

Stream 2. Critical Management Studies
Competitive Session

Coworking: locating community at work

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ABSTRACT: *Coworking is a contemporary phenomenon that has caught the eye of many in search of 'the future of work'. Its lead protagonists purport to offer innovative opportunities through collaborative communities, which appeal to those who have lost faith in conventional organisations' and traditional institutions' ability to lead positive change in society. Through critical ethnographic narrative, I aim to make sense of the function of community symbolism in coworking. Using critical social theory, I find organisational influences on community to identify coworking as a key structural component of contemporary social conservatism.*

Keywords: Collectives and communities, critical social theory, critiques of bureaucracy, oppositional social movements, theories of identity.

INTRODUCING COWORKING

As I reach for the hummus I hear a voice bellow over the chatter: *"Don't forget everyone... this a shared space. We all eat together, so let's all clean up together. When you're finished eating, please rinse your plates and stack them in the dishwasher. When it's full, switch it on; when it's done, empty it."* I turn to the new guy and point out the mirror next to the sink – above it, a sign reads: "The Hub Dishwasher".

Most of its members would agree that the weekly Mixed Bag Lunch event at Hub Melbourne is emblematic of what is different about coworking. On the face of it, it is a simple affair where we each bring an inexpensive ingredient to share around the kitchen's 'barn door' table, make lunch together, and catch up. It is one event of many through which the Hub community comes together.

Community has come to mean something to Hub Melbourne members in a short time. Having opened its doors a little over two years ago in March 2011 it now has a membership

in excess of 700 who come not just to work, but to fulfill its promise of *collaboration* and *innovation* – coworking in this place offers far more than hot-desking for freelancers (Butcher, 2013a). “*Every single thing in here is just such a massive change from the corporate environment that I’ve come from*” (Ella Shay, *HUB Stories - Small Business Teams on Vimeo*, 2013; 1:04). What Ella is telling us is that Hub Melbourne symbolises something different to other workplaces she has encountered. In the same short film, other coworkers describe how they use coworking spaces differently to how they perceive they might use spaces in other forms of organisation, and how spaces change in this place. And in commissioning the film, the organisation that manages Hub Melbourne, is promoting its service as an alternative place in which its members can work in ways not possible elsewhere. The symbolism present in this place sets the boundaries of its community against others (Cohen, 1985).

Thus first impressions of Hub Melbourne are of something new and different, something not easy to describe. When asked what coworking is, I often advise enquirers to go see for themselves. And many do. Coworking is a burgeoning contemporary global phenomenon exemplified by places such as Hub Melbourne. With the promise of collective ways of working, that deliver innovative possibilities, Hub Melbourne attracts freelancers, new venture start-ups, small businesses, government institutions, and large corporations. The potential of community is ‘ripe for the picking.’

As a coworker and researcher, I do not wish to pluck that potential but instead understand what is different about this community. My aim in writing this paper is to understand the embodiment of community in this workplace (Pink, 2008). I seek to make sense of coworking, and offer a critical explanation for the use of community symbolism at Hub Melbourne, from a bricolage of shared experiences, fieldnotes, photographs, film, social media discussion threads and other artefacts gathered during the first two years of my time as a coworker in that place (after Cunliffe, 2003). I thus offer a theoretical conceptualisation of coworking via critical ethnography to question the ethics and values of community commitments and uncover political agendas (Thomas, 1993).

Over my two years as a coworker to date, I have intermittently worked in the spaces provided by Hub Melbourne (at one time, one day per week), engaged in social media discussions on the community's Yammer network, participated in events organised by community members and management, organised and hosted events myself, met with fellow members to discuss collaborative opportunities and offer support, informally promoted Hub Melbourne to curious others, and have brought its management and members into the classroom to discuss coworking and entrepreneurship with undergraduates. I have also briefly experienced three other Hub coworking places in London. From the outset, I have been explicit about this ethnographic inquiry, but this is supplementary to my main purposes for being there – to write in a place that is neutral to my office and my home; and to be surrounded by like-minded people. I am thus aware of and account for my intersubjective reflexivity in this research (Cunliffe, 2011), offering a realist narrative from shared experiences that depict the function of coworking symbols (Bruner, 1991; Van Maanen, 2011).

