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Third sector multilevel organizations and their relational outcomes: indications from a quantitative study in Italy

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Abstract

Social capital and social partnerships are interpretative categories which offered a scientific background for a quantitative research study conducted in Italy on 110 nationally-based prosocial multilevel organisations.

Empirical data show a significant correlation between the existence of social capital and the emergence of social partnerships.

The final results of this inquiry highlight the capacity to create social capital, the differences between bonding and bridging social capital, and the role and meaning of both types of social capital within the associative sphere and in the production of services.

Key-words: third sector, social capital, partnerships, social relations

1. Introduction

The third sector plays a specific role in the process of promoting a pluralistic welfare society thanks to new forms of social networks among

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public, private, and informal subjects based on horizontal subsidising (Anheier, Rossi, Boccacin, 2008).

In order to observe and understand this continuously changing sector and its contribution in terms of services and practices, we need interpretative categories able to explain the morphogenesis of the phenomenon (Archer, 2010). Two of these are social capital and social partnerships.

This paper will shed light on the specificity of nationally-based pro-social organizations operating in the third sector sphere and on their unique contribution as regards the generation of social capital and partnerships.

2. Fundamental concepts

The categories underpinning this investigation have to do with the conceptualization of pro-social associations and multilevel organizations, social capital, and partnerships.

2.1 Pro-social nationally-based associations and multilevel organizations

Nationally-based pro-social associations in Italy are defined as “recognised and not recognised associations, movements, groups, and their coordinations and confederations constituted for the purpose of conducting activities of social utility in favour of associates or third parties without a profit motive and with full respect for the associates’ freedom and dignity” (Italian Law 7 of December, 2000, n. 383, “Regulation of pro-social associations,” article 2).

This is a broad definition in which it is possible to include multiple associative forms that vary in relation both to the context within the sphere in which they operate as well as to the inner nature of their goals and modalities of action (Wolleback, Selle, 2002). As regards associations’ spheres of action, we find an abundant offering of interventions that range from child care, training, health, and social welfare services to activities pertaining to sports, art, scientific research, civil and environmental protection, consumer protection, the safeguarding of human rights and human welfare, and, more in general, social integration

These associations conduct non-profit activities inspired by altruism, giving, equity, reciprocity, and care for others; they include among their goals the promotion and strengthening of relational solidarity networks.

Multilevel organizations were chosen as the analytical unit, moreover: these are third sector formations that have a particularly complex organizational structure deriving from the intersection between internal dynamics and operative strategies exposed to continuous feedback processes coming from

the surrounding context. The multilevel dimension has to do with the organization's hierarchical structure as well as the different functions carried out by the various operational units and is often found at the origin of many social aggregates.

"We define as multilevel those organizations that offer support to other local affiliated groups, creating a network of associations articulated on one or more levels. (...) The central coordinating entity has different characteristics from affiliates, possessing different functions and purposes that are cross-sectional with respect to those of first level organisations" (Rossi, 2006, p.22).

Multilevel organizations offer support to other local affiliated groups, creating a network of associations articulated on one or more levels. The central coordinating entity has different characteristics from those of affiliates, with different functions and purposes that are cross-sectional with respect to those of first level organizations.

When considering organizational structure, we must look for the presence of different levels carrying out differentiated functions:

- the peripheral level, which delivers services and interventions;
- the central level, which has a service function with respect to the former.

Based on this distinction, it is possible to highlight a series of dimensions useful for apprehending the organisation's characteristics.

This set of elements makes it possible to define the association's "operative profile," which can be summarised in the following dimensions:

- *territorial distribution and activities dispensed*, which must be coherent with the conditions set at the start of the research: i.e., that the organisation must be present in at least three Italian regions, and it must have a prosocial function. These dimensions are mandatory, meaning, in effect, that they are conditions that must necessarily be met by the unit of analysis in order for it to be included in the sample under investigation;

- *the organisation's structural data*, which make it possible to apprehend its historical origins, juridical and fiscal form, enrolment in the appropriate national and regional registries, and the magnitude and types of available financial resources;

- *the users reached and the typology of people* who have benefited from the association's services.

2.2 *Social capital*

Social capital is a complex and multidimensional concept and has been a focus in sociological thinking with respect to its dimensions and the

differentiation of its forms (Castiglione, van Deth, Wolleb, 2006; Rossi & Boccacin, 2006a; Donati & Colozzi, 2011).

Social capital has been used as a concept synonymous with association, synthesising a series of dimensions that foster civic associations (Wollebaek & Selle, 2002). This thinking correlates social capital with collective cultural traditions or civic cultures belonging to a specific community or territory (Burt, 2005; Lewandowski, 2008); such cultures aim to promote associative cooperation among members residing in a particular geographic area; social capital, analysed from the perspective of the collective or community structure that determines subjects' individual agency (Loury, 1977; Lin, 2001; Van der Gaag, Snijders, 2004, 2005; Lin & Erickson, 2008), can be traced back to the concept of secondary associative social capital (Donati, 2007).

