflicts (that manifest in resistances, disagreements, arguments, etc.), double binds (in which people face pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives in an activity system), critical conflicts (when inner doubts paralyze people who face contradictory motives inside social interactions), and dilemmas (that rise on the presence of incompatible evaluations of different people or of the same person). These manifestations represent useful cues through which it is possible to identify the inner contradictions of the activity systems, which can be managed through the identification of “novel models, concepts and patterns of activity that go beyond and transcend the available opposing forces or options” (Engeström and Sannino, 2011, p. 371).

The identification of contradictions represents an interesting opportunity to analyze in depth the coworking phenomenon, identifying critical points and innovations in activity systems: The evolution of each activity system in fact occurs when participants act to manage and overcome the system’s contradictions.

2.3 Historicity

As stated before, activities have a dynamic character: They change over time and are described by their past-present and future state. In this sense, *historicity* represents another important principle and aspect of CHAT. Each activity system in fact is transformed during periods of time through which it takes shape and develops. The development is generally determined by the introduction of disruptions, troubles, and innovations that occur during the history of the activity. In this sense, history does not follow a linear and predetermined course of events, but it represents an overall, never-resolved, and never-ended qualitative reorganization of the activity (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993). For this reason, the analysis of historical developments is guided by the notion of contradictions that have to be hypothetically identified. Thus, CHAT theorists underline the importance of historical analysis in the study of activity systems.

Therefore, it is important in the analysis to distinguish between *modes* and *historical types* (Chaiklin and Lave, 1993). The *mode* is related to the current state of the activity

and to the ways by which it is organized and carried out by its participants. The mode is not static, but continuously evolves because, as previously introduced, it consists of different voices, interests and layers, that progressively contribute to change the activity system itself. The mode is the current and temporary result of a history in which the system assumes different forms. Thus in order to better understand the multi-vocality, it is crucial to analyze the historical background and the historical forms of the activity system. Inside this framework the *historical types* correspond to the ideal forms through which the activity system as a whole represents. The types reflect the ideal qualitative patterns of the components and inner relations of the activity systems. The types are ideal because they can only be hypothetically identified through the historical analysis. As ideal types they are pure forms and tend to eliminate the multifaceted composition of the activity system. For this reason, as stated before, the qualitative development of the activity system has to be understood also through the identification of the problems, disruptions, and innovations that can be traced at the level of the concrete modes of activity, both historical and current.

In this regard, CHAT theorists suggest that history needs to be studied both as the local history of the activity system's object and as the history of theoretical ideas and tools that have shaped the activity system under scrutiny. Even if historicity is recognized as one of the key principles of the cultural historical activity theory, the concrete implications of this principle have been little discussed in literature. An exception is represented by Sylvia Scribner (1990), who speaks about Vygotsky's use of history. Even if the author does not provide an explanation about the use of history in more recent applications of CHAT, she illuminates some principles that are useful in the historical analysis of activity systems. More specifically she identifies four steps in Vygotsky's methodology and use of history. These are (1) the observation of the contemporary everyday behavior; (2) identification and reconstruction of historical phases of the cultural evolution of the behavior under scrutiny; (3) experimental production of change from rudimentary to higher forms of behavior; and (4) observation of current development inside naturally behavior. With the identified steps, Vygotsky, by focusing on the analysis of the individual's behavior, sheds light on the importance of historical analysis for the observation and understanding of the current mode of the behavior as well as for the identification of possible future changes in the activity system. According to this perspective, CHAT theorists, who enlarge the unit of analysis from individual behavior to collective activity systems, underline that historical analysis

permits an understanding of why the present mode of the activity system presents specific features. In addition, historical analysis is not only useful for better grasping the essence of the activity, but also for identifying a *zone of proximal development*. The latter is described as an area of possible change of the present in relation to the past and future. In the CHAT perspective, the zone of proximal development is a conceptual tool for understanding the complexities of collective activities. It reflects the distance between the present and the historical forms of the activity that can represent a collectively generated solution and go beyond the existing contradictions. Different representations of the zone of proximal development are used as conceptual tools in order to depict multi-dimensional, tensional, and qualitative developmental directions on which alternative futures can be shaped (Engeström and Sannino, 2010).

Analyzing the historical evolution of the coworking can provide not only the identification of the periods of its growth but also reveal the contradictions that guided its development and give rise to the transitions from one period to another. In this regard, from a methodological point of view, Engeström underlines three main issues that have to be covered for the realization of the historical analysis. The first one is related to the identification of features on which the historical analysis is focused. The second one requires the reconstruction of phases/periods in which the evolution of the activity system is divided. And, the third one is related to the explanation of the way the transition from one period to another occurred (Kerosuo, 2006).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the main principles and roots of Cultural Historical Activity Theory, the theoretical approach I use for the analysis of the coworking phenomenon, which guided the different phases of the research: data collection, selection of participants, and analysis of the research data. Activity Theory is a theoretical approach that has its origins in German philosophy and Russian psychology. It is based on the concept of *activity*, which during the historical evolution of the theory has been characterized by different conceptualizations and meanings. If at the beginning the focus of the theory was on human actions, today it is transcending its own origins and is becoming a multi- and cross-disciplinary theory applied for the analysis of complex social phenomena. The theoretical concepts of the theory that I specifically use in my research are those of object oriented activity system, historicity, and contradictions. First of all, following the approach that guided one of the still most solid studies about

coworking (Spinuzzi, 2012), I consider *coworking* an activity that is still evolving. Following the research questions that emerged in the systematic literature review, the identification of the assumptions at the basis of the studies about coworking underlined the importance of paying attention to some fundamental aspects: the origins of the phenomenon and the characteristic of the social scenario in which it raised; the multifaceted nature of the current manifestations of coworking; and the possible evolutions of the same. To these aims in the next chapters I'll present my research about coworking by focusing on three studies, based on the theoretical approach of Activity Theory.

The first one is a historical analysis of the coworking phenomenon. Based on the AT principle of *historicity*, the intention of the study is to identify the main qualitative developmental phases of coworking and to grasp the complexity of coworking. The analysis will identify the theoretical development of the object of coworking and explain the processes and structures that characterize each historical phase. The second study focuses on the analysis of both the object and processes of the current manifestations of coworking, by identifying a typology of coworking phenomenon as characterized by hybrid activities. This enables a deeper understanding of the internal contradictions of the activities themselves. The third study focuses on the identification of the inner contradictions of each type of the coworking activity with the aim to understand better the actual characteristics and possible evolution of the phenomenon. I use the concept of contradictions cross to intercept the tensions that gave rise to the evolution and historical development of the coworking phenomenon as well as the contradictions that characterize the local coworking activities.

As a specific system of activity with a shifting and developing object, coworking interacts with other multiple activity systems. As it emerges inside a socio-cultural context characterized by important changes in how work is organized, the coworking phenomenon could provide innovative possibilities for new productive paths and emphasize critical elements to be underlined in order to avoid or prevent risks and involution.

- Chapter 3 -

THE EVOLUTION OF COWORKING: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

ABSTRACT

In this chapter a historical analysis of coworking is presented. Through the application of one of the most important theoretical concepts of Activity Theory (historicity), I discuss the main changes and developments of coworking over the years. In the first part of the chapter, I present the objectives that guided the analysis and the methodological approach used to select and analyze documents. In the second part, I present the main results of the analysis, describing the evolution of coworking in two historical phases. Finally, I discuss the main developmental challenges, by identifying the tensions that guided the coworking qualitative evolution.

Introduction

The present study is based on the application of one of the main principles of Cultural Historical Activity Theory—*historicity*. As anticipated in the second chapter, CHAT underlines the analysis of the historical developments of activities (in this case coworking) as a fundamental aspect in the understanding of the characteristics and peculiarities of the current mode of the activities. Following this perspective, the present chapter focuses on the analysis of the historical evolution of coworking and on the identification of the periods of its growth as well as on the inner tensions that guided its development. In this sense the results that derive from the historical analysis, and the tensions that characterize the coworking evolution, represent the basis for understanding the current state of coworking and its plural manifestations.

In literature the analysis of the origins of coworking includes two main positions. The first is represented by scholars who observe that coworking definitely started in 2005. They connect the origins of coworking to the rise and the diffusion of the coworking space, which generally is described as a single, coherent and uniform activity (Fost, 2008; Sundsted et al., 2009; Hunt 2009; Botsman & Rogers, 2011; Spinuzzi, 2012; Capdevila, 2013; Parrino, 2013; Kojo & Nenonen, 2016; Liegl, 2014; Lumley, 2014; Bilandzic & Foth, 2013; Gandini, 2015). The second position is represented by those who draw cultural links between coworking and the earlier appearance of other types of spaces, for instance the hacker spaces like C-Base, founded in 1995 in Berlin, or other entrepreneurial ‘work clubs’ such as *Schraubefabrik*, founded in 2002 in Vienna (Sundsted et al., 2009; Deskmag, 2013).

As an alternative to these two positions, in the present study I analyze the origins of coworking by identifying the main changes that characterize its object (Kaptelinin, 2005; Engestrom, 2009; Miettinen, 2005; Spinuzzi, 2017). In Activity Theory studies, the historical analysis explores the developmental phases of an activity, including its object (Engestrom, 1987). Through the analysis of the object, I try to understand how the idea of coworking has been socially constructed around specific social and individual needs and has led coworking to differentiate and stratify over the years. As disclosed in the literature review, coworking is considered a complex, difficult-to-define phenomenon because it is characterized by various and plural features. From the perspective of this study, the current state of coworking is connected to its history and the development of various coworking activities. More specifically, the study identifies

the phases that are characterized by changes and innovations in the object that marked the transition from one phase to another.

From a methodological point of view, following the methodological questions settled by Engestrom (1995; as cited in Kerosuo, 2006), I firstly identified the features and characteristics of the activity on which I decided to focus the historical analysis; secondly, I identified the sources and documents useful in tracing the history of coworking; then I settled the criteria used to divide the development into periods; and finally I decided how to interpret and explain the transitions from one period to another. Thus, in response to the first methodological prescription, I consider coworking as the emerging object-activity and coworking organizations as the central activity system. Concerning the second aspect, in this study I identify the qualitative transformations of the object and trace the issues, problems, and innovations that have brought about changes in the object-activity of coworking and led to the rise of new organizations. Finally, coherently with the previous point, in response to the third methodological prescription, the transitions are conceptualized as solutions to challenges and innovations that require new forms of organizing and reflect internal tensions.

Concerning the structure of the chapter, in the first section I explain the aims of the historical analysis, the methodology adopted, and the sources I used to identify the historical periods. In the second part of the chapter, I describe the events that characterize each phase. Then in the discussion, I underline the challenges that characterize the phases, the ideal model of coworking, and the historical tensions that drive the qualitative development of coworking.

1. Conducting historical analysis

In this section, I give a more detailed explanation of the objectives and methodology that guided the historical analysis. In the first paragraph, I describe the research questions at the basis of the analysis. Then I explain the sources/documents I used to understand the evolution of coworking.

1.1. The objectives of the historical analysis

The main objective of this historical analysis is to create a useful framework for understanding the current state of coworking and its heterogeneous manifestations as forms of organizations and activated processes (Spinuzzi, 2012; Capdevila, 2013; 2014). More specifically, as previously anticipated, the historical analysis is oriented to

understand the main changes that have characterized the emergence of different meanings of coworking and different coworking organizations, along with the tensions that characterize the historical evolution of coworking.

1.2. Data sources

For carrying out the historical analysis, I identified the most qualified sources about coworking that represent empirical material useful to construct a history of coworking. In particular, I selected different types of documents, interviews, and extensive research papers to accomplish the analysis. To be more precise I collected data from:

- Deskmag (www.deskmag.com)
- The Global Coworking Surveys (from 2010 to 2015)
- Published interviews and articles of key subjects
- Papers and working papers

Deskmag

Deskmag is a valuable source of information and knowledge about coworking all over the world. It is a well-known and reputed website and is considered the official magazine about coworking. Deskmag publishes interviews, studies, and news about coworking in general. In addition, it publishes best practices, trends, criticalities, and news about coworking spaces all around the world. In the same line, it is a useful source for collecting information about experiences and data on coworking users (coworkers) and coworking operators (founders, managers, staff). More specifically the articles that are published on Deskmag are divided into six sections: Coworking Spaces, Tips, Coworkers, Events, Cities, and News. Through reading of all the articles on Deskmag it has been possible to identify trends and changes that characterize the evolution of coworking over the years. Deskmag is also the promoter of the Global Coworking Survey.

Global Coworking Survey

The Global Coworking Survey is an annual survey focused on coworking, which is conducted around the world. The first coworking survey was realized in 2010, and the last one, at the time when the thesis was written, was realized in 2016. The studies are based on the analysis of the status and future trends of coworking, including forecasts

for the coming years. Most of the data collected in the global coworking surveys are related to the status and trend of the coworking spaces all around the world. More precisely, information is collected around diffusion of coworking spaces, their economic sustainability, members, services, and activities proposed. In addition other information is collected about social processes (e.g., collaboration) activated inside the coworking spaces and representations and behaviors of coworking users and coworking operators. The first survey was conducted in 2010 and was based on the collection of data from 661 individuals in 24 different countries. The second survey was realized in 2011 on 1,500 individuals in 52 countries. The third survey (in 2012) was based on a sample of 2,007 individuals. The fourth survey, conducted in 2013, collected data from 2,706 individuals. The fifth survey was completed in December 2014 and the last one in 2016.

Interviews and articles of key subjects

In the historical analysis, I also used as sources of information interviews of people who are considered key players in the historical evolution of coworking. Through the reading of the articles on Deskmag and of other papers, it has been possible to identify key subjects in the coworking historical evolution. Thus, I looked for written and video interviews made by journalists with these players, in order to select useful empirical material for the analysis.

Papers

In addition to the previously described documents, I analyzed some papers. In this case, I used both the papers that I included in the literature review, and other papers and working papers that I considered valuable and useful for the analysis.

In Table 3.1, the sources that I used for the analysis are listed with the connected link and the period in which I had access to them.

Table 3.1: Sources used for the historical analysis

Source	Link	Period of access
DESKMAG		
<u>Articles</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • section “Coworking spaces” • section “Tips” • section “Coworkers” • section “Events” • section “Cities” • section “News” 	www.deskmag.com/... /en/coworking-spaces /en/coworking-tools-tips /en/coworking-coworkers /en/coworking-events /en/coworking-cities-country-profiles /en/coworking-news	From July 2016 to May 2017
GLOBAL COWORKING SURVEY		
1st Coworking Survey (2010-2011)	http://www.deskmag.com/en/why-coworkers-like-their-coworking-spaces-162	From July 2016 to May 2017
2nd Coworking Survey (2011-2012)	https://www.slideshare.net/carstenc2/the-2nd-global-coworking-survey	
3rd Coworking Survey (2012-2013)	https://www.slideshare.net/deskwanted/global-coworking-survey-2012	
4th Coworking Survey (2013-2014)	https://www.dropbox.com/s/5n466f7mv4qs0kd/ResultsOfTheCoworkingSurveyCoworkingEuropeLisbon2014.pdf	
5th Coworking Survey (2014-2015)	https://www.slideshare.net/carstenfoertsch/1st-results-of-the-global-coworking-survey-201516	
6th Coworking Survey (2016-2017)	https://www.slideshare.net/carstenfoertsch/the-first-results-of-the-2017-global-coworking-survey	

INTERVIEWS		
The start of Coworking (from the guy who started it)	http://codinginparadise.org/ebooks/html/blog/start_of_coworking.html	From July 2016 to May 2017
Brad Neuberg interviewed by Martin Wasserman	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=azz5NScFkII	
Coworking Visionaries Weigh In on the Future of the Movement	http://www.shareable.net/blog/coworking-visionaries-weigh-in-on-the-future-of-the-movement-0	
Co-Working: Independent Workers Unite	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeJR3biNW94	
The Coworking Connection	http://www.deepfun.com/the-coworking-connection/	
PAPERS		
Final Report: New Economic Models for, and from, Co-Working	Clifton, Crick, and Fuzi, 2015	From July 2016 to May 2017
Coworking: a transdisciplinary overview	Water-Lynch, Potts, Butcher, Dodson, and Hurley, 2016	
The new office: how coworking changes the work concept	Leclercq-Vandelanotte and Isaac, 2016	
Socio-economic profile and working conditions of freelancers in co-working spaces and work collectives: evidence from the design sector in Greece	Avdikos and Kalogeresis 2016	
The Third Wave of Virtual Work	Johns and Gratton, 2013	
Telecommuting and Co-Working Communities: What Are the Implications for Individual and Organizational Flexibility?	Raffaele and Connell, 2016	
The rise of coworking spaces: A literature review	Gandini, 2015	
The Rise of a Freelance Economy	Gandini, 2016	
Evolution of co-working places: drivers and possibilities	Kojo and Nenonen, 2013	

1.3. Historical phases

In order to identify and define the historical phases, as a first step I ordered the material and arranged the information chronologically to identify evolution and trends in coworking. I identified some key and pivotal events of the history, and I enriched them with the information I collected through my reading of the documents. After reconstructing the description of the history, I identified changes in the object-activity of coworking. Based on these changes, I defined and titled the periods. Then in the analysis of the phases, I underlined in particular: developmental ideas of coworking; the development of coworking organizations; and the tensions that characterize the transition from one period to another.

In Table 3.2, the historical phases identified are reported

Table 3.2: Historical Phases of coworking

	Periods of development	Meaning of coworking	Coworking organization
Period I (before 2005)	<p>Coworking as “working with”</p> <p>Coworking as “working with” at a distance</p>	Practice that characterizes traditional work and organizations	<p>Early, informal, and provisional settings to support collaborative work</p> <p>Shared environment – informal / public settings (third places)</p>
Period II (from 2005 up today)	<p>The rise of coworking spaces</p> <p>(coworking as integration of autonomy and structure; coworking movement: around values of openness, sustainability, collaboration and community)</p> <p>The diffusion of the coworking space concept</p> <p>(differentiation and stratification of coworking; expanded interests around coworking, beyond the coworking movement)</p>	<p>Integration of social and organizational structure for freelance workers</p> <p>Strategy / Policy of different collective subjects</p>	<p>Coworking space</p> <p>Informal, bottom-up and self-organized organizations</p> <p>Coworking space</p> <p>Institutionalized coworking space</p> <p>Networks of coworking space</p> <p>Hybridization of coworking space</p>

2. Findings

In this section, I describe the two historical phases identified. In the two periods I underline the main and peculiar events that characterize each phase and that have contributed to the current historical phase of coworking. More specifically the first phase refers to the period before 2005, which precedes the rise and establishment of the first coworking space. The second phase describes coworking starting from the first coworking space that was established to the current mode that is characterized by a strong differentiation and stratification of coworking.

2.1. Phase 1: before 2005

Introduction

In this phase, coworking is connected to the practice of “working with” subjects inside and outside organization (e.g., clients, users, colleagues, collaborators; Fost, 2011). More specifically the word *coworking* (or *co-working*) referred to the action of working closely together on the same task or project (Fost, 2008). It is used as a synonym of collaboration, at different levels, and it implies the fact that different people/professionals work together on a project, or a piece of work, around the same organization (they can be colleagues, collaborators, client, users, etc.). This first period, underlines two main aspects that characterize the transitions in the object of coworking. The first one regards the fact that “working with” assumes different characteristics and meanings over the years with the diffusion of virtual work and of digital and freelance workers. The second aspect is connected to the fact that the term coworking began to be used in contraposition to the consolidated practice within formal organizations considered to be the limits of effectively working together. Thus a new meaning of coworking appeared, developed in opposition to the predominant paradigm that characterizes traditional organizations. For the practice of coworking to develop, a transition was necessary from the previous routine practice of traditional organizational structures that had prevented coworking to structures that would facilitate and support coworking.

Co-working as 'working with'

Co-working is composed by two words *co*, from Latin *cum*, and *working*. From a research on online databases, google scholar, and researchgate, it is possible to identify that coworking has always been associated to the meaning of working with, by adopting two different meanings. The first one is used to indicate the practice of people who work together inside the same organization, who share the same physical space. The second one refers to people who belong to different organizational contexts and collaborate on the same project or piece of work. In this second meaning the practice of coworking is interpreted as it involves different subjects (colleagues, workers, and superiors, clients and users, etc.). In this sense, coworking is associated with different practices that go from collaboration, to cooperation, to joint planning.

Coherently with the meaning of coworking, the term coworker is associated with people who take part in social and operative interactions. Coworkers are mostly described as peers, professionals who work at the same organizational level, with whom one executes tasks and has routine interactions.

In the literature, different disciplines and in particular those of applied psychology and organizational studies have explored the topic of coworking from different perspectives. The main topics associated with coworking and coworker are connected to the social and psychological dimensions and effects that are involved in being coworkers and engaging in coworking: the studies generally attempt to analyze how working together affects knowledge production, commitment and performance, relationships among coworkers, as well as trust (e.g., Fieldman, 1994; Schinn et al., 1984).

This meaning of coworking and coworker are still in use, and different studies in the literature are focused on the topic. However, over the years, the introduction of changes in the labour market, in particular the virtualization of work, the flexibilization of work, and the diffusion of freelance workers have enriched and enlarged the meaning of 'working with' as well as that of coworkers. The changes described below, in fact, lead to the rise and diffusion of new ways of work and new kinds of relationships between workers and their organizations. The result was qualitative changes in the object of coworking and the rise of what I identified as the second historical phase of coworking, where the object of coworking is constructed around the needs of freelance knowledge workers. The new meaning of 'working with' that appears with the introduction of labour market changes (described below) represent the root of the transformation in the object that characterizes the following historical period.

Working with at a distance

The evolution of coworking is contextualized and influenced by a variety of factors including the development of the flexibility of work, the virtualization of work, and the diffusion of freelancers. In addition, aspects of coworking are connected to an ideology of liberalization of employment regulation that favours the diffusion of more flexible forms of work and that enhances the entrepreneurial initiatives of individuals (Gandini, 2016).

More specifically, the flexibilization of the labor market refers to the liberalization of the rules that govern employment and that have increased “atypical” and “non-standard” forms of employment by using short- term and temporary contracts. The virtualization of work underlines the role of technology, which has helped transformations of work processes and practices and increased self-organization and autonomy of professionals in defining time and places for work. In this context, freelancers have become the best workforce for this new type of work organization. These are important changes that have strongly influenced the way professionals relate and experience their work (Burke and Cowling, 2015; Cappelli and Keller, 2013). The changes in fact involved a division of labor characterized by: communities of professionals who work individually at a distance but on a common task; relationships between professionals and organizations, who are related by temporary collaborations that usually dissolve with the end of the project; and relationships between individuals and their work that can be described as contract-based, independent, and self organized (Donnelly, 2009; Gandini, 2016). Technology played a consistent role in the transformation of the labour market, because it facilitated the possibility to work at a distance by collaborating in a shared virtual space. In this regard, Johns and Gratton (2013) refer to virtual coworkers who are able to contribute remotely without formal connection to a company: technology contributes to give them the feeling of working in a shared environment. This remotely project based form of work has become in the last decades the new normal and started to be preferred both by the workers and the managers compared with the traditional forms of work (Christopherson, 2002; Johns and Gratton, 2013). The characteristics of independence, self-organization, autonomy, and flexibility have attracted professionals who feel they no longer have to compromise with companies and are not constrained by the bureaucracy of institutions. At the same time, organizational managers benefitted from the flexibility of short-term contracts based on specific and contingent needs, which helped reduce costs (less physical infrastructure and lower-cost external

professionals). However this form of work, besides the previously described advantages, has led also to the emergence of criticalities with regard to a lack of a sense of community, a loss of natural collaboration, and weaknesses in the transfer of knowledge (Johns and Gratton, 2013). The encounter of advantages and criticalities connected to the changes in the labour market transformed the meaning of coworking. The latter in fact started to be constructed around the need, which emerged from the freelance workers, to reconceive physical workspaces that would permit them to recover possibilities of more spontaneous collaboration and to create conditions for a less isolated work. This is one of the key factors that has traced the passage from the first historical phase and the second one in the qualitative development of coworking.

The need to create conditions for more direct communication and collaboration among workers led to increases in the use of so-called third places. This is a term introduced by the sociologist Oldenburg (1989) to describe public spaces that are outside the domestic home (first place) and the workspace (second place). Oldenburg underlines the social aspects that characterize places like cafes, coffeeshops, bars, bookstores, pubs, etc. that people can regularly visit and connect with friends, neighbors, but also strangers. The growing number of freelance workers increased the use of public spaces like Cafés, Starbucks, and McDonald's restaurants, with the primary aim to avoid isolation in hotels, etc. (Johns and Gratton, 2013; Moriset, 2014). In the next phase of the rise and diffusion of coworking spaces the term coworking began to be associated with the conceptual model of a 'third place' in the sense that coworking spaces represent, for freelance workers, a 'third way' between standard organizational employment and self-organized work from home (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016).

The passage from the first phase to the second phase is also symbolically characterized by the shift from the use of the word co-working, with the hyphen, to coworking without the hyphen. Different authors (Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2015; Moriset, 2014) have underlined the use of the word coworking as an expression of the introduction of a new meaning of the concept. Firstly, the term coworking was introduced in 1999 by Bernie De Koven to describe the working practice that he defined as "working together as equals" (De Koven, 2013), which is facilitated by a methodology that, with the help of technology, permits breaking barriers to collaboration by reducing hierarchies within organizations and promoting equality among colleagues (De Koven, 2013). In the following years the term coworking was associated with different practices. However, it is interesting that Brad Neuberg, the founder of the first coworking space (explained in

the next paragraph) asked De Koven to use the domain coworking.com. Neuberger explained in an interview:

When I coined the term coworking I did that independently of other terms. About a year and a half later while looking for a domain name for coworking for the coworking wiki I stumbled on coworking.com that was owned by Bernie De Koven [...] We chose the same word to refer to different things that we were doing but in no way were our initiatives connected.⁵

It is interesting to note that at the beginning of the second phase of coworking, the aspects of equality, self-organization, informality, and lack of hierarchy were underlined as De Koven had done.

2.2. Phase 2: after 2005 until today

The rise of coworking spaces

New needs and problems, different from those of the traditional workers, arose. Coworking in this phase is connected to the dysfunction by which many knowledge workers found themselves as independent contractors and freelancers without adequate social and organizational structures to support their practice. This period was characterized by the rise of what the initiators self-defined as “coworking space” and “coworking movement,” both of which were connected to the possibility of supporting and facilitating the working conditions of freelance knowledge workers. The year 2005 is recognized globally as the start of a new idea of coworking that was constructed around the creation of the first so-called “coworking space,” by Brad Neuberger. Starting from this event the idea of coworking further developed and established around the needs of the freelance workers.

In 2005: Coworking as integration of autonomy and structure

Brad Neuberger was a web developer who worked in a start-up inside a rent-an-office and felt himself unhappy with his job because the place in which he worked was, in his

⁵Brad Neuberger, “The start of coworking, from the guy that started it.”
http://codinginparadise.org/ebooks/html/blog/start_of_coworking.html

opinion, non-social and he was not satisfied with the individualistic approach of the working environment. He had experienced both working on his own and in a company. Although he appreciated working independently, being able to organize his own time and schedule, he missed the sense of community and the social connections that he experienced inside a company. Based on his personal experience, Neuberg tried to find a solution for creating what for him were the best everyday working conditions. What led him to the idea of coworking was his attempt to integrate the independence of self-organized work and the structure provided by companies.

In 2005 I was working at a startup and was unhappy with my job. Before that I had worked for myself doing consulting and traveling and hungered for the community a job can provide. At that point I was confused because I had both worked for myself and worked at a job and was unhappy because I couldn't seem to combine all the things I wanted at the same time: the freedom and independence of working for myself along with the structure and community of working with others. (Neuberg, 2014)

By *structure* he referred to the creation of useful boundaries, like clear start and end times for work, which could prevent dysfunctional behaviors of self-organized workers, like those of working during the night. By *community* he meant the possibility that an organization or a company gives their employees opportunities to work with and among other people. Starting from this idea, Neuberg began to use the term *coworking space* to reproduce these working conditions.⁶ The space was created inside an already existing structure called Spiral Muse (a well-being center). The agreement with the owners of Spiral Muse was that Neuberg could use the space two days a week, for \$300 per month. The space offered eight desks (that Neuberg had to arrange each time he used the space by using flexible material). The space was organized as a nonprofit co-op, and people who used the space were asked to pay a low monthly rate for being members of the space. The structure was also equipped with some services from Spiral Muse that the members could use (e.g., free Wi-Fi, a garden, a kitchen, and access to a massage therapist and life coaching). The aim was to offer a place where independent professionals could work with other people who looked for the same working conditions. In this sense they could find the best working conditions but also create a shared identity by being in a place with other people who had the same experiences (Coworking: independent workers unite, 2008). For Neuberg, the coworking space represented a perfect integration of different components of work, some from traditional

⁶ “Coworking: independent workers unite,” 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeJR3biNW94>

companies, and others from independent work. As Neuberg stated in an interview, he was looking for “a middle ground between being inside and outside the establishment” (Neuberg, 2015).

However, when he launched the initiative very few people joined the space and none showed up for the first two months after the inauguration. Neuberg in fact faced difficulties enlisting people to join the space and promoting the idea. He had thought that getting people there would be easy and he had used a limited amount of money and time on advertising. Soon he changed tactics and started spreading flyers and talking to people and finally the first coworkers arrived. However, after a year Neuberg felt like the coworking space had died as well as the whole idea of coworking; nobody knew the meaning of coworking, and he decided to close the space. Nevertheless, Neuberg used to tell people who went to visit that even if they didn’t enjoy the space, “Take this idea, steal it and make it your own” (Hunt, 2009).

Another event, in 2005, can be connected to the evolution of coworking. Even if it is not generally recognized as the pivotal event that gave rise to what today is called coworking, it has had influence in the differentiation of the coworking object that characterizes the second historical phase. The year 2005 in fact was also when the first space, called The Hub, was founded in London. The entrepreneurs who founded the space were young activists who were inspired by the anti-globalization movement of the early years of the new millennium. However, these young activists had not realized that their protest actions were not sufficient to promote the change that their generation hoped to achieve. Thus, they autonomously decided to promote social innovation through social entrepreneurship initiatives. The slogan they associated with their idea was “another world is happening,” which they placed in opposition to the slogan of the activists “another world is possible.” In their opinion, the activists were focused on criticizing the predominant paradigm of the economic model of capitalism, but they had no vision about possible solutions (Kennet, 2008; Bachman, 2014). Guided by these ideas, the entrepreneurs decided to provide a physical space to connect ideas to create a social and environmental impact by enhancing entrepreneurial projects in the social innovation field (Kennet, 2008). Even if The Hub, known as Impact Hub, is today one of the most developed networks of coworking spaces focused on the theme of social innovation, at that time the space was not associated with the term coworking, which was used to refer to the space founded by Neuberg in San Francisco. However, from the

idea of Neuberg other people were inspired and established what they self-defined the ‘coworking movement.’⁷

In 2006: the coworking movement, around the same values

Even though the first effort to develop a coworking space by Neuberg died after one year, it attracted the attention of other people who saw its potential. In particular, Chris Messina, a web developer, and Tara Hunt, an entrepreneur and online marketing expert, in 2006 launched the *coworking wiki*. It is a still active website (“a shared online space” cit. <http://coworking.com/>) where the users can discuss and share knowledge about the idea of coworking. As the authors stated in an interview (Brad Neuberg, Tara Hunt and Chris Messina url: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeJR3biNW94>), from the conversations that happened in the *coworking wiki*, it turned out that many people were feeling the same need that brought Neuberg to open the first coworking space: the need to integrate the independence and autonomy of freelancers with the social relations and structure that traditional working environments can offer. From this initiative, Neuberg, Messina, and Hunt started to speak about a coworking movement, whose aim was that of grouping people and professionals who shared the same needs, interests, and values. Again, as reported in the *coworking wiki*, the aim of the movement was that of creating “better places to work and better way to work” (url: <http://www.coworkingwiki.com/>). The shared values toward which they wanted to move people were those of *collaboration* (willingness to collaborate with others by reducing hierarchies and boundaries; e.g., the founders of the coworking spaces had to consider members as collaborators more than customers), *openness* (be open, share ideas, and be inclusive), *community* (put emphasis on people and interactions and relationships among people), *accessibility* (willing self-selected participants; selection on the basis of shared experiences and values), and *sustainability* (contribute to sustain the available resources, by respecting the structures and the others). These values are today recalled inside numerous coworking spaces and are cited in scientific and working papers (Capdevila, 2013; Fuzi, 2015; Hurry, 2012; Moriset, 2014; Rus and Orel, 2015) as the main principles that guide coworking. The coworking movement was inspired by the open source movement (DiBona, Ockman & Stone, 1999), of which Hunt and Messina

⁷ In this chapter I refer to the term ‘coworking movement’ by using the words of the protagonists of this historical period (emic perspective). The aim of this chapter is not that of analyzing whether coworking can, or not, be considered a social movement (Davis et al., 2005).

were members (Brad Neuberg, Tara Hunt, and Chris Messina [url: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeJR3biNW94](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeJR3biNW94)). As they declared, the coworking movement took inspiration from the open source movement, as they wanted to aggregate people who autonomously decide to take part in the movement because they share the same values as the other members, are guided by the intention to share ideas and experiences about their working conditions, and have the aim to co-create solutions in this direction.

