

‘SMART’ FOR WHOM? UNCERTAINTY AND INEQUALITY WITHIN SMART ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

In this paper we draw on widespread qualitative data from a national study in Italy of creative workers across different professional profiles (i.e. photographers, sound and lighting engineers, video makers). We developed semi-structured interviews and organized focus groups with 70 creative workers linked to a smart organization (SMD as a pseudonym) which involves around 8000 workers within the cultural and creative sector in Italy. SMD can be considered a smart organization as it promotes inclusivity for and between workers by implementing actions and services that reduces transitional costs and increases employment opportunities for the enterprise as labor intermediators. By using the concept of ‘boundary work’ we explain the relational dynamics and processes at the intersection of cultural, cognitive and strategical aspects which foster inequality by shaping uncertainty among different SMD professional members. We analyze the process of boundary making and boundary blurring. Thus, we illustrate how inequalities are created by organizational strategies and business practices in SMD (i.e. boundaries maintenance).

Keywords: Inequality, Creative workers, Boundary work, Smart organizations.

1 Introduction

In the era of *managerialism* the weight of professional associations in defending the boundaries of the profession seems to be no longer effective (Noordegraaf, 2011).

Professionals, even in the professions characterized by a strong legal and formal regulation, are asked to organize their work by combining contradictory professional and managerial principles such as autonomy and control, or quality and efficiency, are combined in order to establish contemporary professional actions. Scholars therefore speak of hybrid professionalism (Noordegraaf, 2015)

The hybridization of professional work affect many professional sectors. We analysed these processes in the creative sector, for three main reasons. First, it is a sector that has greatly expanded, mostly linked to the spread of digitalization. The digital revolution besides having modified the working methods, expanding the demand and above all the offer with the entry into these professions of many workers, has also polarized the market especially with respect to the quality of work.

Second it is a sector that besides not being legally recognized or certified by nation states, it does not even have a normative constraints (Boussard, 2018) provided by recognized training path or by professional associations.

Third, as other new professions with no legal status, contemporary creative professionals due to legal and knowledge vacuum, has been pushing to develop a model of organized professionalism (Maestripieri and Cucca 2018), by creating and be members of- cooperatives, for intermediation, servicing and public legitimization. These cooperatives seem to be fully within the so-called Smart Organization (SO) as it combines different logics and develops a reticular structure oriented to pursue the need of market and supply. More specifically these kinds of SO works as a cooperative platform knowledge-driven, networked, and dynamically adaptive to the market (Matheson & Matheson 2001).

Essential is the use and choice of professionals that with their collective intelligence are able to enhance its ability to learn and adapt to the environment (Filos, 2006). These professionals are mostly self-employed who often lay at the blurring line between independent and dependent work.

By introducing the ‘hybridity’ of the status of self-employed workers - as workers between an independent and dependent work status - recent scholarly work have illustrated the way in which the concept of ‘grey zone’ fleshes out one of the main differences generating inequality, such as the traditional division between ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ in labour markets (e.g. Bureau & Dieuaide 2018). However, in the light of the rather poor and diverse working conditions of self-employed workers, Murgia and Armano (2017) have illustrated that hybridity emphasizes the co-existence of features usually attributed to categories that have been traditionally kept sharply distinct and which therefore produce new inequalities.

In this debate, the ability of SOs to effectively respond to market by using professionals' work more efficiently has hidden the issue of inequalities between professionals in the SO.

The question thus becomes to ask to what extent and which dynamics and processes within smart organisations account for differences in working conditions which may lead to inequality for their members.

The persistence and creation of new conditions of inequality will be analyzed by using the concept of 'boundary work' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). In accordance, we conceptualise boundary work as the relational dynamics and processes at the intersection of cultural, cognitive and strategical aspects within the SO fostering insecurity between different social groups, and thereby concurring to shape inequality. In accordance, boundaries are drawn to determine who receives which scarce resources and in what order. As such, boundary-organizing processes can be intimately tied to (re)producing 'unequal access to an unequal distribution of resources' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 168).