It became mainstream to associate the notion of social capital with that of social network and, later, with that of partnerships: using the notions of bonding and bridging networks, a distinction between bonding and bridging social capital was introduced.

Both strong and weak bonds play a fundamental role within networks in creating social capital (Koniordos, 2005), and each needs the other in order to achieve desired objectives (Granovetter, 1973).

From this perspective, social relations are seen as a determinant factor for promoting personal and social well-being. The propensity and capacity to cooperate as expressed by the members of a community can significantly influence social development in a given geographical area: indeed, social capital is understood as a crucial factor for the development of a community (Rossi, Boccacin, 2007, 2011).

As to multilevel organizations of a pro-social type, which are the object of this investigation, social capital can characterise three different phases of associative life and, as a consequence, can be embodied in different forms (Tronca, 2007; Donati & Solci, 2011). In the first phase, social capital is often present at the association's origin, which effectively constitutes its foundation according to modalities that are coherent with inputs and external feedbacks. In a second phase, social capital is intrinsic to the organization, which, by definition, is constituted by a series of relations that generate networks both vertically - hierarchically - as well as horizontally between levels that are equal among themselves.

In the third phase, social capital is the product of the association: it is the public good that the association generates or that can sometimes circulate in the sphere of partnerships. Thus, we infer that social capital is both *explanans* and *explanandum* -- origin and product of the association -- and, at the same time, that it carries out a fundamental function within the organization itself, allowing the different levels to remain connected and integrated.

When it is present, social capital constitutes a fundamental element that permeates and accompanies the life of multilevel pro-social organizations in which trust represents a very peculiar “object” in that it is an asset put into play both internally, among the different levels and places of coordination, and externally, as regards those who benefit from the organization’s services as well as the subjects which we could define as stakeholders. Trust thus emerges as a relational good, as the nature and foundation of the relations.

Reciprocity is a form of exchange in which the subject is aware that in giving something, he/she will receive something in exchange, not in purely economic terms -- the problem is not the equivalence of the goods involved -- but, rather, through an empowerment of the relation itself, which becomes stronger and increases its generative surplus.

Finally, a cooperative orientation constitutes the engine for the entire service activity carried out within the relations characterizing associative environments.

Considering the differentiation of the diverse functions carried out by both bonding and bridging social capital and the consequent forms that it assumes, it becomes possible to clarify, in the specific context of multilevel organizations (Putnam, 2003; Woolcock, 1998, 2001), what role trust, reciprocity, and a cooperative orientation play within them and what forms their interaction assumes.

2.3 Partnerships

Social partnerships are equal collaborations between third sector organizations, local public agencies and market enterprises, founded on reciprocal relations and voluntarily established, in which resources, capabilities, and risks are shared for the realisation of a multidimensional project not achievable by any of the individual entities (Newman, 2001; Powell, Geoghegan, 2004; Boccacin, 2009).

This definition of the concept of partnership can be seen to include the different conditions that must be met in order to realise a partnership of a social type.¹

The itinerary that led to the refinement of this definition started from a conception of partnership understood as a relational intertwinement and moved beyond reductionist meanings that understood it as a simple involvement or interaction among agencies and entities from different spheres and sectors with heterogeneous areas of expertise.

¹ For a reconstruction of the sociological debate regarding the concept of partnership, see Boccacin, 2009.

Thus, partnership is not a simple collaboration between two or more entities but is something that goes beyond this, putting into relation the identities, in addition to the specific know-how, of the various social subjects (Boccacin, 2005). It bases the different partners' remaining together on a context of trust and reciprocity that makes it possible to realise relations aimed at a specific social action (Newman, 2001; Powell, Geoghegan, 2004), thus well beyond the presence of only an instrumental goal. Wherever social partnerships are constituted and active with such characteristics, they can generate a distinctive added value.

The relational definition of the concept of partnership (Boccacin, Rossi, Bramanti, 2011) is founded on the free intentionality of the different subjects – third sector actors (volunteer organizations, social cooperatives, pro-social associations, pro-social foundations), public entities, and private organisms (Sellgren, 1990) -- to act in collaboration in accordance with a status of relational parity, which does not entail obliterating the partners' diversity, however, but involves specifically identifying and then valorising each one's subjectivity (Archer, 2003).

From the same perspective, Dekker qualifies partnership as a deliberate cooperative relationship characterised by mutual trust and respect that lasts over a prolonged period of time. Dekker (2010) defines partnership as a method for cooperative action founded on a commitment that is freely and mutually accepted by different actors positioned on the same level.

Mixed formulas, which carry out strategic intermediary functions in which responsibilities are shared, give rise to cooperation among different social actors through which they agree to work conjointly in order to achieve a specific goal (Bennett, Krebs, 1991).

The realisation of new forms of cooperation among the public, private, and voluntary sectors heralds a sort of trans-sectorial intertwining that represents something new in the panorama of contemporary societal configurations (Benington, Geddes, 2000).