Guided by these principles, Chris Messina and Tara Hunt, in 2006, opened the coworking space *citizenspace* (a space entirely dedicated to coworking). People could join by paying a monthly fee for using structures (personal desk, conference room, lounge, room for organizing events, or the space for third parties they collaborated with), facilities, and utilities (Wi-Fi, furniture, coffee, water, etc.), and tools (projector, fax, whiteboards, flip charts, etc.). The spaces had the aim, as in the case of Neuberg's first space, to create the best working conditions. To this purpose, the founders strongly stressed the fact that people were invited to co-create with others their own best working environment. For this reason, the life inside the space was not guided by strong prescriptions; rather, few guidelines were given (based on the values previously described). For instance on the website they underlined the importance of respecting the space/privacy of the others, collaboration with other people in the space, and the willingness to give besides receiving from others.

In the same year, Messina and Hunt also created *coworking google groups*, which are open source sites where people can post questions, conversations, and personal experiences around coworking and about the functioning of the coworking spaces. Another similar initiative that they launched in the same year was the *coworking blog*, a collection of stories, best practices, and experiences about coworking ([url: http://blog.coworking.com/en/](http://blog.coworking.com/en/)).

After 2006: the diffusion of coworking space concept

Beginning around 2006, the idea of coworking and the concept of coworking space began to diffuse. Coworking spaces at first were formed as a result of freelance professionals who joined the principles and values of the movement and decided to self-finance their own coworking spaces (Deskmag, Global Coworking Survey, 2011). During the following years, coworking spaces diffused and spread widely throughout the world with consistent changes in the idea of coworking and diversification of the

needs it addresses. Many coworking spaces were founded in different countries. As documented by various data sources (Deskmag and [statista.com url: http://www.statista.com/](http://www.statista.com/)), 30 coworking spaces existed in 2006, most of which were in the United States; while by 2016, the number of coworking spaces increased to 7,800 with approximately 510,000 members all over the world (Global Coworking Survey, 2016). The years after 2006 were characterized primarily by a large and consistent diffusion of coworking spaces. Around this diffusion, a variety of ideas of coworking emerged. Thus, coworking expanded in parallel directions with a strong differentiation of objectives, users, and players involved.

The differentiation and stratification of coworking

Even though in 2010 the vast majority of the coworking spaces were located in America, starting around 2008 the idea of coworking arrived in Europe, which saw an explosion of the spaces in 2010. The diffusion is characterized by some important trends, described below.

Motivations (of operators and coworkers). The analysis of the motivations to run (for the founders) and to use (for coworkers) a coworking space were progressively not only related to the interest in creating a sense of community and constructing social relations but also connected to business and costs. Even if most coworking founders still identify as the top motivations to run a coworking space the possibility to create new connections with other people, other reasons appeared during these years. These are related to the possibility of increasing business opportunities (e.g., finding new clients) and to finding advantages connected to renting infrastructure (e.g., affording a better office, reducing the office rent, and increasing revenue) (Global coworking survey, 2013). In the same line, if the coworkers at the beginning were most focused on the benefits that derived from the creation of connections, social relations, and community, with the diffusion of the coworking concept and spaces they became progressively more interested also in the quality of infrastructure offered in the spaces (e.g., meeting rooms, printers, copiers, wi-fi, etc.). They also became more interested in the events promoted by the spaces, focused on business (e.g., workshops and training sessions) as well as on knowledge sharing (e.g., information and presentation sessions; Deskmag, *A typology of needs for coworking spaces*, 2012⁸; Global Coworking Survey, 2012).

Coworking users. As founded by Neuberg, coworking was initially intended for freelance professionals and aimed to create for them the best working conditions, but

⁸ <http://www.deskmag.com/en/a-typology-framework-of-needs-for-coworking-spaces-586/2>

over the years, the targeted users expanded to small companies, startups, and employees (Global Coworking Survey, 2011; 2013; 2016). In addition, coworkers progressively became more assiduous users of the space, compared to the first years, and had an increased need to have a permanent position instead of a flexible one within the space (Global Coworking Survey, 2011). In this sense, the coworking space seemed to become in some ways a regular office for professionals. This hypothesis seems to be confirmed by the fact that coworkers tend to give increasing importance to the availability of infrastructure, facilities, and services, besides the social aspects of coworking spaces (Global Coworking Survey, 2011).

Territory of coworking. Another interesting trend regards the location of coworking spaces in the so called ‘creative cities’ (Florida, 2002; Moriset, 2014). If at the beginning of the second period it was possible to identify a concentration of the coworking spaces in big and business cities with a working environment of creative industries (e.g. San Francisco, Berlin, New York etc.) (Moriset, 2014), over the years the coworking spaces have been settled also in small cities as rural coworking spaces (*Coworking compared in large cities and small towns*, Deskmag, 2012⁹).

Coworking internal organization. Over the years, coworking spaces have been characterized by more structured organization with more explicit and defined rules and roles. Concerning roles, most of the spaces (around 60%) have a person to function in the role of a *community manager* (an internal operator specifically dedicated to the facilitation and support of relations and interactions among coworkers). Besides, other roles emerged, including *host* (the person in charge of welcoming new coworkers and orienting them to the structures, facilities, and services provided by the space), *marketing coordinator*, and *project coordinator* (Global Coworking Survey, 2011; 2013). Concerning rules, most coworking spaces implement indications and prescriptions about different aspects (e.g., use and access of the structures, facilities, and utilities; organization and attendance of events; behavioral expectations for users of the space, etc.). The rules are explicated in partnership agreements as well as inside the space, with codes of conduct usually hanging on the wall. The rules are usually defined by the owner of the space on the basis of the characteristics of the services and structures offered (coworkingwiki.com). Coworking organizations also tend to implement and propose more and variegated services and activities inside the space, besides infrastructure. Example of services focused on business are training programs,

⁹ <http://www.deskmag.com/en/coworking-spaces-compared-in-large-cities-and-small-towns-552>

business development programs, and coaching. Other activities not focused on work are social and cultural events, services and infrastructure for specific targets (e.g., nursery and child-care provisions referred to as *cobaby*), and agreements and discounts with commercial services in the area. The services usually change on the basis of the users and players involved in coworking. In this period, coworking has begun to focus on specific topics and fields. Coworking spaces are commonly categorized as either *generalist* or *vertical*. Generalist spaces are open to people with various backgrounds, interests, and experiences; while vertical spaces specialize in a domain or specific topic by gathering people with similar professional needs and experiences (Gandini, 2015).

Networks of coworking spaces. In addition, some spaces have expanded over the years by becoming bigger (in 2015 more than 35% of the spaces are larger than 500 square meters), and some of the spaces have expanded into franchise or association networks. More specifically the franchises began to spread around 2008 (Global Coworking Survey, 2013), when some spaces transformed their name into branded local or global chains. This is the period in which the space founded in 2005 with the name The Hub became one of the most famous international networks of coworking under the name *Impact Hub* (a network of coworking spaces completely focused on social innovation, thus intended for entrepreneurs with a business idea related to this field of work). Other famous networks are NextSpace and Wework (Deskmag, *The rise of coworking space networks*, 2011¹⁰; *Global networks of coworking spaces*, 2011¹¹). Besides franchises, there are also networks of coworking (e.g., Coshare, in the United States) that consist of independent coworking spaces that use the same brand and are grouped under the same values and goals. This phase has seen also the increase of other initiatives related to the creation of networks of coworking spaces like the so called *coworking Visa* established in 2008, which is a voluntary goodwill agreement between many coworking spaces that allows coworkers around the world to have a membership card (the visa) in order to use facilities and services of the spaces in the networks, free of charge. Coworking Visa originally started as a sort of exchange program in the United States and then developed to involve other countries.

Coworking sustainability and profitability. Another trend that emerged in parallel with the diffusion of coworking was the problem connected to the economic sustainability of

¹⁰ <http://www.deskmag.com/en/small-coworking-space-networks-209>

¹¹ <http://www.deskmag.com/en/global-networks-of-coworking-spaces-206>

the spaces (Deskmag, *How profitable are coworking spaces today?*¹², 2011). However, at the same time coworking is increasingly seen as a source of direct or indirect income. Founders of coworking spaces consider coworking as an opportunity to increase business by acquiring new clients or projects or by earning money through the renting of space and infrastructure.

Expanded interests around coworking

The worldwide diffusion and development of the idea of coworking as well as of coworking spaces has attracted the interest of other players, like private companies and public and private institutions (Deskmag, *Coworking spaces run by corporations*, 2013¹³).

Large companies are incorporating coworking into their business strategies in two ways. On one side, they experiment with coworking by using services and structures provided by already existing coworking spaces. They encourage employees to use coworking not only to allow their distributed workers to work more productively, while avoiding isolation, but also to attract employees who demand a flexible workplace and work time and to promote cross-fertilization with other organizations (Spreitzer, Bacevice, and Garrett, 2015). In 2011, Deskmag reported that 8% of coworkers in the United States worked for companies with more than 100 employees, and in 2015, the number of employees in US coworking spaces was 36% of the entire number of coworkers in the world. On the other side, companies apply coworking to their own corporate offices. The purpose is that of attracting start-ups, early stage entrepreneurs, and professionals. In this case, what companies like to achieve is to create innovation and connections around their brand and products/services (Deskmag; Spreitzer et al., 2015). This is the case, for example, with various banks (e.g., ING in Toronto, Idea Hub in Poland, National Bank in Australia).

In the same line, various small and medium companies are incorporating coworking inside their structures because they see an opportunity not to waste the structures that they have available and that they do not use. With the economic crisis, small and medium enterprises find themselves with offices and rooms in their facilities that are unused. Thus, coworking in this period is seen also as an opportunity to re-use structural

¹² <http://www.deskmag.com/en/how-profitable-are-coworking-spaces-profitability-business-stats-statistics-make-money-965>

¹³ <http://www.deskmag.com/en/coworking-spaces-operated-by-corporations-765>

resources for different purposes from their own business, as well as to revitalize it through encounters with other professionals (Deskmag, *The coworking project*, 2011¹⁴). Besides private companies, other institutions have begun to incorporate coworking in different ways and for different purposes. For instance, an increasing number of libraries integrate coworking spaces for promoting conversations and interactions. In the same line, universities are integrating coworking spaces for promoting exchange among different subjects inside the university as well as to support students with business ideas. Finally, coworking is embraced by public administrations that in some cities and regions make public spaces available for use as coworking spaces, or by supporting professionals (through economic facilitation) to afford and use the coworking spaces. In addition, other spaces that before did not define themselves as coworking spaces, in this period decided to adopt the label coworking. This is the case for example of The Hub (previously described) and Regus (the space where Neuberger used to work when he decided to establish the coworking space).

Coworking organizations

Even if the instruments adopted by the initiators of what they called the ‘coworking movement’ are still in use (e.g., coworkingwiki), in this period of coworking evolution, coworking is becoming more focused on creating and promoting knowledge around the functioning and the impact of coworking spaces. For instance, in 2012, *Open Coworking*, a nonprofit organization, was established “*to defend and advance the core values of the coworking movement.*” The organization is composed of volunteers, supporters, and curators who are in charge of: (1) gathering people around coworking, by managing the online instruments available (e.g., coworking wiki, coworking group, coworking Visa, etc.) and creating new ones, and by involving people in opening new coworking spaces; (2) but also understanding and creating knowledge around coworking, for example by doing surveys and research to understand the impact and to map the number of coworking spaces in the world. Generally speaking, in this phase the coworking movement seems to be focused on two main objectives: the first one is that of creating and supporting networks (of people who share the same interests, of coworking spaces around the world, of new subjects, and of institutions that are

¹⁴ <http://www.deskmag.com/en/the-coworking-space-project-italy-225>

interested in coworking). The second purpose is that of better understanding the characteristics and impact of coworking, as it becomes more diffuse and differentiated. The orientation to the creation of knowledge around coworking emerges also with the implementation of other initiatives in this phase. The strong and extremely rapid diffusion of coworking brings difficulties in constructing a shared goal and in explaining homogeneously the idea of coworking. For this reason, various formats of conferences, congresses, and workshops have been implemented in order to create knowledge around the topic and to explain the scope and the impact of coworking. Beginning around 2010, an increased number of non-academic congresses and conferences around coworking have been proposed in different cities and regions: 2010 is the year in which the first coworking Europe conference took place, in Brussels with more than 150 attendees coming from 22 countries. In the same year, the first US coworking conference was organized in Austin with three main focuses. During the following years, other local and national conferences were realized (e.g., coworking conferences in Spain and Japan in 2012). The aims of the conferences are sharing experiences (best practices and criticalities) about concrete applications of coworking around the world, discussing future perspectives, and sharing scientific surveys and research about coworking. In the conferences, one topic strongly emerges in this phase, namely, how to make coworking sustainable, both in the sense of making coworking useful and impactful for society, and in terms of the economic sustainability and profitability of coworking spaces. Besides the conferences in 2010, the online magazine, Deskmag, entirely focused on coworking, went online, with the precise aim to create and diffuse knowledge about coworking and coworking spaces. In addition, starting in 2008, scientific publications (see chapter 1) about coworking appeared, oriented to understanding the origins, characteristics, organization, and impact of coworking.

3. Discussion

3.1. Differentiation of coworking object and diversity of subjects involved

The historical analysis has permitted the identification of two main phases in the evolution of coworking and the understanding of the multivocal nature of the coworking object. The trends that characterize the qualitative development of coworking are

mostly connected to an increasing differentiation of the object, which parallels an increasing diversification of the subjects involved in coworking at different levels.

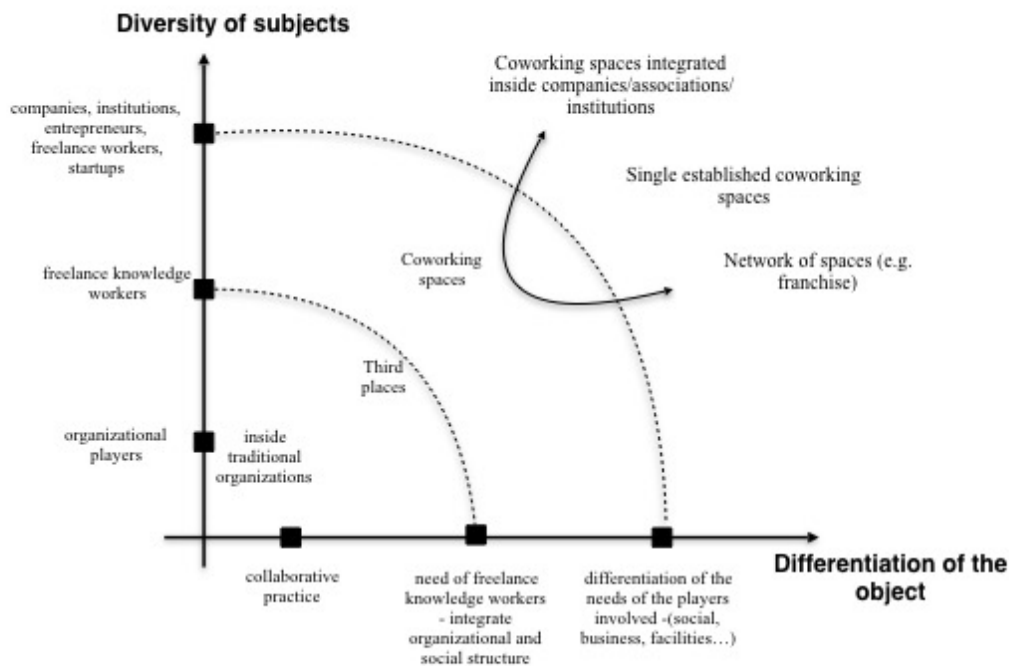
In the first historical phase, coworking was associated with a working practice appropriate to the traditional organizational system. Coworking was generally considered a synonym of *working with* other organizational players (e.g., colleagues, clients, users, etc.). The term coworking began to acquire importance and attract the attention of professionals and scholars when work was increasingly a matter of collaborative work within a network society. Thus, coworking became a fundamental practice that had to be improved and supported inside a system that emphasized differences and distances between the players. Changes in the labor market, including the flexibilization of work and of virtual work made the relationship between workers, their work, and organizations more flexible and project based. This led to a change in the meaning of ‘working with’ that was based mostly on distant collaboration where technology played a crucial role in guaranteeing the possibility of working anywhere at any time and to share a virtual environment. The increase in the number of freelance knowledge workers and the reconfiguration of interactions between individuals and institutions across the domains of work (Castells 2011; Kostakis & Bauwens 2014), trace the passage to the second developmental phase of coworking. In fact, new needs from workers emerged, around which coworking was constructed, by signing the first qualitative development in the object-activity of coworking. More specifically at the beginning of the second phase, coworking was about the articulation of the need of freelance workers to find adequate working conditions. This articulation resulted in the idea of coworking as connected to the provision of spatial and social structures to freelance workers, with which they can construct the best working conditions for themselves. To this aim, the second phase was initially characterized by the creation of dedicated settings, informal working places (coworking spaces), that would fulfill this need. At the beginning, the function of the coworking spaces was similar to that of a ‘third place’ (Oldenburg, 1989): they provide a public space where people could be in contact with other professionals and use internet connection to accomplish their work. As in the third places, the focus was on the social dimensions that a shared space could provide to workers. Moriset (2014) compares the third places and the first coworking spaces. Besides emphasizing the fact that the coworking spaces are ‘third places’ because they provide a setting that is neither company nor private places, Moriset underlines the convergence between the principles of the third places like ‘neutral ground’ (flexible basis), ‘leveler’ (absence of social barriers), ‘accessibility’, ‘low

profile,' etc., and those of Citizen Space (openness, collaboration, accessibility and community). In this sense, coworking spaces are established as informal, bottom-up, and not hierarchical organizations that are oriented to facilitate social interactions between professionals. The coworking movement is instrumental in conceptualizing the coworking idea around these principles by developing online instruments to further the diffusion and sharing of ideas like coworking wiki (coworking wiki) and google groups. Thus coworking expanded first within the San Francisco area, later throughout the United States, and then worldwide (Neuberg, 2015; Hunt, 2009). The expansion is mostly characterized by the exponential growth of spaces, under the label of coworking, all around the world.

This widespread diffusion brought about a progressive reinterpretation and differentiation of the coworking object. Starting from 2007, the second phase saw the implementation of the coworking spaces by different collective subjects (private companies, public, and semipublic institutions). The aims that these subjects wanted to achieve through the establishment of coworking spaces were different. Thus, coworking in the second phase was seen also as a strategy or policy of the players who establish the spaces. In the same line, different subjects began to use the spaces: not only freelance workers but also entrepreneurs, employees, startups, companies. Besides the social dimensions, coworking began to be used also for aspects strictly connected to the development of business to save costs. Later in the second historical phase of coworking, the central activity of coworking space developed toward a more structured and institutionalized organization, with defined roles and tasks and expanded the provision of services and activities to respond to specific needs and purposes. Various organizational models arose: coworking spaces integrated inside already established organizations, small spaces established and managed by freelance workers or entrepreneurs, coworking spaces organized in networks, franchises, etc. The coworking spaces in this period seemed to lose the initial bottom-up, not hierarchical, and informal structure. Another trend in this direction is what Moriset (2014) has already defined as 'hybridization' between coworking spaces and other different types of spaces, e.g. telecenters (drop-in offices where the interactions between professionals are low and not facilitated), flexible offices (that are based on the offer of rental solutions but are not oriented to the promotion of collaboration) and incubators (spaces mostly intended to startup for the development of business and innovative projects). The historical evolution sees a progressively integration (or hybridization) of these spaces

that are implementing coworking spaces inside their structure with a more entrepreneurial logic (Moriset, 2014).

Figure 3.1 Developmental Model of Coworking



To summarize, it is possible to notice a progressive increase of subjects that are interested in establishing coworking spaces and being associated with the principles coworking conveys. As shown in Figure 3.1, the increase in number of subjects involved brought to different uses of coworking spaces and to a reinterpretation of the idea of coworking. This has led to a differentiation of the object of coworking that is difficult to grasp since it is more and more dependent on the internetworked activities of the subjects involved.

3.2 Challenges in historical development

Through the realized analysis it has been possible to identify the main challenges that characterize the two phases of the development of coworking and that trace the passage from one phase to another.

The first phase is characterized by important changes in the labour market that brought about consistent changes in the ways workers relate to their job and organizations as well as how they work with each other. New needs emerged which the traditional organizations were not able to answer. The main challenge here is that of finding new ways to answer the needs of freelance knowledge workers. In the second phase, the object-activity of coworking is in fact constructed around the new needs. Here the challenges that characterize the second phase mostly regard two main issues that are strictly interrelated. The first one is the economic sustainability of the coworking spaces (that represent the answer to the needs emerged) and the second is the sustainability of an idea of coworking based on specific principles that the so-called coworking movement diffused.

At the beginning of the second phase, the coworking space established by Neuberg was revealed to be not economically sustainable because it did not attract many people. The problems identified by Neuberg were that most of the people did not know and did not fully understand coworking, and some considered it a silly idea (Neuberg, 2015). Neuberg underlined that for the first 2 months the space was empty and he had started working inside and adopted marketing strategies to attract people. However, the sustainability of the space and of the initiative itself emerged as another criticality, which reflects the primary contradiction (Engeström, 1987) that characterizes this second phase of the coworking evolution. The desks were available for \$100 and some people could not afford the space, even if they were interested in the idea. However, the financial limitations of people in the space and the low number of desks caused Neuberg to be unable to sustain the operation. Thus, after only one year, the space closed and the idea of coworking seemed to have died (Neuberg, 2015). Nevertheless, the idea of coworking—contrary to the negative expectations of Neuberg—attracted the interest of other professionals. The problems previously described continued to create a need to promote the idea of coworking and to gather people around the same. Thus, the coworking movement attempted to explicate values around which the idea moved on and to determine whether the need for improving working conditions effectively existed

for independent workers. Online instruments (like coworkingwiki) by Hunt and Messina were implemented to achieve these aims because they realized that many other people felt the need to find and construct better working conditions that could take some aspect from traditional companies and others from the independent work. The coworking movement helped spread the idea and implementation of spaces fully dedicated to coworking (e.g., Citizenspace).

With the diffusion of the coworking spaces around the world coworking was reinterpreted and reproduced in different ways. Coworking space organizations have adopted different purposes from the original ones by attracting the interest of different players. In particular in this phase coworking is being considered by private (e.g., companies), public (e.g., public administration), and semi-public (e.g., libraries and universities) institutions as an opportunity to produce economic value. This value creation includes direct means such as renting of infrastructure, tools, and services, as well as indirect means like attracting talent, projects, and initiatives around their core business and focus. This differentiation of players has led to greater diversity of coworking arrangements to accommodate the specialized requirements of coworking members. However, this differentiation also engendered new problems. The first one is related to the difficulty of aligning all these reinterpretations of coworking around the core values identified by the founders of the coworking movement. This results in the need to distinguish those initiatives that are strictly connected to the original idea of coworking from those that are actually distant from the original idea because they are more specifically focused on business, profit, and pursuit of individual interests.

For example, the supporters of coworking tend to distinguish coworking spaces from other types of spaces like serviced offices and rent-an-office spaces (Deskmag, *The incubation space for coworkers*, 2010)¹⁵. These spaces are based on a business model that permits professionals to have low cost and flexible access to spaces in usually attractive and prestigious locations. In past decades, these services frequently included fixed communications facilities, fixed telephone lines, fax machines, physical mail addresses, etc. A peculiar example is represented by the case of Regus: Neuberg was working inside Regus when he had the idea of opening a coworking space. He stated that “[he] was not inspired by Regus because it was utterly non-social [...] those were ways to just save costs. There was no cross fertilization or communication” (Deskmag,

¹⁵ <http://www.deskmag.com/en/the-incubation-space-for-coworkers>

coworking began at Regus... but not the way they think, 2012)¹⁶. However, today Regus self-defines as a coworking spaces. The aspect that is particularly used to distinguish coworking spaces from serviced offices is the social dimension and the focus of coworking to promote social dynamics in respect to the service offices, which instead are oriented to the reduction of costs (Wathers-Lynch et al. 2016).

Various studies, papers, and articles that appear during this phase are focused underlining this distinction (Spinuzzi, 2012; Lange 2011; Deskmag, 2013; Capdevila, 2013). In addition, various local initiatives that took the form of networks of coworking spaces (e.g., associations, programs) aim to gather in a smaller scale, within the coworking movement, different coworking spaces that share values and purposes.

The diffusion of coworking around the world is characterized also by a large number of spaces that have had to close because they were not sustainable and profitable (Deskmag, *The economics of coworking has yet to be proven*, 2010)¹⁷. One of the main open questions that characterizes the debate among professionals and scholars is related to the identification of a business model for coworking that can guarantee sustainability. For this reason different sources of funding, besides self-financing, have been implemented (e.g., crowdfunding and funding from private and public organizations) (Global coworking Survey, 2014). However, reliance on external funding may reduce autonomy in the definition of functioning and objectives, not only for management but also for the workers who contribute to the sustainability of the spaces.

Finally, the other challenge that can be traced in this phase is strictly connected to the first one introduced and is related to the creation of a shared meaning around coworking. The strong differentiation and stratification of coworking initiatives lead also to a loosening of the strong and unique identity of coworking. The evolution of coworking into different and parallel directions has caused the object of coworking to be differentiated and the conceptualization of coworking to be less clear and uniform. For this reason, in this phase different local, national, and international initiatives (conferences, congresses, workshops, online groups) seek to sharpen the understanding of coworking to account for its changing features, characteristics, and impacts in different fields. In the same line the various scientific studies have tried to define and classify coworking's main characteristics (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016; Rus and Orel, 2015),

¹⁶ <http://www.deskmag.com/en/coworking-did-begin-at-regus-but-not-the-way-they-think-362>

¹⁷

motivations (Avdikos & Kalogeresis 2016; Capdevila, 2014; Fuzi, 2015; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016) and outcomes (Waters-Lynch and Potts 2016).

3.3. Ideal models of coworking

Another element that emerged from the historical analysis is the ideal models of coworking. The first ideal model of coworking is well expressed in the principles and values that characterize the coworking movement founded by Hunt, Messina, and Neuberg. As previously articulated, the initiators were inspired by the open source movement (of which they were members). They stressed some specific aspects that they transferred to the idea of coworking. These can be summarized in the creation of a decentralized collective system where people could connect to each other, share ideas, and co-construct solutions in relation to problems created by the labor market. Their intention was that of aggregating people (in particular independent knowledge workers) in order to create, in a bottom-up dynamic, the best working conditions, despite the predominant paradigm of the labour market. In their vision, a coworking space had to reflect the collective-driven, networked approach of the open-source-idea, translated into physical space (Lange, 2011).

This idea emerged in various documents and interviews, an excerpt of which is shown below.

The idea is simple: independent professionals and those with workplace flexibility work better together than they do alone. Coworking spaces are about community-building and sustainability. Participants agree to uphold the values set forth by the movement's founders, as well as interact and share with one another. We are about creating better places to work and as a result, a better way to work¹⁸

This ideal model is also made clear in the challenges previously identified and in particular in the aim to differentiate coworking spaces from other types of spaces and organizations by underlining their basic principles. Within this framework, the ideal coworking organizational model is what here I call the *open space model*, defined as an informal space characterized by a bottom-up organizational structure that is largely decentralized. It is based on a simple system of shared behavioral rules based on declared and shared values. The structure of the space is characterized by the absence of

¹⁸ Coworkingwiki, url: <http://wiki.coworking.org/w/page/16583831/FrontPage>

hierarchy and differences between people. Organized in a horizontal division of labor (flat organizational structure), there is a little distance between the founders and the other coworking participants, who are involved in the funding, design, and construction of the space (Lange, 2011; Wathers-Lynch, et al. 2016). However, over the years it is possible to trace the establishment of other models. On one side, the need to make spaces economically sustainable brought about more organized spaces with differentiated and customized services. On the other side, other types of organizations and spaces labeled themselves coworking spaces, recognizing coworking as a socially desirable concept. Other models of coworking emerged; these are what I define as *Institutionalized Coworking*, where the coworking is implemented within public or private institutions. The space is integrated in the policies and objectives of the main organizations and in this sense is characterized by a conformity with the institutional environment (rules, values, instruments etc.).

3.4. Developmental tensions beyond the historical evolution

Cultural Historical Activity Theory gives an interesting perspective in interpreting the passage from one phase to another as driven by problems and challenges that reflect contradictions. Accordingly to Engestrom (2001), “Contradictions are historically accumulated structural tensions within and between activity systems” (p.137), and are crucial aspects for understanding the qualitative development of the systems. These tensions reflect at different levels the primary contradiction, of the tension between use value (non-monetary value) and exchange value (monetary value). This contradiction cannot be eliminated but is managed in different ways in the various phases of the history of the activity.

The challenges that characterize the historical phases reflect the structural tensions of coworking, most of which derive from the application of the coworking idea in the concept of coworking space. In particular, it is possible to reconnect the challenges previously identified to two main tensions.

The first tension is related to the idea of coworking as emphasizing aspects of work that are not directly connected to profit and business. The original idea of coworking at the beginning of the second phase was that of creating new organizations that could support workers around ideals that challenge the mainstream state and the limits of the traditional organization and of the private institutions dominance (Butcher, 2016). Thus,

against the individualistic perspective, social dimensions were emphasized as fundamental elements in answering the needs of workers and establishing new core values. The coworking movement influenced significant social and economic transformations through the spreading of values like collaboration, community, reciprocity associated to work activities (Gandini, 2015; Butcher, 2016). These have been referred to as “social connections” (Neuberg, 2014), “local bonds,” “social structure” (Messina, 2008), “shared identity” (Neuberg, 2014), and “community” (De Koven, 2013; Neuberg, 2014; Hillman 2011). These aspects not only constitute the original idea of coworking at the beginning of the second phase, but also represent the focus in the debate about coworking, and presuppose the collaborative and community potentials of coworking. (Fost, 2008; Sundsted et al., 2009; Hunt, 2009; Botsman & Rogers 2011; Spinuzzi 2012; Capdevila 2013; Parrino 2013; Kojo & Nenonen 2014; Liegl, 2014; Lumley, 2014; Bilandzic & Froth, 2015; Gandini, 2015). However, the progressive stratification of coworking made it difficult to identify a clear understanding and shared meaning of aspects like collaboration and community. For instance, “collaboration” has been used in terms of innovation; a “culture of sharing” (Rus & Orel 2015); a relational milieu (Gandini 2015); the renewing of social connections (Kubatova 2014); the exchange of information (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016); accelerated serendipity (Leclercq-Vandelanoitte and Isaac, 2016); or the seeking of people, information, or resources when the seeker does not have enough information to coordinate (Waters-Lynch and Potts 2016). Besides, with the introduction and diffusion of the coworking space concept, additional needs connected to the profitability of coworking emerged. The previously described challenges underline an attempt of the subjects involved at different levels in coworking to make coworking spaces directly profitable through the renting of facilities and indirectly by improving their core business, thus integrating coworking. The focus on business and profitability emerged also in the motivations of workers in using coworking spaces that include various aims: cost, resource, and relational collaboration (Capdevila 2014); social support (Gerdenitsch et al. 2016); entrepreneurship and creativity (Fuzi 2015; Fuzi et al. 2014); the reduction of precarious working conditions (Avdikos & Kalogerisis 2016); and the identification of new people, ideas, and resources (Waters-Lynch and Potts 2016). In the same line, besides such aspects as community, collaboration, and openness, aspects of profitability are emphasized in the current debate about coworking. Some studies and articles aim at understanding: which are the most sustainable and profitable models of coworking spaces, which are the business and economic impacts produced by

coworking, and which are the actions and strategies that make the space more secure and sustainable financially. The orientation to economic sustainability and profitability seems sometimes to be against the promotion of community, collaboration, and social relations. An example is the case of a recent article in Deskmag which underlined that “*more private offices secure financial sustainability, more meeting spaces can damage it*” (Deskmag, 2017, *How profitable are coworking spaces today?*).