The study of boundary work was applied to the study of discriminations between different social groups (for example with respect to gender, age, social capital, ethnicity, etc.) (Lamont and Molnár, 2002) or for the analysis of strategies used to defend jurisdictions between different professions (Abbott, 1988; Bechky 2003; Suddaby e Greenwood, 2005).

In the latter studies the boundary work is not only a symbolic concept for understanding social classifications but also a construction of a social space.

The creation of these spaces implies that boundary can be either a clear line of demarcation between the jurisdictions of different professions or an ambiguous and elastic area in which professions have certain degrees of control. Next then to the processes, mainly conflictual of boundary making by which a profession distinguishes itself from other professions or non professional groups, the processes of boundary blurring. refers to the opposite process of hybridization (Bauböck and Rundell 1998; Liu 2008; Wimmer 2008) between professions. In these processes it is important to underline the role of the organizational subjects, through the boundary maintenance processes.. In this case we observe not an action performed directly by professionals, but a mediating action made by a third actor who has interests and capacity in mediating the jurisdictional conflict between different professional groups.

The presented work discusses the results of a qualitative case study of a SO (SMD as a pseudonym) active within the creative industry in Italy. The paper is structured in three parts. After framing the literature review we present the case study and then we analyze the results and conclude.

2 Smart organizations and boundary work

2.1 SO and inequality

The term 'smart' is used for organizations that are knowledge-driven, internetworked, dynamically adaptive to new organizational forms and practices, learning as well as agile in their ability to create opportunities offered by the new economy by responding positively and adequately to change and uncertainty. The three crucial functions of Smart organizations (SO) are: achieve its purpose; understand its environment and

mobilize resources. The goal is above all to improve the competitiveness and performance of the company (Matheson and Matheson, 2001) by adopting a clear strategic vision, merit culture, and supportive incentives system. For SO therefore strategic is the use of employee's collective intelligence to enhance its ability to learn and adapt to the environment (Filos, 2006).

In spite of this importance assigned to human resources, the issue of reducing inequalities does not seem to have yet been problematized within the debate on SO. Although the organizational studies have long examined the mechanisms for the creation and perpetuation of inequality through the collective and independent action of organizations (...), in the analysis within SO, uncritically, inequality is expected to be attenuated, or at least not enhanced.

This limited attention depends first to the fact that since these organizations are based on professionals' "smart resources" (i.e. knowledge, relationships, innovative and collaborative intelligence), it is assumed that these resources belong to all workers or that are equally distributed among the different workers in the SO (Lacity & Willcocks 2016). Secondly, the emphasis on empowerment and the need to encourage internal diversification to achieve greater efficiency and competitiveness (Ratcheva, 2006), favors a series of diversity management practices (ref.) Aimed to efficiently use of the human resources without the need to rebalance disadvantaged conditions.

However, the organizational structure of the SO suggests the existence of important differences among workers, especially in terms of working conditions.

Moreover, SO adopt a recruitment and workflow management strategies that involve the use of a limited number of employees who are associated with many other workers who instead offer services related to specific orders/projects.

The employment of self-employed workers is therefore massive. However, working conditions are very different in terms of autonomy, remuneration, protection, etc. This overlapping seems particularly high in creative industries like advertising, design, film, television, and music (Hartley, 2005). The creative industries are characterized by high internal heterogeneity ranging from high security to high vulnerability of working conditions (...). Indeed, next to workers employed in large enterprises with high wages, good employment conditions and often stable contracts, there are independent producers or quasi-independent subsidiaries serving larger firms (UNESCO, 2013) or workers straddling between self-employment and economically dependent condition.

The chance of reducing these inequalities are assigned either to the extensions of dependent workers' protections to those historically excluded, or to the action of new organizational subjects that try to leverage the advantages of the two different conditions.

Compared to the second option, in the creative sector there are different experiences of workers who have started the creation of new organizations based on a mix of cooperation mechanisms and welfare institutions. These new organizations can be defined as SOs for the ability to recombine resources and adapt to changed market conditions.

Alongside the possibility of guaranteeing more stable income conditions and greater protection, the objective is above all to manage the market. First, the goal is to make stable the multiple networks between workers and contractors. Second, the value chain is linked above all to knowledge, information and reputation, acting on intangible assets and spreading trust both among workers within the organization and outside with customers and clients. (Filos 2005).

