

Is 'co' in coworking a short for contradictions?

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Abstract

Purpose – Building on the existing literature and on a series of interviews conducted in very diverse coworking spaces, this article attempts at analyzing coworking by focusing on the historical evolution and heterogeneity of its interpretations, as well as the plurality of its realization in practice and prospective developments.

Design/methodology/approach – The theoretical framework adopted is Cultural Historical Activity Theory – a dialectical approach which allows the study of human activities as historically evolving and complex systems which change under the impulse of their inner contradictions. The analysis presented here starts with an overview of the history of the theoretical elaborations and discussions of coworking. The authors then focus on the experiences and interpretations of this phenomenon as conveyed by coworkers and coworking managers in the north of Italy – one of the most active coworking areas in Europe.

Findings – Coworking first emerged as a way of promoting forms of work and organization that require simultaneous, multidirectional, and reciprocal work, as understood in contrast to forms that incorporate an established division of labor, demarcated communities, and formal and informal sets of rules. However, with time, coworking has evolved toward novel directions, giving rise to heterogeneous interpretations of it. Inquiry constitutes a deeper investigation of the heterogeneity of coworking. The take-away message here is that the prefix co- in coworking can be interpreted, through a play of words, to evoke multiple positions and views conveying internal contradictions.

Originality/value – The historical overview of coworking shows a strong differentiation and multisided interpretation of this phenomenon along two dimensions of historical development, namely, social and business, and outward and inward. The qualitative analysis of the interviews traces the different lived interpretations and conceptions of coworking. The analysis confirms, on the one hand, the complexity and heterogeneity described in the literature, and on the other hand, it enriches the literature by depicting the contradictory nature of the phenomenon, including how the historical and inner tensions of coworking are dynamically evolving in the concrete experiences reported by the managers and users in the coworking spaces.

Keywords Activity theory, Contradictions, Coworking, Historical tensions

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent decades, globalization and technological changes have led to important transformations in the labor market, which have also involved the introduction of new forms of organization. Coworking space is one prominent instance of emerging new ways of working and organizing. Officially it dates back to the early 2000s and is generally defined as a workplace in which different professionals carry out work activities in one and the same environment without necessarily sharing these activities (Kojo and Nenonen, 2016; Spinuzzi,



2012). Users of these spaces can be also very heterogeneous as to their employment, work sector, professional roles and affiliation (Parrino, 2013). The most recent [Global Coworking Survey \(2019\)](#) indicates that the number of this type of workspace has increased from 8,900 units in 2015, to 12,100 in 2016, to 15,500 in 2017, 18,900 in 2018 and 22,000 in 2019. This rapid spread has generated a number of studies on and representations of the phenomenon of coworking which still lack coherence on what the concept of coworking actually stands for. The heterogeneity of interpretations of this phenomenon in the literature does reflect the variety and richness of the practices of coworking, but in ways that fall short of a systematized and empirically grounded overview.

This article attempts at analyzing coworking by focusing on the historical evolution and heterogeneity of its interpretations, as well as the plurality of its realization in practice and prospective developments. The article is organized as following. The first section introduces the literature on coworking by systematizing it into three levels – macro, meso and micro – which cover the range of types of inquiries on this phenomenon. This first section includes also an introduction to the theoretical lens we use in this study, cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 1987/2015). The second section presents the historical and conceptual background of coworking. Here we focus on the way in which coworking has been conceptualized over time and the key dimensions of development the historical overview brings to surface. For this we use multiple complementary sources which allow a reconstruction of the historical phases in the development of coworking. This section builds a hypothesis of key dimensions of historical development of coworking that will be tested in our analysis. This next step consists of an examination of concrete forms of coworking in local settings by means of interviews. This examination also serves a critical scrutiny of the feasibility of the historical hypothesis itself. In other words, it is not taken for granted that the local data will neatly fit with the historical hypothesis. The analysis of interviews shows the contradictions coworkers and coworking managers experience in four very diverse coworking spaces in the north of Italy – one of the most active coworking areas in Europe. The last three sections of the article present respectively a discussion, a summary of the results of the analyses and concluding remarks.

Literature on coworking and cultural historical activity theory

Coworking has been studied in numerous countries and social environments from the perspectives of psychology (Gerdenitsch *et al.*, 2016), sociology (Gandini, 2015), economic planning (Avdikos and Iliopoulou, 2019), urban informatics (Bilandzic, 2013), management (Butcher, 2013b; Capdevila, 2013; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac, 2016), design (Parrino, 2013), real estate (Green, 2014), urban studies (Groot, 2013) and engineering (Kojo and Neonen, 2016). The literature presents coworking as a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon with inquiries carried out on three levels – macro, meso and micro – as summarized in the following.

At the “macro” level the literature focuses on the connection between the social/economic transformations and coworking (e.g. Jamal, 2018; Mariotti *et al.*, 2017, 2019). This is a lens primarily adopted by the very early research of coworking, when empirical studies were still few. The authors position coworking in connection with the digital economy (Johns and Gratton, 2013), the creative economy (Moriset, 2013), the knowledge economy (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac, 2016) and the knowledge of labor market (Gandini, 2015). The main driver of coworking is reported to be the rise of independent professionals who work on project-based or short-term contracts and are not necessarily tied to one particular organization. The second driver is reported to be the diffusion of digital technology (Castells, 2003), which has strongly transformed the geography and the way of doing knowledge-based jobs (Moriset, 2013).

Coworking is conceptualized as a response to workers who are not anymore able to find solutions in the traditional workplaces and look for flexibility, autonomy and full control over their jobs (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Isaac, 2016). At the same time, these transformations are registered as having 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). Coworking has emerged as a useful compromise between the autonomy and flexibility of knowledge workers and the feeling of being part of a “shared” working environment which provides a space for mobile, project-based, freelance and self-employed workers. Other studies, mostly published starting from 2017, analyze the effects of coworking on the local economy, *in terms of community building within and outside the workplaces, improvement of the surrounding public space, and urban revitalization* (Mariotti *et al.*, 2017; Babb *et al.*, 2018). In these contributions the potential of coworking is interpreted as the capability of the coworking spaces to improve entrepreneurship and social innovation in the local territory (Jamal, 2018; Mariotti *et al.*, 2017; Akhavan *et al.*, 2019).