This tension can be reduced to a developmental tension with “social orientation” on one end and “profit/business orientation” of coworking on the other end.

Fig.3.2 Historical tension Social vs. Individual

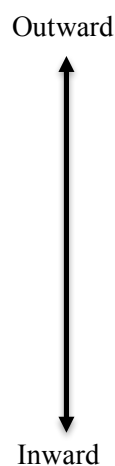


The second tension is connected to the collectively driven and networked approach of coworking. The idea of coworking is characterized by the promotion of connections between different subjects for the co-creation of solutions to the problems introduced by the labor market. In its second phase, coworking responded to new needs that emerged from changes in the labor market with the aim to promote social and economic changes in society. The establishment of what the initiators called the coworking movement was that of creating a network of various subjects who could create local solutions in a bottom-up logic. Thus, the orientation of coworking in this sense seems to overcome the boundaries of the coworking spaces. This orientation is made clear in various discussions, interviews, and conversations by the initiators of the coworking movement (Hunt, 2009). Other more recent examples are the national and international conferences and unconferences that are focused on understanding the evolution of coworking as well as how coworking is changing society socially, economically, and environmentally. Thus, we can say that the nature of coworking is that of producing changes and solutions that involve networks of subjects in society. However, as demonstrated by the historical evolution and the challenges that characterize it, coworking is also connected with the attempt to respond to the needs of the individuals located within the coworking spaces. The reproduction of the coworking idea inside local spaces cannot disregard the

availability of infrastructure, activities, and services to sustain the individual needs of the members inside the space. Examples of this focus are the various initiatives and services that each space provides and that are target the specific types of users of the space (e.g., training courses, coaching sessions, nursery services, networking activities, etc.), but also the different ways in which the spaces are organized in terms of infrastructure (e.g., open spaces, private offices, lunch rooms, meetings rooms, etc.) and internal organization (e.g., community manager, marketing manager, etc.).

In this sense the history of coworking has evolved by reproducing a tension between what I call an “outward orientation” (to summarize the aspects of collectivity, openness, and networking) and on the other end an “inward orientation” (that explains the focus on aspects to satisfy the needs of the individuals within the space).

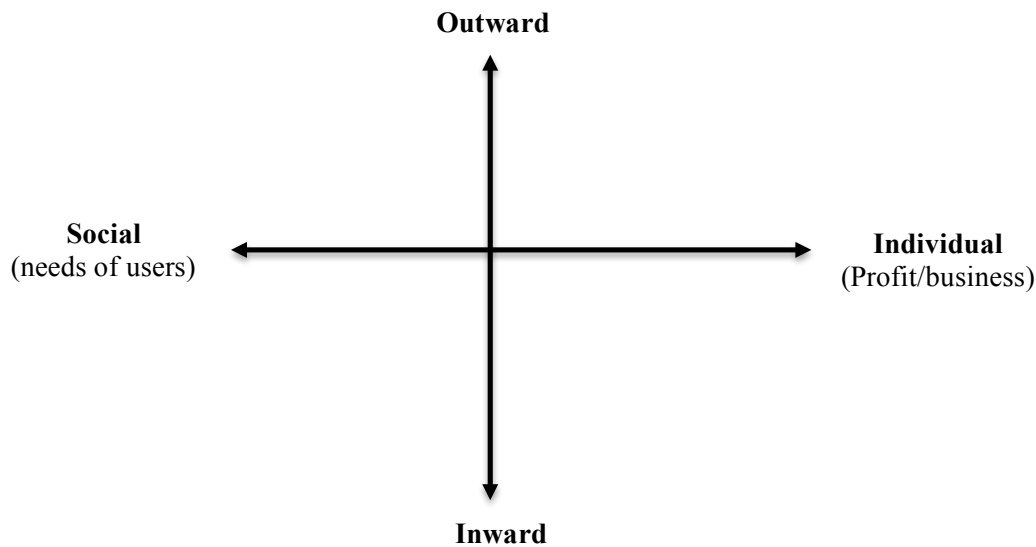
Fig.3.3 Historical tension Outward vs. Inward



The two tensions previously describe manifest themselves in the history of coworking and the challenges that characterize the historical phases that ended up in the identified problems connected to the sustainability of coworking, both the economic sustainability of the space (managed with the differentiation of targeted structures, services, and activities) and the sustainability of coworking idea (managed with the attempt to gather the fragmented offers under the same values and principles). Following Activity Theory, the historical tensions are fundamental to understanding the current mode of coworking activity and to identifying its specific features and the connected contradictions.

In this sense in the next chapters I'll analyze the current state of coworking activity and the connected contradictions by framing them within their development and position inside a matrix that I constructed by intersecting the two historical tensions identified and that can be represented as follows (see fig. 3.4).

Fig.3.4. Matrix of historical tensions



Conclusion

In the present chapter, I presented an analysis of the historical evolution of coworking. Through the analysis of documents, interviews, and reports, I have identified two developmental phases in the history of coworking. In the analysis, I considered coworking as an object-activity and coworking organization as the central activity system. The passage from one phase to another was traced by analyzing the changes in the object caused by innovations, disruptions, and problems. Through the interpretation of the phases described, two main trends were identified: the increased diversification of the collective subjects involved in coworking at different levels and the increased complexity and diversification of the object. The historical evolution entails an overall shift from a model characterized by a bottom-up self-organization to respond to collective needs, to a more institutionalized and structured organization where different services, activities, and facilities are provided to targeted users. The challenges and the changes that characterize the history lead to the identification of two historical tensions at the basis of the qualitative development of coworking. The first one refers to a

tension between a social orientation (focused on the principles of collaboration and community) versus an individual/profit orientation (focused on profitability and economic sustainability of the coworking space). The second tension sees on one side an outward orientation of coworking (aspects of collectivity, openness and networking to promote a social change) versus an inward orientation (with a focus on the satisfaction of the needs of the individuals within the coworking space). These tensions represent a useful framework to understand the present mode of coworking and to understand the connected features. In its current phase, coworking has been expanding to a global scale of influence and has been connecting to a large number of activities. Thus, in the current phase, coworking is characterized by a multivocal object in which plural and diverse collective subjects understand, negotiate, act, and give sense to the object itself. The strong differentiation and stratification that characterize the history of coworking in fact suggests that rather than a distinct, coherent activity (Spinuzzi, 2012), coworking can be understood as a set of different activities—characterized by different elements and in particular the rules, the division of labor, and the characteristic of community. These activities are undergoing rapid and intense development as coworking spaces experiment with different structural and organizational models to achieve sustainability. Thus, in the next chapter, I will analyze the multivocality of the coworking object to identify the various activities of coworking in its current state, by positioning coworking inside the frame provided by the tensions identified. In particular in the next empirical studies (in chapters 4 and 5) I will focus on the analysis of coworking in Italy, that is today a country with a large diffusion of coworking spaces, and where the first coworking space was established in 2008.

- Chapter 4 -

A TYPOLOGY OF COWORKING BETWEEN STRUCTURE AND PROCESSES

ABSTRACT

This chapter is dedicated to the analysis of coworking multiple activity systems. A qualitative empirical study is presented as focused on the identification of a typology of coworking based on the analysis of the object in its current state. For the analysis, 24 qualitative interviews were conducted with founders of coworking spaces in Italy. The results of the study led to the identification of a typology of coworking that describe different structures and sharing practices, starting from the perspective of the founders. Concerning the structure of the chapter, in the first part, I position my study in respect to the literature by discussing coworking classifications and the concept of sharing. In the second part, I present the methodology adopted, the data collection and data analysis. Finally, I present and discuss the main results of the study.

Introduction

Based on the results of the historical analysis, in this chapter I focus on the analysis of the heterogeneity of coworking in its current historical phase. The historical analysis in the previous chapter explained the qualitative evolution of the coworking object and of the coworking organizations that progressively present different and articulated foci, characteristics, and configurations. The objective of this chapter is to analyze coworking activity as heterogeneous in its object and processes.

To this aim, I conducted an empirical study in Italy, based on qualitative interviews with founders of coworking spaces in different regions,¹⁹ to comprehend how the founders understand, act, and give sense to coworking concerning both the structure and processes, and how they shape different forms of organizing (Engestrom, 2009).

Through the analysis of the collected data, I identify a typology of coworking composed of four coworking activity systems that present different components of the activity system triangle and reflect different interpretations of sharing by the founders. I suggest a twofold reading of the coworking types: both in its articulate structure of activity system (with objects, subject, rules, division of labor, tools, and community—as highlighted by the Activity theory approach) and in its sharing processes that emerged from the interpretations of the founders. This reading allows an interception of different forms of organizing that manifest and opens the possibility of identifying the connected contradictions.²⁰

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss the classifications of coworking and how I position my proposal of classification in the literature. Along the same line, I explain why I focus the analysis on the processes on sharing, by discussing the literature. In the third section, I present the methodological approach (selection of participants, data collection, and data analysis) and the results of the empirical study. Finally, I discuss the results and create a link with the empirical research that will be presented in the next chapter.

¹⁹ The first coworking space appeared in Italy in 2008 and now there are almost 400 spaces on the national territory. In Italy there are also networks of coworking spaces (the biggest is COWO project network with more than 120 spaces) and local conferences (e.g., Espresso Coworking). In 2015, Italy hosted the Coworking Europe Conference that I attended and where I had the opportunity to meet coworkers and coworking founders from all over Europe.

²⁰ The analysis of the contradictions is the focus of chapter 5.

1. Coworking classifications in literature

The literature proposes several classifications of coworking. It is possible to identify two trends (Capdevila, 2013; 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012). The first is related to those classifications that take as unit of analysis the structural elements of coworking spaces (e.g., types of coworkers or business models). The second one is connected to the typologies that are based on the social processes activated inside the spaces.

Concerning the first trend, one of the most widespread classifications of coworking that is used in literature (Spinuzzi, 2012; Gandini, 2015; Capdevila, 2013; Ross and Ressler, 2015) pertains to the distinction between *vertical* (or homogeneous) and *generalistic* (or heterogeneous) coworking spaces. *Vertical coworking* refers to spaces that are focused on a specific domain of work and the users of which have similar professional experiences. *Generalistic coworking* refers to spaces intended for people who come from various professional backgrounds. In this case the use of the space is not limited to a specific target, and the result is a multidisciplinary working environment.

Another classification is proposed by Kojo and Nenonen (2016), who identify different types of coworking spaces while undertaking research in Finland. Their typology is based on the *business model of the coworking space* and the *level of user access and affordance*. Concerning the first aspect, the authors state that the spaces can have a profit or a nonprofit orientation, while access can be public, semi-public, or private. Through their observations, the authors differentiate public offices (e.g., libraries) founded by public institutions/organizations that are usually free of charge; collaboration hubs, spaces that operate on a bigger scale and facilitate collaboration among members of certain interest groups; coworking hotels that require registration and offer short-term leases and a compact service; incubators, that develop entrepreneurship for specific professionals and offer shared studios by which an organization or entrepreneur sublets its workplace with a flexible lease. Kojo and Nenonen insist that most of the spaces represent a mix and an overlapping of the identified types (e.g., some provide both profit services, but also public or semipublic access to some coworking facilities). Following the same perspective, Schuermann (2013) categorizes coworking spaces into five types: midsize and big community coworking spaces, small community coworking spaces, corporate-powered coworking spaces, university-related coworking spaces, and the pop-up co-working spaces. These are different in size, industry and type of operators.

All these classifications are based on the identification of one or two structural aspects of the coworking spaces on which the authors construct the classifications of the spaces. However, these typologies do not provide a clear understanding of coworking, nor do they reflect the complexity of the structure and processes on which it is constructed.

Besides these examples, other classifications can be identified based on the social processes activated inside the spaces. Capdevila (2014) focuses the analysis on the collaborative practices that characterize coworking. He underlines three drivers of collaboration and connects them to the strategies adopted by the coworking operators to promote collaboration and to the structural characteristics of the spaces:

- *cost-related collaboration* is based on motivations of cost reduction and general costs, costs related to specific assets, and transactional costs;
- *resource-based collaboration* is characterized by coworkers who engage in collaborative practices and consists of the combination of different types of knowledge. This type of collaboration can be expressed through the participation in knowledge-sharing events, coaching sessions, or the creation of new products and services; and
- *relational collaboration* is based on the development of community resources. The final aim is the synergistic effects of the collaboration. It is promoted by focusing coworking on a specialization, transmitting inspiring vision in the space and empowering a sense of community among coworkers.

Coworking spaces that are based on cost-related collaboration are usually small, with rather inflexible infrastructure and tools. Resource-based collaboration spaces are medium-sized spaces characterized by specific assets (specialization), and relational-based collaboration spaces are characterized by large size and large multi-use space for events.

One of the first studies about coworking was by Spinuzzi (2012), who proposed a detailed analysis based on three questions: what is coworking, who coworks, and why do people cowork? Spinuzzi describes *community work space* (where people work alongside but not necessarily with others); *unoffice space* (where people who do not work in an office and miss the interactions of the office environment); and *federated work space* (that fosters connections among coworkers). From the analysis of the coworkers' perspective, the author describes two outcomes of coworking spaces: *parallel work* (that doesn't involve direct collaboration between coworkers) and

cooperative work (based on feedback, reciprocal learning, trust and eventually partnerships and subcontracting).

Finally, transversely to these analyses, Spinuzzi observes two distinct configurations of collaboration: *good neighbor* and *good partners*. The former describes the coworking spaces that operate as alternatives to traditional offices and are focused on sustaining the neighborly relations of the coworkers while doing their work in parallel. The latter is characterized by momentary collaboration between coworkers on specific shared work issues or problems (Spinuzzi, 2012). The analysis of Spinuzzi interestingly underlines that coworking is a collective activity that different subjects co-construct through discourses, talks, and interactions. The way the subjects interpret coworking strongly influences the creation of different configurations.

The last two classifications shed light on the fact that in coworking the boundaries between structure and processes are labile (Engestrom, 2009). Starting from these considerations, I interpret coworking as a collective activity where subjects are engaged in, co-construct, and give sense to the object (Spinuzzi, 2012) and where the structure and processes are strictly interrelated. Inside this framework in the present study I identify a typology of coworking by analyzing the needs and motives around which the object is constructed. To this aim I use activity system as a useful analytical tool, to draw the different structure and forms of organizing (Engeström, 2000; Engeström and Blackler, 2005) that are shaped around different objects of coworking. Moreover, in my analysis, I shed light on how these coworking activities are connected to different interpretations of sharing (Belk, 2007, 2010; Benkler, 2004; Fiske, 1991; Woodburn, 1998) that orient the social processes that characterize the activities identified.

2. Coworking and sharing

Coworking.com defines *coworking* as “a global community of people dedicated to the values of collaboration, openness, community, accessibility and sustainability in their workplaces”²¹. Indeed, the prefix “co” of the label coworking conveys a multiplicity of different, albeit often overlapping and confusing concepts in the literature, such as mutuality (Garrett et al., 2014); cooperation (Ross and Ressa, 2015); collaboration (Spinuzzi, 2012; Capdevila, 2015); integration (Capdevila, 2015); proximity (Parrino, 2013); and willingness, friendship, relationship (Lange, 2011; Parrino, 2013; Merkel,

²¹ <http://coworking.com/>

2015). The focus on the analysis of specific social processes led the authors to connect coworking to different forms of interactions, exchanges, and communal relationships (Fiske, 1991; Clark and Mills, 1993) that are positioned within a continuum between a more individualistic and inward orientation and a more collective and outward one. Three foci can be identified in the literature.

The first focus is relationship: the plural, dynamic, transactional, and social configuration of mankind. In the *Manifesto for Relational Sociology*, Emirbayer (1997) requests a relational perspective that conceives of the social world as an unfolding dynamic of relations. The relational point of view “sees agency as inseparable from unfolding dynamics of situation” and entails “the engagement by actors of different structural environments which both reproduce and transform those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situation” (Emirbayer, p. 294). Cooper (2005) argues that *relationality* refers to “a fluctuating network of connection and disconnections with the various objects of our world,” as a “restless scene of acts in permanent suspension” (Cooper, p. 1690), in which relation is connection and possible association, a “relationship of betweenness” (p. 1698). Inside this framework, coworking is one of multiple local and/or global social configurations and collective structures. As described in the literature (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Kojima and Nenonen, 2016; Parrino, 2013), coworking can generate interactions (e.g., reciprocal social activities as speech acts, conversational dynamics, discussions, and linguistic games), transactions (ways of enhancing negotiated aims, dealing with bounded rationalities, and opportunistic motives), and relations (connected to a story that links together, yielding constraints and meanings²²; to cognitive proximity, Boshma, 2005; and a sense of belonging). In this perspective, it is possible to analyze possible aims (i.e., to support, to integrate), forms (i.e., formal vs. informal), levels (in depth vs. superficial) and other features of relational ties and connection.

The second focus pertains to collaboration. A good quality of social interactions is a fine predisposition for collaboration (Capdevila, 2014), which requires specific human assets (Williamson, 1985) and agreements between subjects who acknowledge each other’s substantial reputation, temporarily sharing some contents (e.g., knowledge or competences) in order to accomplish a temporary joint objective (Pais and Provasi,

²² The etymological meaning of “relation” refers both to link, tie (from Latin *religare*) and to give sense (from Latin *referre* = yield, transfer meaning). This entails a sort of ambivalence embedded in relational dimension: to be related, with ties and meanings, is about, on one hand, opening possibilities (tie as texture, weave, grid, web, canvas, cloth) but, on the other, dealing with negative features (tie as snare, tangle, wangle, trap, deception). Therefore, a need arises to analyze and understand the relational implications of the sharing process embedded in the coworking spaces.

2015). Spinuzzi (2012) and Capdevila (2014) follow this path in conceiving coworking as emerging forms of collaborative activities and organizations in which people, dwelling in colocation and physical proximity (Parrino, 2013; Boschma, 2005) can create relational conditions for collaborative work. This may be the possible and not taken for granted exit of social processes in which places, spaces, events, and projects are entangled (Capdevila, 2014). This leads to the other concept usually associated with coworking, that different levels of collaboration can give rise to a *grammar of collaboration* of coworking (Engestrom et al., 2015)²³.

The last focus is that of community. Community is one of the most debated concepts in the literature, one with a polysemy of definitions. Adler et al. (2008) call for the evolution of the organization of professional work, highlighting a collaborative form of community as the organizing principle, with more open ties at the global level and stronger ties at the local level. The contribution of Adler and Heckscher (2006), who sketch the evolution of community and trust, moving from the classical formulation of Durkheim (1893/1984), Weber (1947), and Tonnies (1957), calls for a transformation of professional community from a *Gemeinschaft* through a *Gesellschaft* toward a new collaborative community (a development in social organizations different from hierarchy and market). New interdependent activities, related to a strong focus on knowledge production and circulation, require new forms of trust and communality, seeking to shape proper conditions for interdependent contribution, integrated process management and multiple social interaction and peer relationships. The emerging form of community is based on more flexible tasks, knowledge-oriented activities and mutual understanding that ask for a common and interconnected acknowledgment of goals, rules, roles, values, cultures. The collaborative community emphasizes firms as distributed knowledge systems (Tsoukas, 1996) and the need to enhance the flow of knowledge through social networks within communities and overcoming barriers between different communities (Brown and Duguid, 1998; Wenger, 2000).

Inside this framework, coworking has been associated with community in different ways. Generally, it is compared with community in a general sense by underlying the capacity of coworking (and coworking spaces) to bind people against the constitutive outside (Butcher, 2016; Bauman, 2001) and create a sense of belonging among

²³ Engeström et al. (2016) speak about a grammar of collaboration, declined in: coordination (in which people use defined scripts, roles and rules in order to pursue specific objects); cooperation (related to the need to achieve new answers and solutions for a common problem); reflective communication (which entails the possibility to question and revise the scripts developing innovative reciprocal interaction); and carnivalization (that relies to the breaking of the existing scripts, opening new possibilities).

members located inside the coworking spaces (Rus and Orel, 2015; Garrett et al., 2014), in line with the ideal model at the basis of coworking (see chapter 3). In this regard, Butcher (2013; 2016), by revisiting Durkheim, describes coworking as an *organized community*. By going beyond a theoretical division between community and organization, he describes coworking as an institutionalized form of community, thus a place that is not in opposition to societal flux, but in which people can confront and address it (Butcher, 2013). In this framework, he arrives at conceptualizing coworking as a habitus (Bourdieu, 2005) that can be in some cases a more communal habitus and in other cases a more organizational habitus where the dominant dispositions are entrepreneurial and that underline an ambition of progress (Butcher, 2016).

In the same line, Gandini (2016) states that coworking is a para-institutional environment that guarantees trust among coworkers (by reducing the risk of creating interactions between strangers). Through the creation of a common ethos it reproduces a perception of communitarian relations. However, although the principles of coworking give a sense of communitarian relations, they actually reproduce fictitious institutionalism that permits the marketing of subjects to increase their reputation and networks. Gandini (2016) defines coworking as a freelance mode of organization that resembles the collaborative communities described by Adler et al. (2008) only because coworking spaces are intermediaries between hierarchy and market (Powell, 2003).

Regarding these three foci (relationship, collaboration, and community), I state that **sharing is both the unfolding condition and outcome of hybrid combinations of such plural dimensions in their articulated features**. Different authors (Butcher, 2013; 2016; Capdevila, 2013; 2014; Spinuzzi, 2012; Bouncken and Reuschl, 2016) **underline how at the basis of the social processes are practices of sharing that have both material and immaterial dimensions**. I suggest that coworking can be considered an unfolding configuration of new activities in which different representations and manifestations of sharing (Benkler, 2004) are entangled.

Coworking recalls processes of sharing: in the coworking space no one has the clear right to possess the space (with the exception of the founder/owner) and when professionals rent the desk and use the space, coworking requires them to share at least material dimensions (rooms, instruments of work, facilities, etc.). As stated by Griffiths and Gilly (2012), who talk about public spaces, the behaviors and the practices by which the space is shared are a function of the meanings that people give to the space itself, and the meaning differs between individuals and groups. In addition, the way in which people interpret and share the space influences whether and how people share

other immaterial aspects (ideas, projects, experiences, competences, knowledge, etc.). Finally, the way in which the professionals share the space is strongly influenced by the interpretations of the space and of sharing the space that the founders/owners have. The interpretations are in fact reflected in the operating rules, the structure of the space, the instruments, facilities, and activities proposed, which orient and influence the sharing practices among professionals inside (and outside) the space, and that can give rise or not to the social processes previously described.

For this reason, in the present chapter I analyze the idea of the founders about the sharing practices that they promote inside the space and that connect them with different coworking activity systems including object, rules, instruments, community, and division of labor. In order to analyze the different interpretations of sharing I adopt a critical perspective by referring to the theoretical framework provided by Belk.

Belk (2010) argues that sharing can be figured out as “the act and process of distributing what is ours to others and their use and/or the act and process of receiving or taking something from others for our use” (2007, p. 126). Claiming how the emerging digital world and its technological impact (Belk, 2013) have changed the traditional way of consumption, relation, and communication, Belk seeks for an in depth definition of the basic nature of sharing (Belk, 2014), pointing out some conceptual and critical distinctions.

In a macro scenario that can be described as “the sharing turn” (Grassmuck,2012), we have to cope with semantic confusion in which a maze of terms and a plural and multifaceted sharing vocabulary acknowledge under the banner of ‘sharing’ some phenomena that are not sharing at all. There is a vast array of labels that spread from the “share button” in the web 2.0 world, through sharing a common language or a set of experience, till the “virtual kumbaya of joy, communality and fellowship” (Belk, 2014, p.10) that cover enormously profitable transactions in online consumption.

Since the boundaries between different forms of transaction (like sharing, gift giving, and commodity exchange) are fuzzy and shifting, depending of contextual dimensions and situated features, Belk proposes both prototypes (Belk, 2010) and some criteria useful for distinguishing pseudo-sharing from sharing (Belk, 2014).

Belk argues that prototypes, instead of taxonomic definitions, allow a better key for understanding different given transactions, characterized by quick mutations, multiplicity of contents, and strong development of the connected activities (i.e., the evolution from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0;-Belk, 2013). The author (2007, 2010) highlights two prototypes for sharing: mothering and pooling allocation and resources within the

family. Giving birth or providing material and immaterial care are given voluntarily, freely, without expectations of reciprocity, and with an evident condition of joint possession. As a “communal act that links us to other people” (Belk, 2010, 717), sharing enhances feelings of solidarity, generating companionship (from the Latin, *pannis*, bread and shared meal), creating trust, and bonding. In this perspective “sharing defines something as ours” and includes “voluntary lending, pooling and allocation of resources, and authorized use of public property, but not contractual renting, leasing, or unauthorized use of property by theft or trespass” (Belk, 2007, p. 10–11).

Belk (2014) also provides examples and criteria for coping with a proper understanding of complex phenomena that can be judged as pseudo-sharing or sharing manifestations. We can summarize the features that characterize Belk’s perspective of pseudo-sharing, that is “business relationship masquerading as communal sharing” (Belk, 2014, p.5); no sense of mutual ownership; utilitarian rather than communitarian reasons of belonging; and out of the realm of the social and into the realm of business.

Other criteria underline the true forms of sharing: intentionality; voluntary; without compensation; no obligations of reciprocity; feeling and sense of community; and person to person dimension. We can synthesize the true sharing as communal sharing, which Fiske (1991) identified as one of the four basic type of social relationship (the others being authority ranking, equality matching, and market pricing): it pursues goals of solidarity and unity.

It is worthwhile to underline that Belk’s perspective provides heuristic cues and clues for detecting the multiple and new incoming ways of sharing (Belk, 2014), rather than narrow and neatly defined indicators for classifying sharing. Accordingly with Belk’s thought, we can conceive the use of the sharing label in a broader versus more strict sense, as a continuum in which the combinations of self-interest and altruism, stinginess and generosity, and impersonality-personality can be found among different work ventures. So we can articulate sharing as a *sharing in* or a *sharing out*: the first relies on the concept of communistic sharing, that is the inclusion of those with whom we share in our extended relation with the world (“our body, internal processes, ideas and experiences, and those persons, places and things which one feels attached,” Belk, 1988, p.141), enhancing and fostering mutual ownership and sense of community; the second refers to dividing something replicable between relative strangers or as a one-time act (providing spare change, giving directions, using time-share opportunities), without sense of mutuality or community.

Another distinction is about demand sharing (as in the case in which a child asks to be fed, as it is taken for granted that it cannot be refused) and open sharing (when we tell a guest “my house is your house,” implying that he/she can use it, but this is not taken for granted). Belk (2014) also highlights different features (the characteristics of sharable things as lumpy, only available in discrete bundles; granular, too expansive to be affordable only through sharing; in the form of utility to be provided for being sharable—transaction, storage, anti-industry, environmental, social utility; the intention in sharing, helping and making human connections) that enable an emerging and even more complex manifestation of plural forms of sharing (Belk, 2013). Belk (2014, p.16) provides final criteria for moving in this complex landscape: “money, egoistic motives, expectations of reciprocity and lack of a sense of community” are key turning points to distinguish between different forms of sharing.

Such articulated reflections shed light on sharing as a multifaceted and hybrid practice, with plural and often intertwined forms and manifestations. It is worth noting that the words *hospitality* (as one of the main fields in which sharing is practiced) and *hostile* (referring to the danger of hosting strangers) have the same root, suggesting the structural ambiguity that inhabits sharing. As interpersonal process embedded in cultural prescriptions, sharing can both create feeling of community, strong ties and relationships, and collaboration or can generate dependency, resentment, and inferiority; it can be perceived as sincere or insincere; it conveys conditions of excess or insufficiency, with broad or narrow extension (Belk, 2007).

Applying this conceptual framework to coworking, underlines the same hybrid configuration and its positioning in a continuum between economic and social realms, with possible multiple manifestations and different configuration of its specific elements. Thus in this study I start from the perspective of the founders to understand how they construct the structure and orient sharing among the players involved in coworking. This has permitted to identify a typology of coworking that can orient other in depth studies of coworking, as I’ll do in chapter 5.

3. Research methodology

The results presented and discussed in this chapter were collected through qualitative research based on interviews of founders of coworking spaces in Italy. The research

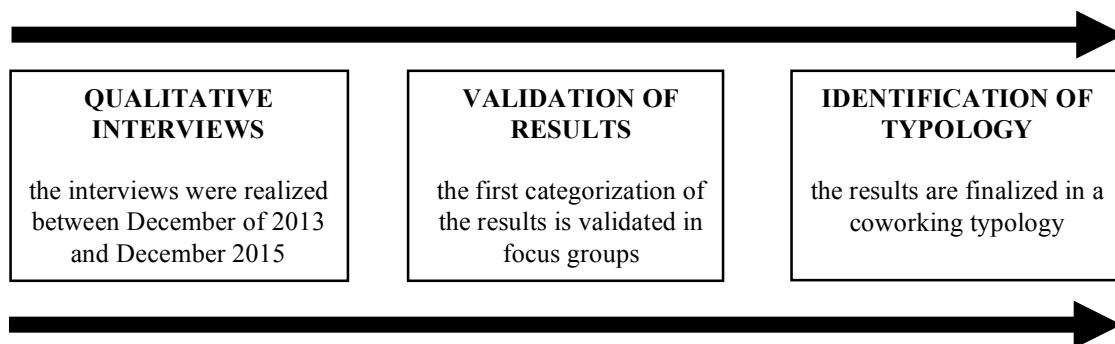
started at the end of 2013, from a partnership between my university and a network of coworking spaces (COWO), and continuing to April 2015.

The COWO network of coworking spaces, was established in early 2008 and now is composed of more than 120 affiliate coworking spaces in 66 cities, making it the largest network of coworking in the Italian territory. The network has the goals of diffusing and developing coworking, in addition to increasing the number of coworking spaces in Italy. The COWO network offers several areas of communications services, organizational and marketing consulting, and research activities.

At the beginning of my PhD study, I took part in this research group, by having the opportunity to analyze interviews as well as to expand the study with new interviews also outside the COWO project network.

There are three phases to this study (see Figure 4.1): (1) the realization of the qualitative interviews; (2) validation of the results through group discussions with coworking founders and coworkers; and (3) finalization of the results and identification of coworking typology.

Figure 4.1. Phases of the study



3.1 Data collection

Twenty-four interviews were conducted with coworking founders in different regions of Italy. Some of the interviews took place at the coworking space of the founders, while other were held over Skype. Interviews were semi-structured and lasted an average of 40 minutes. They were audiotaped with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, read, reread and analyzed throughout the study (Charmaz, 2006). During data collection, the interview guide became progressively focused and memos were written to illuminate data analysis. Demographic (gender, age) data of the participants and information about the structure of the coworking space (year of space foundation, size of the space,

number of desks and offices) were also collected. These interviews permitted investigation of the coworking founders' experience and perspective. In the interviews, the participants were asked for information about the structure, the organization and the practices that characterized their spaces. The structure of the interview (Table 4.1) was followed with high flexibility. All interviews started with the same opening question: "Why and how did you open a coworking space?" The interview was conducted by integrating and adapting the questions based on the information provided; all issues of the track were discussed.