Theoretically, the sociology of community (Bauman, 2001; Cohen, 1985; Delanty, 2010) is used to critique the symbolism experienced at Hub Melbourne. I uncover a collective sense of belonging (Butcher, 2013b) facilitated by the Hub Melbourne organisation. The function of which is to position this coworking place as "*the future of work*" (Rick Chen, *HUB Stories - Small Business Teams on Vimeo*, 2013; 4:30). Consequently I find coworking to be a key structural component of a contemporary social movement that Richard Sennett (2012) calls social conservatism. While 'traditional' notions of community set boundaries against 'modernity', I find its symbolism is wilfully employed here as part of a neo-liberal entrepreneurial endeavor (after Gill, 2013). I therefore problematise this conceptualisation, and reflect on its interest to the discipline (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011).

BOUNDARIES OF COMMUNITY

The idea of community is seductive. Offers of communal harmony, cooperation, and mutuality promise escape from the established order of society and alternative utopian forms

of existence (Kanter, 1972). Community is commonly conceptualised as anti-establishment and anti-organisation (Bauman, 2001; Calhoun, 1983; Cohen, 1985; Kanter, 1972). Community members set boundaries against the constitutive outside (Cohen, 1985), creating a warm, homelike place that is resistant to intrusion (Bauman, 2001). What bind a community are shared understandings about what it is to belong together. These come from a distinctiveness and sameness within (Bauman, 2001). Kinship bonds are forged and friendships are gained through symbolic interaction (Cohen, 1985).

This dichotomous, resistant, nostalgic grand narrative can be traced to the beginnings of social theory through Tonnies' conceptualisations of '*Gemeinschaft*' ('traditional' community) and '*Gesellschaft*' ('modern' society) (Calhoun, 1983), and perpetuated by the first generation Chicago School (Cohen, 1985). Though, like Tonnies, Durkheim witnessed a disintegration of social order as a consequence of transitions to urban industrial society, he found Tonnies' dichotomy problematic (Campbell, 1981; Cohen, 1985; Delanty, 2010). Instead, Durkheim sought to explain the anomie of 'modern' life and secular morality, and offer solidarity as a solution to integrate community and society, and enable those in the West to regain a sense of belonging (Campbell, 1981; Starkey, 1992). This thoroughly 'modern' form of collectivism, he thought would situate community in the flux of 'modernity', giving it structure through organisation. Durkheim thus becomes problematic to those social scientists resistant to the notion of structuring and organising community and who seek nostalgically to position community as distinctly 'pre-modern' (Cohen, 1985; after Staught & Turner, 1988; Turner, 1995). The survival of 'traditional' community against the incursion of 'modern' society has, thus long been a preoccupation of the social sciences (Delanty, 2010). Durkheim has even been accused of attempting to 'kill off' the notion community; yet it keeps 'bouncing back' (Mulligan & Nadarajah, 2012).

Durkheim's conceptualisation of solidarity though offers is opportunity to situate the symbolism of community in organised settings, giving them purpose. With 'modernity' and its organisation comes entrepreneurialism (Gill, 2013). This neo-liberal venture is mythologised as an individualist pursuit, but is instead collectively enabled through solidarity

networks such as the tech start ups in Palo Alto. As Richard Sennett (2012) illustrates, contemporary entrepreneurial collectives mobilise to form social movements whose purposes are to achieve social and economic change through the non-resistant means of social conservatism. Community in this context thus is not a place in which to retreat from societal flux but a place in which to confront it and address it.