An additional distinctive trait of social partnerships illuminated by the relational definition of this concept has to do with the realisation of partnerships in relationship to the sharing of goals by the different partners. In this connection, partnership is understood as "a cross-sector, inter-organizational group, working together under some form of recognised governance, towards common goals which would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to achieve if tackled by any single organization" (Armistead, Pettygrew, Aves, 2007, p. 214). Likewise, some French scholars underscore that the mutualistic input of different contributions as regards financing, human resources, etc. allows for the realisation of a shared project. Moreover, they emphasise that the specificity of social partnerships lies, first of all, in their being a common cause and a relation among a plurality of subjects,

making it possible to achieve a shared result (Brachet, 1994), and, secondly, in the identification of a collective actor that, with a view to social change, introduces diverse and pertinent modalities of action with respect to a shared and complex object (Dhume, 2002).

The objectives pursued by partnerships, whose multidimensional nature allows for a flexible approach in responding to social needs (Hardiman, 2006; Kazepov, 2005), can be understood as a sort of listening to the need for representation on the part of the local community's interests (Walker, Earles, 2008). The pooling of coordinated strategies in order to achieve this (Besse, Henrich, Lab, Lemoine, Pozzebon, 2010), making possible experimentation and innovation in responses through the realisation of participatory practices, on the part of citizens as well (Petrella, 2004).

Thus, actors come from different societal spheres and coalesce around a common agenda and organizational programme (Loncle-Moriceau, 2000), bringing their diverse experience, attitudes, and interests. They inject different cultures, values, and approaches to needs into partnerships, in this way contributing to the dynamism within the partnership (Frank, Smith, 2000), facilitating the pursuit of a shared understanding of social problems (Ebbinghaus, 2006) and, sometimes, allowing the partners to move away from defending their heterogeneous interests toward identifying a common interest of an inter-subjective type.

How are the roles of the actors involved in the partnership configured? As regards institutional subjects, which are usually present through local affiliates, we find both that they share public space with other social partners and that they redefine their role, which, from that of the 'provider' peculiar to institutional welfare state contexts, tends to become that of 'enabler' (Laino, Padovan, 2000).

Private actors inject into partnerships profits generated by the market that will be funnelled in part toward non-commercial purposes of a pro-social nature (Mackintosh, 1992), offering partnerships some guarantees for smooth functioning and stability based on economic efficacy; moreover, they contribute to enhancing the credibility of initiatives realised in partnership, thanks also to their reputation.

The unique expertise of third sector subjects in partnerships has to do with their proximity to the contexts in which social needs manifest themselves and with their relational capacity for offering personalised responses. Sometimes, this characteristic lends itself to creating a sort of limitation on the third sector actors' role as they become more involved in practical matters and less in planning interventions.

Like many polysemic concepts, that of partnership risks ambiguity and ambivalence (Boyd, 2002) both in terms of definition, in light of the meaning

that each cultural context tends to emphasise (Corcoran, 2006; Damon, 2009), as well as in terms of application, owing to different operative configurations present in various European countries.

Several elements allow us to better characterise this ambivalence: these are social partners' unequal capacity to influence political outcomes (Murray, 2006) and asymmetries between partners, whose codes of action are sometimes based on different presuppositions (White, Acheson, Scaramuzzino, Balian de Tagtachian, 2010).

The State's bureaucratized and centralised strategies (Powell, 2007), or plain and simple marketing strategies, can confine third sector organizations within subordinate and residual positions as regards their participation in the final decision making process.

One additional source of ambivalence that can connote partnerships' internal relational dynamics has to do with the diversity of organizational cultures that often characterises the entities involved and leads them to identify dissimilar and heterogeneous strategies for solving problems.

Even considering these non-linear tendencies in some contexts, the configurations in partnerships represent innovative forms of interaction between the macro level (social interactions between sectors and institutions), the meso level (interactions between formal, informal, or hybrid organizations), and the micro level (interactions between individuals in their respective organizations), which cut across different intervention sectors (Seitanidi & Crane, 2009; Waddock, 1988) by interweaving cross-sectionally, through innovative collaborative modalities, each partner's own organizational resources and capacities.

The sociological thinking relative to social partnerships was corroborated by investigations that observed networking configurations realised to deliver services to individuals and families. The findings from this research allow us to characterise partnerships as opportunities for valorising a multiplicity of socially active subjects through trust and cooperation.

These investigations revealed that good partnerships are rarely realised through the activation of symbiotic relationships among stakeholders, which instead can be harbingers of potential risks of organizational isomorphism (Di Maggio, Powell, 1983): on the contrary, the more the partners maintain their own specific identity and are open both to the expansion of networking through the inclusion of new subjects and to variation of the existing relational arrangement, the more useful and efficacious these configurations turn out to be.

It is just such a morphogenetic capacity that represents a qualifying trait that captures partnership forms in the process of becoming as well as in their outcome (Archer, 2010).

Pointing in an analogous direction is thinking that highlights partnerships as relational contexts within which “generative” exchanges can take place. Generativity is understood here as a possible outcome of the different actions carried out within the realm of partnerships: by disseminating good practices, it can inject a virtuous process into the delivery of original, innovative, and creative services (Vandamme, Blanco Gonzalez, Bouza Garcia, Schneider, 2009).