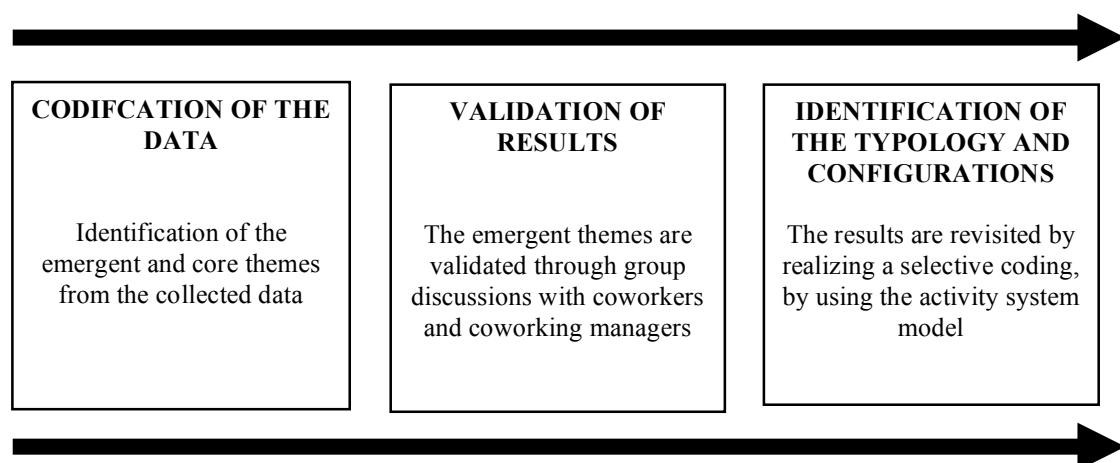
Table 4.1. Interview guide for coworking space founders

Content area	Questions
Motivations and reasons to open a coworking space	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>How and why did you open a coworking space?</i> 2. <i>What are in your perspective the main events that have influenced your path in the activation of the space?</i>
Aim to be reached through the coworking space	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>What were your main objectives when you opened the coworking spaces?</i> 2. <i>Which are now the main objectives that you want to reach with the coworking space?</i>
Characteristics/features of the coworking space	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Who are the coworkers of your space?</i> 2. <i>Which rules characterize your space?</i>
Structure/services and activities of the space	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Which are the characteristics of your coworking space?</i> 2. <i>Which activities/services do you offer to your coworkers or to other stakeholders?</i>
Processes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>What and how do people share inside the space?</i> 2. <i>What kind of relationships are promoted?</i>
Criticalities, strengths and future perspective associated to the coworking space	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Which are the main criticalities and successes that you faced as coworking founder?</i>

3.2 Data analysis

Many thick descriptions of participants, their activities and activity settings have been collected from the interviewees (Geertz, 1973). A constant comparative method through which I went back and forward (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) was adopted in order to examine and reexamine the collected data. Open coding was done by reading the data transcripts and identifying an initial set of codes with the corresponding definitions. In the second step, families of codes were identified through axial coding. In order to arrive to a typology of coworking I have used the conceptual framework of Activity System provided by CHAT and I applied selective coding reconnecting the coded data with the components of the activity systems (object, rules, instruments, community, division of labour). The first results of the analysis were presented in a public presentation organized in May 2015 by the founder of the COWO project network. In that occasion three groups of discussions were organized, involving approximately 12 people (coworkers and coworking space founders). They were asked to review the coherence and relevance of emergent themes as key informants (Morse et al., 2002). After this validation process, I revisited the first results and the identified categories. Figure 4.2 depicts the analysis.

Figure 4.2. Steps of the data analysis



4. Results

As previously anticipated 24 interviews were collected, by interviewing coworking space owners in different regions of Italy. In Table 4.2, the size of the space (first column), the territorial area in which the space is located (second column), and the type of organization that holds the space (third column) are reported.

Table 4.2. Information about space and interviewees

	Size	Area	Organization	Information about the interviewee
CW1	200 m2	North-west	Social enterprise	Male, president of the enterprise, in 2011 opened a space inside the company , by renting the space to other people
CW2	220 m2	South	Not for profit association	Male, freelance, architect, opened the space and a connected not for profit association in 2012
CW3	110 m2	North-west	Small Business	Female, entrepreneur, architect, opened the space in 2008 that uses also as own office
CW4	400 m2	North –east	Medium Business	Male, entrepreneur in the field of interior design. Opened a coworking space in 2011, with the declared intent to introduce a new model of collaborative work by which coworkers will share projects that get from their clients.
CW5	180 m2	North – west	Medium business	Female, entrepreneur in the field of communication, opened the space in 2010 inside the office.
CW6	40 m2	Central	Association of Social Enterprises	Male, member of the association, founded the space in 2013 to open the space to affiliates and other people (in particular young people)
CW7	120 m2	Central	Small business	Male, entrepreneur, architect, opened the space in 2012 after the renovation of the offices
CW8	150 m2	North – west	University	Male, community manager from 2015, the space has been opened by a professor and the direction of the university in order to support students in

				the development of projects
CW9	140 m2	South	Small business	Male, financial consultant, freelance, opened the space in 2009 to use the infrastructures he had at disposal
CW10	500 m2	North-east	Coworking franchise network	Female, community manager of the space that opened in 2012 to gathered and select talents in the field of digital
CW11	350 m2	North – west	Medium business	Male, entrepreneur, multimedia production company, opened the space in 2013 because of a change in the professional field, by which they had to collaborate and work with musicians in different places and cities
CW12	160 m2	North – west	Small business	Male, entrepreneur, real estate company, opened the space in 2012 to share his spaces with other professionals
CW13	220 m2	North-west	Medium business	Male, designer, entrepreneur, in 2013 founded a coworking space intended to professionals who work in the digital and creative fields
CW14	50 m2	South	Consortium of enterprises	Female, entrepreneur, decided to open the space inside the company in 2013 because she wanted to open for collaboration with other types of professionals
CW15	72 m2	Central	Small business	Male, architect, opened a coworking space in 2012 after having shared a rented office with other professionals in 2009
CW16	150 m2	North – west	Not for profit association	Male, freelance, founded the space with a partner in 2012, the space is dedicated to women and parents
CW17	100 m2	North – east	Medium business	Male, developer, entrepreneur, opened the space in 2012. It is integrated in the company

CW18	100 m2	North-west	Medium business	Male, entrepreneur, opened the space in 2015 as part of the cultural association connected to the company
CW19	150 m2	North west	Small business	Female, architect, entrepreneur, founded the space in 2009 integrated in the company
CW20	280 m2	Central	Small business	Male, entrepreneur of a web agency, opened the space in 2012 to share spaces with people in the same field of work. The space is integrated in the company but the intention for the future is to separate the coworking space
CW21	80 m2	Central	Not for profit association	Male, president of the association, opened the space in 2013, integrated in the not for profit association
CW22	100 m2	North – west	Not for profit association	Male, member of the board of the not for profit association in which in 2010 a coworking space was founded as part of the association
CW23	100 m2	North- west	Small business	Male, entrepreneur, communication agency, opened the space in 2008 inspired by other coworking space in other countries
CW24	150 m2	North-west	Small business	Female, entrepreneur, architect, opened the space inside her office in 2012

The interviews permitted the collection of a rich corpus of data. In the next paragraphs the results of the qualitative analysis of the empirical data are presented. More specifically I firstly present a typology of coworking in which different coworking activities are identified; then an analysis of different interpretations of sharing in the perspective of the founders are described as reflected in the coworking activities.

4.1 Four coworking activity systems

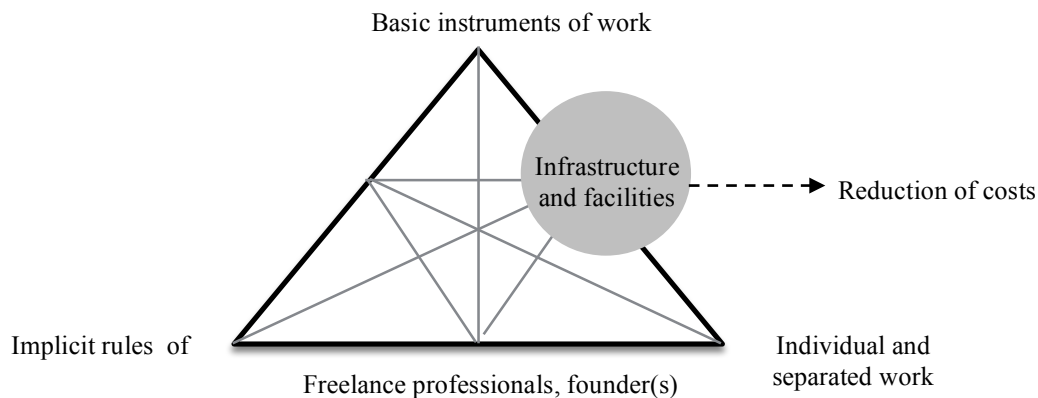
The analysis of the needs and the motives around which the object of coworking is constructed and shaped by the founders, allows the drawing out of four different activity systems. Here the systems represent different structures of coworking (including the community, rules, and division of labor). As previously indicated, the activity systems have been identified through a selecting coding by which for each interview the information provided by the coworking space owners was categorized, by identifying the element provided by the activity system triangle. Below the different coworking activities are presented. The types have been named with a label to summarize the main characteristic of the object and the other components of each activity system.

Type 1: Infrastructure Coworking

This first type of activity system can be represented in Figure 4.3. The picture show that the object of the activity is constructed around the need of professionals to find a place, separated from those of their private life (e.g., home) and different from public spaces that are not dedicated to professionals, with the primary aim to do their everyday work. According to the coworking space founders, the outcome of coworking is related to the economic benefit both for the owners and the coworkers. In the first case, the benefit derives from the renting of structures and facilities; and in the second case (for coworkers) the benefit is connected to the fact that coworking space is less expensive than other office space. Accordingly, the coworking activity seems to be constructed around the materiality of the space: the desks and the other facilities (e.g., kitchen and Wi-Fi connection) are considered the most important elements to accomplish their work. In addition, as shown in the triangle, the community of the activity system consists mostly of independent professionals who come from different professional fields and have different expertise and competences. The rules are mostly implicit and consist of basic guidelines, established by the founder(s), that govern cohabitation inside the space.

The division of labor follows the object: the founder recognizes her/himself as the owner and responsible for the economic and structural functioning of the space, while people inside the space feel responsible of their own work.

Figure 4.3. Representation of Activity System 1 (Infrastructure Coworking)



Object and desired outcome. The object of this activity system is constructed around the need of professionals to accomplish their job by using infrastructures, instruments, and tools of work. The founders consider the coworking space a place where independent professionals can find all they need (“as in a real office”) to perform their work at a competitive price on the market. The space is also an opportunity to avoid isolation: in the interviews the founders said that most of the coworkers before using the coworking space used to work from home and after some period started to feel themselves isolated. Thus the desired outcome of the object is related to the reduction of costs, both for the founders themselves as well as for the professionals. The founder(s) have an economic return from the renting of desks and facilities, while for coworkers the space enables them to save money by sharing an office.

(CW14) " In 2009, I bought a very large apartment - too big for my needs. The apartment with many rooms which was definitely just a waste for me considering that I was only at the beginning of my professional career. At that time, I read articles and references on coworking. The idea of providing the rooms that were unused for other people and professionals stems from there. This is also because I know how hard it is to find a working place at decent prices for those who are at the beginning of their activities"

(CW3) *“In general, we say that the assessment to open a coworking is positive because I consider it as a good way to cover costs and recover a bit”*

(CW12) *“Our main goal is to have the occupied positions and try renting them all”*

Tools and rules. The instruments that characterize this coworking activity system are mostly material tools of work (e.g., infrastructure, desks, rooms, computers, printers) that the founder made available for professionals. Other instruments that characterize coworking are social places like meeting rooms or a kitchen where people take breaks and have the opportunity to socialize. These spaces are considered important by the founders and are compared to the coffee machines in the traditional organizations. Finally, the typical rules are related to the regulation of cohabitation. Examples of rules are guidelines related to open and closing times, ownership of keys, and respect for privacy.

(CW3) *“We provide everything people need for work: writing desks, wifi connection, and there are also fix computers for some desks”*

(CW24) *“We have no particular rule, only that of the good manners such as not speaking excessively high tone when talking on the phone [...] I am the one to have the keys, sometimes there are some that come out later and I leave the copy of the keys to them. But basically it's me to open and close it”*

(CW24) *“The first few days one arrives on, maybe we're a little more careful after taking over the trust, then the keys we all keep alert us, and however, they can come and go as they want. Maybe on the weekend we alert you if they have to come in and we're going to disconnect the alarm. There is always some control”*

Actors and community. The community of the activity is described with the people that are inside the space and is composed of the founder(s) usually entrepreneurs of small companies or private who have empty spaces/offices from other businesses to dedicate to coworking, and coworkers, typically freelance workers. Coworkers have diverse professional interests, competencies, and backgrounds; thus the spaces in this type are horizontal coworking spaces since they are not characterized by a selection of coworkers on the basis of their professional field. The founder in fact is most concerned with economic benefits, and is therefore willing to rent out the desks without any restriction.

(CW1) "In our case, we do not apply admission selection [...] we do not look for those professionals who necessarily work in our field. We do not exclude anyone"

(CW3) "We are very open, normally they are all professionals who ... Now, for example, we have two architects, a professional who works independently in the finance sector, an IT startup with two stations. Over time, there was a lawyer, there have been always IT companies. We had graphics, more or fewer activities related to the world of creativity or freelancers. From an accountant to a lawyer and a small business. Even now, we have a small startup linked to a larger group"

Division of labor. Professionals inside the space tend to work independently in the same office. The interactions based on work or the activation of common projects are not so frequent and are a possible consequence of the informal interactions. The coworking founder(s) see social interactions as beneficial to the work environment and climate and conducive to the creation of business opportunities. However, they do not feel themselves responsible for making connections between people inside and outside the space: social relations do not have to be guided or promoted, since they occur automatically thanks to the physical proximity of professionals who share a space. However, they do feel responsible for the functioning and maintenance of the space and infrastructures.

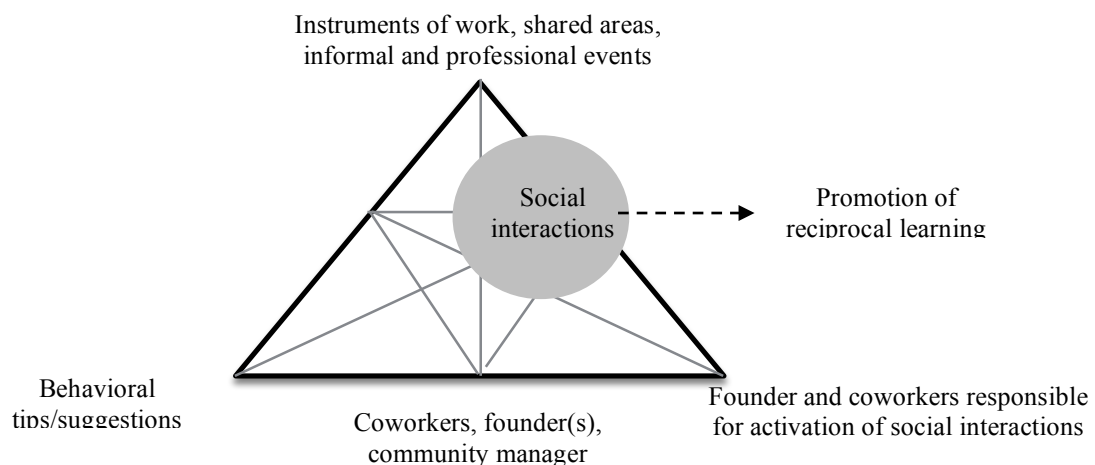
(CW7) "For sure a positive aspect is also the social dimension, like the possibility to find friends [...] this occurs because obviously everything is in the same place, comparisons and exchanges of ideas regarding the work are also inevitable"

Type 2: Relational Coworking

This type of coworking is depicted in Figure 4.4 where the object is constructed around interactions and relationships. The desired outcome is the promotion of reciprocal learning between professionals inside the space. In other words, the founder(s) are interested in the added value, which is not clearly defined but associated with learning and which can derive from the interactions. The community is composed mostly of freelance workers, but sometimes also by small businesses and startups. In this case the community is heterogeneous concerning the focus of work. This heterogeneity is a source of reciprocal learning: coworkers can learn more from each other if they have different experiences and jobs. In terms of instruments and tools, particular attention is paid to the use of open space and open areas: besides the desks and other basic instruments of work, the space is equipped with places where people can interact. The space is considered a

site of social events and rituals, organized by the coworking founder(s) and sometimes by the coworkers. The rules reflect the nature of the object and are simple guidelines about how to behave inside the space. They are intended to support and facilitate interactions.

Figure 4.4. Representation of Activity System 2(Relational Coworking)



Object and desired outcome. The object is social interactions that can be activated among coworkers inside the space. The desired outcome, according to the founders is the promotion of reciprocal learning: the space is where coworkers have the opportunity to interact and learn from each other. These interactions are not a natural consequence of the physical proximity (as in the case of the activity system previously described), but they have to be oriented and facilitated by the founders and supported by all the members inside the space.

(CW20) " My idea was to create a space where sharing can be easily organized. In the sense that my idea was to create events where it was possible for coworkers to exchange information as part of their work, but not only that [...]I wanted a place where people could create synergies in a simple way"

(CW4) "The greatest stimulus that all of us have is to be influenced by each other [...]" The greatest satisfaction is that I have had the opportunity to know works that I didn't even know that exist [...] It has really opened my mind to new worlds"

Tools and rules. Also in this case the space is usually equipped with desks, computers, printer, and a wi-fi connection. However, more attention is paid to the disposition of the working facilities, with open space offices and common areas, like relaxation areas or lunch rooms. The rules underline some behavioral tips and suggestions to support the relationships (e.g., *“be open and collaborative with the other people in the space”*). Another instrument adopted is the social events held inside the space. There are two categories of activities: (1) informal events and meetings dedicated to the sharing of personal life and professional experiences, opinions, anecdotes, etc.; and (2) training events and formative sessions dedicated to the sharing of soft skills and cross professional competences. Both kinds of events are organized and implemented by the coworkers and supported and facilitated by the coworking operators.

(CW15) “The space has folding chairs and tables with wheels. Because it is a coworking space during the day on week days until 18.30, while in the evening the tables can be moved. Other chairs and everything else is pulled out and the area becomes a space for small gatherings or meetings”

(CW4) “The writing desk is perhaps the smallest thing. There are two fairly small meeting rooms that can host 5 and 3-4 persons which can be closed and then become independent workplace. Then, there is a very large 100 square meters room where we hold events. It is a very nice hall designed for events and also organized for the group work”

(CW20) “Each room has a name and a typical phrase of the person who gives the name to the classroom. In the Mozart's room, one can read:” We live in this world to learn and enlighten one another”

Actors and community. The internal community is composed of the coworkers, the coworking founder(s), and often by a coworking operator who serves as community manager/facilitator. The latter promotes and supports interactions among coworkers. Even if the coworking experience is based on the personal and individual initiative of the coworkers, the interactions inside the space are supported by the operators/founders and facilitators of the social interactions through the creation of social events and initiatives where coworkers can informally exchange ideas and experiences. Inside this type of space, it is possible for the interactions among coworkers to lead to a homogenization of the coworkers and their professional interests.

Often the community is also composed of other coworking spaces on the territory that is involved in the organization and participation in events, in order to increase the number of people involved in the relationships.

(CW4) " My original idea was to fill the space of people, so much so that at the beginning we used the 'event room' space and we started building a community around these events [...] the coworkers are involved in the organization of the events"

(CW20) "I consider myself a facilitator of the space: I only handle the traffic matching and bringing people together and making them work together. However, the initiative is absolutely personal"

Division of labor. Even if professionals have their own job and inside the space tend to perform their everyday work independently, coworking is characterized by moments and events where they share knowledge, experiences, competences, and ideas. The founder(s) are responsible for the functioning of the space and for establishing the rules and instilling a specific culture, climate, and approach inside the space. At the same time coworkers have a role in organizing activities and events.

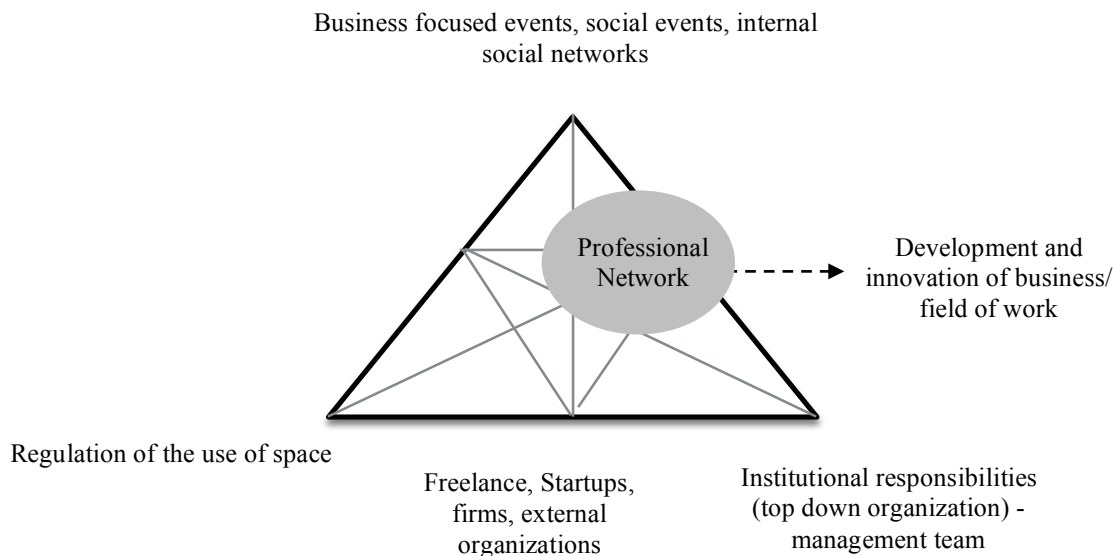
(CW23) "I believe that the creation of relationships and networks within the space is not something that happens by itself. I think it's a specific task of those who manage the space to organize different events that allow everyone to know each other"

Type 3: Network Coworking

The third activity system (depicted in Figure 4.5) is characterized by a focus on the development of the professional network of coworkers in order to develop and innovate a specific field of work. The community is composed of people, and in particular by startups and firms that work in the same field (the spaces inside this type are vertical coworking space) but also by organizations, firms, and subjects outside the space that are involved in the field/focus of the space. The coworking space is often a large space (more than 150 m²) and is considered a nexus of professional connections and business opportunities, by gathering individuals and collective subjects. The space becomes a brand with a good reputation and it creates partnerships with organizations that are important stakeholders in the field of work. The activities focus on business and its

development: workshops, business presentations, pitches, training sessions. Often these spaces have a team of coworking operators with different role.

Figure 4.5. Representation of Activity System 3(Newtork Coworking)



Object and desired outcome. The object of this activity is the network that professionals can create with other subjects and organizations both inside and outside the coworking space. Here the idea at the basis of coworking is related to the promotion and development of the work opportunities of the coworkers, by facilitating useful and strategic contacts and professional collaborations among coworkers and between coworkers and other organizations outside the space. The desired outcome for the coworking founder(s) is to contribute to the development of a specific field of work (e.g., digital innovation or social entrepreneurship). The innovation of a specific field of work lies with the development of individuals/organizations, professional paths, and businesses. The network is supported inside and outside the space. The space represents the point of connection between the internal and external world.

(CW8) "What we try to do is to provide the students all possible contacts in order to develop their business and idea. We create external partnerships with different organizations and create network with the people that are within the space"

(CW10) *"We give people the space, the community and the network to create and develop their work within a specific professional field [...] We also help companies and organizations develop their talents in the field of digital"*

Tools and rules. Tools are usually instruments connected to the work of the professionals inside the space: 3D printers for designers and architectures, photographic studio for musicians and photographers. Other important tools adopted inside the space are online instruments (e.g., social networks, chats, newsletter) created for the internal community and to activate the internal networking among coworkers. Inside these coworking spaces in fact the coworking operators are involved in the organization. Special attention is paid to the design and disposition of the space in order to reflect the nature and spirit of the specific field of work. In terms of the rules, explicit rules regulate of the use of the space, while implicit rules cover the relationship with other coworkers and the way people have to approach work in order to innovate and develop.

(CW13) *"We use an internal mailing list to communicate with coworkers and put exclusive things aside for them. Then we will create an internal chat during the work day to allow everyone communicate by computer with each other and us"*

(CW11) *" We have a meeting room and a very large relaxation room that ends in a green screen because one of our special features is that being a record and video production label we have the exposure room with the green background, for example. And we provide this both to coworkers, the band and outside groups. In this room, you can take pictures that are transferred and placed on the new backgrounds using the computer graphics that we have"*

(CW10) *"For example, through the writing on the walls, we try to inculcate a spirit of innovation. We try to make it clear that you have to be open to innovate, create networks, share, and beneficially influence each other"*

Actors and community. The managers are usually organized in a team of operators with different roles. The complexity of the team usually depends on the size of the space. The coworkers are people who work for different organizations, but in the same field (e.g., digital work, architecture, design, university). Most of the coworkers are teams of small firms or startups who want to develop their business by working in an environment that provides useful contacts and incentives to grow. In addition, the

community is composed of other organizations and subjects that do not work inside the space, but that represent interesting and important players in the field of work.

(CW11) "Within our space, we have graphic designers, video makers, music producers, IT specialists, programmers who are focused on entertainment"

(CW8) "We are professionals and small businesses in the creative and digital sector. As suggested by our name, in fact, we wanted to create an environment that was a reference point for the fanatics of the digital world [...] we thought of combining the digital and creative sector because we thought that together they can produce great things, projects and synergies"

Division of labor. The structure of these spaces is usually more complex than the previous two described Activity systems. The most developed spaces are usually organized in franchise network organizations. The focus on a specific field of work and the development of some spaces in franchise networks makes the space into a brand (that guarantees the quality of networks) for professionals and organizations that work in the field. In these spaces the operator(s) have an important role in organizing and implementing activities to promote and facilitate relationships among coworkers inside the space and events designed to promote contacts between coworkers and outside organizations.

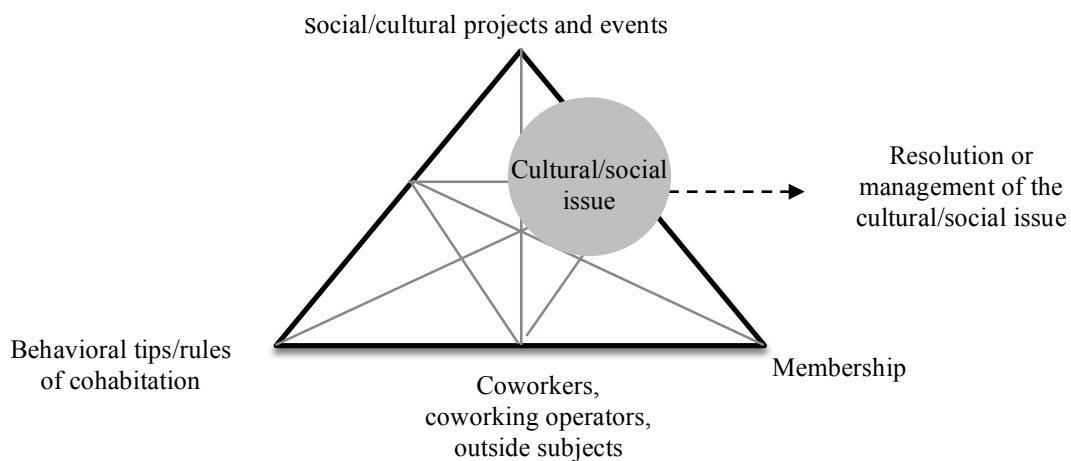
(CW8) "We want to make it clear that in this place we can trigger a process of change [...]we are responsible for everything from the management of the functioning of the space, to the organization of the events, to the construction of internal community etc."

Type 4: Welfare Coworking

The object of the activity is a cultural or social issue that affects society or the territory in which the space is located (as shown in Figure 4.6). The aim is to create conditions to resolve the problem at stake. The instruments are social projects implemented by the management team or the coworkers inside the space. The space is a gathering place for people who are involved at different levels in the issue, or because they are directly facing the problem or because they are interested in solving it. In this sense the subjects involved in the activity are the coworkers inside the space, the coworking operator(s), but also subjects and organizations outside the space that participate in the projects. In

this case, the space is often part of a not-for-profit association or social enterprise. Thus the differences and boundaries between coworkers and coworking operators/founders are flexible, since the operator(s) consider themselves coworkers, and coworkers often become members/employees/volunteers of the association/social enterprise.

Figure 4.6. Representation of Activity System 4 (Welfare Coworking)



Object and desired outcome. In this case the object of the activity is a cultural or social issue or problem that affects society or local communities. The issues that coworking addresses are aspects that, in the opinion of the founder(s), the government or the public administration lack in managing. Examples are reintegration of people in the labor market; enhancement of the local culture and environment; or regeneration of urban areas. In this case the coworking space is a place where it is possible to group people who are involved in the issues in different ways.

(CW2) “ *The change that we want to bring is a cultural change, often we talk about the digital divide, instead we believe that there is really a cultural divide. Here, we live in an area where people work in a black market. And our goal is just to generate new forms of economy, new jobs with a design phase and growth because a new job does not draw back so suddenly*”

(CW18) “*We did an analysis of the local context and found that in our territory we, the young men do not have the opportunity to study at universities because there aren't any, we cannot go to the libraries because they are always closed. Many young people were complaining about this. So, we decided to include the co-study for the students who want to study together with others and stay in contact with the organization to make projects with*”

Tools and rules. The instruments are represented by the social projects that are usually planned and implemented by the coworking operators and in which the coworkers participate. The explicit and implicit rules that characterize the space concern how to use the space, the relationship with coworkers, and especially the behavioral dispositions to approach the issue under investigation. In this case the space is an instrument to gather people around a problem.

(CW22) "We must guide and inspire change. The physical space has, therefore, a number of features that can be imperceptible to a person who comes here, but overall we think that change has to be also generated by material characteristics of the space that surrounds us [...] For example, the colored doors of the rooms where we work is something that in our opinion boost people to think differently"

Actors and community. The community here is composed of the founder(s) and operators (usually members of the association/enterprise with which the space is associated) and people who use the coworking space (coworkers), and the services and projects implemented. Some of them are also involved in the planning and implementation of projects and events. Besides, the community consists of external subjects (people who do not work in the space, but participate in the projects and events) in addition to the public or private institutions that take part in the planning and/or funding of the projects.

(CW21) "The not for profit association manages the coworking space through its members: the governing board, and the president [...] our coworkers are usually members of the association and some of them actively participate in the implementation of our projects"

Division of labor. The coworking space is usually held by other associations/organizations that implement projects and initiatives related to a specific social issue. The founder(s) of the space, in addition to the coworking operators, are also members of the association/organizations, with various roles similar to those in network coworking (e.g., projects coordinator, responsible of the fundraising, community manager). There are few barriers between coworkers and coworking operator(s). However, the latter perceive themselves as more responsible and active in implementing the projects and events.

(CW16) *"We have C. working on the project y, and then we have A. whose main task is handling the community of coworkers and promoting the relations. R.is a little inspiration of space, 99% of ideas and things we do here come from it. I manage projects and external relations. R. is also the "face" of our space and handles the communication"*

4.2. Different interpretations of sharing

The analysis of the different interpretations of sharing in the perspective of the coworking space founders, has been realized through the identification of three core themes that were recurrent in the qualitative interviews. These themes can be summarized with the following questions: *What is shared? Why it is shared? How it is shared?*. Through the answer to these questions I have tried to understand how the different activity systems previously described are characterized by various ways in which the founders orient sharing inside their spaces.

What is shared?

The first theme that emerges from the interviews is connected to the content of sharing, in which the contents that are shared between people can be positioned along a continuum between material and immaterial dimensions. More specifically the contents refer to: material aspects, networks, and knowledge.