In these organizations the presence of hybrid professions is functional to the competitive logic and adaptation to the environment of the SO. On the one hand, they ensure the maintaining a double bond with the internal organization and the external market by encouraging continuous processes of acquisition and redefinition of skills and networks. On the other hand, they manage medium-high skill workers that use their skills without the need to choose between the status of an autonomous or dependent worker, seizing the advantages and opportunities of both conditions.

However, as shown by the research carried out on the networks, these new forms give rise to complex and contradictory situations (Grimshaw and Rubery 2005).

The coexistence of divergent objectives within the organization, makes difficult to define coherent and homogeneous human resource management practices (Scarbrough, 2000; Grimshaw and Rubery 2005).

For example, hybrid professionals not only have greater difficulty in identifying power and control, but also live a condition of greater individualization of their own chances and opportunities within the company.

Within these organizations is then interesting to understand how resources are distributed, who or which groups have access to them, and therefore if there is a reduction of inequalities or if they are strengthened or replaced.

2.2 Boundary works

The persistence and creation of new conditions of inequality will be analyzed by using Lamont's (2002) concept of 'boundary work'. The adoption of this framework allows to explain the relational dynamics and processes at the intersection of cultural, cognitive and strategical aspects which foster uncertainty by shaping inequality among members of SO

'Boundary work' refers to the process of creation, maintenance and disruption of boundaries that structure and characterize the labor market. These are objective boundaries, that is, dependent on individual characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, etc.), or subjective in which the reference is to symbolic, institutional and working practices (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010).

Boundaries must be drawn to determine who receives which scarce resources and in what order. As such, boundary-setting processes, for example in the organizational context, can be intimately tied to (re)producing 'unequal access to an unequal distribution of resources' (Lamont and Molnár, 2002, p. 168).

The boundary work, however, are distinct from the practices, they serve in fact to establish which practices are legitimate and therefore which practices are functional to support the jurisdictions between the groups. This distinction is useful because it allows to understand the mechanisms that produce stability or change within different organizational contexts (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). In the debate the efforts of actors to establish,

expand, strengthen or weaken boundaries (Llewellyn, 1998; Arndt and Bigelow, 2005) have been variously described. For this work, are useful mainly the studies on the processes of preservation and defense of the boundaries, made by sociology of work and professions (Abbott, 1988; Bechky 2003; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005).

In these studies boundary work are not only a symbolic concept for understanding social classifications but also a construction of a social space, such as the space of knowledge (Gieryn 1999) or the space of professions (Abbott 1988, 1995). Building these spaces implies that boundary can be either a clear line of demarcation between the jurisdictions of different professions or an ambiguous and elastic area in which professions have certain degrees of control. Such blurred boundaries in professional life calls for a more nuanced conceptualization of boundary work. Next to the mainly conflicting process of boundary making by which a profession distinguishes itself from other professions or nonprofessional groups in order to carve out a jurisdictional area for itself in the social space of work there are also the processes of boundary blurring. The latter refers to the opposite process of hybridization (Bauböck and Rundell 1998; Liu 2008; Wimmer 2008), by which a profession seeks to resemble another profession in order to make the boundary area between them ambiguous and porous, sometimes giving birth to hybrid professionals.

The role of organizations lies in the boundary maintenance processes. In this case we observe not an action performed directly by professionals, but a mediating action made by a third actor who has interests and capacity in mediating the jurisdictional conflict between the two professional groups.

In the case of creative professionals, organizations, due to the lack of legitimating bodies, seem to represent a system to support normative recognition processes. Legitimation would be based on the reputation of the organization able to recruit professionals, train and enable them to practice the profession according to the safety rules provided by the law.

Against this backdrop our research, by focusing on a specific organization (a cooperatives of creative workers) highlight if and to what extent the boundary work performed by professionals and organization, in order to delineate their jurisdictions, legitimize their monopoly, defend their working space from the others, create inequalities among professionals.

In order to analyze the creation of boundary work we examine first the strategy of single professionals for making or blurring Boundary.

Second the way in which the emergence of a social cooperative that organizes creative professionals, affects their work and life experience within a changed and highly fragmented labor market (i.e. boundary maintenance).