At the “meso” level, coworking is studied as an organization and as a way of organizing work. The aim of the contributions at this level is to identify the distinctive features of coworking spaces by comparing them or distinguishing them from other organizations. The first studies of this kind underline that social relationships (Kojo and Nenonen, 2016), collaboration (Fuzi, 2015; Bianchi *et al.*, 2018), sense of community (Schopfel *et al.*, 2015) and knowledge sharing (Schopfel *et al.*, 2015) are the main characteristics which coworking organizations are based on. Generally, coworking is compared with community (Butcher, 2013; Rus and Orel, 2015; Schmidt and Brinks, 2017) in a general sense by underlying its potential to create proximity and a sense of belonging among members located in coworking spaces (Rus and Orel, 2015; Garrett *et al.*, 2017; Mariotti and Akhavan, 2020). De Peuter *et al.* (2017) emphasize that coworking should be reinterpreted as a collective organization through which people can cope with precarious work.

Other authors identify differences among coworking spaces, classifying them on the basis of structural aspects, such as business models, the type of access and affordances and the target of the coworking spaces (Kojo and Nenonen, 2016; Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Spreitzer *et al.*, 2015) or social and relational dimensions like the interest in collaborating within the space (Spinuzzi, 2012; Capdevila, 2014). This brought us to a polarized description of coworking (Ivaldi and Scaratti, 2019). On the one hand there is the “true” coworking with a collective orientation that guides relationships, collaboration and community. On the other hand, there is the “false” coworking building on individualistic and instrumental motivations of professionals who seek to increase their business opportunities, reputation and networks (Gandini, 2016; Butcher, 2013; Jakonen, 2017; Bueno *et al.*, 2018). For example, Butcher (2013) describes 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 economic gain. Gandini (2016, 2019) distinguishes a para-institutional and neo-corporate organizational model of coworking (that embraces an entrepreneurial ethos) from a resilient organizational model of coworking (open, integrated with the local territory and focused on the production of social impact). Recent studies attempt at overcoming these polarized interpretations by pointing out that a clear separation between two distinct organizational forms of coworking does not actually exist as coworking spaces are hybrid activities that dynamically reproduce the constitutive ambivalence and contradictory nature of coworking in different forms and at different degrees (Spinuzzi *et al.*, 2019; Ivaldi and Scaratti, 2019).

The studies that adopt a “micro”-level perspective focus on the analysis of the experiences of individual users of these spaces and of the social processes involved in these contexts. In line with the literature at the macro and meso levels, these studies firstly identify the creation

and promotion of interactions among professionals in the spaces as a distinctive feature of coworking. The interactions in coworking spaces can take various forms: collaboration (Spinuzzi, 2012), social support (Gerdenitsch *et al.*, 2016) or informal communication (Parrino, 2013). In this framework, knowledge exchange seems to have a fundamental role for the promotion of local innovation interpreted as the production of new knowledge and new resources (Capdevila, 2014; Butcher, 2018). Coworking provides a solution to “professional isolation”: sharing a common space offers a community to those who otherwise would not enjoy relational support while working from home. Among 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 (Merkel, 2015; Ivaldi *et al.*, 2018).

Coworking members can experience coworking in a more passive way (Garrett *et al.*, 2017) and consider relationships as automatic results of the physical proximity (Parrino, 2015). Alternatively, they can be more actively engaged (Garrett *et al.*, 2017) by nurturing social interactions, relationships and knowledge exchange through both top-down (from the coworking managers to coworkers) and bottom-up (from coworkers to coworkers) initiatives aimed at enhancing trust and social support (Gerdenitsch *et al.*, 2016; Bouncken *et al.*, 2019). In line with this variety of interpretations of social dynamics connected to coworking, some authors (Waters-Lynch and Duf, 2021) refer to a sense of ambivalence concerning the not realized promise of coworking spaces as authentic and creative community spaces (Blagoev *et al.*, 2019; Waters-lynch and Duf, 2021). These authors claim that what is prevailing is an ambivalence between the potential appeal of these spaces and the risks of precarity that characterize the working life of these practitioners. This is connected to an apparent social dilemma coworking spaces face: encouraging shared practices and interaction while at the same time producing the social, affective and material resources that instantiate the affective commons that shape the character of work.

Our aim in this article is to dig into the rich variety of representations of coworking in the literature on this phenomenon and in this sense of ambivalence that these conceptualizations have generated (De Peuter *et al.*, 2017). We will do so by analyzing the heterogeneity of coworking from the perspective of its contradictory nature with the help of CHAT (Engeström, 1987/2015; Engeström and Sannino, 2011). This is a dialectical framework in which the notion of contradiction is foundational to grasping systemic relations and processes of becoming in human activities as well as to revealing their transformative potential and realistic trajectories of development (Aagaard *et al.*, 2013; Engeström, 1987/2015; Groleau *et al.*, 2011; Virtaluoto *et al.*, 2016). The features of this conceptual framework make it a suitable instrument to analyze a phenomenon as heterogeneous as coworking.

Contradictions in this theoretical framework are not only personally experienced ontological dilemmas but also systemic and structural constraints that accumulate over time and may become aggravated throughout the history of activities. Mutually exclusive and apparently incompatible alternatives clash within contradictions (Engeström and Sannino, 2011; Putnam, 1986). These clashes are constitutive of every activity and are also the driving force for the development of activities. As they are intrinsically connected to the evolution of the activity, contradictions have to be understood and traced within the historical development of the activity and seek their contextualized manifestations as expressed by those who have direct experience of these activities. Contradictions are also source of development and change as the disturbances they generate open up opportunities for new and not-taken-for-granted solutions. Historically, new forms of activity emerge when contradictions are collectively addressed and resolved.

The object of activity is another central concept in CHAT. Activities differ from one another by their objects. This concept refers to the motive that justifies the very existence of an activity in response to specific human needs. This is different from the goal of a specific action, which is

limited in time and scope. For instance, educating pupils is the motive of the school activity, and healing patients is the motive of the medical activity. In this sense, the object has driving power and refers to something at which human being inhabiting activities direct their efforts to: “[...] *The main thing that distinguishes one activity from another [...] is the difference of their objects. It is exactly the object of an activity that gives it a determined direction. [...] The object of an activity is its true motive. The motive may be either material or ideal, either present in perception or existing only in imagination or in thought*” (Leont’ev, 1978, p. 62).