Material aspects: people share places (e.g., rooms, offices, kitchen, etc.) and instruments and facilities (e.g. desks, Wi-fi connection, printers, computers, etc.). As previously described, the practice of sharing these kinds of contents represents the basis of coworking that necessarily requires people to use materials/objects of which no one is the proper owner. Coworking in fact firstly consists of making available material resources to professionals.

(CW8) *"Well, the main feature of coworking is precisely having spaces that people can share. It means having a place where people can work at the same desk and in the same room"*

Network: the second aspect that people share, is represented by the networks and social contacts of the different subjects involved in coworking. The networks can be strictly connected to the job of the subjects (professional network), such as clients, colleagues,

and suppliers. An example of professional network sharing is the case in which the coworking space owners see coworking as an opportunity for people to share the clients that ask for work that a specific person cannot or does not want to provide.

(CW24) “what is interesting of coworking is that if a client needs a work or a competence that I cannot give, I can ask some coworker of the space to work for my client and viceversa[...] it happened over times that we have shared clients and suppliers”

Networks can be also informal networks. In this case coworking is seen as an opportunity to share personal contacts (e.g., friends, acquaintances) for supporting the others in personal experiences and activities.

(CW23) “ Let me give you an example: when I had to go to another city for work, a coworker put me in touch with his friends and acquaintances who lived in that city and that's why I was welcomed and did a lot of things when I was there”

The third content identified is represented by *knowledge*. In this case knowledge can be strictly connected to work, or can involve aspects besides the job of the subjects. In the first case, examples are situations in which coworking is seen as a place in which professionals can share knowledge with other people on specific pieces of work or projects and can receive and give feedback and suggestions. In the second case, coworking is considered an opportunity to enrich personal knowledge in a broader sense, not necessarily connected to the job, but also concerning other aspects of life (e.g., sports, travels, hobbies, experiences, etc.).

(CW7) “I think that the interesting part of coworking is the human dimension. There are many comparisons between coworkers, many exchanges of ideas, with regard to work, but not only that. For example, here we have two architects, and it often happens that people work and exchange of views”

How is it shared?

The second question lets emerge another recurrent theme, which is that of how people share. Two main aspects emerged in this regard. The first one is connected to the extent

of sharing, that reflects the commitment with which people are involved in sharing. Different levels have been identified:

The first one refers to an idea of sharing in which subjects share something while they are actually pursuing different individual objectives.

(CW3) “ in my space people share the same room, the same desk, sometimes they share also their own clients [...] the aim is that people can share the space and be concentrated on their own work and task, in order to accomplish the everyday work”

The second regards the case in which subjects, temporarily share some content (e.g., knowledge or competencies) to accomplish a temporary joint objective (e.g., a work project).

(CW1) “The idea is also that of developing some projects together or to share projects between coworkers. For example with the firm X we are developing some digital projects [...] with coworking we would like to share projects that can give work to coworkers but also to other people outside the space, who can become coworkers as well”

The third level regards the cases in which sharing is not considered a temporary practice, but the first meaning and essence of coworking: sharing is not only the means but also the outcome of coworking. In this case the owner speaks about the creation of a community that is constructed and based on the value of sharing.

(CW2) “Sharing is not just the means for us but the purpose as well. Coworking is facilitation and creation of sharing practices. Through this, it is possible to activate projects that have an impact on the territory. First of all, with regard to the construction of the processes. It means that people get together, know each other, reason, and sort out what it means for them to collaborate. Later, based on that, you also get together to define what to work and take action on”

A second aspect that emerged by answering the question “How it is shared?” regards the ways through which sharing is facilitated or occurs. Three distinct ways can be identified.

The first one consists of dedicated events in which professionals participate by paying a fee. These can be both social events or training or business events usually organized by the owners of the space.

(CW10) “We organize lots events to which people have to subscribe [...] these events are useful to facilitate people in knowing each other and in sharing knowledge, ideas and contacts [...] we organize also events that involve other firms outside the space”

The second one consists of free events in which coworkers can participate. These events are mostly social activities but it is can also involve project-based activities organized both by the owners and the coworkers;

(CW4) “The idea that I have is that of creating a group of people that can organize activities and events [...] I give you an example: there are some coworkers who are organizing some evening events, almost training events, that are managed by coworkers and dedicated to other coworkers but also to the network that coworkers can bring. In this way they share both their networks and their knowledge and competencies”

Finally, sharing can occur without the activation of dedicated events, in the everyday actions of people inside the space;

(CW9) “Here in our space there are a lot of people that do similar jobs. Thus you can imagine that almost every day we speak to each other in order to share ideas and to exchange opinions about our field of work. For example, in this period we are sharing a lot about financial news that are important in our work”

Why is it shared?

The last question that guided the analysis of the interpretations of sharing can be expressed as “Why is it shared?” The analysis of the interviews underlines that sharing can be conceived as guided by individual interests and seen as utilitaristic: sharing practices oriented to sustain and improve the professional businesses and work, or more in general, personal interests.

(CW12) “I would like that people share rooms, desks, instruments because I know that it is hard to find a working place at decent prices, in particular for those who are at the beginning of their activities”

From the interviews emerged also a conception of sharing based and guided by the intent to produce positive effects at a more collective and communitarian level, both within and outside the coworking space. In this sense the desire is that of involving other subjects outside the space in sharing practices and to produce effects that overcome the interests of single individuals by impacting the entire community, which can be identified with the group of coworkers inside the space or with both the community inside and outside the space.

(CW10) “We involve also startups in our initiatives [...] in the events that we organize for the community we invite also other organizations who are not coworkers”

(CW2) “Sharing ideas, projects, knowledge is not only for ourselves, but it is important for promoting a new culture and also to implement ideas on our territory”

In order to summarize the presented data, it is possible to say, in line with Belk’s perspective, that the analysis helped shed light on variables that are at the basis of the construction, disposition, and management of different types of coworking spaces. The analysis in fact underlines that what differentiates sharing practices are: the contents of sharing (what is shared), which can be material (places, rooms, instruments...) or immaterial (ideas, knowledge, competences...) aspects; the intentionality at the basis of sharing, since sharing in coworking can be guided either by individualistic and utilitarian purposes or based on the sharing of something (projects, ideas, actions...) that is perceived as “ours.” Another element that emerged from the data is that sharing can be collective (by involving other subjects outside the space) or can create a sense of community. Another element that emerges in the representations of the owners is connected to the ways by which sharing is realized: in everyday activities or through dedicated events, which can be free or by payment and can be organized by the owners (in a top-down logic) or by the coworkers. These different interpretations of sharing guide and orient the processes between people who are involved in coworking and are reflected in the rules, structures, and community that characterize the spaces.

5. Discussion

In line with what emerged in the Historical Analysis (Chapter 3), the qualitative study presented in this chapter shows that coworking cannot be explained with a single activity system, but rather manifests in plural activities. Different interpretations of the coworking object-activity in fact give rise to plural configurations of coworking organizations, structures, and processes. The analysis also stressed how the four activity systems identified reflect in their components different interpretations of sharing.

In *Infrastructure Coworking* what is shared is mostly material aspects, like desks, rooms, facilities, computers, etc.; and the motivations at the basis of sharing are guided by individual interests, since the desired outcome is that of cost reductions, both for the owners and the coworkers. The basis of this coworking activity is the idea that people inside the coworking space primarily need to accomplish their everyday work as inside a traditional office. Thus the predominant interpretation of sharing is that it occurs while people are pursuing their daily activities and objectives. In addition, from the analysis, the insight emerged that the founders feel responsible of the structural functioning of the coworking space; they think that sharing of other immaterial contents can occur occasionally without any facilitation by the founders themselves.

In the second activity system, *Relational Coworking*, the founders speak about the sharing of immaterial contents and in particular of informal knowledge (*What is shared*). The desired outcome is that of producing reciprocal learning at a collective level that involves coworkers inside the space (*Why it is shared*). The sharing is based on the creation of relationships and trust between people that favour the sharing of knowledge. This has to be facilitated with the implementation of dedicated social events that are organized also by the coworkers. In this case sharing is interpreted as mostly based on temporarily shared objectives, which can be projects, activities, or experiences that involve coworkers inside the space (*How it is shared*).

In the third activity system, *Network Coworking*, the content of sharing is identified with professional networks and contacts (*What is shared*). The primary aim is to develop and enrich working opportunities of not only coworkers who are freelancers but

also firms and startups. However, the motive of sharing is utilitarianistic since it is seen as an opportunity to accelerate the growth and progress of business of the single individuals/organizations (*Why it is shared*). Here sharing is facilitated by the proposal of events (e.g., training, networking, meetings, etc.) that are usually organized by the founders. Sharing is considered at a collective level because it involves different subjects inside and outside the space to produce reciprocal advantages (*How it is shared*).

Finally, the fourth activity identified, *Welfare Coworking*, is characterized by an interpretation of sharing that involves particular competences and knowledge (*What is shared*) with the intent to activate social projects to solve and respond to social and cultural issues. The interpretation of sharing is based on the intent of the founder to create a sense of community of people, inside and outside the coworking space, who face the issue at stake (*Why it is shared*). Sharing is considered at a collective level since it involves different subjects, not only inside the space but also on the territory, and communitarian, since the founders' idea is to create a distributed responsibility toward the solutions of the social problem identified as the object of coworking, through the activation of initiatives and projects (*How it is shared*).

From the analysis it is possible also to identify some recurrent characteristics of the coworking space structure and internal organization, that are connected to the activity systems. More specifically *Infrastructure coworking* is usually related to small spaces founded by entrepreneurs of small enterprises. The space is frequently part of an already existing office. The founder is the only manager of the space. *Relational Coworking* activity is typical of small/medium spaces founded by entrepreneurs or freelance workers. These spaces can be part of already existing offices but can be also spaces specifically dedicated to coworking. In this case sometimes besides the founder there is another person who has the role of coworking manager. *Network Coworking* is typical of medium/large spaces with well-defined internal organizations. Usually there is a management team composed of people with different roles (e.g., project manager, community manager, marketing coordinator, etc.). Sometimes the spaces are organized in franchise coworking networks. *Welfare Coworking* usually characterizes small/medium spaces that are connected to not for profit associations or social

enterprises. Also in this case there is usually a management team composed by people with different roles.

Table 4.3 below provides a summary that reports the spaces included in the sample of the qualitative studies, the connected activity system, and interpretation of sharing.

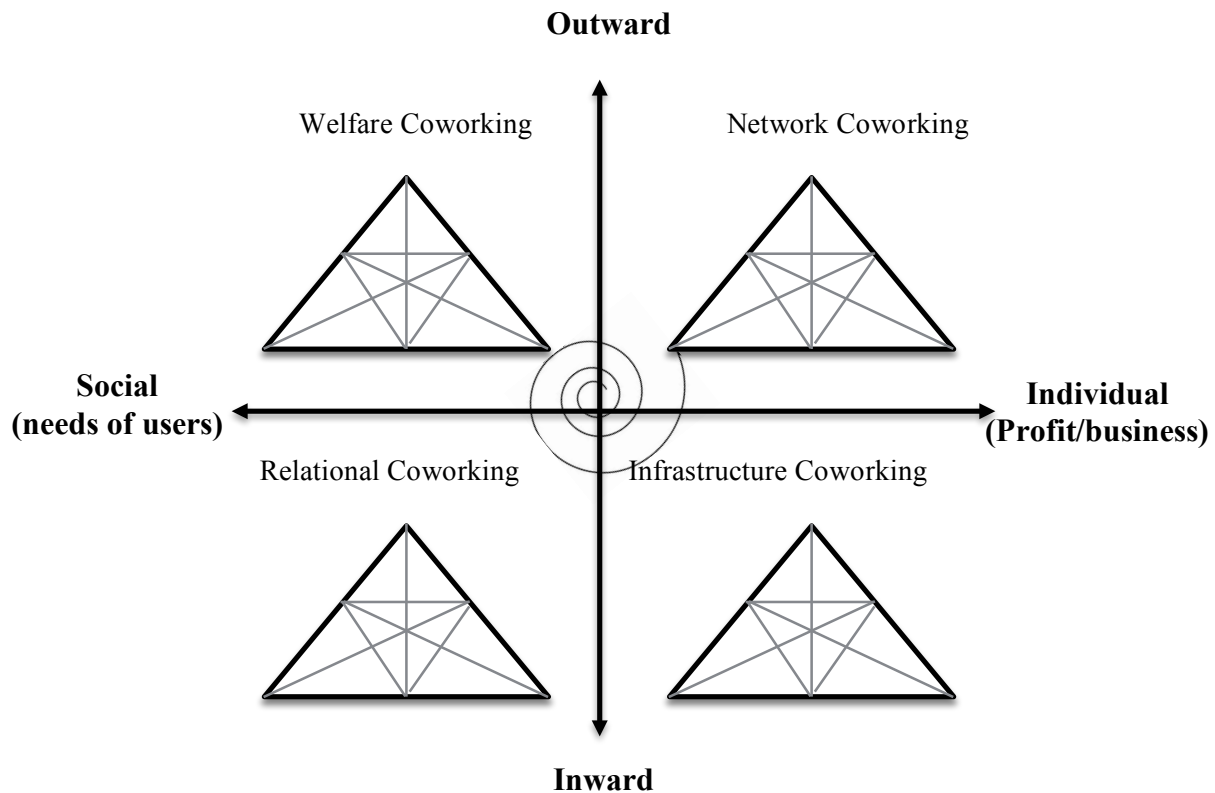
Table 4.3. Spaces, Activity Systems, and Interpretations of sharing

Spaces	Activity System	Interpretation of Sharing
CW1 CW3 CW6 CW7 CW12 CW19 CW24	<u>Infrastructure Coworking</u> object: infrastructure and facilities outcome: economic benefit, reduction of costs community: freelance workers division of labor: individual separated work - owner responsible of the space functioning rules: implicit norms of cohabitation instruments: basic instruments of work	what is shared: materials, places, facilities how it is shared: division of spaces - separated objectives why it is shared: individualistic advantages (reduction of costs)
CW4 CW5 CW9 CW14 CW15 CW20 CW23	<u>Relational Coworking</u> object: social interactions outcome: promotion of reciprocal learning community: freelance workers division of labor: owner and coworkers responsible for the promotion of social interactions rules: implicit and explicit norms of cohabitation instruments: instruments of work, shared areas, informal events	what is shared: informal knowledge how it is shared: social events and activities why it is shared: temporary shared objectives - creation of community inside the space

<p>CW8 CW10 CW13 CW17</p>	<p><u>Network Coworking</u></p> <p>object: networking outcome: development/innovation of business community: startups - organizations (inside and outside the space) division of labor: management team with roles rules: explicit rules - cohabitation, use of the space, organization of events instruments: equipped rooms, business focused events, internal social networks</p>	<p>what is shared: professional network how it is shared: networking events and business, education activities why it is shared: temporary shared objectives - individualistic aims</p>
<p>CW2 CW18 CW21 CW22</p>	<p><u>Welfare Coworking</u></p> <p>object: cultural/social issue outcome: resolution/answer to the issue community: specific target of people/professionals in relation to the issue - organizations / institutions outside the space division of labor: flexible boundaries between the management team and coworkers rules: explicit rules - cohabitation, use of the space, organization of projects instruments: social projects</p>	<p>what is shared: knowledge, competences how it is shared: social projects - co-construction why it is shared: collective and communitarian - responsibility toward the shared object</p>

Through the historical analysis (Chapter 3), two historical tensions emerged that traced the evolution of coworking and brought about and define the current state of coworking. Going back to the matrix constructed through the intersection of the tensions in the previous chapter, it is possible to position the current coworking activities inside the matrix itself, as shown in Figure 4.7.

Figure 4.7..Activity Systems and historical tensions



Some activity systems (*Welfare Coworking* and *Relational Coworking*) seems to be more oriented and can be positioned in what Belk (2010; 2013) defines as the social realm, with an orientation to solidarity, companionship, bonding, and reciprocity; while other activity systems can be positioned in the profit/business realm, as they are characterized by utilitarian reasons aimed at a more individualistic business development and reduction of costs (*Infrastructure Coworking* and *Network Coworking*). In this sense, some activity systems aim at constructing mutual ownership and sense of community, while others aim at dividing or exchanging something between strangers who are in the same space without providing a sense of mutuality and community. In the same line, some coworking activities present a more collective orientation, by involving plural subjects both inside and outside the space (*Welfare Coworking* and *Network Coworking*), while other activities focus more on answering the needs of the individuals inside the coworking space (*Infrastructure Coworking* and *Relational Coworking*). These considerations let emerge how the historical tensions still characterize the current state coworking and can describe different manifestations of

coworking. The coworking activities identified are not narrowly defined: the typology provides interesting cues to understand and recognize the multiple and sometimes hybrid manifestations of coworking in reality. This seems to challenge most of the studies in literature that describe coworking as based on collaboration, community and solidarity (Spinuzzi, 2012; Capdevila, 2013; Rus and Orel, 2016) and introduce doubts about the innovation of values and logic at the basis of work and organizations provided by coworking. This result will be deeper analyzed through an ethnographic study presented in the chapter 5, that will be focused on the analysis of the contradictions that characterize each activity system identified.

Conclusion

The aim of this chapter is to analyze different forms of coworking activities starting from the perspective of the coworking space founders who firstly construct and orient the structure and processes that characterize the coworking activity itself. The idea of coworking as based on values of community, collaboration, openness, accessibility, and sustainability is questioned, put into discussion, and relegated to a more idealistic model of coworking. This perspective is questioned and upset, with reference to the critical analysis of sharing suggested by Belk (2007, 2010). We can consider different forms of sharing and claims for the diffusion of hybrid manifestations of these phenomena. Because of the structural connection between the features of coworking and sharing, the chapter highlights a more nuanced and multifaceted interpretation of this assumption.

The present chapter analyzes the plural manifestations of coworking and the results of the qualitative study identifying a typology of coworking with four different ideal types, which are ideal in the sense that they are constructed from the perspectives and aims of the founders. As anticipated in the introduction of the chapter, coworking has been classified in the literature on the basis of structural elements of coworking spaces (Kojo and Nenonen, 2016) or on the basis of the social processes activated (relationships, collaborations, interactions...), where the focus is strongly influenced by the perspective of the authors (Capdevila, 2013;2014; Parrino, 2013; Garrett et al., 2015). The typology proposed has been constructed by taking into account how coworking space founders construct both the structure and orient the processes of the coworking activity. In order to achieve this goal, the typology has been identified through the use of the conceptual tools of activity systems (Engestrom, 2000; Sannino et al. 2009) and sharing (Belk, 2004; 2010). The results permitted the identification of different types of

coworking, reflecting different values and foci that in some way are broader than the original intent to provide a social and organizational structure to freelance workers in order to give rise to a new class of workers who can produce positive changes in the labor market. Indeed, the objects are constructed around: the reduction of costs and provision of organizational structure to freelance workers, the identification of solutions to social or cultural problems, the innovation and development of businesses, and the promotion of reciprocal learning. Coworking appears to be positioned in a continuum between a social and a profit realm (Belk, 2013). The current activities in fact reproduce the historical tensions identified in Chapter 3 and shed light on the fact that coworking can be constructed and be based on a more individualistic, utilitarian, profit-based use of coworking. On the other side, coworking can assume configurations oriented to a more communal, collaborative, and reciprocity-based use of coworking spaces. The typology identified opens up the possibility to understand the complexity of coworking. In the next chapter, starting from the ideal types identified in this chapter, the perspectives and real experiences of coworkers are analyzed. This is done in order to understand how the interpretations of the object and sharing processes declared by the founders are effectively put into practice and also to identify the contradictions that emerge in everyday actions in the context of coworking.

- Chapter 5 -

‘CO’ OF COWORKING AS SHORT FOR CONTRADICTION

ABSTRACT

This chapter is focused on the analysis of the systemic contradictions that specifically characterize the four types of coworking activities identified in the previous chapter. The aims are to understand how the historically accumulated contradictions manifest themselves in reality in relation to various coworking activities and to reveal possible evolutions of coworking. The present chapter presents a second qualitative study realized with ethnographic observations of four spaces, selected inside the activity systems identified, enriched with qualitative interviews with operators and coworkers. Whereas the focus in Chapter 4 was to understand the perspective of the coworking space owners to identify how they construct and orient the structure and processes of the coworking activities, the study in this chapter aims at a deeper analysis of everyday actions, processes, and practices that occur inside the space, as well as the perspectives of the coworkers. In this way, starting from the coworking activities identified in the previous chapter, specific contradictions of the activities are detected and analyzed in order to underline the criticalities and possible evolutions of coworking. Thus in the first section I explain the theoretical framework and the methods adopted for the study. Then I present the main results, by describing the manifestations of contradictions identified for each coworking type. Finally, I discuss the results and present the systemic contradictions and the main transverse theme at the basis of their manifestations.

Introduction

Butcher (2013), at the end of his paper *Coworking: Locating Community at Work*, where he conceptualizes coworking by positioning the theoretical tension between community and organization, states: “*It may be that community is not the ‘co’ in coworking. This is not the end of this tale.*” In this chapter, I continue the tale about coworking, starting from Butcher’s reflection, and speculate that the ‘co’ in *coworking* may be understood to signify *contradiction*. In the previous chapters, I have highlighted that coworking is not a linear and uniform phenomenon: when coworking started to become more popular and diffuse, it began to be stratified and redefined in different ways. Through the analysis of the evolution of the coworking object over the years, it has been possible to identify the tensions at the root of the evolution itself as well as different types of coworking activities that characterize the current historical phase of coworking.

Within this framework, the aim of the present chapter is to identify the local manifestations of contradictions that characterize each of the activities identified in the previous study. Shedding light on local tensions permits the capture of themes and issues and reflects on possible future developments.

To this aim, it has been necessary to analyze deeply the local contexts by gaining access to the perspectives of participants who work inside the coworking spaces. For this reason, the best methodology for the research is that of ethnography, supplemented with participant observation and interviews. This approach focuses on how people effectively interpret, make sense of, and reproduce the processes in which they are involved and which they contribute toward creating and reproducing. This chapter is underpinned by ethnographic observations of four coworking spaces that exemplify the types of coworking activities in the typology identified in the previous chapter.

As anticipated in the theoretical part of the thesis, contradictions are a fundamental conceptual tool, derived from Marxian dialectical contradiction of Cultural Historical Activity Theory. Contradictions are systemic and inherent to all activity systems and represent the explanation of historically accumulated structural tensions. They illuminate the richness and diversity of each activity as well as its possible trajectories of development and shifts (Groleau et al., 2011). Because the contradictions are rooted in history and derive from different evolutions of the activity, none of the contradictions can be identified directly but rather need to be analyzed through their manifestations,

which correspond to concrete articulations of the contradictions themselves (Engeström and Sannino, 2011; Foot, 2011). In particular, Engeström and Sannino (2011) identify four main manifestations that represent a useful methodological framework for the analysis of contradictions: *conflicts* (that manifest in resistances, disagreements, arguments, etc.), *double binds* (in which people face pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives in an activity system), *critical conflicts* (when inner doubts paralyze people who face contradictory motives in social interactions), and *dilemmas* (that arise from the presence of incompatible evaluations of different people or of the same person). Inside this framework, the present study examines tensions that characterize each coworking activity (inside the typology). The research analyzes how subjects construct, negotiate and modify coworking activity in everyday actions. The analysis is based on ethnographic observations of four different coworking spaces and includes conversations and dialogues with various subjects (coworkers and coworking operators) involved in coworking.

1. Research Methodology

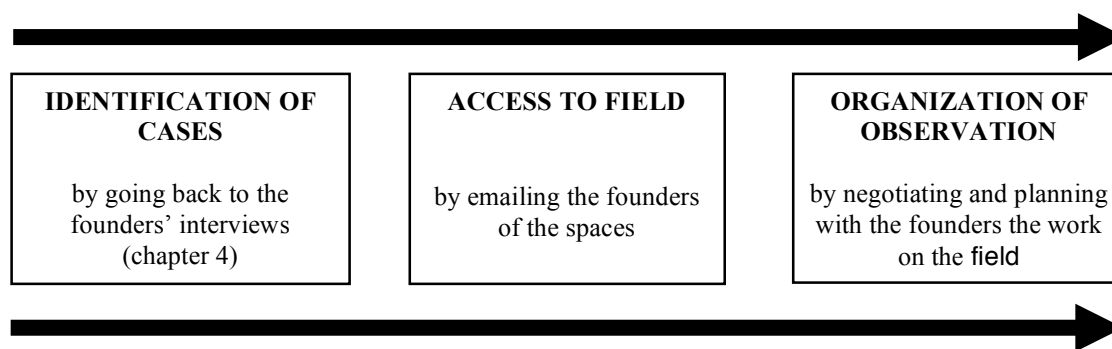
Ethnography is a specific form of qualitative inquiry (Hammersley, 2006) whereby researchers enter a particular social context for an extended period of time in order to directly capture the perspective of participants, the local actions, and the symbols and rules in use (Fetterman, 2010). Ethnography has its origins in anthropology, when the practice involved living in the communities of the subjects under investigation and participating in their activities often for several years (Ybema et al., 2009). Today, however, many sociological ethnographers conduct what Hammersley (2006) refers to as “part-time participant observation,” spending a limited amount of time with their subjects inside the context under investigation. The aim of ethnography is to produce thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of local contexts through the eyes of participants (Van Maanen, 2011), enriched with the scientific interpretations of the researcher. Ethnography in fact relies on the encounter of two different sets of interpretations: those of the ethnographer (i.e., the *etic* or *outsider perspective*) and those of the participants (i.e., the *emic* perspective or *insider perspective*) (Van Maanen et al. 1982; LeComte et al., 1999). From a methodological viewpoint, ethnography adopts methods and techniques that allow researchers to get close to people’s sense-making “by sharing their life as far as possible and conversing with them in their own terms” (Gellner and

Hirsch, 2001, p. 1). By immersing themselves in a specific context, ethnographers aim to interpret events and interactions through participants' perspectives (Gellner and Hirsch, 2001), in order to produce situated and embedded knowledge.

1.1 Selection of cases

As illustrated in Figure 5.1, cases were selected according to three steps.

Figure 5.1. Steps of the case selection



Identification of cases: The selection of the cases was determined strictly by the results of the previous qualitative study. In order to enhance the in-depth exploration and understanding of the identified typology (as described in the previous chapter), four coworking spaces were selected as emblematic—one for each type. To achieve this, I returned to the interviews with the founders and selected a representative case for each type. All four of the selected cases were situated in Milan. The choice to limit the ethnographic research to Milan was guided by two main reasons: (1) Milan was the first city to adopt coworking and has the longest tradition of coworking, which permitted me to identify contradictions linked to different phases in the evolution and to collect rich data; and (2) different private and public institutions in Milan are currently investing in the development of coworking. This offers the possibility to focus on a highly developed configuration of coworking spaces as they have continually unfolded and evolved into new forms of collectivism (Butcher, 2013).

Access to the field: After the cases were selected, the founders of the four spaces were contacted by email to describe the research aims and process and to request access to their coworking space for participative observation.

Organization of participant observation process: All four founders responded positively. During our first meeting with the founder or operators of the space, access to the coworking spaces and the process of participative observation were negotiated to determine several details: the duration of the observation, which station to sit at, and some basic rules (e.g., everyday access to the space, the hours of opening and closing time). Negotiation also concerned communication with coworkers regarding the field observations, and the researcher was publicly introduced to the group to achieve a general consensus from the coworkers.

1.2 Data collection

The ethnographic research took place after the first qualitative study was concluded, between June 2015 and December 2016. The duration of the observation varied from space to space. This was due to two main reasons. First, the founders/managers of the spaces had different stations available in the different periods. And second, the spaces, as will be explained later, had different sizes, different numbers of coworkers and stakeholders, and different levels of complexity. This means that some contexts required more time than others to be studied.

In each of the four coworking spaces, the participant observation (which included field notes, conversations, and photographs) was also integrated into formal interviews with participants (coworkers and operators). In Tables 5.1–5.4 below, the characteristics of the observations and interviews that were conducted in each space are summarized in detail, explaining the duration of the observation (first column), the number of sessions conducted for each period (second column), and the number of participants interviewed for each session (third column). The role of the interviewees and the assigned code²⁴ are specified as well.

Table 5.1. Ethnographic observation and interviews in space1 (1 session = 4 hours)

²⁴ In the codes the letters are the short for the role of the subjects, the first number indicates the number of the subject, while the second one, after the hyphen, refers to the number of the space (e.g. coworker 1 in the first space = CW1-1)

CASE 1		
PERIOD	OBSERVATION	INTERVIEWS
November 2016	3 sessions	founder (F1-1) coworker 1 (CW1-1) coworker 2 (CW1-2) coworker 3 (CW1-3)
December 2016	4 sessions	coworker 4 (CW1-4) coworker 5 (CW1-5)
January 2017	1 session	-
TOTAL	8 sessions (-32 h)	6 interviews

Table 5.2. Ethnographic observation and interviews in space 2 (1 session = 4 hours)

CASE 2		
PERIOD	OBSERVATION	INTERVIEWS
June 2015	5 sessions	coworker 1 (CW1-2) coworker 2 (CW2-2) coworker 3 (CW3-2)
July 2015	4 sessions	founder 1 (F1-2) coworker 4 (CW4-2)
September 2015	4 sessions	coworker 5 (CW5-2) coworker 6 (CW6-2)
TOTAL	12 sessions (-50 h)	7 interviews

Table 5.3. Ethnographic observation and interviews in space 3 (1 session = 4 hours)

CASE 3		
PERIOD	OBSERVATION	INTERVIEWS
November 2015	7 sessions	coworker 1 (CW1-3) coworker 2 (CW2-3) coworker 3 (CW3-3)
December 2015	5 sessions	coworker 4 (CW4-3) coworker 5 (CW5-3)
February 2016	5 sessions	coworker 6 (CW6-3) community Manager (CMI-3) Coworker 7 (CW7-3)
March 2016	4 sessions	office Manager (OM1-3) coworker 8 (CW8-3)
TOTAL	21 sessions (-80 h)	10 interviews

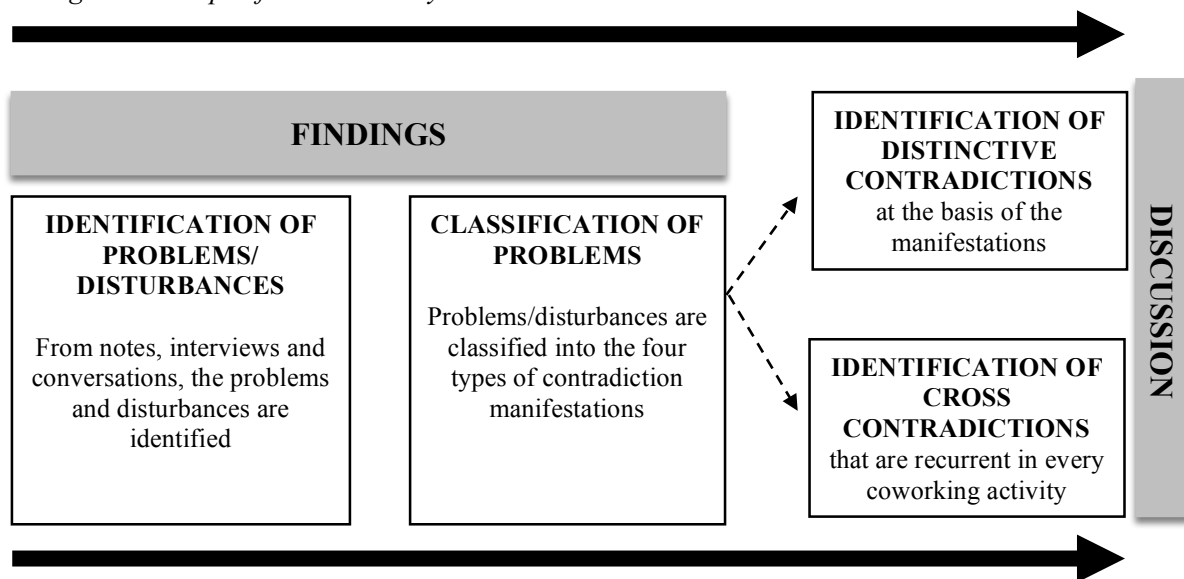
Table 5.4. Ethnographic observation and interviews in space 4 (1 session = 4 hours)

CASE 4		
PERIOD	OBSERVATION	INTERVIEWS
October 2015	7 sessions	coworker 1 (CW1-4) project manager 1 (PM1-4) project manager 2 (PM2-4) collaborator 1 (CI-4)
November 2015	8 sessions	coworker 3 (CW2-4) coworker 4 (CW3-4) cofounder (FI-4)
December 2015	5 sessions	coworker 5 (CW4-4) coworker 6 (CW5-4) community manager (CMI-4) project director (PD1-4)
TOTAL	20 sessions (-80 h)	11 interviews

1.3 Data analysis

Observational and conversational notes were transcribed at the end of each fieldwork day. The collected data were organized into several categories. First were the in-depth descriptions of the characteristics of the space. In line with Cultural Historical Activity Theory, the descriptions referred to the system of rules, the characteristics of the community, the division of labor, and the instruments/material aspects. Second were the observational notes, detailed descriptions of actions, interactions, and other events. And last were the methodological notes, which included reflections and useful indications regarding the collection of data (Thomas, 1993). The notes, conversations and dialogues (both from the interviews and field observations) were analyzed in two steps. In the first, the manifestations of contradictions were identified and classified following the scheme proposed by Engestrom and Sannino (2011). More specifically, problems, disturbances, and criticalities were classified into the four manifestations: *Critical conflicts*, *Conflicts*, *Double Binds*, and *Dilemmas*. In the second step, a cross reading of the data was performed. More specifically, starting from the manifestations of the contradictions that had been identified, the analysis continued by identifying on one side a distinctive inner contradiction for each space and identifying on the other those contradictions that affect all types of coworking activities (Figure 5.2).

