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## The academic network in the field of psychology as a strategy of innovation for nonprofit enterprises

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### ABSTRACT

*Aim:* The present study aims to explore the issue of innovation and public-private partnership by presenting an analysis of the economic and non-economic effects produced by the collaboration between an Italian Social Cooperative and the academic sector. The main questions addressed by the study are: does the collaboration with the university sector boost the economic growth of social enterprises, both in their startup phase and afterwards? Does the collaboration with the university sector promote social innovation?

*Methods:* The authors analyzed: (1) number of agreements (cumulative data) and number of interns, PhD students, and master students operating at the target Social Cooperative per year; (2) number of agreements (cumulative data) and number of internships per year for the target Social Cooperative and 4 other organizations replicating its model; (3) annual income from privates (in euros) per year for each organization; (4) awards and recognitions gained by the target Social Cooperative throughout the years.

*Results:* Besides the existing differences among the observed organizations, data seem to confirm that the relationship with the university sector does not promote, at least in the initial phase, any important outcome in terms of income growth. Moreover, despite the description and amount of grants might not represent an "objective" measure of social innovation, it is undeniable that the target Cooperative shows a propensity to social innovation which is recognized by third parties too.

*Discussion:* Although the data seem to disincentive, at least in the startup phase, the assumption that the university represents an economic or marketing boost, future studies might investigate other strategies to measure the qualitative and quantitative relationship between private companies and universities, in order to find different correlations with the social innovation issue and other economic and financial variables.

**Keywords:** *University, network, social innovation*

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## Introduction

The Italian welfare state is nowadays facing two urgent and opposed pressures: the first is represented by the national budgetary constraints, which limit the investment in public expenditure, and the second can be defined in terms of rapid transformation of the social demand structure. Among the emerging urgencies it is utterly relevant to respond to the healthcare and social conditions of kids and youngsters with special educational needs (CENSIS, 2017). Over the last years, it has emerged that increasing discomfort and psychological and psychiatric disturbs affect kids in an earlier age and with a more severe clinic and evolutionary process. Hospitalizations due to misconduct, lack of impulse/control, psychosis and personality disorders have increased by 24%; the number of underage boys and girls with certified disabilities (under national Law n.104 concerning pathologies and the right to education) have increased, with specific mention to kids identified by regional legislation as in need of therapeutic and healthcare treatments (Intellectual Disabilities, Communication Disorders, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, Specific Learning Disorder, Motor Disorders, and Other Neurodevelopmental Disorders) (CENSIS, 2017).

Families and schools have become more concerned of the issues related to neuropsychic conditions, with a resulting increasing demand for clinical support. The scientific literature (Alonso et al., 2002) reports that about 12% of the population between 0 and 18 years suffers from neuropsychiatric conditions. The growth in demand for specialized assistance, similar in all Italian regions, appears to be unmet by the structural capacity of the SSN - national healthcare system, whose clinical staff is under dimensioned and increasingly precarious. Current data confirm that we are going through an historical period in which the increasing demand by families with kids with special educational needs of getting access to healthcare services is not satisfied by the national system offer (<http://www.lombardiasociale.it/2016/02/28/neuropsichiatria-riforma-in-corso/>). As much as for other healthcare sectors, the exacerbation of the conditions of public contracts and the reduction in public financing have often highlighted the dependency of private social cooperatives from public decisions, as in the case when they are forced to close their services, to resort to lay-off schemes for their employees, or to be partially absorbed by bigger cooperatives (Bertin & Fazzi, 2010). Also, over the last fifteen years, the tendency of the Italian private social services (social cooperatives) to adapt to the public offer appears as quite straightforward (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2011). The requests advanced by citizens and service users need to be thoroughly understood in order to overcome a sort of "organizational myopia", which, especially in historical periods of economic crisis and public programs restraints, might lead the social entrepreneurs to overlook the existing opportunities (Brandsen & Helderman, 2012; Pestoff, 2012). A more direct contact with the stakeholders (services beneficiaries) might allow social entrepreneurs to correctly intercept some of their needs and to