Due to its close connection to human needs, an object develops historically and is never fully reached or accomplished. In many respects, it resembles a vision, sometimes utopian, which, however, finds concrete implementations in the everyday. Human beings pursue and transform the object through the actions they perform individually or collectively. However, a single individual often only grasps some aspect of the overall complexity of the object of activity. Hence the methodological requirements to conduct activity theoretical analyses on data which are longitudinal and multivoiced. Moreover, an object of activity carries in itself the pervasive contradictions of its given socioeconomic formation. As coworking is a form of activity taking place within capitalism, any object of coworking spaces is at least potentially a contradictory unity of use value and exchange value. The foundational contradictory feature of human activities and their objects as understood in CHAT make this conceptual framework particularly appropriate to explore the complex dynamics of becoming of coworking as well as to trace their potential trajectories of development.

This study addresses the following question: Which contradictions are experienced by coworkers in different types of spaces and how do they relate to the dimensions of historical development of coworking?

In the next section we provide a background overview of the developmental dimensions that characterize the conceptualizations of coworking.

Coworking and its dimensions

In this section we give an overview of the evolution of coworking by identifying the main changes that have reportedly characterized its object (Kaptelinin, 2005; Engeström, 2009; Spinuzzi, 2017). With the lens of CHAT this historical overview traces how the activity of coworking has evolved, from its origins to its current and prospective developments. We trace how the idea of coworking has been constructed around specific social and individual needs and has led coworking to differentiate in the many ways indicated in the introductory section of this article.

From a methodological point of view, we proceeded by identifying the features of the activity of coworking. Then, we formulated the criteria to divide the history of coworking into periods. Finally, we decided how to interpret and explain the transitions from one period to another. As to the first step, we consider coworking an evolving object-driven activity. Concerning the second step, we identify the qualitative transformations of the object of coworking and trace issues, problems and innovations that have brought about changes in the object and led to the rise of its new organizational forms. Finally, for the third step, the transitions are seen as solutions to historical challenges that required new forms of organizing coworking and consequentially reflect clashes between old and new ways of working.

This historical overview is based on a selection of the most qualified sources about coworking relevant for tracing the evolution of its conceptualizations. More specifically, we used content from the following four sources:

- (1) The reputed website Deskmag (www.deskmag.com), considered the official worldwide source of information on coworking. In particular, we considered the

articles that are published on Deskmag in the sections Coworking Spaces, Tips, Coworkers, Events, Cities and News. The reading of all the articles in these sections of Deskmag led to the identification of trends and changes that characterize the evolution of coworking over the years.

- (2) The annual Global Coworking Surveys from its first year of existence in 2010 to 2018, covering the status and future trends of coworking spaces all around the world, their economic sustainability, members and services, as well as the users' representations and behavior. 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) in the coworking spaces as well as representations and behaviors of users and operators.
- (3) Published interviews and articles of key actors, recognized as the main 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 actors who have played significant roles in shaping the history of coworking. Thus, we looked for written and video interviews made by journalists with these players, in order to select useful empirical material for the analysis.
- (4) Academic publications, using SCOPUS and Google Scholar, from 2012 to 2019.

Whereas in the preceding section the literature was reviewed descriptively with the help of the three levels of macro, meso and micro, in this section the academic publications are used as data for reconstructing the historical evolution of coworking. We arranged the information in chronological order. We identified key and pivotal events and enriched them with the information we collected through the reading of the documents. After this, we identified changes in the object of the coworking activity. Then we focused on how the conceptualizations of coworking have developed, how coworking organizations have changed over time and which dimensions of development characterized the transitions from one period to another.

Over the years, changes in the labor market – in particular, the virtualization and the flexibilization of work and the diffusion of freelance workers – led to the rise and diffusion of new ways of interpreting coworking. These changes 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 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). 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. 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 benefited 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).

Despite these advantages, these developments have led also to the emergence of criticalities concerning, for instance, lack of a sense of community, obstacles to initiate actual collaboration and weaknesses in the transfer of knowledge (Johns and Gratton, 2013). Around these criticalities, the object of coworking started to be reconstructed to address emerging

needs of freelance workers to reconceive physical workspaces that would afford spontaneous collaboration and create conditions for overcoming isolation. This is one of the key factors that have led to the transition to a qualitative development of coworking. This period was characterized by the rise of “coworking space” and “coworking movement” aimed at supporting and facilitating the work conditions of freelance knowledge workers. The aim here is that of finding new ways to answer the needs of freelance knowledge workers, that is, to combine freelance workers’ autonomy and the structure and working relationships that an organization can guarantee.

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)

This is the reason why the coworking space founded by Brad Neuberg in 2005 was recognized as the first coworking space with this explicit intent. In this period a self-defined coworking movement was founded in order to create, with the help of coworking spaces, a group of independent freelance workers which could strengthen and improve their working conditions (Sundsted *et al.*, 2009), overcoming the negative effects of flexibility and precariousness. The objective was therefore to create a decentralized collective system in which people and professionals could connect, share ideas and co-construct solutions to problems created by the labor market. In this phase the main challenges were connected to, on the one hand, the economic sustainability of the coworking spaces and, on the other hand, the diffusion of an idea of coworking based on specific principles that the so-called coworking movement advocated for.

As reported in the coworking wiki, the aim of the movement was that of creating “*better places to work and better way to work*” (<http://www.coworkingwiki.com/>). The shared values toward which they wanted to move people were the following: collaboration – willingness to collaborate with others by reducing hierarchies and boundaries; openness – to share ideas and be inclusive; community – emphasizing interactions and relationships among people; accessibility – with self-selected users based on interest or on shared experiences and values; and sustainability – contributing to support the available resources by respecting infrastructures and other users. These values are today explicitly mentioned in numerous coworking spaces (Capdevila, 2013; Fuzi, 2015; Hurry, 2012; Moriset, 2013; Rus and Orel, 2015) as the main principles that guide coworking.

