

ISCAR 2017 - call for proposal

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When Merleau-Ponty meets Engeström, integrating phenomenology in the emotional dimension of the Activity Theory

After a year spent among collaborative spaces and their workers, it becomes obvious that co-worker communities are not just marketing punchlines. If the first argument to rent a desk in a coworking space is about price and shared facilities, quickly appears the importance of the community. Collaborative spaces talk about “tribe”, “family” or “third-place community” (Oldenburg, 1989) to describe the extended group of their customers. However, research has mainly focused on business models and on how space and materiality have improved collaboration and innovation (Capdevilla, 2013; Moriset, 2014; Fabbri, 2015; de Vaujany & Vaast, 2016). This research wants to deepen the understanding of the community in collaborative spaces through the particular role of the community manager. In this objective, I would like to question my theoretical framework at ISCAR in order to answer my actual research question: How embodied phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty, 1945) can improve the emotional dimension of the fourth generation of the Activity Theory (Engeström, 1999) to explain the community feeling in new work configurations?

Coworking spaces are, indeed, new work configurations, meaning that they are facilitators for collaboration and innovation between different kind of entities (Fabbri & Charue-Duboc, 2016). If the definition of which space is a coworking space is still polemic, we have chosen to focus on two different coworking spaces. The aim is not to make a comparative analysis or an exhaustive list of what artefact or materiality is making them a coworking space. But, we aim at showing that the community self-described through experiences is part of the performative discourse which creates the community feeling. In so doing, we explore two different types of coworking spaces: one is independent and governed by an association, the other is dedicated to students-entrepreneurs managed by a meta-organization of French universities. One is in the center of Paris, the other is in a residential suburb. During my first PhD year, I worked with them as their part-time community manager. One was already opened for less than six months and I participated to the opening of the second one. This position and this timing allow me to look at the processual attempt at creating a sense of community. It means that, at the heart of the community concept in collaborative spaces, I have observed and participated to the process which welcomes prospects, tries to transform them into new customers and daily works to construct a “feeling” of community.

As I spent 12 months to observe the daily life of those spaces, my research design is an ethnography. I code my material with Nvivo (interviews, visuals, documents and flyers). Moreover, my research goes beyond my two research fields: as coworking movement is relatively new in France (La Cantine: 2008), making an ethnography in coworking spaces is like making an ethnography of the ecosystem. Through my 30 registered face-to-face or Skype interviews, I have met public policy managers, customers, competitors, inner workers, etc. I have also participated in many events from local breakfast to international congress. As Marcus points out, “*ethnographers may have to change their position or role as they encounter changing sets of subjects*” (1995). All of this has driven me to experience the notion of

community on different levels, such as micro, meso and macro, and to understand that this kind of community is never fixed. Besides, the community feeling can be ephemeral and/or spatially limited.

But, as I also work for those spaces and I share my working daily life among them, a secondary aspect of my ethnography is an auto-ethnography. In this goal, I write a research diary every time I visit a space or I meet a member of the ecosystem. Thanks to my position of community manager during my first year, I have experimented the role and I know (even created some of them) the daily routines of it. Now, I have left the position to others so I can step back and reduce the emotional link I have created with my fields. Indeed, I have great concerns about how ethnographers need to take a breath from their field not to forget their research duties, like O'Reilly warns about "*the term « going native » refers to the danger for ethnographers to become too involved in the community under study, thus losing objectivity and distance*" (O'Reilly, 2009).

In another secondary part, I begin to code my photos taken during those twelve months in order to conform the visual ethnography design. It allows me, for example, to compare the evolution of the use of space in the big meeting room or how coworkers have taken up their temporary desk.

The primary aspect of my ethnography is becoming a more specific design: organizational ethnography (Watson, 2012). As I am discovering it, I am very curious to discuss it at this workshop if other PhD students use this design.

Theoretically speaking, Activity theory, and in particular the 4GAT (Engeström, 2000), is a complex model of nodes and networks of different aspects impacting an object, with a common finality. As Engeström pointed out, « *processes become simultaneous, multidirectional, and often reciprocal. The density and crisscrossing of processes makes the distinction between processes and structure somewhat obsolete* » (Engeström, 2000, p. 309, *In Spinuzzi, 2012*). Thus, exploring the emergence of a community in a recent social phenomenon needs a model that takes into account spatial, temporal and multiple aspects (rules, artefacts). Besides, two of the aspects of the Activity Theory are "emotion" and "community".

In addition, phenomenology increases those two dimensions through a deeper understanding of the experience lived by the actors. The phenomenology conceived by French philosopher Merleau-Ponty is an integrative conception of being to the world. As he has rejected the opposition of body and mind, Merleau-Ponty has shown how experience is rather the association of the body and the intellect (*Phenomenology of perception*, 1945). Phenomenology is not only describing events through one's five senses, it is about conceiving that the world we inhabit is partially intellectually created through one's history, neurobiology and personality. In this view, Merleau-Ponty has aimed at conceiving an ontology of perception, not only a theory. But in this way, the world is not exclusively constructed in one's mind, which means that a world exists outside oneself but is not entirely accessible because of one's mind. This confirms the importance of multiplying interviews, observations and other data collections to draw a more complete map of the phenomenon we observe.

Two preliminary findings have already been identified: being a "collaborative community" is different from a "community" implied by common language. Coworking spaces are clearly artificial business-oriented third-place. Consequently, those spaces attract people who are looking for collaboration and discussions. People already know that they are integrating a community because this community is a notorious marketing element of those spaces. However, the community feeling is not perceived equally by every coworker and sometimes, some are rejected by the community itself through a kind of auto-regulation process. It also

happens that people try a space and do not feel the way they are supposed to, they do not experiment this feeling, and they choose to leave for another space where they feel better they belong to. We have also met people who have left the space but not the community and others who are in the space for the desk, not for the community. Those considerations drive us to wonder how to define this community and how to improve this feeling while being the community manager.

The role of the community manager is the second preliminary finding. Indeed, we have noticed that there is a difference between spaces with and without a host to welcome in or to deal with daily issues. But more than just a host, people are looking for a kind of butler: able to answer all their desires, fears and preoccupations, either business, personal or collective. Moreover, this community manager could be a single person or a team, the owner or an employee or a volunteer. Whoever it is, he or she is exposed to several levels of stress. They are supposed to facilitate the “feel better” of their customers but they are asked to be so multitasked in a time as short as possible freely and without considerations despite the fact that they have to have the same availability for each coworker. Beyond this, community managers also share the community feeling as they are part of it. Collaborative communities are partly depending on their manager and it is usual to hear that the place owns everything to one person in particular or that the community feeling exists because of the personality of the manager. In some spaces, when the community manager is an employee, this feeling is the owner’s but in those cases, it is rare that the owner is not very active in the community and in the space.

A last finding could be that, in France, it is really different from elsewhere because there are many spaces for a small country or city (if talking about Paris) and the independent and personalized relationship aspects are really important for customers. To confirm this hypothesis, we plan to visit more spaces outside France, like it has already been done in Thailand and in Belgium.

My research aims at contributing to four academic fields: activity theory, phenomenology, materiality turns and ethnographic methodology.