Of particular interest from a societal standpoint are community partnerships (Frank, Smith, 2000): these are situated within a specific territorial context and elicit active participation from the members of such an environment. Their actions, whose primary mission consists in the integration of social, economic, environmental, and cultural aspects connected to the development of a given context, have a direct impact on the entire community environment, and not only on specific organizations or institutions.

3. The research design

The conceptual framework based on these key concepts offers a scientific background for a quantitative research study carried out in Italy on 110 nationally-based pro-social associations and multilevel organizations belonging to the third sector².

The process of identifying the sample was lengthy and complex³: retracing it in detail would exceed the scope of this paper, but the perplexing nature of

² The quantitative investigation is situated within a national project directed by Pierpaolo Donati of the University of Bologna. The investigation presented here was carried out by a team from the Department of Sociology at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan, directed by Giovanna Rossi and coordinated by Lucia Boccacin. The collection of data, of a quantitative type, was carried out between June, 2009 and October, 2009

³To identify and define the field of investigation in the absence of certain statistical sources on the subject, a preliminary reconnaissance was carried out starting from the following sources:

- National Registry of Prosocial Associations pertaining to Law 07 December, 2000, n° 383, "Regulation of prosocial associations."
- Regional Registries of Volunteerism that were compared with the aim of identifying organisations operating in at least three Italian regions.
- Lists of national and regional Centres of service for volunteerism (C.S.V.).
- Database of the Third Sector Forum.
- Database of NGOs having at least one office in Italy and carrying out a specific activity in our country.

this process, due to the absence of information at the origin of the referential universe, must be underscored.

Reconnaissance on the different sources consulted aimed to verify that the following criteria were present in third sector organisations so that they could be included in the sample:

- they have a multilevel structure;
- they are of national importance or present in at least three Italian regions;
- they have one of the following juridical/organisational forms: association, association of associations, federation, forum, or movement, including prosocial associations enrolled in their own registry and non-governmental organisations (NGOs);
- they promote social activities and human services, broadly understood.

The sampling technique used is of a non-probabilistic type in that the subjects constituting the universe do not have the same probability of becoming part of the sample. In fact, the very nature of the associations studied and the lack of universalistic sources does not allow for the use of a random sampling procedure of a probabilistic type. Data collection for the research regards the apical levels of the organisations, i.e., the associations' national or coordinating headquarters.

The final sample used in the investigation was composed of 110 multilevel, nationally-based organisations.

The realisation of the questionnaire was complex in that the different thematic areas comprising it have the not so easy objective of tracking the potential interconnections between social capital and multilevel associations in light of the theoretical thinking referenced above. The questionnaire used in the investigation was administered online to the managers of the multilevel organisations. Administration was accompanied by a follow-up telephone call. The questionnaire's definitive version was preceded by a provisional one that was subjected to validating pre-test.

The questionnaire, with its 57 questions, refers to four thematic macro-areas: the first section has to do with the organisation's structural data and contains items relative to the association's juridical and organisational form on

In these sources we took under consideration organisations active in human services understood in a broad sense and operating in the following spheres: health, socio-sanitary, social welfare, educational and training, cultural and artistic, coordination, recreational and/or sport, protection of rights, work orientation, international development, environmental defence and promotion, sensitisation of public opinion.

the date of establishment and to several variables regarding human, organisational, and financial resources. The second section focuses on the establishment and the consolidation of the associative processes currently underway or that had to do with prior phases of the associative life such as the dynamics at the origin of the association's establishment, significant transformations that occurred in the last five years, and the possible launching of new local entities. The third section considers the organisational dimension, the services and activities offered, the services recipients, the articulation of internal relations, and the levels of coordination present in them, with particular attention given to the functions carried out but the central associative level. The fourth section is aimed at exploring the organisations' openness to the outside and their networking capacity.

The hypotheses that guided the investigative work can be summarised in two questions. The first, of a descriptive nature probes the forms of both the bonding and bridging social capital that is generated and put into circulation by the nationally-based pro-social associations considered as multilevel organizations. The second question, of an explicative nature, has to do with the connection between forms of social capital and organizations' propensity to establish formalised relations with different subjects. This second point represents a specific finding of the investigation under consideration and concerns both the identification of formalised networks in which the associative organisms under study are involved as well as the societal significance of such processes in terms of their results in the form of relational goods produced. The synergy realised in partnerships is positioned at the point of origin of an organizational and social process that extends over time: in this way, the configuration of partnerships understood exclusively as an action of mere contingent exchange between parties is superseded by a medium to long term temporal perspective that often assumes broader social significance.

4. The productivity of relational intertwinements: indications from two multivariate analytical techniques

To analyse the specific generation of social capital by multilevel, nationally-based pro-social associations, we applied two multivariate analytical techniques: a cluster analysis and a logistic regression.