With the diffusion of the coworking spaces around the world, coworking was reinterpreted and reproduced in different ways. Coworking spaces have adopted different purposes by attracting the interest of different players in the labor market. In particular in this phase, coworking is being considered by private companies, public and semi-public institutions as an opportunity to produce economic value. In particular, what has changed over the years pertains to the following factors:

- (1) The motivations that drive both founders and professionals to use coworking spaces. Besides the intent to improve social and organizational conditions for independent workers, other motivations have emerged, linked to profit and entrepreneurial opportunities. For founders, 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). 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.

- (2) The profiles of the users – from independent workers and freelancers to entrepreneurs, employees and founders of startups. As founded by Neuberg, coworking was initially intended for freelance professionals and aimed to create for them the best working conditions. Over the years, however, the targeted users expanded to small companies, startups and employees ([Global Coworking Survey, 2011a, b, c, 2013, 2016](#)). In addition, coworkers progressively became more assiduous users of the space, compared to the first years, and displayed an increased need to have a permanent position instead of a flexible one within the space ([Global Coworking Survey, 2011a, b, c](#)). In this sense, the coworking space seemed to become in some respects like a regular office for professionals. This 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, 2011a, b, c](#)).
- (3) The areas in which the spaces are located – from large cities to small and rural areas. 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) ([Moriset, 2013](#)), 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, 2019](#)).
- (4) The ways the spaces are organized – from small independent spaces to large spaces with defined rules, roles, structures and activities. For example, 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). Also 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, 2011a, b, c, 2013](#)).
- (5) The organizational forms of the spaces – from single spaces to networks, franchises and associations. Multiple variations have emerged of coworking by using services and structures provided by already existing coworking spaces. Employees are encouraged to use coworking not only to help them to work more productively while avoiding isolation, but also to attract employees who demand flexible workplaces and work times, and to promote cross-fertilization across organizations. Similarly, numerous small and medium companies are incorporating coworking inside their structures to put into use offices which are otherwise not much utilized. Besides private companies, other institutions have begun to incorporate coworking in their organizational structures. An increasing number of libraries, for instance, integrate coworking spaces, and universities use coworking spaces to support students with business ideas. In a sense, it is possible to say that coworking is characterized by institutionalization combined with hybridization.

Coworking spaces have evolved into more structured organizations (e.g. integrated spaces within established organizations, small spaces created and managed by independent workers or entrepreneurs, coworking spaces organized in networks and franchise) and have integrated with other different types of spaces, for example telecenters, flexible offices and incubators (Ivaldi *et al.*, 2018). This differentiation engendered, however, 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 resulted in the need to distinguish those initiatives that are strictly connected to the original idea of coworking from those that are distant from the original idea because they are more specifically focused on business, profit and pursuit of individual interests. For example, Neuberger was working at 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, “Coworking began at Regus . . . but not the way they think,” 2012). Yet, today Regus self-defines as a coworking space.

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. One of the main open questions that characterize the debate among professionals and scholars is related to the identification of a business model for coworking that can guarantee sustainability. Finally, the other challenge that can be traced in this phase is the creation of a shared meaning around coworking. The strong differentiation and stratification of coworking initiatives lead also to a loosening of the 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.

The contents summarized above from our sources point at a number of diverging pathways or directions of development which cannot be reduced to unitary phases. The identification of these directions of development has been the result of a numerous discussions between the research groups of the authors. These directions of development are depicted in [Figure 1](#).

The first dimension concerns an outward and inward focus of coworking. In its evolution coworking responded to new needs that emerged from changes in the labor market with the aim to promote social and cultural changes in society. The establishment of what has been called the coworking movement was that of creating a network of various actors 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 (the “outward” orientation). However, the challenges that characterize the evolution of coworking concern attempts at responding to the needs of the users of the coworking spaces (“inward” orientation). Thus, the reproduction of the coworking idea inside local spaces cannot disregard the availability of infrastructure, activities and services to respond to the individual needs of the users.

The focus here is the organization of the coworking activity. Examples are the various initiatives and services that each space provides and that target the specific types of users of the space (e.g. training courses, coaching sessions, nursery services, networking activities), but also the different ways in which the spaces are organized in terms of infrastructure (e.g. open spaces, private offices, lunchrooms, meeting rooms) and internal organization (e.g. community manager, marketing manager). During recent years, the strong attention put on the needs of the single individuals inside the spaces has been seen as connected to a strong focus on an individualistic interpretation of coworking that could lose its social value and impact. Thus, different initiatives indicated in the literature are oriented to the creation of

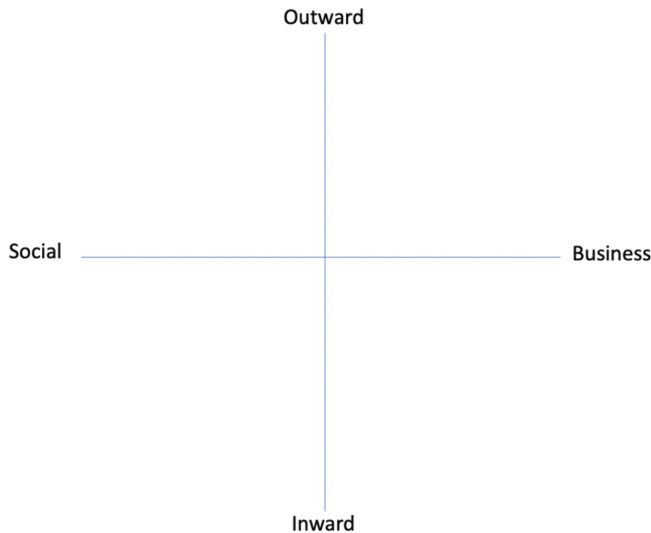


Figure 1.
Dimensions of
development
characterizing the
historical evolution
of coworking

coworking spaces that are strongly integrated with the territory in order to match local needs and the needs of the professionals inside the spaces (Ivaldi *et al.*, 2019; Gandini, 2019).

