



Solidarity as a byproduct of professional collaboration: Social support and trust in a coworking space



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ABSTRACT

This article investigates solidarity arising from economic exchange, by studying a multiplex network of collaboration, trust and social support. After a qualitative pre-study, we performed a full-network survey on a group of independent professionals sharing a coworking space and occasionally collaborating with each other. By running multivariate Exponential Random Graph Models, we showed that successful collaboration might not determine expectations of social support. However, these relationships were related to business-based trust ties, which were predicted by collaboration. Our results suggest that solidarity can emerge as a byproduct of peer economic exchange when trust mediates between professional relationships and expressive ties.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between economic exchange and solidarity is still a subject of debate in social sciences. On the one hand, some scholars suggest that successful economic interactions structured as “negotiated exchanges” (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1981; Molm, 2003) can generate solidarity, provided that joint bargaining promotes coordination of common interests between partners. The perception of cooperative attitudes would confer expressive value to the relationship (Lawler, 2001; Thye et al., 2002; Lawler et al., 2008; Kuwabara, 2011). On the other hand, other scholars argue that economic exchanges cannot easily generate solidarity, because negotiated agreements binding subjects' interaction tend to exacerbate conflict between their mutual interests. Moreover, by preventing individuals from mutually exploiting each other, an economic exchange would not allow partners to show their trustworthiness, thereby hindering the development of mutual trust, a crucial component of solidarity (Molm et al., 2000, 2006, 2007, 2009; Molm, 2003).

This paper aims to contribute to this debate by empirically studying the effect of economic exchange on expectations of social support in a group of ICT professionals working as independent freelancers, while sharing the same coworking space (DeGuzman and Tang, 2011). Our study was conducted in ‘Talent Garden Bres-

cia’ (TaG), a coworking space located in Brescia, Northwestern Italy. TaG was composed of 29 ‘residents’, who were mostly freelancers and small company associates. These included, for instance, software developers, web designers, photographers, graphic artists, and video makers, who worked on commissioned and subcontracted orders by external companies, such as start-ups, private companies or public administration. Mostly due to technological and business complementarity, they relied extensively on collaborations by formally and informally subcontracting activities to other residents.

This setting provided us with the opportunity to observe self-organized economic exchanges among peers who were free to select their partners outside the constraints of a formal organizational or hierarchical structure. Furthermore, due to the volatility of market demand by external clients and their moderate returns, these professionals engaged in multiple overlapping activities at the same time, increasing the likelihood of opportunistic behaviour against the sub-contractors (e.g., time delay in deliveries, quality shrinking). Therefore, this setting also provided us with the opportunity to consider economic exchanges where partners had to face the risk of being exploited. Finally, the absence of a formal organization allowed us to study expectations of social support among subjects who did not share any group-related collective interest.

We analyzed the multiplex network of professional collaborations, business-related trust, and expectations of social support among these professionals. We looked at social support – defined as the perceived or actual provision of material or emotional resources by others (Lin et al., 1986) – as one of the instances of “solidary behaviour” at a dyadic level (Lindenberg, 1998; see also

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Flache and Hegselmann, 1999a,b). It is interesting to note here that Lindenberg (1998, p. 63) claimed that ‘solidarity’ is a “behavioural pattern across five different situations”, i.e. “common good”, “sharing”, “need”, “breach temptation”, and “mishap”. Here, we looked only at a situation where an actor expects support from others in a situation of *need*. As a proxy for economic exchange, we analyzed professional collaboration between partners.

At the same time, we also analyzed the *structural logic* (Markovsky et al., 1988; Rank et al., 2010) of the network of expected social support emerging among collaborating partners. To do so, we assessed the impact of reciprocity (Wasserman and Faust, 1994) and closure (Davis, 1970; Holland and Leinhardt, 1971) independent of the multiplex effects of collaboration and trust.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The following section presents our research background, while Section 3 describes data collection and analysis. Section 4 discusses our results, while the final section summarizes the main findings and discusses limitations and prospects.

2. Research background

The importance of the “embeddedness” of an economy within social structures is a key point of sociological analysis (Granovetter, 1985). Social network research has shown that the control and exchange of social resources, such as advice or information, affect the performance of entrepreneurs and organizations through informal interpersonal relationships (e.g., Krackhardt, 1992; Ingram and Roberts, 2000; Lazega, 2001; Brass et al., 2004; Rank et al., 2010; Brailly et al., 2015), which often entail trust and support (Coleman, 1988, 1990; Granovetter, 2002). Though it is acknowledged that “most forms of social capital are created or destroyed as a byproduct of other activities” (Coleman, 1990, p. 317), we know less about the structural conditions under which instrumental relations, such as professional collaboration, develop into expressive ties (Ibarra, 1992), such as social support.