The cluster analysis, of a "constrained" type, was broken down into three additional analyses, each with reference to three indices: the bonding social capital index, the bridging social capital index, and the index relative to

networking activated through partnerships. Nine classes (three for each index) were thus identified, each relative to the indices' low, medium, and high levels.

In the interests of brevity, we will comment only on the three classes that are characterised by a high level on the three indices under consideration.

The second multivariate analysis conducted applied a logistic regression model to shed light on the relational style of the multilevel associations under study.

4.1 High bonding social capital index

The associations that show a high level on the bonding social capital index comprise 45.4% of the universe⁴. This group is characterised in 70% of the cases constituting it by an increase in collaborations with local providers of human services. The local structures of these organisms also increased during the last five years (86%). Organizations belonging to this class turn out to be widespread throughout the different regions: in fact, they are present in Sardinia, Campania, Lombardy, and Veneto, with local offices numbering between two and ten in the first two regions (42% and 48%) and exceeding eleven entities in the other two (respectively, 48% and 24%).

As regards internal governance, this class is characterised by the presence of assemblies among the representatives of different associative levels (88%).

Almost the majority of cases (46%) have good relations with market entities and, to an analogous degree, with public institutions. These are probably effective collaborations that have seen a trend toward improvement during the past year (94%).

The result of collaborations established with institutional organisms turns out to be an increase of trust and a propensity to engage in more widespread collaboration with partners (44%). The cohesive force of this cluster is confirmed by the considerable number (56%) of organisms in which directors state that the organization allows for the establishment and strengthening of trust among members; the associative life, moreover, constitutes a sphere in which people can experience sociability by offering a context in which they enjoy being in one another's company (36 %).

The activities and services delivered by the organizations that can be included in this cluster consistently target the elderly (62%).

⁴ The percentages discussed relative to the variables characterising this cluster and the following two clusters are reported in the column (modality percentage over class) of synthetic cluster tables. See Rossi, Boccacin (Eds.) 2012.

A notable element, having to do with the action carried out by the presence of bonding social capital, is the large number (58%) of entities in which the local offices were established following action taken at the apical level or within the central coordinating level.

4.2 High bridging social capital index

33.6% of multilevel associations in our sample show a high level on the bridging social capital index,⁵ which has a positive repercussion on the efficacy of collaborations with subjects that are external to the multilevel entities (97.3%), especially with third sector subjects with respect to which we also find increased trust on the part of the organisms under study (62.1%). Relations established with public entities come next in this hypothetical ranking of an increase in the asset of trust between partners (48.6%).

Closely connected to the collaborative orientation illustrated so far is another factor distinguishing this group: a propensity on the part of the organisms to launch social partnerships. In fact, 91.8% of this class has ongoing collaborations in partnerships formalised during the last five years, stipulated with public entities for the most part (70.2%) -- generally, two or more entities (51.3%) -- while 51.3% report a partnership with market actors. These are decidedly higher percentage values than those reported by the overall universe under study (respectively 47.2% and 36.5%) and, thus, stand out as being particularly distinctive of the cluster under consideration. The aim of these agreements is often that of finding financial resources (43.2%).

A sort of dragging effect emerges in this sphere on the basis of which the collaboration between individual multilevel organizations and other different entities tends to increase following the formalisation of partnerships (56.7%).

Here, a previously illustrated trend, which also emerged in other investigations (Boccacin, 2009), is confirmed. This trend points to a direct correlation between the presence of bridging social capital and an inclination toward social partnerships.

The process by means of which social partnerships are launched in a given local context enables the organizations involved to be less self-referential and more aware (64.8%) of the array of interventions and organizations active in their geographical area.

⁵ It is necessary to underscore the strong presence, in this class, of variables whose weight is greater than 2.0: this characteristic makes clear the statistical robustness of the cluster thus identified.

A noteworthy element has to do with the trend toward an increase of the voluntary component in the sphere of multilevel associative entities belonging to the class in question: in 35.1% of cases, in fact, the number of volunteers increased in them, evidence of a type of situation that causes oblation and fiduciary codes to “flow” from collaborative “communicating vessels.”

In this group, the organization’s central level has a fund raising function for the most part (94.5%) and, to a lesser degree, a planning function (54.0%).

Which organizational profile characterises this group? In 45.9% of cases, we find within these entities forms of vertical coordination (from the centre to peripheral offices) and forms of horizontal coordination (among the different services offered in their geographical area): collaborations of the latter type, in particular, are marked by collaboration as regards the relations between the national level and the thematic coordinating offices (75.6%).

Let us now examine what bridging social capital produces within the organization: in 54.0% of cases it contributed to a very slight improvement in the management of human resources while significant improvements and innovation came about on the organizational side (13.5%) and in communication styles (29.7%). As to membership, a strengthening of trust emerges among the individual subjects in the organizations belonging to this class (59.4%).

The finding, characterising as much as 100.0% of this group, of a praxis of regular meetings among the local representatives of the different associative levels stands out as a determinant factor that contributed to raising the level of reciprocal trust among subjects operating in the multilevel organizations’ local offices (62.1%).