The second dimension of development is related to the idea of coworking as emphasizing aspects of work that are not directly connected to profit and business (“the social”). The original idea of coworking was that of creating new spaces that could support workers around ideals that challenge mainstream orientations and the limits of the dominance of private institutions (Butcher, 2016). Thus, against individualistic perspectives, 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 and reciprocity associated with work activities (Gandini, 2015; Butcher, 2016). These have been referred to as “social connections,” “local bonds,” “social structure,” “shared identity” and “community” (Neuberg, 2014; Hillman, 2014).

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 and 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 seeking people, information or resources when an organization does not have enough information to coordinate (Waters-Lynch and Potts, 2017).

Then, with the introduction and diffusion of the coworking space concept, additional needs connected to the profitability of coworking emerged, strengthening the orientation toward “business.” The challenges described earlier in this section underline attempts at making coworking spaces directly profitable by renting the facilities and indirectly improving their core business. The focus on business and profitability emerged also in the motivations of users seeking collaboration (Capdevila, 2014), social support (Gerdenitsch *et al.*, 2016), entrepreneurship and creativity (Fuzi, 2015), reduction of precarious working conditions and the identification of new people, ideas and resources (Waters-Lynch and Potts, 2017).

These historical dimensions of coworking reveal the heterogeneity of this phenomenon as it is evolving across intersecting polarities. The contradictory tendencies presented above may appear as neat binaries, due to our effort to convey in an organized and comprehensive manner rich contents from the different sources. Yet, seen through the activity-theoretical lens we adopt in this study, the opposing terms of these dimensions define a messy area of both struggles and potentials which may be a useful resource to reflect on the complexity and developmental prospects of coworking as it unfolds in local settings.

Locally experienced contradictions in four coworking spaces

This section of the article focuses on a qualitative analysis of interviews conducted in four coworking spaces based in Milan, Italy. The aim of this analysis is to grasp how the contradictions of coworking are manifested in the discourse of interviewees who are using the coworking space. For this, our analysis focuses specifically on the heterogeneity and ambivalence of needs and desires coworkers, managers and founders express while describing their work in the space. The heterogeneity and ambivalence of interviewees' accounts of how they use the space and the extent to which the space meets their needs and expectations are key indicators of possible systemic contradictions as they are experienced by the users. We recognize that discursive analysis cannot substitute inquiries such as in-depth historical analyses, observations or participatory analyses such as in Change Laboratory studies of activities (Virkkunen and Newnham, 2013). Discourse, however, is an essential vehicle to formulate at least an initial understanding of 'lived' activities and to identify specific contradictions which may serve as starting points for further and different types of inquiries.

We collected data through semi-structured interviews with founders, managers and coworkers. More specifically, we interviewed 6 people in the first space (5 coworkers – all freelancers – and the founder of the space); 7 people in the second space (6 coworkers – 1 startupper, 2 employees and 3 freelancers – and the founder); 10 people in the third space (8 coworkers – 2 employees, 2 startupper and 4 freelancers – 1 community manager and 1 office manager); 7 people in the fourth space (4 coworkers – all freelancers – 1 community manager, 1 project manager and director, and 1 cofounder).

The sampling strategy adopted in each space aimed at ensuring as much as possible representativeness of coworkers' occupations, backgrounds and needs. Prior to the interviews, the ethnographic fieldwork included collecting contextual information on typical use, duration, as well as occupations, backgrounds and needs of the users. The interviews were arranged over a period of about three months in each space, to be able to have access to the diverse coworkers typically using it. In spaces 1, 2 and 4 we interviewed all the professionals that were using the space during the observation months. In space 3 – the largest among the four spaces in our study – the selection of the interviewees was specifically aimed at reaching a comprehensive representation of the diversity of users. In space 3 the coworkers were all representatives of the fields of digital professions, occupying, however, different roles as freelancers, employees or startupper. In order to avoid oversampling, we made sure to have a balanced representation of these roles.

For analyzing the data we relied on phenomenological (Minimi and Manuti, 2017) and hermeneutic approaches (Bartunek and Louis, 1996; Cunliffe and Locke, 2019). The interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by coding the interviewees' utterances with the help of the scheme presented by Engeström and Sannino (2011). This method distinguishes four types of discourse which voice manifestations of contradictions: dilemmas, conflicts, critical conflicts and double binds. Dilemmas are manifestations of contradictions conveying the coexistence of incompatible evaluations. Conflicts are manifestations conveying resistances, disagreements and arguments. Critical conflicts convey inner doubts and contradictory motives which

paralyze actions. Double binds refer to situations in which people face pressing and equally unacceptable alternatives and feel the urge to overcome them.

For our analysis we used codes based on the manifestations of contradictions described above. The transcripts were coded by three independent researchers. The four categories of manifestations of contradictions covered well the empirical material. The researchers discussed their codings, focusing in particular on diverging interpretations among the coders, and for all these instances they reached a unanimous decision. Differently from some recent similar analysis, the researchers did not find it necessary to construct additional codes such as the category of “condemnation” proposed by [Bal et al.](#) (submitted) on a data set from a very different discursive context.

[Armstrong \(2001\)](#) warns scholars and readers to be aware of the traps of confluences between theory, method and treatments of the literature which may lead to systematic misrepresentation of reality. He refers to “the textual device of ‘description’ through which that audience can be led to believe that the researcher has indeed got to grips with the culture in question. What is not clear is why this should be so persuasive when both researcher and reader also believe that nothing but the text is the case. If the word for world is text, there is nothing outside the text which might authenticate it” (p. 158). Activity theory, the methods of data collection and analysis, as well as the literature on coworking are used in this article as [Armstrong](#) suggests. Building on and expanding on the work of the early founders in Soviet Union (e.g. [Vygotsky, 1962, 1978](#)), contemporary activity theory conceptualizes discourse as a vital instrumental and mediating resource to grasp structures, relations and processes in the making of human activities (e.g. [Engeström, 1999](#); [Sannino, 2008](#); [Wells, 2002](#)). Activities are constituted by cultural-historical layers of bodily and artifactual resources. Discourse, however, is an essential avenue to formulate at least an initial understanding of activity and to identify specific contradictions which may serve as entry points for further inquiries. This study builds on an extended set of ethnographic interview data which allow to “actually verify statements about the prevalence of a discourse” ([Armstrong, 2001](#), p. 156) and from which verbatim examples of discourse are extracted as evidence of manifestations of contradictions ([Engeström and Sannino, 2011](#)). This allows us to test and refine the hypothesis developed on the basis of the historical overview.