Figure 5.2 Steps of the data analysis



2. Results

The main findings are divided into two parts: (1) a narrative description of each space (Bruner, 1991; Butcher, 2013), through the quotes of the operators, managers and founders of the spaces; and (2) an analysis of the manifestations of contradictions for each space. Discussions will be dedicated to the critical analysis of the distinctive inner contradictions, the cross contradictions, and reflections on the future development of coworking.

2.1 Description of the cases

Case 1 – Infrastructure Coworking

The first case regards a coworking space in central Milan, close to the city's two main train stations. The founder defines the location as 'strategic' since it facilitates coworkers' use of the space: **(F1-1)** *“In general, it's a very sought after space; on the one hand, because of the geographical position (easy to reach, because it's in the central station, near the subway stop).”*

The space is the property of a self-employed architect, who in 2012 decided to dedicate her office to coworking by affiliating it with the COWO project. This 100 m² space is situated inside an ancient building that was constructed at the beginning of 900 CE. More specifically, it is composed of a living room (used for coffee breaks and by coworkers with a day subscription when the stations are all occupied), a room with three stations and a kitchen area, a room with four stations (one dedicated to the owner), a meeting room (free for coworkers but requiring a fee from external workers), a restroom, and a big terrace. Coworkers can use the space autonomously from Monday to Friday between 9 am and 7 pm. From this point of view, the founder in different conversations compares the space to a traditional office: **(F1-1)** *“This coworking space is almost a professional office, in the sense that organization of the spaces and times is very similar.”* In terms of the type of coworkers involved, the space can be considered a 'generalist/heterogeneous' coworking space, in the sense that it is not intended for a specific professional theme/field and the coworkers are professionals with different formative and professional backgrounds. The founder explained, **(F1-1)** *“We don't have a specific theme here. In the sense that there aren't only coworkers that deal with*

architecture, like me, for example.” Most of the coworkers are freelancers or self-employed professionals; however, as confirmed by the founder, the space has also hosted startups over the years. The founder considers the space as a quiet space, different from those intended for startups and young people: **(F1-1)** *“a quiet place, located in a building from the 1900s; the people who come here to work are mainly managers, professionals, not rowdy people that you find in other spaces.”* The founder decided to turn her office into a coworking space because some rooms of her already existing business were not being used. For this reason, when she first learned about the concept of coworking by visiting another coworking space, she decided to contact the founder of the national network COWO and, with his help, rent the empty rooms of the office to other external professionals: **(F1-1)** *“With all this space I had, my boyfriend said, ‘Why don’t you open a B&B?’ But this is where I work. One day, I discovered space X, which is very different from my space today, insofar as it has a specific theme, in the sense that all professional coworkers work in that environment. But I discovered that it’s possible to open a coworking space, and I turned to the founder of the national network. I spoke to him, and my office soon also became a coworking space.”*

At the time of the field observation, there were five coworkers in the space (three with a full-time subscription, one with a subscription based on hours, and one who was a collaborator of the founder).

By talking with the coworkers it’s been possible to identify some main reasons they decided to use the space: (1) since it is close to home or other strategic places, as one coworker said, **(CW3-1)** *“I go to the swimming pool nearby, my children’s school is by the subway stop, and it doesn’t take me long to get to it, everything that isn’t work is near here [...] it’s handy, because otherwise, when there’s bad weather, roadworks, and the traffic in Milan... and public transport ... getting around ...becomes a great waste of time;”* (2) it is functional and quiet, as expressed by another coworker, **(CW2-1)** *“This building in particular is very quiet, and [...] it’s well-furnished and it’s very comfortable and cozy;”* (3) it is equipped with all the facilities needed to make the daily work effective and pleasant.” According to another of the coworkers, **(CW5-1)** *“It has a lovely terrace, that makes you want to work, even in summer. And there’s a kitchen. There’s everything you need.”*

In terms of the organization of the space, the founder is viewed—both by herself and the other professionals—as one of the coworkers. However, some differences between the founder and the other coworkers are emphasized: she is also perceived as the owner and

the person who is responsible for the general functioning, the rules, and the administrative aspects of the space. A coworker expressed, **(CW5-1)** *“L. is certainly the person we go to for any problems, or at least, for any aspect regarding how the space operates.”*

There are also some physical boundaries between her and the other coworkers: her work station is positioned in a room that she shares with her part-time employee and another architect, who employs the part-time employee the remainder of the time. The other coworkers (who have different professional backgrounds) work in the other room with the kitchen area.

Coworkers in this space do not seem to construct strong relationships, as some coworkers stated, **(CW2-1)** *“our relationship is primarily a professional one... we’ve never developed a relationship that’s sufficiently close for us to see each other and spend time together outside work hours.”* Each of them, in fact, tends to go about their everyday work with only a few moments of interaction, and some tend to spend their lunch break alone; however, in several conversations, the founder frequently underscored that one of her highest priorities is to promote interactions, relationships and collaborations among coworkers, and describes situations in the past when coworkers would spend informal moments together (like coffee breaks and lunches) and even share clients. In this respect, the founder also stresses that **(F1-1)** *“a coworking space without interactions and relationships cannot be considered a coworking space.”*

Case 2 – Relational Coworking

The second case regards a coworking space that was one of the first spaces to be founded in Italy and in Milan. It was created in 2008 by two entrepreneurs who worked in the field of marketing communication and who founded the COWO project network that, as anticipated in the previous chapter, is a franchise network that has been exponentially expanded over the years and today counts hundreds of spaces in the network. The space is located in what used to be an industrial building. The space also houses the marketing agency. Thus, as in Case 1, this coworking space is part of an already existing office. On the ground floor are seven stations (some equipped with a stationary computer), a private office (usually occupied by a company), a common area (with a big table used for meetings and lunch), and a kitchen area. On the second floor are seven stations (not equipped with computers) positioned close to each other. The

space is structured in such a way that the people on the ground floor can see those on the first, and vice versa.

In the beginning, the founders decided to dedicate their offices to coworking, because most of their desks and rooms were not being used, and they saw coworking as an opportunity to utilize the resources at their disposal, as one founder said, **(F1-2)** *“OK, we no longer needed the cutting table, the bureaus full of layouts and cardboard to stick the storyboards on, but we didn’t feel we wanted to forgo the space. It was as though we felt the importance of the resource, but were looking for a new way of making the most of it.”* Starting from this idea that they describe as *‘individualistic and opportunistic,’* and after having worked side by side with others, they discovered the importance of relationships both formal (i.e., based on work) and informal, in making every day work more pleasant and effective. Today, they declare that the main objective of their space is that of promoting: **(F1-2)** *“a shared use of spaces, for professionals who are interested in broadening their knowledge and relationships.”*

During the observation, there were eleven coworkers. The office was occupied by a company. On the ground floor were six coworkers, and on the first floor were five more. Two of them, the founders of the space, worked at the stations not equipped with stationary computers and sat alongside the others. In conversations, it emerged that the founders were considered as *“the owners of the space,”* the *“people we pay for using the space,”* the *“coordinators”* and *“supervisors”* who oversaw the functioning of the physical structure, as well as the point of reference for any problem that arises. At the same time, the founders interpreted their role as being *“responsible for the relationships and interactions that occur between coworkers,”* and to this aim they underscore the importance of their role in facilitating such interactions through planned events and activities.

This was the case, for example, with a weekly event called *“presentation lunch,”* where coworkers come together for some pizza and to present themselves, their ideas, or their projects to the founders and the other coworkers. During the observation, I participated in this lunch, presenting my research and asking questions of the coworkers and the founders. The event is considered a special tradition particular to this space. In addition, since the space is part of the national network, coworkers have the opportunity to participate in events that involve all of the spaces affiliated with the network. The most famous event is the so-called *“cowo-share,”* an annual event open to coworkers and coworking founders/managers dedicated to presentations and discussions on specific

topics (e.g., legal aspects of coworking, public administration of coworking). By talking with the coworkers, it was possible to identify various reasons why they had decided to use the space. The motivations seem quite similar to those identified in Case 1.

These reasons, in fact, were connected to: (1) the need to avoid the isolation that seems to characterize working from home, as one coworker said, **(CW1-2)** *“I also chose it, so that I wouldn’t be working alone, at home”*; *“I started working from home, I spent a year doing it, but then it started to be hard;”* (2) the aesthetic beauty of the district in which the space is located, as a coworker expressed, **(CW3-2)** *“I chose this, because I liked the neighborhood and the space a lot. I think the quality of the space you work in is really important;”* (3) the proximity to other important places, explained another coworker, **(CW5-2)** *“it was extremely handy for me, I mean, my children’s school was near here, and my house was also very close by, so I chose this.”* During the day, the coworkers spend most of their time working at their stations; however, the exchanges between coworkers are still frequent. Coworkers also tend to spend their lunch together or eat at the table in the common area on the ground floor or go together to a pub nearby. Besides these everyday interactions and relationships, the coworkers also described projects in which they work together. One founder said, **(F1-2)** *“I’ll give you an example; I had this job where I had to create a site, so I asked M. if he could help me.”*

Case 3 – Network Coworking

Case 3 is a vertical coworking space organized as part of a franchise network. Its name is well known throughout Italy and Europe. The franchise network is composed of sixteen spaces (called ‘campuses’) all across Europe. The network began in Italy and then spread with campuses in Spain, Albania, Lithuania, and Romania. The idea came from a young entrepreneur who decided to open the space because, **(CM1-3)** *“(he) was looking for a space in which to work together with other young collaborators, maybe with the possibility of sharing spaces, but also sharing, somewhat, experiences with other people who operate in the same field of work.”* As explained by the community manager, after he had opened the space, many entrepreneurs asked him to open coworking spaces under the same name but in other countries. Thus, the space has become a network (franchise) and spread widely. In Italy there are ten spaces, located in various cities in the northern, central and southern regions. Nowadays, the network is still growing and looking for opportunities to open new campuses: **(CM1-3)** *“It began*

as a single, coworking space, then, bit by bit, it evolved, and now it's the largest network of coworking spaces in Europe, and we have 16 premises; not only in Italy, but also outside, because we have a space in Barcelona, one in Lithuania, one in Albania, and we're also opening up in Vienna and in Bucharest, and we're also going to open other spaces." In Milan there are two spaces; but, at the time of the research, one (the biggest) was under construction and inaccessible. The franchise includes: (1) *"the central direction team."* composed of ten people, including a president (the founder), vice president, marketing manager, sales manager, and a communication manager. The central direction team was structured around different "functions," such as marketing, sales, project, and design; (2) spaces opened by independent entrepreneurs or directly by the central direction team. Each space is autonomously managed by the local founder(s), but the directional team gives general guidelines concerning how to open a space in franchising, how to be a good community manager, how to arrange the style of the space with a precise design (each space has its own distinctive features), and how to manage the spaces (campuses), as a community manager explained, **(CM1-3)** *"so, let's say it works like this: there's the general structure of the holding company and then lots of little campuses; then, clearly, the role of the holding company is to provide guidelines and to ensure that, when you come into the franchise, you can't furnish the space the way you want. Then, everyone can personalize it, but the holding company gives the guidelines, also for communication and community management; it also organizes training sessions for this."* The internal layout of the local spaces is structured, with a group of coworking operators called the *management team*. This team is autonomously defined and identified by the local founders of each space. In the spaces observed, there was a management team composed of an *office manager* (responsible for managing the building) and a *community manager* (responsible for social relations among coworkers). However, the roles of the two seem to frequently overlap. They are both responsible for different tasks, like organizing events in collaboration with other spaces of the franchise, organizing social events inside the space, deciding the practical layout of the space, and welcoming new coworkers. They interpret their role as that of *"connectors,"* helping people to find useful synergies for developing their businesses. According to one manager **(CM1-3)**, *"our role is to connect, so what's nice is getting to know people well; this is important to us. So, maybe, I'll give you an example: when a new coworker arrives, initially you should say, 'Okay, this person here is a printer and he likes tennis; F. over there likes tennis,' so I*

tell him, or, 'Ah OK, he's a freelance printer,' so that startup might be interested in him." With respect to the internal organization of the coworking franchise network, the community manager of the space observed it is similar to that of a proper, consolidated firm/industry: **(CM1-3)** "We began as a startup, and we've become a company to all intents and purposes, so, as there were first, maybe, 3 people doing everything, now, for example, there's a team who only work on design, so when we open a new space, there's someone who deals with furnishing the interior, there's an architect who gives us advice and a woman who prints out the pre-spaced documents, with the right fonts, etc." The space is large (more than 500 m²), organized into three floors. The raised ground floor is divided into three spaces: reception, a leisure space, and an office space. The office is an open space with desks for coworkers and an enclosed (with glass walls) meeting room. The first floor is divided into four spaces: a room for private offices that is enclosed by a glass wall; a big meeting room; and another private office that, at the time of observation, was occupied solely by one company. The second floor was organized into three spaces: two open-space offices (used by coworkers), a space dedicated to a private office, and two meeting rooms. Finally, the basement comprised one open-space room, the *food space*, which included a *leisure area* and a *coffee area*. The layout was eco-friendly (with chairs made of cardboard) and innovative (an open lounge space with modern objects, pillows, foosball, and mini golf). The mission of the space (as well as the franchise network) is well defined and known by the coworkers, explicitly and implicitly expressed through different slogans and signs inside the space and on the website. Generally speaking, the main objective of the space is that of "creating a community of digital innovators, help to transform their business by giving them the right space, instruments and connections" (website). Inside the space there are various mottos on the walls underscoring the focus on business development and the importance of sharing knowledge and experiences with others (e.g., "Share our life with others/ u will have a joyful life;" "Small opportunities are often the beginning of large businesses;" "Behind every successful business, there's someone who made a courageous decision," etc.). The declared mission of the space is frequently recalled in conversations with coworkers and the management team, who emphasize two main aspects in particular: the professional development of coworkers, as an office manager stated, **(OM1-3)** "The goal of this place is not just to be a sharing of spaces, but also a sharing of abilities;" and the creation of connections and synergies to develop the businesses; **(OM1-3)** "We focus on the digital sector, because we believe that people

who work in the same field should have the opportunity to exchange ideas, but also to identify synergies.”

The coworkers are, for the vast majority, startups and small businesses that work in the digital field; however, there are also some freelancers. The reasons why coworkers usually decide to use this space are connected to: (1) the chance for young startups to use a space for work: **(CW3-3)** *“At an economic level, it’s a good solution for companies in the beginning stage. It certainly helps;”* (2) the chance to network and develop professional competences through the events organized by the management team, **(CW1-3)** *“I was expecting a place where it was possible to come in contact with people, to create professional contacts, but also to learn skills and to grow professionally. Here, they give you the opportunity to take part in events that enable you to have professional growth;”* (3) the chance to interact with other businesses in the same field, **(CW7-3)** *“There’s a chance to exchange ideas with other people, who are very often in the same situation as you, so, for example, while you’re drinking coffee, you might meet someone who’s dealing with the same difficulties as you and can advise and help you.”*

In terms of the events/activities organized by the management team, these added services include upgrades (e.g., a registered office, or parking); subscriptions to weekly activities (e.g., pilates); free weekly events (e.g., English lessons); free monthly social events inside the space to facilitate interactions among coworkers (e.g., aperitifs, lunches); events dedicated to connecting coworkers with external organizations (e.g., pitches, workshops). As one community manager said, **(CM1-3)** *“There are additional services, for example, the chance to have a registered office, but you have to pay extra to be able to have it [...] for business, we regularly organize courses, like English lessons [...] every month, we have events, like aperitifs or lunch all together [...] then, we have other events, for example, this year, we organized activities with the theme of ‘discover food,’ a monthly event with all the startups that made deliveries; then one with those involved in agritech etc.”*

Case 4 – Welfare Coworking

The fourth case is represented by a coworking space that was opened at the end of 2012 and today is recognized as the first coworking space in Italy specifically dedicated to the topic of ‘women and work.’ The founder said, **(F1-4)** *“[The space] proposes another*

way of organizing work, different from the traditional ones, that can help women face problems that they experience in the current work environment and permit them to better balance private life and working life.” The coworking space arose from the idea of an entrepreneur with professional experience in big companies. When she became a mother, she experienced ‘bad practices’ toward women and mothers with children inside the working context. As she states in an interview online, no choice actually needs to be made between being a mother or being a professional: *“If option A is a career, and option B is being a mother and dedicating oneself to family, I think there should be an option C, that permits workers to choose another way.”*

Based on these beliefs, the coworking space was founded with the precise intent to provide different solutions to the issue of women and work. Today, the space proposes various projects and activities related to the support of women at work. The space was opened by her and another professional (man) who embraced the idea: **(F1-4)** *“I can still remember when R came to me and said ... ‘you know what? I’ve got an idea.’ And I said, ‘What idea?’, and she said, ‘There’s this new model called coworking ... we could adapt the model and use it to tackle the themes we deal with linked to women and work.”*

The space is characterized by distinctive services and projects. Firstly, the space—in addition to the working stations—is equipped with a *cobaby* service. This is a space inside the coworking space specifically dedicated to hosting children between 0 and 10 years. The cobaby is managed by an expert educator. The services provided in the cobaby are babysitting, pedagogical and psychological consultancy, and parties. In addition, different projects related to the issue of women and work are proposed. More specifically, there are projects for supporting professional women to understand their potential, weaknesses/strengths, and opportunities; to enter (or re-enter) the labor market; to develop personal and professional skills; and to enhance their professional networks. Most of the projects are provided by a not-for-profit association that is connected to the coworking space. The organization behind the space is a hybrid organization: on one side, there is a for-profit startup that hosts the coworking space, comprised of a board of directors with eight silent partners (who don’t work in the space) and a managing director. The startup manages the costs and incomes derived from the management and renting of the space. On the other side, the projects are provided and managed by a not-for-profit association that has a president, a management committee (composed of the president and two other people), and the

group of members (composed of four people). The founder further explained, (F1-4) *“We have an organization typical of organizations that work in the field of social innovation. We have a very fluid organization chart; this is because we were founded already with a double nature. There’s a limited liability company and there’s a non-profit association [...]. The limited liability company has a board of directors with 8 non-working members, and an administrator. In terms of governance, the association consists of a president, and a steering committee. At the moment, the committee is coming to the end of its term, and we’re electing another one on Monday. [...] Now, we’re trying to make the meeting of the members as democratic as possible.”* In regard to the projects, at the time of observation, the association was managing three main projects, two of which were invented and provided directly by the association (and implemented in collaboration with other organizations, e.g. university), while the other was provided by an external organization. One project in particular aims to help women re-integrate into the work force; the second is a mentorship project for developing personal and professional competences; and the third is a training program.

Inside this organization, according to the vision of the cofounder, the coworking space should represent a platform that permits people to gather around a specific issue: (F1-4) *“The space is the facilitator! [...] the place where things and projects can be realized. The space facilitates the starting up and creation of certain projects and actions. [...] on the one hand, it enables certain people to gather and then to create a community. On the other hand, if it’s structured in a certain way, with open-space rooms, with colored doors, with certain writing on the walls, it also makes it possible to inspire and to promote change.”*

The space is located inside a residential building. It is composed of an open-space large room with two big tables and almost twenty stations in total, six meeting rooms (some rented by companies), a kitchen, and a co-baby. The large room with two tables is what people consider as the proper coworking space. On the front door is a sign inscribed with the question *“Is this a home or an office?”* emphasizing the opportunity to integrate and balance these two aspects of life. Similarly, inside the space, on the walls are other sentences underscoring the possibility of finding alternative ways of life that do not necessarily already exist: *“Logic will get you from A to B. Imagination will get you everywhere.”* In one of the conversations, the co-founder highlights the importance of the space and its material aspects in promoting change in the way people (and particularly women) think and relate to their work. The coworkers, as in the other

coworking spaces, sign up for several types of subscriptions: annual, monthly, daily, full-time, or part-time. Most of the coworkers are women or men with children. During the observation period, there were only a few coworkers in the space between 4 and 7. Most of these people are part of the management team, which they call the “staff team.” More specifically, the staff is composed of a *community manager* with the main task of “*managing the space and the interactions between coworkers as well as subscriptions.*” Two people are the *tutors* of the three projects. Another staff member is responsible for advocacy and communication and constructing institutional partnerships for the organization. The general director of the association also has the task of supervising and coordinating the projects. The co-founder, who has the role of general manager for the entire organization and who defines himself as “*the father of the organization,*” manages and coordinates the entire staff. All the members of the staff work inside the space, and some are employed in the startup while others work in the not-for-profit association. Besides the coworkers who work in the space, most members of the staff team speak about a larger *community* composed of the coworkers that use the coworking space and people and professionals (mostly women) who use the projects and services but do not necessarily use the coworking space. The coworkers seem to use the space for three main reasons: (1) they embrace the idea/ideology behind this specific coworking space; (2) they are a mother or father and need to balance their family and working life, and are attracted by the cobaby service; or (3) because they are facing difficulties in their working experience (e.g., entering or re-entering into the labor market after maternity). Most of the time, the coworkers work at their stations, but there are many moments when they interact with each other. In particular, they tend to spend lunch and coffee breaks together. These are peculiar moments in which coworkers speak to each other about their personal experiences and sometimes about their work. From these conversations, opportunities to collaborate sometimes arise, particularly between coworkers and the staff. This was the case, for example, with three young coworkers (of a startup) who were invited to work for a project of the association.

2.2 Manifestations of contradictions

After having described, mostly through the voices of the operators, the contexts in which I realized the observations, in this section I present the main results that emerged from the analysis of the conversations, dialogues that characterized the four coworking spaces under investigation. The intent is that of identifying the contradictions that manifest in the various types of coworking activities. Here, I focus on a qualitative thematic analysis, more specifically, I adopt for the analysis the theoretical framework proposed by Engestrom and Sannino in *Discursive Manifestation of Contradictions* (2011), and categorize the manifestations that characterize each space in *critical conflicts*, *conflicts*, *double binds*, and *dilemmas*, shedding light also on the differences with the ideal types that emerged from the representations of the founders.

Case 1. Infrastructure Coworking

Dilemmas

The analysis of dialogues and conversations with and between people in the space revealed that the dilemmas are connected to the fact that the possibility of facilitating interactions between people is perceived, theoretically, as a positive aspect. This because it opens up chances for enlarging one's professional network and sharing clients with each other, as well as creating a positive working environment that make daily work more pleasant.

(CW4-1) Having people different from you to interact with leads you to learn about more things, it encourages you to find out also about different things, it provides you with things to reflect on ... you can come in contact with people who need you, and then start making acquaintances also outside. And then, having some good relationships in here also makes the work more pleasant.

(F1-1) If I want to form professional collaborations, I don't go into general coworking, with people who are completely different from me. I'd look for a coworking space with architects, something like that [...] that would be ideal for me: in future, creating a space with people that all work in the same sector.

In the opinions of the coworkers and the founder, sharing clients is easier to achieve if people in the space are working in the same professional field or similar ones. In this

regard, the founder points out that opening the space only to people who work in the same field can increase the possibility of sharing; however, it would reduce the number of potential users of the space (by appealing to a smaller target market), and consequently the income derived from the rent would diminish.

(F1-1) For me, it would be ideal to open to people who work in the same field as me, so to architects or people like that. That would be ideal for me, that's what my vision would be. However, I can only achieve that if I direct the search for coworkers and the advertising in certain fields. In this way, I'd reduce the number of potential coworkers. But if I leave entry free... even people who don't belong might ask to come here, so it would be easier for me to occupy the desks, because I need to, in order to support the space economically.

However, various doubts emerge in regard to this issue. Interactions and relations between people in the space are also seen as interference and sources of distraction. In the citations, coworkers and the founder explained that although the facilitation of interaction is seen as a good opportunity and an added value of coworking, when the interactions are frequent the perceived risk is a loss of productivity.

(CW5-1) The big problem is this ... there's always the fear of interfering in other people's work, I can see that the others also have a bit of the same problem, when I talk or discuss with some of them.

The doubts at the root of the dilemmas regard the tension between the pursuit of a direct advantage (by renting the space and equipment) and an indirect advantage (through interactions and sharing that lead to an increased number of potential clients and projects).

Conflicts

Conflicts are caused particularly by the sorts of disturbances that come from sharing a space. Coworkers, in fact, often feel disturbed by others talking on the phone or with each other. This is generally considered a source of interference in their daily work.

(CW4-1) For example, I had some problems with the people opposite me, G. and G., because they're collaborating at the moment, so, at the beginning, I occasionally had a problem of listening... they did the briefing, they did ... they gave updates on certain data and information, so at the beginning, it was a problem ... because I found it annoying.

(CW2-1) I might have to concentrate on the report of a deed, or maybe on doing a legal search, but maybe at the same time, the person in the place next to mine has a conference call and is therefore talking on the phone with other people, and this might create a sort of inconvenience.

Another conflict that emerged in a conversation with a coworker was related to the fact that some people do not like to share their desk with others and prefer to work alone.

(CW3-1) When L. asked M. to share the desk with me, he didn't react very well, he was not so happy about that, so we discussed a little bit for this reason.

The conflicts seem to derive from the general idea that coworking consists mostly in sharing space with other people in order to realize individual jobs, thus the presence of other people and interactions with them are harmful to productivity. Conflicts in this space are frequently solved at the individual level by adopting different behaviors to reach a compromise and meet the needs of the people involved.

(F1-1) We know we have to clean the table and get back to work at 2 p.m., because we know that M. starts working again at that time.

Critical Conflicts

The critical conflicts emerged particularly in conversations and dialogues with the founder. They regard the frustration and regret that arise from the difficulty that she had experienced in enhancing interactions/relationships with and between coworkers. The critical conflicts identified are connected to two main aspects. These regard the founder's interpretation of the general mission of coworking and, consequently, of her role in respect to the coworking space and the coworkers. In different conversations, she underscores that coworking has to be based on the creation of relationships among the people in the space. More specifically, she stresses that in her opinion a space cannot be considered a coworking space if it is not oriented to promote 'synergies' between coworkers:

(F1-1) A coworking space cannot be a coworking space if there aren't synergies between people who are inside the space; the aim must be to create as many synergies as possible. Collaborations, which I think are the foundation of coworking ... either it's a business, but this is possible if there are large

spaces and money can be made on the workstations/desks rented out, or, if this isn't possible, for example, in a small space like this, coworking should be an opportunity to create synergies, collaborations with those around you.

Along the same lines, generally speaking, she highlights that the role of the coworking founder/manager should be that of facilitating and enhancing interactions between coworkers and representing a positive example for others in the space:

(F1-1) *So, as the person responsible for the space, I should try to give the example for the climate that could be created in here, trying to speak and discuss with everyone.*

However, on the basis of these interpretations, she expresses frustration connected to the perceived impossibility of involving coworkers in conversations, interactions, and spending time together. Obstacles to the creation of such relationships can be traced to the dispositions of the coworkers and the founder. It emerged that most of the coworkers interpret the coworking space as a place they share to accomplish their daily work. This interpretation of coworking does not facilitate the possibility of sharing moments where they get to know each other better and create stronger ties.

(F1-1) *There are times (like now) when there are coworkers in here who do their things, without even saying a word to each other [...] there are some people who just don't have the right personality for coworking. Not everyone has the right spirit; I think some people just want to save on space.*

(CW2-1) *With the others in here, it's 'Hi, hi', in the sense now that there's no need to chat. Also because we're all people that have limited work time, we're not employees, we're all responsible for our work, so no one chats randomly in here, we just work.*

However, in these conversations, the founder also shed light on the fact that this was not her priority. If, on the one hand, the dispositions of coworkers represent an important obstacle to the effort of coworking, then the way in which the founder acts in the space and organizes the space and facilitates interaction represents another crucial aspect (and potential obstacle).

(F1-1) *I'm a welcoming person, and I'm curious, I take an interest ... I try to establish a certain kind of approach with everyone. I don't like to see closed doors, it annoys me. I say this, but then, I think I could do a lot more. That is, I'm not even one of those super extra people who are always nice, who always laugh and joke with everyone. Sometimes, I have to sit here, I have my work, I say goodbye quickly and go... I might be stressed out by something and not do very much.*

(CW4-1) In here, we always sit in the same place. L. never gives us the opportunity to change desks. And this doesn't make interactions among us easy.

The critical conflicts that emerge are connected to the object of coworking that here emerges as double: on the one hand, coworking is considered as intrinsically social, in the sense that it cannot disregard the promotion of relationships among people in the space; however, on the other hand, it is associated with the possibility of sharing space with other people to accomplish one's daily work.

Double Binds

The double binds identified in this case are related to the individuals' relationship with the content of the work and the space itself. From the conversations, it emerged that coworkers in the space feel a lack of privacy. Working side by side with others necessarily implies the possible exposure of the contents of their work to their neighbors. This eventuality is perceived as a personal violation and potential risk for them and their clients.

(CW5-1) If I have documents that are rather confidential and personal... I don't care, because I know that seeing what I'm doing is the least of the problems of the person opposite me. Considering how this coworking is structured, I think this is a bit of a sore point. And I wouldn't know if there was an immediate solution. But it's not a nice thing. For example, he's a lawyer, and every now and again, he pulls out documents with "trial against Giuseppe Rossi" written on them. Well, I can see, if you put it in front of me, I see. And I don't think it does him any good, and, above all, I don't think his client will be very happy.

Besides this aspect, two coworkers also did not like that they could not consider the space their own office. In particular, they did not appreciate some of the rules imposed by the founder, which prevented them from acting as if the space were their own.

(CW4-1) The rule here is that you can't put your name on the door, so I can't put a plate with my name on the door of the office I work in. [...] this is really silly and annoying [...] I realize this is a coworking place, but at least, when someone comes, they can see you work here. I feel like I'm on loan here.

So even if they did not want to work from home (because they experience a sense of isolation) or have their own office (because it is too expensive), they seemed not to completely appreciate some aspects of coworking. The double binds in the conversations showed difficulties in accepting the consequences of sharing the space with others. In particular, coworkers seemed to experience a lack of ownership over the content and the site of their work activity.

Case 2. Relational Coworking

Dilemmas

The observation revealed dilemmas that regard the heterogeneity of coworkers inside the space. As previously indicated this kind of space is characterized by the presence of professionals with different backgrounds and interests. This aspect is perceived by the coworkers and the founders as an added value for the creation of relationships among coworkers.