The services offered by this group of associations have to do with social cohesion practices, in particular (51.3%): these are activities, complex at their origin, that find their natural setting outside the associative environment and, inevitably -- by the very nature of the interventions -- can be realised only through the cooperation of more than one social actor.

4.3 High networking index in partnerships

Here, we also consider the group that obtained a high score on the index for networking through partnerships because this choice allows us to capture the principal direction of the different partnership modalities that emerged with respect to this index. These are partnership forms that, in all cases, were launched during the last five years (100.0%) involving other third sector subjects (88.8%), two or more public entities (70.3%), and just as many commercial enterprises (48.1%). 48.1% of the class belong to multifaceted

partnerships that involve subjects from either institutional, private, or third sector levels.

The objectives pursued by networking configurations in partnerships characterising this group concern the delivery of different types of services, including those of a cultural nature (55.5%) and those that promote environmental defence and protection, involving local offices in 40.7% of the cluster and central offices in 37.0% of cases.

This class is distinguished by the numbers of advocacy actions undertaken, as demonstrated by 59.2% of cases working to safeguard rights and 44.4% in which the action carried out is aimed at consumer protection.

Among the functions carried out by the partnership forms launched by the multilevel organizations belonging to this class, almost all cases include coordination and planning (96.3%), training (96.3%), and activities of social representation (92.5%) and political representation (88.8%): these functions are carried out exclusively by the central level of the entities analysed.

Overall, therefore, the apical level of the multilevel organisms, to which representation of the entire organization in its various articulations is delegated, also preforms this task with respect to partnership forms launched with other interlocutors. In these contexts a form of bridging social capital is generated that is characterised by the “cross-sectional” nature of the relational connections.

5. The relational style of associations: perspectives emerging from the logistic regression

To test the relational style of the associations under observation and to obtain a predictive understanding of propensity to establish and maintain/strengthen new relationships, a multivariate analysis was conducted on the data collected by implementing a logistic regression (Lanzetti, 2012). This technique, which places the estimate of maximum verisimilitude at its statistical foundation, considers how, certain conditions being equal, a certain result (expressed with the dependent variable) has a given quantifiable probability of happening or not happening in relation to other variables considered by the researcher to be good predictors.

5.1 Medium and high index of collaboration in relations with other subjects outside the associations under study

The first logistic regression that offers us elements for understanding the relational framework characterising our sample of nationally-based multilevel

associations concerns the index of collaboration in relations with external subjects. By bringing to bear an index in terms of attributing meaning, thus involving a synthesis of several concepts, we were able to enrich the analysis with additional elements for consideration.

This index, in fact, considers the perceived (negative and positive) quality of the collaborations established by each organization with subjects outside of itself, belonging to the public, market, and third sectors.

Tab. 1 - Index of quality of the collaborations within the partnerships

	%
Low	41.9
Medium	24.8
High	33.3
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>100.0</i>
<i>A.V.</i>	<i>105</i>

The logistic regression carried out elucidates several latent aspects of this evaluation of collaborative quality, with reference, in particular, to the contemplation of functions aimed at developing and managing external relations, the belief in the efficacy of collaborations with subjects outside the organization for bringing about real improvement, and the launching of partnerships during the last five years. The data reveal that, compared to associations in which representatives believe that collaboration with other stakeholders is hardly, or not at all, effective, associations in which representatives instead believe it to be very useful show a five-fold improvement (Exp(B) 5.329) in the probability of finding a medium or high index of collaboration in relations with other social subjects (when conditions of the other predictors considered remain constant).

As regards the formalisation of partnerships, the analysis reveals that entities that participated in such undertakings register a more than doubled probability (Exp(B) 2.358) of obtaining a medium to high index of collaborations with other partners as compared to those that did not take part in such collaborations.

Tab. 2 - Estimates of beta regression coefficients on the medium and high index of collaboration in relations with other subjects outside the associations examined as regards: contemplation of functions of developing and managing external relations, belief in the

efficacy of collaborations with subjects outside the organization. and launching of partnerships.

Variables in the equations

		B	E.S.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95% CI for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1a	b67(1) contemplation of functions of developing and managing external relations	-.487	.447	1.187	1	0.276	0.614	0.256	1.476
	RQ69 belief in the efficacy of collaborations with subjects outside the organization	1.673	.711	5.532	1	0.019	5.329	1.322	21.489
	RQ72 launching of partnerships	.858	.513	2.792	1	0.095	2.358	0.862	6.449
	Constant	-4.052	1.763	5.282	1	0.022	0.017		

We can deduce from this analysis that pursuing collaborations with other subjects in a reiterated and stable manner through different forms that are structured to varying degrees -- less structured in informal agreements, more so in partnerships -- makes it possible to test the productivity of these exchanges “in the field” and to positively assess their efficacy.

The reduced or almost non-existent influence determined by having a dedicated role in the organization for developing relations with the outside (Exp(B) 0.614) is a significant finding that emerges from the logistic regression. To explain this result, we could speculate that practice appears to make the difference rather than a position appearing on an organization chart.