In the following we present the results of the analysis by explaining the manifestations of contradictions that specifically characterize each space. This is done in order to grasp how different types of coworking activities and spaces can give rise to diverse experiences, criticalities and problems.

Coworking space 1

This is a small operation, property of a self-employed architect, who in 2012 decided to dedicate unused rooms in her office space to coworking. The space consists of a living room used for coffee breaks, a room with three stations and a kitchen area, a room with four stations one of which is occupied by the owner, a meeting room which is free to use by the coworkers but requiring a fee from external users, a restroom and a big terrace. Coworkers can use the space autonomously from Monday to Friday between 9 am and 7 pm. The space is a “generalist/heterogeneous” coworking space with coworkers from diverse professional backgrounds. The intention of the founder is to offer a positive work environment based on collaboration among coworkers. Her future aim is to dedicate the space to professionals in the same field, in particular to architects. She considers the coworking space as a place where self-employed workers can find everything they need (“like in a real office”) to do their job, at a competitive price on the market, compared for instance to a traditional rent.

Coworking space 2

This coworking space was established in 2008 by two entrepreneurs in marketing communication. The coworking space is located in what used to be an industrial building which also houses the marketing agency of the two founders. Originally the founders decided to open their office space to coworking for “opportunistic reasons,” as most of their desks and rooms were unused. After having worked side by side with coworkers in this space, they now firmly believe in the role these spaces can play for enhancing formal and informal work relations and for making everyday work more pleasant and effective. The main objective of their space is promoting “a shared use of spaces for professionals who are interested in broadening their knowledge and relationships.” The space hosts heterogeneous independent professionals and small businesses that usually rent the private office.

Coworking space 3

This coworking space is part of a franchise network comprising 16 spaces referred to as “campuses,” distributed across Europe. The idea came from a young entrepreneur who decided to open the space because he was looking for a site in which he could work together with other young operators in the field of digital work. The franchise includes “the central direction team” of ten people and spaces opened by independent entrepreneurs or directly by the central direction team. The central direction team includes the founder as the president, a vice president, the marketing manager, the sales manager and the communication manager and is structured around different “functions,” such as marketing, sales, projects and design. The spaces opened by independent entrepreneurs are autonomously managed by the local founder(s), but the directional team gives general guidelines concerning how to open a space in franchising. The purpose of the space is to support the development of businesses and projects in the digital field by promoting connections between coworkers and external organizations. The declared objective of this coworking space is that of “helping top innovators to connect, learn and grow together.”

Coworking space 4

This space was opened at the end of 2012 and today is a relatively small space dedicated to “women and work.” The objective is to offer an alternative way of organizing work specifically tailored to the needs of working and of balance with private life. The space, besides an open space for working, is characterized by distinctive services and projects such as co-baby, training courses for the competence development and mentoring programs. Most of the services are provided by a non-profit association connected with the coworking space. At the time of the study, the association was managing three main projects, two of which were designed and carried out directly by the nonprofit organization in collaboration with the university and other organizations. One project in particular aims at women’s reintegration in the working life. The organization behind the space is a “hybrid” organization. On the one hand, there is a for-profit startup that hosts the coworking space, comprised of a board of directors with eight “silent partners” who do not work in the space and a managing director. The startup manages the costs and income. On the other hand, the projects are provided and managed by a nonprofit association consisting of a president, a management committee of three and a group of four elected members.

Results

Discursive manifestations in space 1

Critical conflicts were primarily voiced in the interviews with the founder and two coworkers. These critical conflicts revolved around two main aspects: the interpretation of the general

mission of coworking and the role of the founder in the coworking space and with the coworkers. What emerged was the evidence of different motives in promoting and interpreting the values associated to relationships inside a coworking space.

In different conversations, the founder underscores that coworking has to be based on the creation of relationships among the people in the space. More specifically, she stresses that a space cannot be considered a coworking space if it is not oriented to promote “*synergies*” between coworkers.

(F) A coworking space cannot be a coworking space if there are not 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 is not 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. 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.

(F) 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.

(F) But there are periods (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 do not have the right personality for coworking. Not everyone has the right spirit; I think some people just want to save on space.

Obstacles to the creation of such relationships are voiced in the interviews also, as in the examples below (CW2 and CW4) when the interviewees underline that coworkers live the space just as a place in which they happen to be together to do their daily work. This does not facilitate sharing moments to get to know each other and to create stronger ties. At the same time, the founder (F) admits that creating and facilitating relationships is not her priority, revealing another crucial aspect of how coworking is co-constructed on the basis of requirements, obligations and norms specific to different professions and functions of those operating in the space.

(CW2) 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.

(CW4) 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.

(F) 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.

The critical conflicts voiced here are connected to the object of coworking as a contradictory entity. On the one hand, it is considered as intrinsically social, in the sense that it cannot disregard the promotion of relationships among people in the space. On the other hand, it is associated with the possibility of sharing space with other people to accomplish one's daily

work without interferences and disturbances created by relationships with other people in the space.

The founder and the users of coworking space 1 also voiced double binds as in the following examples. Two interesting aspects are underlined in these cases. The first one (CW5) is connected to the ownership of work. Working side by side with others necessarily implies the possible exposure of the contents of their work to their neighbors. This eventuality can be perceived by someone as a personal violation and potential risk for them and their clients.

(CW5) 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.

The second aspect is connected to the difficulty of creating personalized places and rooms. The coworker (CW4) in the example below underlines that coworkers could not consider the space their own office and this prevents them from acting as if the space is their own.

(CW4) 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.

Double binds such as these voiced in the interviews show difficulties in accepting the consequences of lack of ownership over the content and the site of the coworking activity.

Discursive manifestations in space 2

The interviewees in the second space voiced primarily dilemmas and critical conflicts. We found dilemmas particularly in the interviews with coworkers. These dilemmas are connected to the interpretations and representations of collaboration among professionals inside the space. An example is an interview with one coworker who, talking about the heterogeneity of people who use the space, expresses different evaluations. This aspect is perceived by the coworkers and the founders as an added value for the creation of relationships among coworkers concerning the possibility to learn about each other and to enrich knowledge and opportunities

(CW3) 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.