3 The case study

The case study presented concerns a social cooperative, which as a smart organization (SMD as a pseudonym), involves around 8000 workers within the cultural and creative sector in Italy.

SMD can be considered a smart organization as it combines different logics and develops a reticular structure oriented to pursue the need of market and supply. More specifically SMD works as a cooperative platform knowledge-driven, networked, and dynamically adaptive to the market (Matheson & Matheson 2001).

SMD, active since the late nineties in Italy, has entered in a regulatory vacuum for the so-called “creative” workers who are historically characterized by great informality. SMD, created by creative workers, especially performers and musicians, aware of working in a rapidly expanding market, driven by new digital technologies, has pursued a multi-faceted action (recruiting, matching, intermediations, influence) following the smart organization strategies. First, the attempt is to valorize the multiple interconnection networks between people and organizations in whatever role they may be in. Second, the focus is on a new concept of value linked to knowledge, information and the brand by acting on intangible assets and spreading trust both among the workers, and externally in relationships with customers and suppliers (Filos 2005).

The research was carried out from September 2018 to March 2019. In-depth interviews were conducted with the management of the SO, the CEO and the managers of the three professional areas considered: the technicians (audio and video), photographers and video makers. The three groups of professionals were chosen based on the number and weight within the SMD.

Management interviews have allowed us to identify not only the most significant professional groups within the organization, but also to proceed with the organization of focus groups (FGs).

Four FGs were held: the first 2 involved the audio and video technicians (20 participants for FGs, 40 subjects in all), the third the photographers (15), the fourth the video makers (15). The subjects were selected for the profession, also for age (between 20 and 55 years), gender (heterogeneous groups for photographers and video makers, while for technicians only men because it is a masculine sector) and seniority of membership in the SMD.

4 Smart for whom? Empirical findings

The perfect coherence with the push towards managerialization on SMD professionals is focused on two objectives. The first is the professionalization of work. Through a method of soft coordination among the members, which directs them to define a minimum wage and supports them in updating skills, with a basic training system (security and updating on technical instruments). The second is the implementation of a cost reduction system by providing a support system on tax and social security aspects, to maximize income and guide professionals in the labyrinth of deductions and tax relief.

The third is to try to get a sort of monopoly in managing the creative labor market. SMD has worked to expand its membership through reputational dynamics between clients; institutions and workers. Compared to clients, has operated through the enhancement based on the high professionalism of their members and compliance with safety regulations. On the institutional side through influence and lobbying actions both with the unions and with local and national institutions and policy makers. Finally compared to workers through the promotion of different services and training. SMD promotes an extensive and cumulative recruitment strategy aiming to

widen first its sphere of action to represent the highest number of workers in the sector. Second to increase employment opportunities for the enterprise as labor intermediators.

However, these actions, although extended, seem to suggest the absence of an organizational action aimed at rebalancing the conditions of the entering professionals. A generically inclusive model which however lacks managerial practices and logic that effectively implementing this inclusion.

Compared to the strategies of professionals, both differentiation processes and hybridization processes emerge. In the Boundary making process the absence in this sector of specific legal or educational requirements, supports the maintenance of subjective boundary work (Lamont, 2002).

Besides the strong masculinization of some of these professions (technicians and videomakers), it is above all the age and professional experience that determine the quality of work. Construction strategies are therefore aimed above all at keeping closed the possibility of access to quality and better paid jobs, forcing other professionals, especially the younger ones, to choose a work method based on the number of customers rather than the quality of work.

At the same time, the revolution offered by digitalisation which has changed creative work, above all with respect to technical tools, opens up also interesting hybridization spaces between the skills possessed by new professionals and the relational capital of older professionals. As shown by other research (Liu 2011; 2017) networks are fundamental in Boundary blurring mechanisms. Professionals develop expertise and fight for jurisdictions in the social space of work, but they also build networks to consolidate the profession, expand their expertise, and create a distinctive team for providing specialized services. The focus groups highlighted how the possibility of meeting very different professionals in SMD is one of the major elements of commitment and loyalty to the company. The exchange that can occur between practitioners in the same profession, between different professions, between professions and clients does not demarcate or blur jurisdictional boundaries but facilitates the flow of skills, socio-economic capital, and other resources between two or more actors.