Hence it must be asked whether such organised entrepreneurial collectivism is community. Some might instead view it as a rhetorical ‘spray-on solution’ to achieving organised solidarity (Bryson & Mowbray, 1981). It is, after all, possible to construct an ‘edifice of signs’ to create social order without imposing upon a group (Dillistone, 1986). What may appear to represent traditional community may not be that at all. If community is merely an aesthetic device to build solidarity, true bonds cannot be forged (Bauman, 2001). Thus surely if members seek ‘traditional’ forms of collective belonging, but find it to be something entirely different will this perpetuate rather than resolve their anomie? This dilemma thus speaks directly to Durkheim’s central concern: *“[w]hen people lose their sense of belonging to a group and become out of touch with the form that the group gives to their lives, they lose their own identity, their sense of place, their commitment to what they believe to be worthwhile activities and so any realistic hope of a meaningful existence”* (Campbell, 1981). What this paper aims to understand are the symbols and rituals used to create a form of coworking collectivism. Consequently I aim to offer an explanation of coworking as community, and reopen the debate through this conceptualisation. Hence this research can begin to assist coworking protagonists in distinguishing their ‘modern’ reality from a ‘traditional’ imaginary. These two forms are all too often collapsed into one (Bauman, 2001) because their symbols are imprecise and subjective, conveying no inherent meaning per se (Cohen, 1985).

COMMUNITY AT WORK

For many new Hubbers, the weekly Mixed Bag Lunch is their first collective experience of Hub Melbourne. This coming together follows the Thursday morning Open

House, in which the Host offers a walkthrough its different spaces. When led into the kitchen, newcomers enter a utopian ideal of communal work, with volunteers having left their morning's work to slice homegrown tomatoes, plate up freshly made potato salad and set the table while discussing the day's hottest topics on the Yammer feed. The warmth of this welcome offers stark contrast to their commute through the city to this top floor oasis. Harmony, cooperation, and mutuality replace conflict, competition, and exploitation (after Kanter, 1972).

Insert figure 1 about here

From the communal kitchen, past the indoor garden, to the lounge room-like event space, Hub Melbourne is somewhere few will feel uncomfortable. That is not to say all will want to work here, but it can feel more like home than work (see figure 1). It can also just as easily feel like a classroom or design studio, as desks are wheeled away, and whiteboards are slid in. When commissioning architects to expand the place, Hub Melbourne's CEO not only spoke of co-creation, but practiced it. Several consultations with members created a long list of wants and needs, translated into modular spaces to host the day-to-day of work, learning events, town hall meetings, and anniversary parties; the disco ball was also on the list too. Coworking at Hub Melbourne offers more than a desk, Wi-Fi, print services and meeting spaces. It is a shared place in which we talk of belonging together as a community.

So when we speak of community what do we mean? Reminders are all around; it is hard not to think of it as a community place. The signs are clear. While many symbols are co-created by members within spaces, others have been initiated by the organisation. Polaroid photos are taken of each member by the Host and pinned to the communal pin board. Together, these are surrounded by business cards, notices, and event fliers. Meanwhile stickers commissioned by the Connections Catalyst to stamp our almost obligatory MacBooks with the declaration that "*Hubbers do epic shit*", complement the logoed t-shirts advising "*keep calm and Hub on*". Having a limited print run, they afford community status and make a clear statement to outsiders. While the ideas for these emblems were co-created through Friday night discussions over drinks and polls on the Yammer feed, they were organised. The

Host and Connections Catalyst are key roles in coworking. While non-invasive, one welcomes individuals into the place, while the other matches us up with likeminded peers. Though some bonds are forged serendipitously, many are ‘curated.’ This passive form of organisation is necessary to connect diverse individuals to stimulate the innovative possibilities of this ‘collaborative ecosystem’ (Krauskopf, 2012). Case studies of its success abound. Apparently chance discussions over lunch lead to new business ideas (*Hub Stories - Eyal Halamish on Vimeo, 2012*), and new ventures flourish (*Hub Stories - Watt Else on Vimeo, 2012*).