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.

(CW3) 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.

Another aspect voiced through the dilemmas is the dynamics of collaboration versus competition connected to the homogeneity of experiences inside the space. One example is

a coworker (CW4) who emphasized that, before deciding to enter this space, he used to be a coworker in another space focused on his specific fieldwork (architecture). After a period in that space, he decided to leave due to jealousy, envy and project ownership issues:

(CW4) Before coming here, I was in another coworking space, where they (coworkers) 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.

The same interviewee states that in the current coworking space there is no competition with other people, but it is more difficult to do projects together.

(CW4) inside this space the climate is more relaxed but of course is more difficult to find objects and works to collaborate in with other people.

The interviews in this space underlined the intent and declared interest in promoting all the conditions to permit people to know each other and collaborate in developing projects. However, there are resistances that are particularly related to the fear of reproducing competitive dynamics that characterize, as indicated by the interviewees, traditional organizations.

In space 2 we also found critical conflicts in particular among the two founders of the space concerning interpretations of their role, those of coworkers and the relationship among the two:

(F1) we try to boost coworkers to organize events in order to facilitate interactions, reciprocal knowledge and collaboration, and even events that can make the experience of coworking more pleasant. But they organize an event and then we have to insist. What we can do? [. . .] We try to create and propose social activities between coworkers within our space, or perhaps with neighboring areas or belonging to the coworking space network, we try to make them known and to make sure that you will enrich each other and to diffuse a different idea of working. [. . .] but we see that coworkers do not do this on their own.

(F1) coworkers for us are the people who pay to use the space; Responsible for the functioning of the area; Responsible for the relations, coordinators, supervisors [. . .] they are certainly the people we spend our whole day with, and also the people who pay our space to work inside [. . .].

These critical conflicts underline aspects connected to the type of relationship between coworkers, the founders and the external network of coworking spaces. Implicit roles were also mentioned. The declared intent to promote a new idea of working based on reciprocal knowledge, collaboration and networking is obstructed by the lack of motivation of coworkers in taking responsibility. This is made explicit by the owners of the space who complain about the fact that most initiatives intended to promote interaction and knowledge sharing are organized by them instead of by the coworkers. At the same time this seems difficult also because the founders have different representations of the coworkers and their roles as professionals with the same responsibility and autonomy as the founders, or as clients who pay the rent for using the space. An example is that even if everybody declared that there is no physical boundary between founders and coworkers, as a coworker reported, the keys are only in the possession of the founders or those who pay full-time for a desk with a desktop computer.

Discursive manifestations in space 3

The interviewees in the third space voiced primarily critical conflicts and double binds. The critical conflicts in this case concerned 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 as stated in the following statement by CM1.

(CM1) 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.

(CM1) 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, coworkers as in the examples below (CW3 and CW5) 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 that they were asked to confirm their attendance days before the event took place.

(CW5) networking is for sure important, but 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) Sometimes, the events seem to me to be over-sponsored, almost fake, I don't want to go.

The double binds are focused on the selection process, as illustrated by CW8 below, 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) 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, coworkers stress also that the standards for selection are not so strong. In fact, the coworkers complain that (1) some coworkers are not startupper 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) 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) 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) 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) 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.

These excerpts are mostly concerned with a clash between an orientation to attract a large number of users and to work on improving the quality of the projects and of the networks and connections among coworkers and other stakeholders. This new policy is seen as a strategy of the management to broaden the franchise network and increase income. However, this 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.

Discursive manifestations in space 4

A number of dilemmas and critical conflicts were found in this space. The dilemmas mostly concern the representation and meanings associated with the role of the coworking space in respect to the organization and the idea/project as a whole. The most represented 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 which gives sense to the whole project

(PD1) 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) What is at the heart is the projects, the social projects are the ones that count, we could even do without the space.

(PM1) 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.

In this case, the critical conflicts concern, 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 in promoting a cultural change in people, particularly women, who are unfamiliar with coworking and do not see it as 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) 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) 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 cofounder 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 181 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) 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) 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. 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, people who participate in the projects usually do not use the coworking space. This second issue regards the fragmentation of what they call the internal community (i.e. the coworkers): the space is used only by a few people, most of whom are members of the staff. In addition, the coworkers seem not to know each other very well. 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, for example, people who are interested in services such as the co-baby service; people who use the space because they are interested in starting projects and initiatives; and people who use the space only for working.

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

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

(CW1) I feel I'm outside the coworkers, outside the staff . . . I work on a parallel project orbiting around.

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.

Discussion

In the title of this article we consider if the prefix “co” in coworking could stand for historically accumulated contradiction. Our historical overview indicates that the meanings associated to coworking have evolved over time toward divergent directions illustrated in Figure 1. On the one hand, coworking appears as a movement “outward” aimed at bringing people together around a social issue or similar interests to collectively work on. On the other hand, coworking is understood as an organization turned “inward,” which builds on the work and professional interests of individuals.

Our analysis of the discursive manifestations of contradictions in the four types of coworking space allows us to specify the fields presented in Figure 1 by inserting in each field the predominant contradiction voiced by the interviewees from the respective coworking space. This is depicted in Figure 2.

The four-field representation in Figure 2 is by necessity a simplification, as any conceptual representation of a complex phenomenon. Each of the four fields is an empirically derived average type which becomes “alive” when tested by means of the analysis of the interview data (Adams *et al.*, 2020). The manifestations of contradictions in the interview data reveal characterizations of coworking which are in movement, demonstrating colliding tendencies rather than exclusive poles on neat binaries which never meet. These are orientations which struggle to coexist. The four-field representation indicates the wide range of multiple configurations of coworking experiences and orientations we see voiced by the professionals interviewed in our study. The bi-directional arrows and the spiral in the four-field representation (Figure 2) indicate the movement and constant evolution of the complex configurations.