(CW3-2) If we all have different experiences, it's much easier to gain something from being here. In the sense that there's much more chance of learning things that you didn't know, that you usually don't come across.

(CW6-2) Of course, the fact that we all have different jobs helps the relationships a lot, because there's a greater desire to get to know each other.

However, at the same time, the heterogeneity is also seen as an obstacle for the possibility to integrate knowledge and competences focused on work. The homogeneity of the coworkers is seen in this sense as an aspect of facilitation concerning the possibility to integrate knowledge and competence in respect to work. At the same time some coworkers underline that this kind of homogeneity brings also the risk of competition among professionals inside the space.

(CW3-2) On the one hand, being in an environment with people who do the same, or a similar job to you certainly makes it easier to exchange ideas on work aspects and maybe, also to start projects together, but, at the same time, it's more likely that there's also competition with those that are more capable or that do clever things.

In particular, one coworker in a conversation emphasized that, before deciding to enter this space, he used to be a coworker in another coworking space that is focused on a

specific fieldwork (architecture). After a period in that space he decided to leave because different conflicts raised connected to work like jealousy, envy, and project ownership issues.

(CW4-2) Before coming here, I was in another coworking space, where they were all architects, like me. We did a load of jobs together, lots of joint projects, but then I left because the dynamics typical of a traditional company were created ... there were people competing with me and I didn't want any of this. This isn't coworking in my opinion.

What is here described shows tensions between the idea that the similarity of coworkers' jobs can improve and increase the opportunities of knowledge sharing, and the idea that focusing on the same work field can reproduce the dynamics of competition that coworkers ascribe as typical of the traditional organizations.

Conflicts

The arguments that are underlined in the interviews and in the conversations in this case regard those aspects connected to the implicit rules about how to behave with the other coworkers during working time. The main source of the arguments is represented in fact by the interferences produced by phone calls or conversations while other people are working.

(CW1-2) Definitely, the most annoying thing and the reason why I sometimes get angry are to hear people constantly talking on the phone. We are not in a huge space, and if somebody is right next to the person arguing loudly on the phone it becomes an element of extreme annoyance to others.

Another important aspect that is considered as a source of conflict or arguments is represented by the common management of space. Actually, in the course of conversations stories emerge about situations where the kitchen is left without provisions or when the spaces were left in disorder.

(F1-2) Yes, sometimes I have to say that the coworkers forget to take things that end up in the kitchen. In that case, I get nervous and certainly do not indulge in doing them mercy and buying things for them.

The founder of the space highlights that with regard to these aspects he would like greater autonomy and self-management by coworkers, which sometimes does not appear to take into proper consideration the fact that they are sharing the space with

other professionals. In this sense, he happens to be the one to handle and resolve such situations.

Critical conflicts

The critical conflicts that arise in this case are closely related to the role that the founder of the coworking space undertakes towards coworkers. Emerging within this space, the founders and in particular one of the two are considered by coworkers as:

(F1-2) *The people who pay to use the space; Responsible for the functioning of the area; Responsible for the relations, coordinators, supervisors.*

There are no obvious physical boundaries between coworkers and the founders, in the sense that they work and occupy the same desks of coworkers (even with fewer available services, without a desktop PC on their table). However there seem still to be symbolic barriers that create a distance between coworkers and the founders. The founders, in fact, speak about coworkers defining them '*clients*,' '*the people who pay the rent for using space*.' They are also defined as '*the people that we spend the working day with*.'

(F1-2) [...] *For us, they are certainly the people we spend our whole day with, and also the people who pay our space to work inside [...].*

These role distinctions may be reflected in the aspects related to the management of space and the available tools. An example that has emerged in relation to these aspects concerns the ownership of the keys of the space. As told by a coworker, the latter are owned only by the founders or those who pay full-time for a desk with a desktop computer. Several times during the observation this caused some coworkers without keys to remain the last to leave and not having the chance to close the space, thus being forced to call the founder to solve the problem.

(CW1-2) [...] *I don't know why, but they only give the keys to those who rent a desk full time. And then this happens: we remain within the space without being able to close the door and we have to call M. hoping that he responds or that is free [...].*

These problems indicate that there are differences within the space that hinder the autonomy and bring out the effort by some coworkers to represent themselves as partially dependent on the manager of the space.

Double Binds

The highlighted double binds relate largely to the object of a coworking space and the coexistence of two different orientations in the representation of the founders of space. On the one hand, the founders focus on the organization and promotion of events and moments of sociability to achieve the goal of sharing knowledge and subsequent personal and professional enrichment for coworkers.

(F1-2) Here, within the space, we try to create and propose social activities between coworkers within our space, or perhaps with neighboring areas or belonging to the network, we try to make them known and to make sure that you will enrich each other.

On the other hand, however, the founders include in their coworking formulas a need to convert unused space in existing offices and enterprises into coworking spaces.

(F1-2) Our communication and the particularity of our network are to ensure that all those who have access to a professional space where they work can open a coworking space without difficulty and in a few steps.

The founders of coworking space aim to create conditions that can facilitate the sharing of knowledge and mutual learning, showing a strong commitment to the needs around which this activity has been built. At the same time, however, entrepreneurs who have the space available experience pressure to include coworking space within their facilities, focusing less on the added value of construction and sharing of knowledge and more on the possibility of reusing physical resources that would remain unused. Founders who value the social and knowledge sharing aims of coworking must also have some degree of concern for a profit dimension more similar and consistent with the orientation of coworking infrastructure.

Case 3. Network Coworking

Dilemmas

The dilemmas that emerge in this type of space can be traced to the discourses of coworkers, regarding the focalization and the specialization of the space on a specific field of work. The representation of coworkers may be one of the most positive aspects of the space, but some coworkers also perceived that it was overly focused or restricted to aspects of the digital field.

(CW1-3) I'd get away from this mono-themed environment that focuses so much on the Web. Digital hi-tech isn't only the Web. Putting so much emphasis on the Web, when talking about hi-tech is really a cultural problem. I often say this also to C., our community manager. Although I do understand them, they have to do business and the topic of the Web is an attractive and fashionable one.

(CW1-3) Certainly, the interesting part of this space is the fact that it allows you to get to know people who work in the same field of work.

(CW2-3) I think it's great; it's really stimulating to be in an environment of this kind, with people who all work in this sector. We enrich each other's experiences. But at the same time, I don't come from this field, in terms of training, and sometimes I feel a bit outside .

In the interpretation of various coworkers, this orientation/focus is guided by the founder's vision of creating a strong identity for the coworking space and the whole franchise within a trendy and contemporary professional field.

Conflicts

The conflictual situations were connected to the ways people behave towards others in the coworking space. Even if most of the coworkers considered disturbances to be a constitutive and intrinsic part of coworking, they also denounced the fact that some people did not respect the others, speaking loudly or making noise. One coworker in particular mentioned that he felt a lack of control over the interactions that occur in the space, and felt obliged to interact with the others even when he did not want to interact.

(CW1-3) Sometimes, I need to be left alone, to work in silence. Sometimes, I don't need any kind of relationship. Of course, this isn't possible in here. Whether you want it or not, living inside a coworking space, you're always interacting. Sometimes, this is nice, other times, absolutely not, and unpleasant situations are created, that don't respect the others much, who might need to work .

Another source of conflict that various coworkers mentioned during the observation was related to how clean people leave the bathroom. Messiness was viewed as a sign of

disrespect, and some coworkers also stressed the responsibility of the management to solve these kinds of problems.

(CW7-3) One problem that often repeats is the question of the bathroom, it's often left dirty. And, in my opinion, this is also the responsibility of the community manager, who should intervene.

These aspects sometimes led to conflicts between coworkers and were usually solved through the intervention of the community manager, who is considered by the coworkers as the point of reference for all problems that arise between coworkers and regarding the structural and functional aspects of the space. Interestingly, the coworkers saw as a potential solution for these kinds of problems the application of strict rules and supervision by a member of the management team.

(CW1-3) There should be precise rules, in fact, there already are, but no one respects them. Let me give you a banal example: there's a telephone booth, but, in fact, no one uses it, and people end up here, phoning and disturbing everyone else. And sometimes, I just have to shout to get the rules respected. [...] There should be an outsider, whose job is to establish the rules and make sure they're respected, with a company mandate to do this.

Another type of conflictual situation that the coworkers emphasized focused on business. Since the coworking space is intended particularly for startups and companies, conflicts sometimes emerge between colleagues of the same organization.

(CW7-3) My boss came back a few days ago, and now we practically can't play table football anymore, because he forbids it, or at least, we know it's better not to.

(CW2-3) I've had some problems with my colleague, in the sense that we had two different methods of doing things, so we clashed and we discussed it.

Also, in this case, one coworker reported that when she had a conflict with her colleague, she asked for help and advice from the community manager.

(CW2-3) When I had problems with X, for reasons I don't want to explain now, but matters linked to work and to how we both behaved at work, I went to Y (community manager), to ask her for advice on what I should do. She was a reference point for me.

The conflicts, as well as the ways people try to manage them, shed light on tensions between an orientation towards flexibility/autonomy and the need to create hierarchies and structures more typical of traditional organizations.

Critical Conflicts

The critical conflicts in this case involved problems related to the events/activities that were organized and promoted in the coworking space. As described in the previous section, this space is strongly focused on the enhancement of the professional networks of coworkers and on the creation of the conditions needed to develop their business. To this aim, different events were organized by the management focused on coworkers' business (e.g., business presentations, hackathons, training, pitches), development of technical or soft skills, and training sessions on trends in the digital field. Besides these events, other internal activities were proposed to coworkers that were oriented toward the promotion of relationships among coworkers (e.g., aperitifs, lunches). The basic assumption is that their professional networks would be better activated if the people in the space knew each other well and were involved in informal interactions.

(CM1-3) I organize the various community events, so that people know they range from workshops, to aperitifs, to lunch, so all of the activities that help to develop community and help people to get to know each other .

However, the community manager highlighted that it is often difficult to involve people effectively in this kind of social initiative, because coworkers sometimes are too focused on their work and business.

(OM1-3) It's difficult to get coworkers to take part in these initiatives. Sometimes, you have to keep on at them, to hassle them, so that's the problem, it's what's most difficult.

Along the same lines, some coworkers admitted that they were uninterested in participating in the social events, because they perceived them as “*too forced and unnatural,*” organized only as part of the policy of the franchise network. Also, one coworker stressed that the networking events seem to be too sponsored by external institutions and organized to project a certain image. Another aspect that represented an obstacle for coworkers in attending organized events was the type of organization: the coworkers were asked to confirm their attendance days before the event took place.

(CW5-3) For me, this place hasn't been very important in terms of events and activities organized to get us to socialize. I think they're a bit forced. They're too structured, as if they had to organize them,

and in that way. Like the aperitifs or pizzas, where everyone has to say what they do, who they are, which projects they have. And, I have say beforehand if I'm going to be there, if I'm not.

(CW3-3) *Sometimes, the events seem to me to be over-sponsored, almost fake, I don't want to go.*

The critical conflicts arise because the founders consider the events and activities organized in the space to be important and fundamental for responding to the main need of the coworkers (that of creating professional networks and opportunities); however, at the same time, the coworkers perceive them as not necessarily focused on their needs but rather on the internal policy and marketing strategy of the franchise.

Double Binds

The double binds can be traced by analyzing the dialogues in particular of three coworkers, and considering the organizational level and policy of the space. The double binds are focused on the selection process that characterizes the coworking space and the franchise network in general. Originally, the franchise implemented a strong selection process based on the focus of work and the quality of the business of coworkers.

This strict selection process has permitted the franchise to become a well reputed brand in the field of digital innovation.

(CW8-3) *At the beginning, there was an extremely intense selection. Many startups were rejected. In fact, it was the largest companies that indicated startups and that brought them into this coworking space.*

However, nowadays some coworkers stress that the standards for selection are not so strong. In fact, the coworkers complain that (1) some coworkers are not startups but freelancers without a vision of developing their own business; (2) the quality of the startups and companies is no longer evaluated as it had been when the coworking space was founded; (3) many professionals, startups and companies decide to use the coworking space only for its image and reputation. These lower selection standards brought greater differentiation of the target of coworkers, even if it was all within the digital field. This has had consequences on two levels: some coworkers (i.e., those who are part of a startup and have experienced the selection process) denounce the decrease in the quality of the space, while others (i.e., those who are not part of a startup) feel a sense of isolation, because they perceive themselves as being different from the others.

(CW8-3) *Now, coworking is no longer bound so much to the logic of quality, it's become more bound to a logic of 'I pay, so I can come into the space'.*

(CW8-3) *When I came in, there were lots of startups, more or less of the same size. I exchanged ideas with people who did the job that I did. But today, let's just say that the coworking population has changed a bit. Let's say it's a bit more varied.*

(CW1-3) *As a freelancer, I'm slightly different from the others, insofar as most of those in here are startups and companies [...]; sometimes I feel I have quite different needs from them .*

(CW5-3) *Well, we're already a well-developed company, we aren't a startup like many of those in here. So, we have an office all to ourselves, and we hardly ever see the others, we speak very little to each other. Let's say it's as though we were a coworking space within a coworking space.*

This new policy is seen as a strategy of the management to broaden the franchise network and increase income; however, it leads to dissatisfaction among the coworkers who stress that it is more difficult to create business opportunities and connection under these conditions. They also highlight the risk of an increasingly adverse effect on the image of the space and the franchise.

Case 4. Welfare Coworking

Dilemmas

The dilemmas mostly regard the representation and meanings associated with the role of the coworking space in respect to the organization and the idea/project as a whole. These dilemmas emerged both in reflections and dialogues of the same persons, and in conversations between different people. The biggest dilemma is that although the coworking space represents an essential, pivotal, and fundamental aspect of the organization, it is perceived as the core idea from which the entire organization rose, and that gives sense to the whole project.

(PDI-4) *a bit because it's part of history, a bit because it constitutes the idea that everything was based on, a coworking space for women, conceived for women and mothers...which has also won prizes, which is acknowledged and greatly loved... these walls ... the whole idea needs these walls... it has important value at various levels: at a commercial, symbolic, marketing level.*

By contrast, however, the space is seen as an unnecessary element: the original idea can be also pursued without the coworking space, since it was based on the activation of social projects in order to respond to a social need/problem.

(CM1-4) What is at the heart is the projects, the social projects are the ones that count, we could even do without the space.

(PM1-4) Let's say that the coworking space is almost secondary ... let's say that the space and hiring the desk are collateral aspects ... because all of the projects that are done [...] are projects that prevail over the space.

The dilemmas highlight the presence of tensions that influence and can impact the reconfiguration of the object of the organization and the coworking space itself.

Conflicts

The main conflicts mentioned by the coworkers and staff team are connected to respecting the rules regulating relationships and cohabitation of the space. The arguments, in particular, are focused on the responsibilities that people have in taking care of the space and others. Conflicts were of two main types.

The first includes behaviors that tend to disturb others while they are working, like speaking loudly on the phone.

(CW3-4) I come here because I need to work and I have to concentrate as much as I can, so it annoys me a lot when someone is talking loudly on the phone as if it didn't matter, as if there was no one else in the room. It's then that I get angry and I say so.

Other conflicts are related to the ways in which people take care of the space, facilities, and services offered. In conversations, coworkers and particularly the community manager stated that some people do not seem to care about cleaning up the kitchen or their station after using it.

Both kinds of conflict are perceived as a lack of respect that can have bad consequences on the relationships between people in the space.

These situations have led the community manager in the past to create a code of conduct called “*Good manners of coworkers.*” This set of simple rules, in their view, can help coworkers improve their relationships with each other:

(CM1-4) In here, obvious things, in fact, are clearly not obvious to everyone. Often people are unable to manage themselves, they leave the kitchen dirty; they leave their desks untidy. Then there are some people who speak very loudly on the telephone while the others are working.

(PM2-4) *There was a need to write a coworking etiquette...which, incidentally, is still not always taken into consideration.*

The conflicts, as in the other cases, shed light on tensions that exist between a mostly individualistic perspective towards using and living in a coworking space and a more collective orientation that promotes behaviors that benefit the community as a whole.

Critical Conflicts

In this case, the critical conflicts that emerge in the analysis of the conversations and dialogues regard, in particular, aspects related to the creation of a community around and inside the coworking space. What emerged is the frustration that staff members and coworkers feel toward what they perceive as the presence of a “*fragmented and weak community.*”

The founder of the space underlines the difficulties that he initially faced in attracting people to the space and finding solutions to answer their specific needs. He emphasizes the difficulty of promoting a cultural change in people, particularly women, who are unfamiliar with coworking and do not see it as a useful means to promote positive changes in their relationship with work; however, he also states that at first, he did not know exactly how to help people in the space or perform his role as facilitator.

(PM2-4) *It's aimed at a target that's very weak in terms of work. There are few women doing basic work who have limited awareness of the coworking space and of possible additional services. The coworking space is seen as a cost. It's not considered to be interesting in this sense.*

(F1-4) *When I started working here...I'm talking about long before the space was opened... I was fascinated by the potential of this project, but I didn't have very clear ideas of it as a whole. In particular, I came from jobs where I didn't have much to do with people before. I had experience linked to large organizations, when I began, I felt I'd failed.*

These difficulties initially led to weak participation both in terms of people using the coworking space and in participating in the social projects offered. Consequently, an effort was made by the staff to create personalized solutions for users in order to increase the demand for the coworking space and the services provided, and to convey their potential and importance. The difficulties in supporting the internal community started when the space was founded. The co-founder explains that the idea of integrating the theme of coworking with that of welfare was widely considered by the public and the media as a winning idea. The strategy of communication that was adopted led to opening the space very soon; however, the space was initially empty. At first, the

founders progressively increased the number of coworkers by listening to the personal experiences of applicants and trying to find personalized solutions to support them.

(F1-4) When we started out, we had colossal, nationwide media coverage. At the time, coworking was a new model for Italy. Linking it with the theme of welfare and of childhood and dealing with the female problem, plus adding a very provocative communication style, the space was immediately seen as a social innovation, and acknowledged in the world of work. But there was no one in here.

(F1-4) We started meeting the people, who told us their experiences, and from that we started to make the first connections, what I mean is we didn't know there were those who were looking and there were those who were offering, and we began the first connections.

However, today the internal community is still perceived by the staff and the coworkers as weak and fragmented. There is in fact a disconnection between the coworkers and the people/organizations who participate in the project. The projects provided by the not-for-profit association are perceived by the coworkers as distant and disconnected from everyday life in the space. Along the same lines, the people who participate in the projects usually do not use the coworking space.

(CW2-4) The people who come here, in fact, don't use projects.

(CW3-4) I don't know who's participating in the projects promoted by the space, I know there are several.

The second issue regards the fragmentation of what they call the internal community (i.e., the coworkers): the space is used by only a few people, most of whom are members of the staff. In addition, the coworkers seem not to know each other very well.

(C1-4) I feel I'm outside the coworkers, outside the staff...I work on a parallel project orbiting around.

This seems to be related to the fact that there is a variegated group of coworkers who use the space for very different and sometimes divergent reasons (e.g., people who are interested in the services provided, and particularly the cobaby; people who use the space because they embrace the fundamental idea and are interested in starting projects and initiatives; and people who use the space only for working).

All of these aspects generate frustration both among coworkers whose expectations are not completely satisfied and staff members who ask themselves how they can better integrate the communities that are involved in different ways in the organization.

Double Binds

The double binds emerge mostly on the institutional/organizational level. As mentioned before, this coworking space is part of a wider organization composed of a not-for-profit association (that provides the social projects) and a for-profit startup (that holds the coworking space). This hybridity derives from the social vocation of the organization and the coworking space itself. In the original idea, the space should serve as a starting point for ideas and projects by gathering people with specific interests and desires.

(F1-4) We have an internal organization typical of organizations that work in the field of social innovation. We have a very fluid organization chart; this is because we were founded already with a double nature, there's a limited liability company and there's an association.

(F1-4) The space is the facilitator, a place where things can be made concrete [...] the physical space can facilitate starting up our projects .

When the space first opened, most of the investments were dedicated to the startup (that owns the space). The space in fact was expected to be the most important source of the income (through the renting of desks, services, and facilities). Over the years, however, the most consistent part of the income has been derived from the projects (through funds that come from private and public institutions).

(F1-4) At the beginning, the idea was that the startup should prevail, we wanted to be a commercial business. Then, we realized that we had social projects that were not commercial, so we established a non-profit association beside the startup. Then we realized that the sustainability of our organization came from the projects of the association. Now, the ratio of strength between the association and the startup is 50% and 50%, and we'd like it to get to 90% and 10%.

(F1-4) The association is increasingly taking up space and the startup will become less and less important, and those of us who believe in it will shift to the association, in the meeting of the members, with capital members who could participate directly in the activities.

(PM2-4) The space is a cost, and it's difficult to support economically, so, let's say that they're also somewhat forced to review the initial plans, and see with what and how to continue.

This led the founder to invest more in the not-for-profit associations and in the projects; however, in respect to this policy, the founder and two staff members have mentioned the risk that the coworking space might increasingly lose its original function by becoming almost useless and increasingly separating the two parts of the organization's soul (i.e., the association with the projects, and the startup with the structure, facilities, and services). Such distance could also increase the fragmentation of the two

communities: the internal community, of the coworkers, and the external community, of the users of the projects.

(CM1-4) The danger is that everything shifts to the association, so to the projects; it's a bit as though the coworking space is losing value. Also because the space is able to give continuity: the projects are temporary and have on-off times. Whereas, the space is always there, with people working in it.

The double binds identified in this case show a dual organizational identity that derives from the object of coworking, and strongly involves the issue of how to sustain the coworking space economically.

3. Discussion

In the previous sections, the different cases were described and the manifestations of contradictions were identified. In this section, I discuss the findings related to each aim. First, I identify the distinctive contradictions of each space that are at the root of the manifestations. Second, I discuss the findings, providing a cross reading in order to identify the main themes associated with each case, as well as the different manifestations identified.

Case 1. Working vs. Co-working

I have called the local contradiction of Case 1 *Working vs. Co-working*, in particular emphasizing the prefix 'co', which is put into discussion as the social aspect of working. Moreover, 'co' represents the main source of the manifestations of contradiction identified in the analysis. The coworking pole represents a view of coworking that does not disregard the presence or promotion of interactions and relationships between people in the space. In this case, the interactions are seen as opportunities for collaboration, sources of personal enrichment, and an aspect of a positive working climate. The working pole, however, represents the idea of coworking activity as equal to working. These two poles coexist and represent the main tension at the basis of the different manifestations identified, which are expressed through different positions of the various subjects involved but also sometimes within the various views of a single person. It is possible to identify an overlap in the views of the subjects involved in coworking, between the idea of working in a normal office and

inside a coworking space. By analyzing the manifestations identified in the first case, the *social* orientation of coworking is recognized in the interactions and relationships coworkers construct inside the space. This element is considered a fundamental aspect of coworking (in particular by the founder of the space), but not the priority. The main aim of coworking in fact is connected to the possibility of effectively realizing the daily work of all the individuals in the space. In addition, from the dilemmas identified, the social interactions and relationships are viewed by the coworkers and the founder in a utilitarian way: as a means and instrument to enrich the pool of clients and professional opportunities. People do not seem to consider social interactions as necessarily positive; on the contrary, they identify them as the main source of conflicts inside the space. In fact, social interactions are viewed at times as detrimental, because they can make daily work less productive and decrease one's ownership and control over one's work and working space.

Case 2. Infrastructural vs. Relational

Case 2—relational coworking—is represented by a relatively small space that is intended for different kinds of professionals (i.e., heterogeneous space) with the main aim of promoting social relations and the sharing of knowledge not necessarily focused on work. Analysis of the characteristics of this space reveal a primary contradiction, which is the tension I call *infrastructure vs. relational*. The relational pole shows the orientation of the founders as well as the other subjects involved towards the creation of social interactions (e.g., through social events, rituals, absence of physical boundaries). The *infrastructure* pole recalls the name of the first type of space (i.e., infrastructure coworking) since it represents coworking as based on the sharing of spaces and instruments and on individual and separated work inside the space. The main characteristic of the space that emerged from the manifestations is on one side the orientation to eliminate or reduce dynamics that are typical of the traditional organizations: competition (people underline how working inside a place with professionals who come from different professional backgrounds facilitates to avoid competition), hierarchy (no visible boundaries between the founders and coworkers), and autonomy (coworkers can use facilities, space and implement events as they like). At the same time, the space is seen to converge with the type of Infrastructure Coworking. This is demonstrated by the avoidance of risk in bringing isolated and separate work of coworkers into the space, in the motivations of coworkers to use the

space (e.g., the space is near home, it is beautiful, etc.), and in the interest of the founder in enlarging the network of spaces by focusing on the structural aspects (boosting entrepreneurs with empty space to transform them into coworking spaces). Therefore, just as coworkers depend on the founders, whom they consider responsible for the space and primarily responsible for organizing events, the founders also depend on coworkers, as the people who pay for the space, thus making maintenance of the space possible.

Case 3. Quality vs. Appearance

Case 3—network coworking—is represented by a coworking space focused on a specific field of work: digital innovation. In particular, it is intended for startups and small businesses with the aim of developing their professional networks and business opportunities and innovation. This space has a structured internal organization with clear roles and hierarchy. Control and coordination by the community manager was cited by the community manager herself as well as by the coworkers who considered her responsible for solving problems connected to the functioning of the space for settling conflicts among coworkers. The main idea at the basis of the space is that of being recognized as a brand that guarantees quality of network, training, and knowledge in the field of digital innovation. The quality is pursued by the implementation of initiatives, activities, and events organized and controlled by the management team. The manifestations identified are connected to the tension between what I define as a substantive object and a formal object (*quality vs. appearance*). The first pole refers to the promotion of networks and business opportunities based on the quality of stakeholders and the services/activities provided (e.g., selection of coworkers, specialization in a specific field, activities and services provided based on the subjects' needs). The formal object is manifested through actions based on appearance and the intent to increase the visibility and knowledge of the brand name of the space (e.g., activities inside the space are perceived as forced, low selection standards for coworkers). This tension reflects the inner contradiction based on the need to produce positive effects for the business of coworkers and external stakeholders and on the need to expand the franchise network.

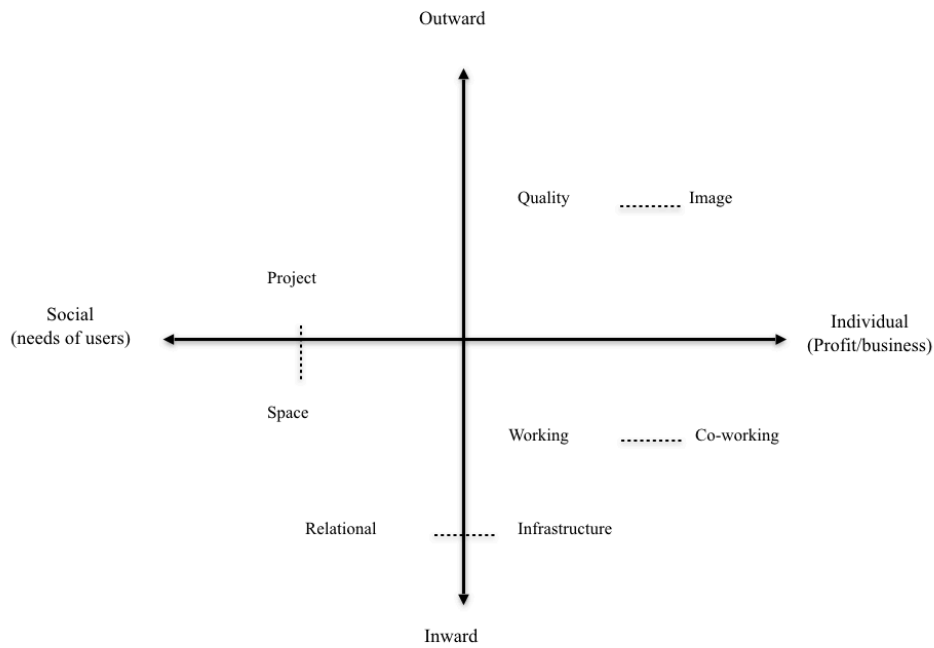
Case 4. Space vs. Projects

In Case 4—welfare coworking—the manifestations identified refer to the multiple

identities of this kind of coworking that derive from the interpretation of the object of coworking itself. With an orientation to the theme of cultural/social issues of women and work, the founder implemented both a coworking space and social projects focused on this theme. Moreover, the founder aimed toward a larger group of people in order to produce a wider social impact that exceeds the boundaries of the coworking space. The multiple identities of the space are expressed at different levels: the institutional level (with the copresence of the not-for-profit association and the for-profit startup), the organizational level (with the parallel implementation of social projects and activities/services in the space), the individual level (with the overlapping of roles of the operators who work both for the association and the startup, and with the presence of coworkers who have different needs and views on how to use the space). The manifestations identified mostly refer to the use of the coworking space. The facilitation of social initiatives and the construction of community at times are in conflict with the very projects that are the main aim of the space (creation of social impact). The space seems to lack support on the part of the coworkers for the aim of creating community, as people find their own answers to individual needs that may not be consistent with the vision of the founder. This appears also at the organizational level, where the coworking space progressively loses value in its relative weight in the organization, by being substituted by the not for profit association, through which money is easier to obtain for sustaining the entire organization. In this sense the space becomes useful in attracting people and media and in creating an image around the organization and the projects activated. These aspects are expressions of a primary contradiction that I define here as *Space vs. Projects*. This contradiction is related to the role of the coworking activity in the broader aim to intervene on a social/cultural problem: on the one hand, coworking, and in particular the coworking space, is considered an essential component for the activation of social initiatives and projects; on the other hand, the space is considered an unnecessary component, and the social projects become the main instrument that can be sufficient without the coworking space.

As I did in Chapter 4, with the types of coworking activities, going back to the matrix of historical tensions identified, it is possible to understand how the local contradictions are positioned inside the framework provided (see Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3. *Local contradictions and historical tensions*



The local contradictions are connected and move between the historical tensions (social vs. profit/ outward vs. inward). In the case of *Infrastructure Coworking* the main contradiction moves inside the poles Individual and Inward since the manifestations of contradiction are connected to the interpretation of coworking as traditional work (focus on individual interests inside the space). The tension relational vs. infrastructure that characterizes *Relational Coworking* indicates a movement between a more social orientation (with a focus on improvement of social interactions for knowledge sharing) and a focus on a more utilitarian use of the space and infrastructures. The third activity, *Network Coworking*, is characterized by a tension that moves inside the first quadrant (outward and profit), between a substantive object (by which the innovation of businesses and improvement of profit are perceived through a collective approach based on high quality connections between organizations) and a formal object where profit is perceived through strategies to create an image or brand around the name of the coworking spaces. The fourth activity, *Welfare Coworking*, is characterized by a contradiction that moves between promoting social impact by creating a community that involves subjects inside and outside the coworking space, and an orientation to respond to the needs of single individuals inside the space (through services, facilities and activities) and the needs of subjects outside the space (through the activation of social projects).

As shown in Table 5.5, by cross-reading by columns it is possible to identify some macro themes that seem to play a crucial role and which the manifestation of contradictions can be identified.

In terms of the *critical conflicts*, the main theme at the root of this kind of manifestation regards the **role of the founder/manager** and the type of relationship that he/she establishes with the other subjects involved in coworking. Of course, this takes on different meanings in different spaces. In terms of Case 1 [*Infrastructure Coworking*], the tension is between the role of the founder as focused on the management of the physical structure and general functioning/sustainability of the space and the role of promoting and facilitating interactions among coworkers. In the Case 2 [*Relational Coworking*], the theme acquires a different meaning and is expressed as a tension between a founder who plays the role of a coworker among the others and a founder who establishes symbolic boundaries with coworkers. In Case 3 [*Network Coworking*], the critical conflicts manifest around the interpretation of the coworking manager as a formal role that has to accomplish specific tasks and activities and a person who proposes and creates activities based on specific needs of the people in the space. Finally, in Case 4 [*Welfare Coworking*], the tension expressed in respect to this topic is between a coworking manager as a curator and connector of the various coworkers' paths and as a manager/coordinator of the social projects connected to the not-for-profit organization.