Regular ‘town hall meetings’ offer all a voice in deciding the community’s present and future, and self-organised clubs and interest groups solidify existing bonds, and give purpose to membership. Being a Hub Melbourne member brings with it certain forms of conformity despite the diversity. One member reaching the end of his first week confided in another that over the weekend he’d trade in his Windows laptop for an Apple. While there is diversity of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and career, shared symbols and rituals displace difference.

Insert figure 2 about here

Membership rituals are pervasive. As with observations of what technologies are used, we learn to work together by sharing and merging practices at learning events and informal gatherings. Another piece of the coworking jigsaw is thus learning. Whether sharing ancient tea-making rituals (see figure 2), teaching juggling, or debating applied integral theory, we have a shared sense of advancement. This collective learning informs self and community to foster a shared purpose that we can take together outside of Hub.

Increasingly, our collaborative ecosystem has solutions to offer others. Many members arrive with nothing more than a will to belong, but soon find ourselves part of a conversation. For some that conversation is nothing more than a pleasant distraction from the day job; for others it is a chance to make a difference. Hub Melbourne offers incubation. Groups such as the Better Business Club, and the Conscious Capitalism collective aim to support the growth of the community and offer alternative business solutions. Our diverse

talents coagulate to bring new ideas to old problems. At Hub Melbourne, coworking is fast becoming a movement.

SOME EARLY CONCLUSIONS

This is the beginning of a tale. In writing this preliminary narrative I realise the complexity of the debate. At Hub Melbourne we are experiencing a form of collectivism that is either reframing the dichotomous conceptualisations of community and organisation or merely revisiting Durkheim. It is either a convergent phenomenon or is simply re-emergent. At this point you either want this tale to continue, or see no new contribution. It is symptomatic of the community debate.

Whilst I have a wealth of artefacts, this brief paper merely begins to explain how community symbolism is embodied through coworking. Hub Melbourne's symbols and rituals are wilfully 'curated' to organise a purposeful form of collectivism. As a collective of (mostly) entrepreneurs in a co-created place managed by an entrepreneurs, it organisation is passive yet pervasive. The notion of organised community is often viewed as problematic (Bauman, 2001; Bryson & Mowbray, 1981; Cohen, 1985), but this contemporary move to create a nostalgic aesthetic to foster cooperation might be seen as successful. Exponential growth in membership and new venture case studies have led to interest from not just entrepreneurs but also government and big business. The very institutions this coworking community positions itself against seek to pluck its innovative potential.

As institutions and organisations recognise their diminishing ability to provide meaningful contributions to society, they look to entrepreneurial ventures and 'new' forms of organisation such as coworking (Butcher, 2013a). Coworking communities mobilised as at Hub Melbourne offer alternatives. Those who are entrepreneurially minded now look to such forms of collectivism instead of to institutions. And those institutions they shun follow them there. Coworking in this form is at the core of contemporary social conservatism (after Sennett, 2012).

Though its protagonists leverage the 'old' to offer something 'new', they should heed

the warnings of bygone tales. The utopia of the commune is often short lived. Constructed communities that do gain some longevity quickly lose their vitality. The symbols and rituals of their originators can all too easily descend into institutionalised routines that offer no meaning to successors (Kanter, 1972). It is this that further research will focus on.

For now though, I offer a reconceptualisation that negates the theoretical tension between community and organisation. Hub Melbourne might instead be seen as a place in which there are spaces for dispositions (Bourdieu, 2005). It a place of organisational becoming (after Butcher, 2013b). The structuring structures of the organisation, and structured structuring by the community combine to create habitus – spaces in which members co-create meanings. While communal harmonies prevail today, praxis and habitus may shift and change to cope with restructuring and changing patterns of dominance. This coworking place may become something entirely different as its membership transitions. And indeed, other forms of coworking already exist. Adopting Bourdieu’s conceptualisation may be less alluring than Tonnies’ or Durkheim’s, but he does not over promise. It may be that community is not the ‘co’ in coworking. This is not the end of this tale.

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Figure 1: Symbolising coworking



Figure 2: Sharing rituals