In space 1 the object is constructed around the need of professionals to use a physical space for doing their job, and the desired outcome is to produce economic benefit for both the

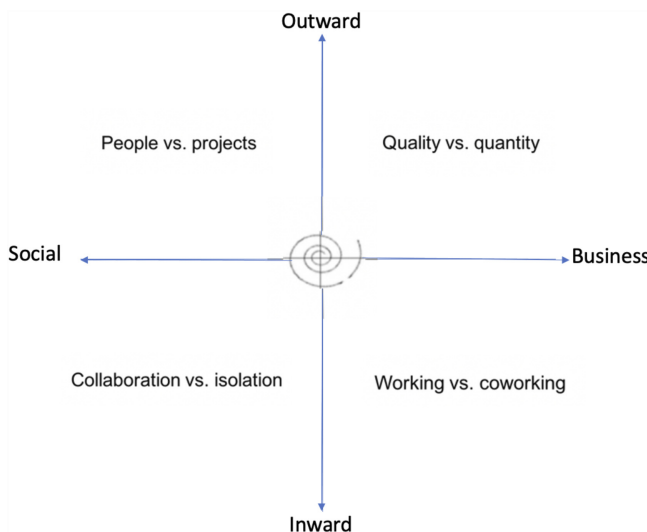


Figure 2.
Contradictions voiced
in the coworking
spaces and their
relation to the
historical dimensions
of development

founders (by renting the space) and the coworkers (by using a space at a competitive price on the market). In this case the discursive manifestations of contradictions give rise to a specific contradiction that we called “*working vs. coworking*.” The importance of sociality is critically interpreted here: it is part of the discourse of the coworkers and the owner of the space, but it is also seen as a risk of losing time, control and ownership over the work and the physical space. In this sense, sometimes sociality seems to be more suffered than sought, and the interest of people is more focused on individual productivity.

The outward/inward tension is connected to the declared intent of the founder to help the category of freelance and independent workers to find a place to work and help each other. At the same time, coworking space answers to specific needs of coworkers to perform their jobs that do not permit to maintain a collective vision an orientation. This tension is also visible in the creation of symbolic boundaries between “my desk/your desk, my work/your work, my office/your office” inside the coworking space.

In space 2 the object consists of social relations that occur inside the space and the creation of a good environment for the coworkers. The desired outcome is the creation of an approach to work based on informal exchange of knowledge, ideas and competences. In this case we defined the local contradiction “*collaboration vs. isolation*” in which the social pole shows the orientation of the founders as well as the others involved toward the promotion of knowledge sharing (e.g. through social events, rituals, absence of physical boundaries). At the same time the focus on profit and business is made evident by the intent to reduce competition and improve autonomy in order to make work easier, more effective and profitable by coworkers. The outward/inward tension is interpreted on the one hand with the intent to promote and diffuse outside a new way of working based on knowledge sharing (the owners are also the founders of a coworking space network) and, on the other hand, in the motives of the opening of a coworking space consisting in making available for-profit rooms not used by the owners of a working space.

In space 3 the object of coworking is the professional career, and the intent is to create profitable links between coworkers and other organizations. The aim is the improvement of the community of digital workers building on connections of the coworkers inside and outside the space. Here the contradiction is related to “*quality vs. quantity*.” The main idea 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 historical tensions are reproduced by a contradiction between a substantive object and a formal object. The substantive object is the promotion of networks and 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 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), with the result that the specific needs of the coworkers are not listened.

Finally in space 4 the object is constructed around a specific social need and aims at supporting women to reenter the labor market. This coworking space is oriented to a large group of people (women in the territory) and to produce a wider social impact beyond the boundaries of the space with the implementation of social projects. The specific contradiction is that of “*people vs. projects*.” This coworking space is outward-oriented to a large group of people and to produce a wider social impact beyond the boundaries of the coworking space. The facilitation of social initiatives and the construction of community at times collide with the very projects that constitute the very reason of the existence of the space (creation of social impact). The space seems to lack support on the part of the coworkers for creating a 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. On the one hand, coworking, and in particular the coworking space, are 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.

Conclusions

Coworking first emerged as a way of promoting forms of work and organization that require simultaneous, multidirectional and reciprocal work, as understood in contrast to forms that incorporate an established division of labor, demarcated communities and formal and informal sets of rules. However, with time, coworking has evolved in novel directions, giving rise to heterogeneous interpretations of it.

Our inquiry constitutes a deeper investigation of the heterogeneity of coworking. The takeaway message here is that the prefix *co-* in coworking can be interpreted, through a play of words, to evoke multiple positions and views conveying internal contradictions. By adopting the framework of CHAT, this study addresses the following question: Which contradictions are experienced by coworkers in different types of spaces and how do they relate to the dimension of historical development of coworking?

The historical overview indicates a strong differentiation and multisided interpretation of coworking along two dimensions of historical development, namely, social and business, and outward and inward. Our qualitative analysis of the interviews enabled us to draw closer to the experiences of users of the coworking spaces and understand the different lived interpretations and conceptions of coworking. The historical and discursive analysis confirmed, on the one hand, the complexity and heterogeneity that are described in the literature, and on the other, it enriched the literature by depicting the contradictory nature of the phenomenon, including how the historical and inner tensions of coworking have dynamically evolved in the concrete interpretations of the people who use coworking spaces. The original idea has been interpreted in different ways and was applied to achieve plural purposes.

Coworking in the contemporary society faces a double challenge. On the one hand there is the risk of an “empty” and meaningless role of the coworking space, by which the coworking space becomes a commodity; a means to promote image, acknowledgment, or economic revenue; serving instrumental ends and initiatives (e.g. creation of networks, business development, implementation of social projects), as coworking is largely recognized as socially desirable. On the other hand, the evolutionary paths of coworking show multiple repertoires and possible directions. This double challenge should be recognized and dealt with by organizers and practitioners of coworking. As our main findings condensed in [Figure 2](#) indicate, the future of coworking can undertake alternative future pathways, each having to deal with specific contradictions. These are connected to the meaning of coworking (working vs coworking), to its nature of social relations (collaboration vs isolation), to its economic and social sustainability (quality vs quantity) and to the common values at stake (people vs projects).

The four types of coworking do not represent linear progression or normative direction toward, for instance, more advanced forms of this activity. It is possible that we will see shifts from one type of coworking to another as well as hybrids of the different types, indicated by the spiral in [Figure 2](#). The most interesting developments might involve local expansive resolutions to the contradictions sketched in this study.

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