In the subjective construction of these boundary work, however, it must be emphasized that SMD has exercised a compliant neutrality to the mechanisms of boundary making and boundary blurring, useful in consolidating its reputation both internally and externally. In supporting the maintenance of objective boundary work (gender; age and social capital), SMD, internally, manages to maintain its ability to attract new membership, validating and confirming the goodness and competitiveness of a managerial choice open to different types of professionals. Externally, the result is a strengthening of its leadership position in the market.

Instead the support for processes of blurring boundaries, internally have offered many professionals the opportunity to qualify on emerging and niche professions or to expand their customer portfolio by entering markets from which they were excluded. Externally, it guaranteed SMD the possibility of offering a team of professionals able to provide a service capable of covering the various professional skills required above all from orders with higher profitability and remuneration.

Compared to the processes of boundary maintenance, the analysis revealed that SMD acts without paying attention in its managerial practices to the rebalancing of the various starting conditions. The distribution of resources, as well as the possibility of making a career or being included in training systems reproduces the

subjective boundaries. The recruitment process remains shaped within the organization following a strong path dependency of boundaries historically produced and reproduced within the professional groups.

Some professions, i.e. the audio and video technicians confirm as young-male-dominated sectors. The exclusion of women and mature workers is justified on the basis of two elements. On the one hand, the tools and working methods have been able to count on technological innovation that has increased their performance in terms of quality, decreasing the working time. However, these improvements have not been able to make work neutral with respect to physical strength, which remains an essential element to practice such works. On the other hand, the working schedule is organized on the customer's need to minimize working time as the main cost-cutting strategy. This creates for women an imbalance system especially with the care loads, and for mature workers physical effort is considered too demanding.

Similarly training deployed by SMD meets two needs. The first reputational, creates and reproduces the SMD's positioning as attentive and updated on safety through a system of certification, that provide a space in the market of high-level orders, with public and private actors linked to local and national cultural events and production. This type of training is offered free to all members of the organization, which also uses it as a strategy to maintain quality or at least fair wages. The second profitable, regards the specialist training, linked to the use of specific equipment, or specialized skills are voluntary and financially dependent on the worker. This managerial strategy has the effect of reproducing inequalities along the subjective boundary of individual socio economic capital. It is in fact consequent to the willingness of the individual worker to finance himself the specific training, which opens to better quality jobs and greater income. This dual training creates a polarization of skills, which results in the formation of "non-competing groups" within the same SMD members.

Finally the career paths follow the boundaries built through the managerial strategies in the previous steps, strengthening the segmentations both inside and outside the organization. Within SMD, for example, the organizational practice that involves the purchase and sharing between workers of expensive and innovative tools, if on the one hand meets the need to lower the production costs for the individual worker, on the other strengthen segmentations within the professional groups based on the personal of SEC. These practices indeed reproduce inequality because it structures the possibility of the workers to develop the skills necessary to use these technologies and instruments, competences achievable through the training paid by the worker.

5 Conclusion

The analysis showed how SMDs compliant neutrality to the mechanisms of boundary making and boundary blurring with the active processes of boundaries maintenance, has consolidated rather than reduced inequalities among professionals.

In the SO, workers belonging to the same professional group can have a very different weight, in organizations so dependent on the external environment, starting for example from the different relational capital they carry.

The analysis of the mechanisms used by the organization to make some internal functionings homogeneous and standard can represent a further creation of barriers producing new segmentations among the different professionals. The opportunity, for example, to have access to a series of services offered by SDM may however remain subordinate to the possession of some resources not equally distributed because protected by the construction of subjective boundary work mechanisms.

Although SMD remains a market player, developing a management practice geared towards enhancing diversity could represent a win-win solution for the organization and its members (Kirton and Greene, 2015). From this point of view it is useful to recover the distinction between equality and equity. The second assumes that in the organization corrective measures are introduced to support the conditions of groups or individuals in conditions of greater disadvantage (Guy and McCandless, 2012), thus acting as a substantial and not only formal rebalancing of the conditions of disadvantage.

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