Towards an Economy of Encounters? A critical study of affectual assemblages in coworking

Mikko Jakonen[a,*], Nina Kivinen[b], Perttu Salovaara[c], Piia Hirkman[b]

[a] Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, 40014 University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland
[b] Åbo Akademi University, School of Business and Economics, Fänriksgatan 3B, 20500 Åbo, Finland
[c] Stern School of Business, 44 West 4th Street, New York, NY 10012, New York University, USA

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Coworking spaces have been established in great numbers around the globe over the past 10 years. Previous studies on coworking spaces argue that these spaces are designed to enable serendipitous encounters. Here we introduce the concept of an economy of encounters, arguing that both intended and unintended encounters have become a form of production in the knowledge-based new economy. This paper draws upon the critical analysis of three case studies of different coworking settings − two open coworking spaces and a corporate coworking office. Following Deleuze and Guattari, we see coworking spaces as affectual assemblages that create affects that push knowledge workers in flow and motion to enable the formation of new kinds of heterogeneous and constantly changing work communities, where serendipitous encounters become a force of production. We argue that this commodification of a social phenomenon, i.e. the intentional use of affectual assemblages of people, objects and ideas to create serendipitous opportunities, ignores the precariousness of contemporary work.

1. Introduction

In recent years, numerous coworking spaces have been established in particular in urban areas. Although the annual growth rate has according to the latest Global Coworking Survey declined from 88% in 2011 to 30% in 2016, the number of coworking spaces and members is growing steadily around the globe (Deskmag, 2017; Foertsch, 2017).

Coworking spaces are generally understood to be shared workspaces where freelancers and entrepreneurs can rent desk space for a membership fee (DeGuzman & Tang, 2011; Jones et al., 2009; Suarez, 2015). As an activity, coworking refers to people working alongside each other at a shared location, where people share not only an office space but also kitchens and lounges for both formal meetings and informal mingling. Thus, as an effect, coworking is claimed to produce unexpected encounters with strangers and these encounters are expected to eventually turn to fruitful ideas, concepts and solutions needed in the creative new economy (Hood, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2015). Similar ideas of coworking have been adopted in multipurpose office spaces in large corporations when refurbishing their office spaces into trendy open-plan spaces that include lounges, cafés, creative spaces and other amenities traditionally not associated with an 'office' (Saval, 2014). Hence, coworking spaces and coworking as a practice are at the centre of changing post-industrial work, a manifestation of what is often called the new economy or the sharing economy.

Conceptualizing an emerging phenomenon such as coworking is challenging as different discourses around coworking are only developing (cf. Spinuzzi, 2012; Waters-Lynch, Potts, Butcher, Dodson, & Hurley, 2016). The ideological discourse on coworking is based on an open coworking movement that highlights entrepreneurship and emphasizes how innovation is driven by collaborative practices. The Coworking Manifesto movement proposes coworking to become 'a new economic engine composed of collaboration and community' (cf. Coworking Wiki, n.d. ; DeGuzman & Tang, 2011; Jones et al., 2009). Another discourse on coworking is being produced by the coworking industry with its own conferences, software, and publications aimed at space owners and managers on how to grow their business and community (Gandini, 2015; Suarez, 2015). A third discourse, fed by corporate and real estate interests adapts parts of the ideology and movement that fit corporate interests (Bouncken, Clauß, & Reuschl, 2016; Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017; Hood, 2015).

Coworking is attracting attention by academics in different fields. As a recent phenomenon, academic studies thereof have been mainly explorative in nature (see e.g. Spinuzzi, 2012; [name omitted], 2015; Spreitzer, Bacevice & Garrett, 2015). Various sources provide different classifications of coworking. Potts and Waters-Lynch (2016) divide

these into serviced offices, coworking and a mixed form; Kojo and Nenonen (2016) into public offices, third places, collaboration hubs, coworking hotels, incubators and shared studios; and Salovaara (2015) into jellies, traditional coworking spaces, hubs for specific groups of professionals, accelerators for high-growth start-ups and office hotels. Beyond these typologies, there are coarser and finer approaches, such as Pearce-Neudorff's (2014) division between hackerspace, coworking space, makerspace, and innovation lab, and Kropp's (2017) nine forms of coworking that range between high-end full-service coworking and coffee shops and condominium lounges. A study by Bouncken et al. (2016) of coworking spaces in Asia, distinguishes between corporate coworking spaces (i.e. spaces within large corporations) and commercial coworking spaces (i.e. spaces provided by space managers and owners). The studies of coworking spaces so far show that the use and practices that construct these spaces can, therefore, be very different. However, it seems that space managers and users of coworking spaces strongly believe in this form of organizing in addressing contemporary needs of flexibility in knowledge work.

The ideology of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship that is embedded in the coworking discourse, also highlights its more critical features. The real driving force of coworking and the perceived value of coworking spaces is seen in the new organization of work that brings together individual and heterogeneous workers in the same space, which eventually is said to lead to the formation of new kinds of changing and living communities. The precariousness (e.g. Gill & Pratt, 2008; Sennett, 2006; Standing, 2011) and mobility (Jeanes, Loacker, Śliwa, & Weiskopf, 2015; Küpers, 2015; Rodda, 2015) of knowledge workers is also seen to be at the centre of this need for opportunities and creating work communities and collaboration (Capdevila, 2013; Garrett et al., 2017; Merkel, 2015).