Social support mainly encompasses a *material* (or tangible) along with an *emotional* (or intangible) component, according to the nature of the resources which one is asked to mobilize in order to help the recipient (van der Poel, 1993; see also Lin et al., 1986). Research on social support has mainly focused on actual personal support networks (Hall and Wellman, 1985), by identifying certain regularities in the determinants of support relationships along individual lines. While kinship members are usually considered more important as a source of emotional support, workmates play a prominent role in the provision of material support (Wellman and Wortley, 1989, 1990; Wellman et al., 2001).

In this study, expectations of social support are looked at as instances of expected “solidary behaviour” (Lindenberg, 1998). This was suggested by past works in which solidarity was studied through the investigation of social support relationships. For instance, Flache and Hegselmann (1999a,b) studied the emergence of “solidarity networks” by simulating the exchange of “support” among heterogeneously motivated individuals. Moreover, Uehara (1990) analyzed the structural logic of solidarity by conducting an ethnography of the mobilization of support networks in a group of low-income African-American women in cases of job loss.

One of the most important facets of solidary behaviour is that its scope goes beyond one’s kinship or proximate social circle. More precisely, new social support relationships can be established between two individuals who were previously connected by other social relationships. Dyadic exchange relations provide individuals with opportunities to develop beliefs about each other that may trigger the change of that relation into a different one, or to develop new relations of different nature (Emerson, 1976; Molm and Cook, 1995). Following Granovetter’s claim that “[c]ontinuing

economic relations often become overlaid with social content that carries strong expectations of trust” (1985, p. 490), we argue that expectations of social support between two otherwise unrelated individuals might arise as the byproduct of an economic exchange relationship between them.

Exchange theorists (Homans, 1974; Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976; Molm and Cook, 1995) have provided a sound conceptualization of *economic exchange* as a specialized form of social exchange (Homans, 1974), which is often referred to as *negotiated exchange* (Blau, 1964; Lawler, 2001; Molm, 2003). In this conceptualization, economic exchange between two partners is defined as a bilateral transfer of resources which benefits both, upon a jointly negotiated agreement. The benefits yielded to both partners occur as two paired events, although the agreement is reached through a joint bargaining process. The terms of the agreement can be either binding or non-binding (Molm et al., 2009; Kuwabara, 2011).

Experimental research in social psychology has provided conflicting evidence on the effects of economic exchange on solidarity (Molm et al., 2000, 2007, 2009; Thye et al., 2002; Barrera, 2007; Lawler et al., 2008; Kuwabara, 2011). Some scholars suggest that economic exchange is more likely to prevent the emergence of solidarity than non-economic forms of exchange (see Molm, 2010 for a comprehensive account). The joint character of the decision-making process inherent in the negotiating activity and bilateral transfer of benefits during transactions, while providing room for cooperation, may also exacerbate at the same time the salience of conflict between the two partners’ interests (Molm et al., 2006). First, the bilateral structure of exchange heightens the perception of competition between partners, who can frame splitting benefits as a zero-sum game. Secondly, the instrumental and strategic nature of other partners’ commitment is made explicit by constraining exchange within the terms of a negotiated agreement (Molm, 2003; Molm et al., 2007). Finally, the most relevant point is that the act of establishing an agreement limits the exchange partners’ opportunity to form beliefs about each other’s trustworthiness, thus preventing the generation of trust. More precisely, even in case of a successful exchange, the existence of an agreement designed to neutralize structural risk would make an exchange partner attribute the cooperative behaviour of the other to the incentives or sanctions provided by the agreement terms, rather than to the partner’s benevolence (Molm et al., 2000, 2007; Molm, 2003).

Therefore, the risk of being exploited is a necessary condition for this kind of cognition-based trust (McAllister, 1995) to develop within an exchange relation. This is because it provides individuals with the opportunity to prove themselves to be trustworthy (Gambetta, 1988; Hardin, 2002; see also Kollock, 1994; Yamagishi et al., 1998). If subjects succeed in finding an agreement, trust is not particularly necessary for a positive outcome, as they can rely on assurance provided by the agreement (Yamagishi and Yamagishi, 1994; Malhotra and Murnighan, 2002). Instead, this kind of cognition-based trust would arise if one could believe that an exchange partner would not exploit him/her even if he/she had the opportunity to do so.

Nonetheless, other studies suggest that the structure of joint negotiation entailed by economic exchanges generates solidarity between the partners. This is achieved through a cognitive mechanism, which allows them to attribute the positive outcomes to themselves and their relationships as a unit (see Thye et al., 2002 for a review; see also Lawler et al., 2008). First, Lawler et al. (2008) showed that the character of “jointness” entailed by bargaining activity promotes coordination and the partners’ collective responsibility, which eventually increases the chances to reach an agreement. In these cases, the benefit of exchange can trigger positive emotions that individuals tend to link to collective responsibility. The relationship in itself is made more important by

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