5.2 High index of overall improvement of relationality inside the nationally-based pro-social associations

The second logistic regression carried out on the data focused on networking inside the organizations: this examines the strategic intertwinement within organisms that carry out their activities on multiple levels and that, therefore, need to have access to tools and methods able to foster cohesion among the various organizational spheres and among the different subjects operating in them.

The variable of reference is an index -- the index of overall improvement of internal relations in short "relationality" -- which aims to reveal the improvement reported within the associations following upon relationships and collaborations with external stakeholders by taking into account seven specific operative structural dimensions: planning, fund raising mechanisms, human resources management, communication modalities, the realisation of new organizational models, the improvement of services offered, and openness to other external entities.

This index, originally broken down into three steps in the logistic regression -- low, medium, and high -- tends to be high on two levels, the first of which is low (33.6%) and the second of which combines the medium and high levels (56.3%), also due to the fact that the number of cases is not large.

The variables inserted into the logistic regression probe the principle transformations that occurred within the organizations during the last five years with respect to statutory changes or changes in the associative mission, recognition gained on a juridical level and as regards accreditations, quality certifications, and the development of local offices.

We also inserted into this logistic regression variables relative to changes in the goals pursued by the nationally-based associations, always for the last five years of activity, and information about a possible increase or decrease in the number of local entities associated with the multilevel organizations. Finally, we examined the variable relative to the quality of the collaboration among components of the various organizational levels engaged in delivering services and carrying out other activities.

The variety of variables introduced into the analysis makes a multifaceted discussion possible: from an analytical perspective, it emerges that changes introduced in the last five years regarding service offer, whether within the same intervention area or in different areas, have a five times greater (Exp(B) 5.076) incidence, in terms of probability, of improving internal relationality as compared to the option of not introducing changes in the range of services provided.

Analogously, having increased the number of local offices during the last five years turns out to be important: this strategy, in fact, with all other conditions remaining unchanged, considerably increases (Exp(B) 4.274) the probability that the associations that carried out such an expansion will show a noticeable improvement on the index in question as compared to associations that did not increase the number of local offices.

Similarly, collaboration in service delivery among different local entities' members increases by more than half (Exp(B) 2.398) the probability of seeing an improvement in internal relationality following trade-offs with the outside.

Tab. 3 - Estimates of beta regression coefficients on the high index of comprehensive improvement of relationality inside the nationally-based pro-social associations as regards statutory changes, recognition of a juridical nature, changes in goals, increased number of local affiliated entities, and quality of the collaboration among various organizational levels.

Variables in the equation

		B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Exp(B)	95.0% C.I. for EXP(B)	
								Lower	Upper
Step 1(a)	R43 principle transformations within the organizations during the last five years			1.701	3	0.637			
	R43(1) statutory changes	0.287	0.550	0.272	1	0.602	1.332	0.454	3.915
	R43(2) changes in the associative mission	-0.331	0.689	0.231	1	0.631	0.718	0.186	2.772
	R43(3) recognition on a juridical level	0.815	0.874	0.869	1	0.351	2.259	0.407	12.540
	N44 principle transformations within the organizations during the last five years			5.539	3	0.136			
	N44(1) accreditations	0.301	0.946	0.101	1	0.750	1.351	0.212	8.627
	N44(2) quality certifications	0.162	0.605	0.072	1	0.789	1.176	0.359	3.848
	N44(3) development of local offices	1.625	0.736	4.868	1	0.027	5.076	1.199	21.493
	n45 changes in the goals pursued for the last five years of activity, and information about a possible associated with the multilevel organizations			4.239	2	0.120			
	n45(1) increase in the number of local entities	0.712	0.871	0.667	1	0.414	2.037	0.369	11.236
	n45(2) decrease in the number of local entities	1.453	0.784	3.432	1	0.064	4.274	0.919	19.874
	RN59 quality of the collaboration			2.682	2	0.262			
	RN59(1) in delivering services	0.029	0.626	0.002	1	0.964	1.029	0.302	3.512
	RN59(2) carrying out other activities	0.875	0.637	1.884	1	0.170	2.398	0.688	8.362
	Constant	-1.322	1.004	1.735	1	0.188	0.267		

Finally, the development of human resources also has a two-times greater probability ($\text{Exp}(B) 2.259$), compared to the introduction of changes of a juridical and statutory type, of triggering an improvement in internal relationality.

A comprehensive examination of the trends that emerged from the logistic regression reveals a kind of *sui generis* “indicator” of associative vitality: in other words, the associations that gamble on increasing internal complexity by expanding services provided, promoting the opening of new offices, and enlarging the operative base involved in the organization’s functioning and service delivery are confronted with the possibility of an incremental differentiation of internal structural dynamics which, however, almost paradoxically contributes directly to improving these dynamics. Here we find a confirmation of the claims of relational theory (Donati, 2011), which asserts that the “relation-thing-relation” sequence fully captures the specific dynamism inherent in social relations, making them morphogenetic. This generative expertise is characteristically typical of pro-social spheres, in particular, which base their social action on oblativity and solidarity-building orientations, constituting the premise, in terms of culture and values, that is necessary so that this relationality can give rise to a resource that is peculiar to the relations represented by social capital.

