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‘COLLECTIVE SPACE AND NEW PRACTICE EMERGENCE: THE CASE OF A FRENCH SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP COWORKING SPACE’

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long been interested in understanding the emergence of new practices. Recently, research has focused on the role of temporary, collective spaces, such as coworking spaces, maker spaces, accelerators, and incubators, in facilitating new practice emergence. A core insight from this literature is that ambiguity and openness (e.g. keeping the space open and relatively undefined in terms of its underlying meanings) facilitate experimentation around new ideas and activities, which can in turn support practice emergence. Yet, there is an inherent tension between the openness and ambiguity necessary for new practices to emerge within a space, and the stability required to reproduce and institutionalize these practices. Thus, we ask: what are the micro-processes by which the ambiguity and openness of a collective space are sustained over time?

To address this research question, we conducted a longitudinal qualitative case study of La Ruche (“the Beehive”) (2009-2021), a coworking space that was instrumental in the emergence of social entrepreneurship in France. Our findings show that a number of spatial mechanisms were designed as means to achieve the end of new practice emergence. However, over time, these mechanisms were gradually turned into ends in themselves and become disconnected from the new practice that they are meant to support – it is the space itself that acquired meaning for the coworkers, even after leaving the space. Therefore, such spatially-induced mechanism supports indirectly rather than directly the emergence and diffusion of new social entrepreneurship practices through the creation of a community around a new type of space (“The Beehives”), which spread throughout France starting from the first of these spaces located in Paris. We call this process spatial socialization – i.e., the process by which new members are induced and socialized into the activities and meanings of a new practice through their inclusion in a collective space.



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