In this paper, we critically examine the nature of encounters in coworking and this ideology of coworking through the concept of an economy of encounters. With this concept we aim to bind together several different discourses and conceptualizations related to coworking, which argue that encounters have become a form of production in the knowledge-based new economy, as the new economy demands constantly new ideas, concepts, solutions, knowledge and other immaterial artefacts based on creative work, which can be created only through the social interaction and communities. Empirically, we have studied three different coworking spaces − an open plan coworking space, an activity-based office within a large corporation, and an office hotel and coworking space with both private and shared offices − which we see to represent the different types of coworking spaces.

We approach this economy of encounters in coworking spaces as affective assemblages. With this concept by Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987), we can recognize the work done for and in the economy of encounters. Affectual assemblages offer us a way to follow how these coworking spaces create affects that push heterogeneous and precarious knowledge workers in flow and motion, and why on the other hand people do not engage or seek encounters. Thus, by analysing coworking spaces as affectual assemblages consisting of space, people and objects, we are able to compare how different coworking spaces produce and enable encounters, and also to see how encounters are taking place in the living reality of these affectual assemblages. In short, we have studied how encounters appear and are talked about in the everyday practice of coworking.

2. Precarious knowledge work and serendipitous encounters

The increase in mobile, virtual, precarious, self-organizing and self-controlling work has influenced and continues to influence how work is organised and controlled in post-industrial societies. Office work and office design have adapted to the technological changes through the move from cellular offices to open plan offices with more flexible and versatile office arrangements such as activity-based offices referred to as 'the activity-settings approach' (Stone & Luchetti, 1985), 'club

offices' (Duffy, 1997) or 'collective offices' (Felstead, Jewson, & Walters, 2005; see also Halford & Leonard, 2005; Halford, 2005; Hislop & Axtell, 2007, 2009; Laing, 1997; Saval, 2014).

Within the coworking movement, coworking is seen as a profoundly new way of solving the problem of precarious work and private enterprising in the new economy or post-office knowledge economy (see for example Avdikos & Kalogeresis, 2017; Spinuzzi, 2012). The number of people doing knowledge work alone from their homes is increasing and more and more people find themselves in a precarious position, where the ideals of the new economy seem to be only partly fulfilled, if at all (Bresson, 2007; Cincolani, 2005; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Pennel, 2013). The coworking literature emphasizes how coworking spaces can solve the problems of the contemporary precarious workforce by offering an office space, which brings those who are working alone to work alone together. Coworking spaces function as hubs for chance encounters and community building, bringing people with different backgrounds together and offering opportunities for exchange (Gerdenitsch, Scheel, Andorfer, & Korunka, 2016; Lumley, 2014; Merkel, 2015; Spreitzer et al., 2015).

Current research argues that the key tenet and *raison d'être* of coworking is social interactions and encounters (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Spinuzzi, 2012; Spreitzer et al., 2015): coworking is considered as a site for knowledge exchange clusters and hubs (Capdevila, 2013; Pearce-Neudorff, 2014). Further, essentially to counter isolation of working from home, coworking spaces are seen as sites of social learning (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016), social support (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016), situated and unexpected encounters (Fabbri, 2016), and providing grounds for voluntary-based community-building (Garrett et al., 2017). It also functions as a focal (Schelling) point 'for finding people, ideas and other resources when workers lack the information necessary for coordination.' (Potts & Waters-Lynch, 2016) The value of coworking spaces is thus seen not only in the desk space they offer but in a new kind of open workspace that is based on a community of heterogeneous people encountering each other serendipitously.

There are only very few critical reviews of the coworking to date (Gandini, 2015; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). Karppi, Kähkönen, Mannevuo, Pajala, and Sihvonen (2016) argue that in affective capitalism 'encounters and the relations that emerge are surrounded by a vast array of technologies that produce, capture, valorise, commodify and eventually attempt to transform them into different modes of capital' (p. 10). These ideas of community and serendipitous encounters in the organization of coworking capture the tension between the planned and the designed workspace on one hand, and the free and individualist worker or entrepreneur on the other.

In recent literature, the phenomenon of encounters in coworking spaces has been conceptualized as serendipity or accelerated serendipity (DeGuzman & Tang 2011; Spinuzzi 2015; cf. Dew, 2009). Serendipity can be seen as unpredictable by definition, and thus unmanageable. However, according to Cunha, Clegg, and Mendonça (2010), there are different views on whether serendipity can be managed. By systematically tapping into various kinds of knowledge and managing an 'innovation pipeline', serendipity can be deliberately constructed. Serendipity can be also seen as a combination of planned and unplanned activities:

> …[M]anagers may need to accept that learning and discovery may be programmed but also, in some cases, non-programmed. (…) managers may facilitate strange connections, mix networks that normally do not blend and assume that organizing is as much about freeing than it is about controlling. (Cunha et al., 2010, 328)

The phenomenon where chance encounters create added professional, personal and economic value has, in the context of coworking, also been called 'asynchronous reciprocity' (Olma, 2013, p. 19). In Spinuzzi's (2015) framework, this kind of flexible organizing and ability to react to emergent issues is the basic principle of all edge adhocracies, organizations that are able to react to real-time changes in the business