The third sector, together with the family and informal networks, is a sphere specifically dedicated to taking into account and valorising social relations: its social action in Italy over an extended period of time has been characterised on both a reflexive and an empirical level (Donati & Colozzi, 2004, 2006; Rossi & Boccacin, 2006b) as being especially effective in contributing to producing relations of trust that lead to cooperation in terms of reciprocity and that succeed in regenerating these same social relations through widespread relationality.

In our case, this regeneration of relations turned out to be a valuable resource for the everyday management of associations and their organizational and functional complexity, both for the relationships with service recipients and for the local context of reference through service delivery.

We can affirm in this connection, based on the comprehensive analysis of the results of the logistic regressions, that there is evidence of the emergence of a specific relational good produced within the associative spheres examined which presents several distinctive characteristics as compared to other types of relational goods produced by third sector organizations. Its most salient feature is its capacity for re-generation and for making associative and inter-associative relations into vectors for managerial competency in the organizations’ internal dynamics, for expertise in personalising services offered

to recipients, and for policy strategies that address the bond with the socio-communitarian context of reference.

This is, therefore, a multidimensional relational good in which the centre of gravity is constituted by the meso level which, to the greatest degree, determines the generation of this good: around it are arranged “offshoots” of a micro type and, occasionally, extensions of a macro type.

6. Concluding observations

This investigation allowed us to shed light on several critical points that the managers of these organisms should attend to in future. First of all, in the complex mechanisms actualised through networking, there is a risk of losing the meaning of the relations themselves: the more third sector organizations are configured as multilevel entities, the more they run this risk in that they are involved in a dual mechanism in which the organizational complexity characterising them must simultaneously maintain and strengthen the pro-social and solidarity-oriented motivation that is at the very basis of the pro-social option on both the subjective and inter-subjective levels. Furthermore, there is a risk of privileging “instrumentality” in organizational choices, especially those that have to do with the launching of partnerships with other subjects: when such an orientation takes root, it can determine a weakened awareness of the civil sphere, both within the associative contexts as well as in the community, and a notable impoverishment of efforts to promote it. Finally, the investigation reveals the importance of governance processes and the strategic value of adopting transparent and democratic practices: a risk in this area highlighted by the findings was that of reducing these processes to the procedural plane, thus eroding their essential meaning content as regards the promotion of actions aimed at developing both bonding and bridging social capital.

This research, which set out to investigate the forms of social capital generated by nationally-based pro-social associations and by multilevel organizations, shed light on the multiformity of this complex investigative “object,” which can indeed be differentiated in terms of distinct dimensions. However, the observation of this object cannot be separated from the relations within which this resource takes shape and is spread throughout the surrounding context.

Echoing Simmel’s analysis of intersecting social circles, our findings could be grasped analogously, precisely in the processes of intersecting and relating to which the great German sociologist was referring: in this connection, the specificity of our work lies in the observation of these processes on a meso level and on a quasi-macro level, within perimeter of which they are situated.

It is in these processes that several immaterial realities (Donati, 1991) take shape; these are discriminating factors for the achievement of a good quality of life by individual subjects and inter-subjective environments. Certainly, social capital is one of these immaterial realities.

In this connection, there is evidence of a significant correlation between social capital and the launching of partnerships: indeed, in the majority of the indices created, the social capital values are higher for subjects participating in partnerships with other interlocutors as compared to values for subjects not participating in these processes.

Third sector organizations play a specific role within the social partnerships. As empirical evidences demonstrate, when the third sector organizations generate forms of shared social partnerships, the response to the social needs gets wider and services improve in terms of quality

As was highlighted by the aforementioned findings, bridging social capital is also strengthened in these cases. We can observe a sort of spiral that raises the level of the social capital circulating in these relational circuits, as is also demonstrated by the findings, discussed above, on the second cluster.

We conclude with a thought about partnerships: by observing the propensity of the third sector organizations under study to establish formalised relations among different subjects, we were able to capture an emerging orientation that, in quantitative terms, involves over three quarters of the sample. The data reveal that in the partnership forms activated, it is the central level that spends both the organizational identity, understood in its totality, as well as its own specificity with respect to the sphere of synthesis: all this complex relational intertwinement generates an additional instance of social capital, that of cross-sectional bridging social capital, which makes it possible to strengthen community trust (Donati & Tronca, 2008).

In short, some practices are really innovative with reference to the fixation of networking processes, the quality of the relationships between different stakeholders and the modality they use to meet needs in services and activities.

The research thus confirms the hypothesis that posited social capital as an intervening variable able to mediate the quality and quantity of public relational goods, with particular reference to those goods that take shape in the sphere of associative relations. This orientation becomes evident when observing services offered. These are characterised, in fact, not only and not so much by the productive process through which they are realised but, rather, by the quality -- especially, the relational quality -- to which they aspire: from this perspective, the offer of quality services tends to be configured as a true public good.

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