In all cases the *conflicts* emerge with respect to the constitutive element of coworking: **sharing space with other people** and the connected implicit and explicit rules. This aspect leads to conflicts when people interfere in the everyday work of other coworkers, by making noise or by not taking care of common instruments/spaces (e.g., not cleaning the kitchen); however, it is possible to identify some differences throughout the cases. First of all, it is possible to trace differences between Case 1 [*Infrastructure Coworking*] and the other three: whereas in the latter cases, disturbances and noise are seen as acceptable and in some extent inevitable in coworking, in Case 1 they are considered aspects that have to be eliminated. Another difference regards the way the conflicts are managed in the different situations. In Cases 1 and 2, the conflicts are managed through implicit agreements among people in the space that differ on the basis of the different subjects involved (*"We know that we have to clean the table at 2 pm because M. starts*

to work at that time”); however, in Case 3 [*Network Coworking*], the role of the community manager is crucial to solving the problems. Most coworkers in fact stress that the management team has to directly intervene and implement some specific rules to guide the behaviors of people in the space. Also, in Case 4 [*Welfare Coworking*], the role of the community manager seems to be important in facilitating and reducing the sources of conflicts; however, in this case, the staff team is not considered as fully responsible for regulating behavior in respect to these aspects, and the set of rules (under the name of “the good manners of coworkers”) is decided by consensus.

The *dilemmas* identified are strictly connected to the **construction of the community**, and thus to the characteristics of the coworkers. In Case 1, the dilemma, whether to create a homogeneous group of coworkers in the space (i.e., specialized in the same or similar work fields) or a heterogeneous group,— is based on weighing the advantages these two situations would bring. What emerged from the conversations was that homogeneity, as indicated by both the founder and coworkers, is considered a facilitating aspect for collaboration between professionals based on the sharing of clients. However, conversely, heterogeneity is perceived as an opportunity to produce more income from the renting of instruments and spaces, since the coworking space is targeting a larger group of people. In Case 2, the reflection about this theme sheds light on homogeneity as an opportunity to focus on the sharing of knowledge and competences by creating more opportunities for collaboration based on the integration of various resources. By contrast, heterogeneity facilitates the possibility to create more opportunities to share knowledge based on different experiences and fields. In Case 3, the dilemmas are not constructed around the tension between heterogeneity and homogeneity, but rather on the extent of specialization with a single field of work. This space is focused on the field of digital innovation, and is particularly intended for startups; however, it has gradually become more open by including freelancers and other types of organizations. This aspect is mentioned particularly by coworkers, that a more open orientation makes it possible to encounter more varied situations (related to work) and to increase the direct income for the management team; yet, strict specialization of the space is perceived as proof of the quality of the space and of the networks provided. Finally, in Case 4, the dilemmas are constructed around the doubt that comes from the cofounder of the space, whether to construct personalized programs for the people inside the space or to stress the components of the social projects that

would lead to better response to social needs (by including more subjects from outside the space) but at the same time more fragmentation of the community (composed of subjects with different needs and expectations).

Finally, the *double binds* are connected to the **mission of coworking**. In Case 1, the coworking activity is mostly oriented to providing a space for professionals who need a place for their daily work (see Chapter 4). Thus, the space is mostly composed of people who share the space for this aim. Sharing space with others leads different professionals to feel that they are losing ownership and control over their work (due to the possibility of others seeing the contents of their work) and over the space/instruments of their work (they cannot act as if they were in their own office). In Case 2 the double binds emphasize a tension between the intent to create a work environment based on social relationships and sharing of knowledge and, on the other hand, more oriented to spread the concept of coworking through the promotion of the use of physical structures for this purpose. The resulting risk is that the activities and initiatives of the promotion of social relations are seen as a communication tool rather than a real response to the needs of coworkers. In Case 3, the focus of coworking on promoting and developing professional networks is connected to the fact that coworkers in the space feel a lack of attention towards the creation of strong ties among coworkers (the social events inside the space are perceived as too forced) and to a sense of isolation for some coworkers (particularly freelancers who have experience that differs from that of the startups). Finally, in Case 4, the coworking object that is constructed around the resolution of a social problem leads the staff team to stress the implementation of social projects and the development of the not-for-profit association. This raises the risk of a progressive loss of meaning and sense of the coworking space as well as decreased attention toward the subjects inside the space.

In Table 5.5, themes that connect the cases are shown in the columns, with details of the contradictions for each space being shown in the rows. Following the table is an analysis of the specific contradictions for each space.

Tab. 5.5. Summary of the contradictions

	Critical Conflicts	Conflicts	Dilemmas	Double binds	CROSS -READING
Case 1 [infrastructure coworking]	Founder as owner of the space or facilitator of interactions/relationships	Noise / distraction from work that are caused by interactions	Homogeneity of coworkers as source of sharing – Heterogeneity as source of direct income	Sharing space – loss of ownership and control over work and space	Working Vs. Coworking
Case 2 [relational coworking]	Coworking founder as a coworker or manager	Noise / distraction from work Lack of respect toward shared things/spaces	Homogeneity for enhancement of knowledge sharing focused on work ; Heterogeneity as wider knowledge sharing	Promotion of social interactions or focus on enlarging the network	Infrastructure Vs. Relational
Case 3 [network coworking]	Coworking manager as a formal role or coworking manager as socially constructed	Noise / distraction from work Lack of respect toward shared things/spaces Disagreements related to work	Homogeneity of target for specialization heterogeneity of target for a more open environment focused on the same field	Focus on a specific topic – isolation	Quality Vs. Appearance
Case 4 [welfare coworking]	Coworking manager as a facilitator inside the space or social projects manager	Noise / distraction from work Lack of respect toward shared things/spaces	Focus on the community inside the space or focus on social projects	Focus on social projects – lack of meaning of coworking	Space Vs. Projects
	Role of the manager	Distributed responsibility/hierarchy/control	Community (homogeneity heterogeneity)	Focus of the coworking activity	

Conclusion

In this chapter, I presented the second qualitative study of my research. Starting from the findings of the first study and on the typology, I selected four coworking spaces that reflect each type of coworking activity identified in Chapter 4. In these spaces I conducted ethnographic observations and qualitative interviews with coworkers and coworking operators. The results of this study shed light on the problems and criticalities that characterize each coworking activity and represent the manifestations of local contradictions. In this framework Activity Theory was particularly useful for analyzing and intercepting systemic contradictions that characterize local activities that are constantly in evolution and in which multiple dynamics are daily co-constructed and negotiated. The analysis in fact was based on a theoretical framework for the analysis of contradictions that permitted the identification of different forms of manifestations (Dilemmas, Conflicts, Critical Conflicts, and Double Binds) and intercept the inner contradictions of each activity system.

The main results and the differences between the activities can be summed up as follows. *Infrastructure Coworking* is characterized by an overlap between working and co-working where social interactions are seen both as a peculiar characteristic of coworking, and as a threat and obstacle to effective individual daily work and the source of a lack of ownership over the place of work. Coworking sometimes seems to be considered an obligation rather than a choice—that is, to choose instead to have a private office. Based on this analysis, I call the main contradiction Working vs. Co-working.

Relational Coworking, besides the interest in promoting social relations and knowledge sharing among coworkers, presents also an orientation to consider coworking activity as constructed around functional aspects, sharing of spaces, individual and separated work (for what concern the coworkers), and enlarging the number of coworking spaces in the franchise (in respect to the founders). Therefore, *Relational Coworking* tends to converge with the idea of *Infrastructure Coworking*. I labeled the local contradiction as Relational vs. Infrastructure.

The analysis of *Network Coworking* underlines a tension between: on one hand the search for quality for developing and innovating business in a specific field of work (digital), by promoting and implementing connections with high level organizations, a strong selection of coworkers, innovative training and education events, etc.; on the other hand the interest

of the founders and the management team in enlarging the franchise network and creating an image around the name/brand of the spaces. In addition, the founders value having coworkers associated with the well-known brand of the space to enhance the reputation around their business. The contradiction in this case is called Quality vs. Appearance.

Finally *Welfare Coworking* is characterized by the progressive prevalence and importance connected with the activation of social projects at the organizational level, and to the not for profit association, with respect to the coworking space. Thus besides the interest of the founders and the coworkers in creating a community around a social and cultural issue in order to solve it, there is a perception of a fragmented and not integrated community associated with a coworking space in which people seek responses to specific and individual needs (instead of a collective ones) that are not well integrated with the broader social aim. The local contradiction is named Space vs. Projects.

In addition, some general observation can be made from the analysis of the differences.

First of all, the topic underlined in the historical analysis presented in Chapter 3 about the sustainability (economic and of the idea) of coworking is seen to be connected to all the local contradictions identified. The contradictions (working vs. coworking; infrastructural vs. relational; quality vs. appearance; space vs. project) all reflect this main theme: how to sustain the idea at the basis of the coworking activity along with the coworking space. The analysis of the local contexts reveals that the original idea has been interpreted in different ways and to achieve different purposes. Indeed, the distinctive contradictions derive from the different interpretations and ways people construct the activity and use the space. The strategies adopted to economically sustain the spaces go from increasing the number of coworkers and the renting of structures and facilities (with respect to more simple structures, like Cases 1 and 2), to strategies that involve the implementation of projects and activities besides the coworking space (where the object and the organization of the spaces is more complex, like in Cases 3 and 4). The idea at the basis of the local coworking activities is put into discussion when the problem of economic sustainability emerges. For instance, in the first case the founder gives up the effort to create conditions for improving social interactions and collaboration for maintaining a larger pool of coworkers and increasing the number of the members inside the space. Similarly, in Case 2 the original declared meaning of coworking activity (to create conditions for promoting knowledge production and sharing) is moved to the background when the founder aims to increase the network of coworking spaces. In Case 3 the objective to provide networks of high quality to coworkers and organizations outside the coworking space is in contradiction with the

opportunity to increase the number of coworkers and the diffusion of the brand. Finally, in Case 4 the role of the coworking space is put into discussion when it does not represent anymore the main source of income for the entire organization, in respect to the social projects activated. In addition, analysis of the cases reveals the necessity of recreating dynamics, practices, and processes typical of the traditional organizations (e.g., dependence from the owner, hierarchy, control, coordination by the founder/management team, use of the space as a typical office etc.) in order to make coworking economically sustainable. These put into discussion the sustainability of the original idea of coworking based on absence of hierarchy and differences between people. Such a structure is organized in a horizontal division of labor with a little distance between the founders and the other coworking participants, who are involved in the funding, design, and construction of the space.

The rationale behind the manifestations of coworking as presented in Chapter 5 (Dilemmas, Conflicts, Critical Conflicts, and Double Binds) permits an identification of a crescendo and intensification of tension towards a potential crisis. This is connected to the risk of an 'empty' and meaningless role of the coworking space, by which the coworking space becomes a commodity, an instrument useful to promote image, acknowledgment, or economic incomes to other ends and initiatives (e.g., creation of networks, business development, implementation of social projects, etc.) because coworking at the moment is recognized as a socially desirable word.

Finally, this chapter also offered an overview of the contradictions reflected in crucial topics, which can be considered pivotal in the analysis of tensions of the coworking spaces and that also can represent levers of the potential development of coworking to avoid the risk previously described. These aspects are: (1) the role played by the manager inside the space (and the type of relationship with coworkers), (2) the ways decisions are made and conflicts solved inside the space, (3) the intended aims of the homogeneity/heterogeneity of the internal community, and (4) the differences between the declared mission of the space and how it is put into action.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusion and final remarks

The dissertation is focused on the analysis of coworking, an emergent social phenomenon that is in constant evolution. The increasing attention and number of studies about coworking depict it as an innovative phenomenon that leads to important and positive changes at different levels including working practices (Parrino, 2013; Merkel, 2014; Spinuzzi, 2012), organizational configurations (Rus and Orel, 2016; Capdevila, 2013; 2014; Butcher, 2013; 2016), and ways of production and consumption (Moriset, 2014; Gandini, 2015; Bouncken, and Reuschl, 2016). The main elements in coworking are promotion of processes and values like collaboration, community, and accessibility, which are distinctly different ways of thinking about work than those associated with capitalism. In fact, coworking presents an ability to promote forms of work and organization that involve simultaneous, multidirectional, and reciprocal work, as opposed to forms in organizations with an established division of labour, demarcated communities, and formal and informal sets of rules. From these considerations, the present work started from the idea that coworking is presented in literature with an optimistic view that enhances and exalts the positive effects of coworking and avoids a critical analysis of the phenomenon. The aim of the thesis is to upset and question this optimistic approach and the innovative nature of coworking in the direction previously described. This thesis proposes a more articulated interpretation of coworking that is characterized by multiple manifestations and that moves along a continuum from a more collaborative nature to a more utilitarian and individualistic one. In other words at stake is the meaning of the prefix 'co', that instead to be identified as the short of 'co'mmunity, 'co'llaboration, 'co'operation, could be interpreted, with a play of words, as evoking multiple positions and views that brought about to plural 'co-ntra'-dictions.

To briefly recall the general definition, coworking is a phenomenon that is associated with the emergence of new forms of production/consumption known as the 'collaborative economy' (Benkler, 2006; Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006; Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Schor, 2016) and new forms of collaborative organizations (Adler, 2005; Adler & Heckesher, 2006; Engeström, 2009; Nardi, 2007). The phenomenon is based on the

increase and diffusion worldwide and over the years of so-called coworking spaces. These are described in the academic literature as new forms of organizations based on the values of collaboration, openness, community, accessibility, and sustainability (Capdevila, 2014; Merkel, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012), which freelancers and knowledge workers access with the purpose of fostering networking practices and social interactions (Capdevila, 2015; Parrino, 2013). They are also described as new concepts of workplaces where different sorts of professionals (Gandini, 2015; Kojo and Nenonen, 2016) who are heterogeneous by occupation and/or sector of work, organizational status, and affiliation (Parrino, 2013), are co-located and share the same working environment by working alongside others, not necessarily on the same task, in the same space (Kojo and Nenonen, 2016; Parrino, 2013; Spinuzzi, 2012).

In line with these premises, the question that guided the thesis is the following: *Can coworking be considered an innovative phenomenon that introduces new collaborative forms and logics of work and organizations?* To this aim in Chapter 1, I presented a systematic literature review of the studies and papers about coworking. The literature review proposed a classification of the contents in the scientific contributions in literature, a discussion about the interpretations and conceptualizations of coworking, and a discussion about the assumptions at the basis of the debate about coworking in the literature. The first chapter permitted first of all an understanding of three focuses and perspectives through which coworking is analyzed: the macro level (the social-political and economic contexts and the interaction between market and society), the meso level (which studies the structure and model of the coworking space organization), and the micro level (which investigates the social practices shaped and embedded in the material and immaterial infrastructural contexts). The analysis underlined some aspects that needed to be clarified. Coworking is generally described as a coherent, linear, and uniform phenomenon. This idea has led to difficulties in integrating and connecting the different understandings of coworking presented in literature, and by which the potential of coworking has been identified in terms of the facilitation of social processes (Parrino, 2013; Rus & Orel, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012), innovation, and entrepreneurship (Capdevila, 2014; 2015), as well as the promotion of social change (Merkel, 2015). This consideration has opened up interest in understanding the evolution of coworking, by shedding light on the criticalities and contradictions that some authors (Gandini, 2014; Johns and Gratton, 2013; Moriset, 2014) had already started to outline. Moreover, the

plural current interpretations of coworking have led to the implementation of different organizational configurations that can explain the various processes identified in literature associated with coworking and the contradictions that characterize these manifestations. Attention to these contradictions helps to avoid the taken-for-granted idea that coworking is oriented only to values of accessibility, openness, sustainability, community, and collaboration (Capdevila, 2015; Gandini, 2015; Rus & Orel, 2016).

The interests that emerged from the literature review have been settled to respond to the research question previously anticipated and have guided the studies that have been presented in the chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the thesis.

The theoretical framework adopted in the thesis and described in Chapter 2, is that of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), also known as Activity Theory (AT) (Engeström, 1987; Sannino, Daniels and Gutierrez, 2009; Engestrom, 2015). The reason for the adoption of CHAT as a theoretical model for analyzing coworking is the possibility it offers for a dynamic reading of the phenomenon under study, achieving a critical framing about its proximal development and evolution. Particularly the main concepts of CHAT that have been used in the thesis are those of: (1) *activity*: coworking has been conceptualized as a collective activity characterized by the interaction of different elements (subjects, community, rules, division of labour, instruments) that are at the same time influenced by specific socio-cultural context; (2) *object*: the object (conceptualized in CHAT as the sense-maker that gives sense to the phenomena) has been analyzed in its historical evolution and its current state; (3) *historicity*: a historical perspective has been emphasized throughout this study and by which coworking has been considered in its historical development in order to understand its current state; and (4) *contradictions*: the contradictions of the coworking phenomenon have been investigated both in terms of historical tensions, which gave rise to changes and developments in coworking, and in terms of local contradictions that characterize different coworking activities. In particular, the logic of the thesis, provided and supported by the theoretical framework, is the idea of moving from history, to a classification of coworking, and from classification to dynamic contradictions, which point toward future possibilities of coworking evolution. This is, as suggested by CHAT, the thesis develops a progressive and dialectical way to approach coworking.

The research methodology adopted for the empirical studies is in line with the logic provided by the previously described theoretical framework and with the research questions pursued. The thesis in fact is based on a context driven approach (Van Maanen, 2011) that has allowed the author to understand the evolutionary dynamics of coworking with a broadened view of its concrete manifestations. Particularly the use of qualitative interviews and ethnographic observations permitted immersion in the situated contexts and interpretation of events and interactions through participants' perspectives (Hirsch & Gellner, 2001) in order to produce localized and embedded knowledge. As anticipated in the introduction of the thesis, the methodology has been based on an abductive approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002) since the theoretical concepts of the Activity Theory have been always put in dialogue with the empirical data collected in the studies and oriented their interpretation and analysis.

The first two chapters were generally aimed at outlining the breadth and depth of the subsequent contributions in this dissertation, and inviting exploration of perspectives and settings of application. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 provide empirical studies of coworking.

Chapter 3 presented a historical analysis of coworking. Through the analysis of documents, papers, published interviews, and articles it has been possible to identify issues, problems, and innovations that have brought about changes in the object-activity of coworking and led to the rise of coworking spaces and coworking organizations. Two phases of coworking's qualitative development have been identified: the period before 2005 and the period from 2005 (the year that marked the rise of coworking spaces) up to today. The analysis of these periods clarified the challenges (cultural, social, but also at the organizational level) that characterize the evolution of coworking, the ideal models of coworking organizations that emerged and the developmental tensions beyond the historical evolution of coworking. Chapter 4 summarized the results of a two-year long qualitative study that was based on the analysis of qualitative interviews of coworking space founders to intercept their interpretations and better understand the current mode of coworking. This work was conducted in line with the results of the historical analysis, in order to elucidate how different interpretations of the coworking object affect the development of plural coworking activities, with different structures and processes. Thus, the fourth chapter provided a typology of coworking, presented in four activity systems characterized by different configurations, which are reproduced in different kinds of

coworking organizations. The results of this study foster more detailed and empirically grounded research. In Chapter 5, in fact, the activities identified are further explored through an ethnographic analysis realized in four coworking spaces that were selected because they exemplified the types identified in the previous chapter. The aim of the fifth chapter was to understand how the historically accumulated tensions manifest in reality and with which differences in relation to coworking activities. The results of this study shed light on the problems and criticalities that characterize each coworking activity and represent the manifestations of local contradictions. The analysis in fact is based on a theoretical framework for the analysis of contradictions that identified different forms of manifestations (Dilemmas, Conflicts, Critical Conflicts, and Double Binds) and intercepted the inner contradiction of each activity system. Thus, specific and transverse contradictions have been identified and put forward. At the same time, topics and issues in which the contradictions are reflected are listed that can represent topics for further research.

The structure of the thesis as previously described, has permitted to arrive at some interesting results that are reported below.

The literature describes coworking as a uniform and coherent activity (Spinuzzi, 2012); however, at the same time the processes, dynamics, and issues that are associated with coworking lead to an interpretation of the phenomenon that is difficult to understand in its characteristics, implications, and effects. What is put into discussion and that emerged in the literature review is the interpretation of coworking as an innovative form of work and production based on the valorization of social and collaborative dimensions. In the same line the coworking spaces are conceived as new organizations that promote social support (Gerdenitschet et al., 2016), community (Rus and Orel, 2016; Butcher, 2013), collaboration (Spinuzzi, 2012) and innovation (Capdevila, 2013) and challenge mainstream and private institutional dominance. Most of the authors in literature in fact underline these positive aspects without discussing the difficulties, risks and exploitation of postmodernist workplaces (Butcher, 2016).

Inside this framework the questions in the literature review (*Chapter 1*) permitted better clarify the elements that needed to be further explored and that would have answered the main research question: What is the object of coworking and how has it evolved over the years? Which are the plural concrete manifestations of coworking in its current state and

how are they connected to each other? Which are the contradictions that characterize coworking manifestations, as well as its possible future evolution? These questions were addressed by the literature review and were answered in depth in chapters 3, 4 and 5.

In this framework, the first result the thesis provides is the interpretation of coworking as a stratified phenomenon characterized by a progressive differentiation of the object and the coworking organizations. In contraposition with most of the studies in literature that describe coworking as a coherent activity (Spinuzzi, 2012), the historical analysis (see Chapter 3) underlined how coworking can be understood as a set of activities that are undergoing rapid and intense development as coworking spaces experiment with different structural and organizational models to achieve sustainability. Coworking in fact has evolved in two historical phases (prior to 2005 and from 2005 forward) from a practice typical of traditional organizations (working with other organizational players), to work organized around the needs of freelance and other individual knowledge workers for finding an adequate supportive community, (the creation of coworking spaces in 2005 would have fulfilled this need), to diverse policies and strategies for different purposes by plural players. The coworking spaces that firstly appeared around 2005, at the beginning emphasized the communal and collective nature of coworking, where professionals (mostly freelance workers) aimed to organize themselves collectively in order to create social conditions and transformations in opposition to capitalism and traditional organizations (Butcher, 2016; Gandini, 2015). Over the second historical phase we can assist to a progressively organization, hybridization and institutionalization (Di Maggio and Powell, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 1977) of the coworking spaces, and coworking started to be constructed around different objects (Engestrom, 1987).

This is connected to another result of the thesis that regards the understanding of the current state of coworking, that has been realized through the analysis of the current mode of the coworking object. Today coworking can be explained by different manifestations that derive from plural interpretations of the object. The qualitative study provided in Chapter 4 in particular underlines that the coworking object can be constructed around: (1) the needs of professionals to find a place, separate from their private life (e.g., home) and different from public spaces, with the primary aim to do their everyday work; (2) the need of creating social conditions (interactions and relationships) that permit the promotion of reciprocal learning for different kinds of professionals; (3)

the need to promote networking in order to develop the business opportunities of professionals and organizations; and (4) the need to answer a cultural or social issue that invests a specific target of people.

This evolution and differentiation of the object is accompanied by the development of different organizational configurations. The historical analysis underlined two ideal models (ideal in the sense that they have been constructed on the basis of historical dimensions). The first one is based on a collective-driven approach of the open source idea translated into physical spaces: flexible, informal, with a bottom up organization, and largely decentralized. The second model is what I defined as the institutionalized model, which presents a more structured organization in its rules, processes, roles, and procedures. The *institutional model* appeared when traditional organizations began to implement coworking spaces in their structures while, at the same time, coworking spaces began to enlarge and organize.

These models are reproduced in current coworking activities. In fact the objects previously described are associated with activities that present different components in terms of rules, instruments, community, and division of labour (Engestrom, 1987). One of the results provided by the study presented in chapter 4, is that some coworking activities are typical of small spaces equipped with basic instruments of work, simple sets of rules, a horizontal division of labour between the founders and coworkers, a community composed of single individuals who are freelance workers, and with spaces usually integrated in the offices of small/medium enterprises. This organizational configuration characterizes those activities that I called *Infrastructure coworking* and *Relational coworking*, which are constructed around the first and the second objects previously listed (respectively, the needs of professionals to find a place, and the need for creating social conditions to promote learning for of professionals.) Other activities are instead associated with a more structured organization, with a well-defined division of labour including a management team composed of people with different roles (e.g., project manager, community manager, marketing coordinator, etc.), a more articulated set of rules, and more targeted services and activities to answer the specific needs of coworkers who are not necessarily only individuals but also small or medium firms and startups. These spaces are usually organized in networks or associations. This organizational model characterizes more the activities that I called *Network coworking*

and *Welfare coworking*, which are constructed around the third and the fourth objects (respectively, the need to promote networking in order to develop the business opportunities of professionals and organizations, and the need to answer a cultural or social issue that invests a specific target of people.)

From the analysis of the coworking activities and connected organizational configurations, it seems that coworking has been evolving not in opposition and as an alternative to traditional organizations, but as embedded within their structure by reproducing their capitalistic logic. This consideration is connected to the intuition of Butcher (2016), who states that coworking is facing a dilemma: to sustain the coworking ideal, it has to adjust its scale and scope; but at the same time, to grow, coworking has to organize, to institutionalize, and in some way to mainstream. This is demonstrated also by the challenges that characterize coworking evolution. To this regard the theoretical framework of CHAT underlines that each activity, inside the current socio-cultural scenario, is characterized by a primary contradiction that regards the tension between use value and exchange value (Engestrom, 1987; Foot and Groleasu, 2011). In line with this perspective, the challenges that coworking has been facing in its evolution regard its own sustainability: both the economic sustainability of coworking spaces that have been diffusing worldwide and the sustainability of the ideal of coworking (see Chapter 3).

This challenge characterizes also the various coworking activities identified and the current plural manifestations of coworking. The strategies adopted to economically sustain coworking spaces go from increasing the number of coworkers and the renting of structures and facilities, to strategies that involve the implementation of projects and activities besides the coworking space. The object of coworking is put into discussion when the issue of economic sustainability emerges. Some examples are when the founder of the coworking space gives up the effort to create conditions for improving social interactions and collaboration in favor of maintaining a larger pool of coworkers and increasing the number of the members inside the space; when the original declared meaning of coworking activity to create conditions for promoting knowledge production and sharing is moved to the background, with the founder instead focusing on increasing the network of coworking spaces; or again when the objective to provide high-quality networks through a strong selection of coworkers and organizations is forsaken because it conflicts with the opportunity to increase the number of coworkers.

These challenges can be explained by the historically accumulated tensions typical of coworking, as described in the historical analysis (see Chapter 3). These tensions are between a *social vs. profit* orientation (indicating that besides community, collaboration, and openness, aspects of profitability are also emphasized); and an *outward vs. inward* orientation (emphasizing the coexistence of the creation of networks of subjects for promoting social changes along with a focus on the satisfaction of the needs of the single individuals within the coworking spaces).

Inside this framework what is put into discussion and has been critically questioned in the thesis is the nature and the meaning of the prefix ‘co’ in coworking. At stake is the correspondence of ‘co’ with the concepts of community, collaboration, and reciprocity. Another result that emerged from the study in the chapter 4 and 5 is connected to the fact that I acknowledge that in order to achieve a more complete understanding of ‘co’ in *coworking* it is necessary paying attention to the *contradictions* inherent in coworking (see Chapter 5). Additionally, the contradictory processes and meanings of coworking were extensively explored in Chapter 4, through analysis of the concept of sharing. In accord with Belk (2010; 2014), I see sharing as being promoted in coworking in different ways in a continuum in which the plural combinations of self-interest–altruism, stinginess–generosity, and impersonality–personality can be found. Sharing in fact regards the exchange of instruments, places, facilities, and networks with the primary intent to pursue individual interests, mostly related to reduction of costs, business development and profit, both for the coworking space founders and coworkers. In other cases coworking is associated with the sharing of spaces, knowledge, competences, and networks with the aims to pursue shared objectives and promote a sense of community and belonging among people who are involved in coworking. In this sense, it is possible to say that in some coworking activities ‘co’ can be positioned in what Belk (2010; 2013) defines as the social realm, with an orientation to solidarity, companionship, bonding; while in other activities it can be positioned in the profit/business realm (pseudo sharing), where the aim is that of dividing or exchanging something between strangers who are in the same space without providing a sense of mutuality and community. This is in contraposition with most of the studies in literature. From the study in fact it emerged that in the intentions of the coworking space founders and managers, the coworking activity is guided by a utilitaristic logic that can be expressed or with a usage of the coworking

spaces based on cohabitation of people in the same who intend to make their everyday work sustainable (economically and socially). On the other side the utilitarian orientation is expressed also with the adoption of an entrepreneurial disposition to coworking by which what is emphasized is the exchange and improvement of professional networks and reputation (Gandini, 2016). This in order to give rise to individual and profitable projects.

Another result that sustains these considerations regards the analysis of the local contradictions of coworking (see Chapter 5). The contradictions identified, that are peculiar to each coworking activity previously described, explain the risk that coworking can be considered, variously, as an obligation instead of a choice (to choose instead to have a private office), a way to reduce costs and make profit, or a way to create a new business or not for profit organization. The analysis in fact identified a possible crescendo and intensification of contradictions towards a potential crisis. This is connected to the risk of an 'empty' and meaningless role of the coworking space, by which it becomes a commodity, an instrument useful to promote image, acknowledgment, or economic incomes to other ends and initiatives, by reproducing the traditional logics that coworking at the beginning of the second historical phase tried to challenge.

In light of these results, I would like to conclude by underlining the pivotal issues for future research, taking into account the limits of the present work. The empirical studies realized in the thesis, and in particular the analysis of the contradictions, permitted the identification of macro themes concerning the topic of coworking that can represent also elements on which work in order to avoid the risks previously introduced. These arguments particularly include the *role of the managers* of coworking spaces. The management of a coworking organization can be expressed variously as a curatorship of relationships, interaction, and sharing among players or as the management of functional aspects of the coworking space. In this sense it would be interesting to understand in which way and to which extent coworking managers can be considered managers and how they construct and shape their managerial identity. Another interesting issue that emerged regards the topic of *community*: prior empirical case studies on coworking have emphasized the importance of the community in coworking spaces (Butcher, 2013; Capdevila, 2014). Similarly, this thesis has shown that the creation of communities in coworking is put into discussion and is a source of contradictions. Thus it would be

interesting to understand in an evolutionary perspective, which are the conditions for either supporting or constraining the possible shift towards the creation of communities, with a particular attention to the topic of collaborative community (Adler and Heckscher, 2006) and its possible evolution. Another interesting and fundamental topic is that of the role of the *space* itself, how it is lived and interpreted in its function. An interesting further understanding could regard the analysis of the role of the physical space in a sociomaterial perspective, by analyzing not only the structural and static aspects, but also the relational interactions, the very negotiations that give sense and shape to the space itself (Jarzabowski et al., 2015)

Finally some considerations are due about the reliability and validity of the research presented in the study. In the thesis, consistency has been pursued through the consideration of an evolutionary perspective used to understand and frame situations, contexts, and aspects that otherwise would have been perceived as enigmatic or confusing. Reliability also has been supported by the realization of several interviews of coworking founders and coworkers, and the findings of the interviews were discussed in focus groups with different players involved in coworking. This provided a way to crosscheck the findings and to triangulate the different interpretations. However, the studies presented in the thesis were limited in three main aspects: in territorial context, as the qualitative interviews of managers were realized in Italy and in particular as the ethnographic observations were realized only in the city of Milan; in the types of coworking spaces, as most of the interviews were with founders of coworking spaces that were affiliated in the same network of spaces; and in terms of time, as the typology presented in Chapter 4 was constructed without the possibility of directly observing the previous evolution of the spaces. In this sense it would be interesting to integrate in a future study an evolutionary perspective into the typology to highlight the movement between the different types identified.

As a final remark, despite the inevitable limitations and shortcomings, I think this work sheds light on a new social phenomenon that is still understudied. I hope the criticalities and risks I have underlined will provide inspiration for future research for a deeper understanding and for future practical applications of coworking. In addition, I hope that this study and the theoretical approach adopted would be of inspiration for other studies and analysis about collaborative and interorganizational forms of work and organizations.

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