anticipate some of the market trends (Bernardoni & Picciotti, 2016): for this reason, notwithstanding a progressive tendency adopted by the private non for profit sector to mirror the public healthcare offer and its sharp dependency to the public financing, some Italian social cooperatives have begun to operate in new, innovative ways (Osborne, Chew, & McLaughlin, 2008). Many organizations have lately experimented new strategies of service supply, for instance in the non-invasive diagnostic sector (Borzaga & Fazzi, 2011). Within the third sector literature, the most relevant study about the issue of innovation is the one by Osborne and colleagues (2008), which claims that innovative cooperatives tend to be more accountable to their stakeholders rather than to other subjects, and this point confirms a higher and more articulated attention towards the direct service users than towards the public system, like in the case of cooperatives which are public subcontractors. Other studies (Murray, Grice, Mulgan, Giordano, & Arvidsson, 2009; Vitale, 2005) observe how the ability to establish collaborations between a cooperative and the public actor, based on a medium-long term partnership which differs from the more traditional procurement contracts, represents a key factor to achieve a successful level of innovation in the field of social cooperation.

The present study aims at exploring the theme of innovation and public-private partnership by presenting an analysis of the economic and non-economic effects produced by the collaboration between a Social Cooperative and the academic sector. In particular, the increase in turnover registered by the Cooperative involved in the study will be analyzed and compared with other organizations with a similar business model, in order to add evidences to the debate concerning the issue of social innovation. The main questions addressed by the study are: does the collaboration with the university sector boost the economic growth of social enterprises, both in their startup phase and afterwards? Does the collaboration with the university sector promote social innovation?

### **Tice Social Cooperative**

The subject of the study is a Social Cooperative founded in 2006 by a university research fellow and three PhD students at the time working on evidence-based psycho-educational methodologies (University of Parma, former Department of Psychology). None of the founders, by the time the Cooperative was launched, had ever worked on the territory, neither they had a proper business/economic background. Shortly before the Cooperative was founded, its appointed President had spent 90 days in 3 learning centers in USA. A learning center embodies a private service model (Davies, Aurini, & Quirke, 2002; Pusser & Doane, 2001) deriving from the American tradition, which is similar to an after-school program but managed by qualified personnel (specialized psychologists and educationalists graduated with a master degree or a PhD) conducting highly individualized, evidence-based interventions (Calvani, 2012; 2013; Calvani & Vivinet, 2014). The proliferation of

learning centers in the USA resulted to be strictly correlated to the positive effects observed in their young users (i.e. kids and young adolescents) (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010; Lauer et al., 2006). Learning centers are generally founded by practitioners from the academic sector (master or PhD graduates) and they are conceived as business services for which families pay a monthly fee for school-support programs, accessible 2 to 5 times a week.

The intuition of the founders of the target Cooperative consisted in transferring and adapting the learning center business model to the Italian educational culture. In particular, the Cooperative meant to offer a private paid service which envisaged no conventions with the national healthcare system, and which was conceived to be complementary, but not alternative, to national public services.

Direct competitors on the "out of pocket" Italian market are self-employed practitioners, psychologists, educationalists and speech therapists: by the time the Cooperative was founded (i.e., 2006) the social cooperation sector in Italy was characterized by hybrid services managed by public-private collaborations, and the legal status of "cooperative" was not used to start (private) market activities (Piangerelli et al., 2017). Moreover, the only market strategy adopted since the cooperation sector was born is the direct market strategy (Nwankwo & Gbadmosi, 2011).

Since its establishment, the Cooperative resorted to a regular collaboration with the academic world, which according to the authors strongly influenced its "generative" and "innovation" capacity. The present study refers to "innovation capacity" in terms of social innovation awards granted to the Cooperative or to its staff throughout the years, thanks to its project activity (Evangelista, 2007; Da Rin & Malerba, 2002; Evangelista & Savona, 2002; Caroli, 2016), while its "generative capacity" has been considered in terms of replication of the model by university students trained by the organization (Venturi & Zandonai, 2016; Caroli, 2016). With the intent to provide an operational meaning to the mentioned definition of "regular collaboration with the academic world", and according to a parallel and opposite logic with respect to the third mission of the university, the analysis looks at the numbers of formal agreements signed between different Universities and the Cooperative and their significant outcomes. For instance, an internship agreement can generate 4 interns who can make a working experience inside Tice Cooperative. Turning an agreement between a university and a private organization into an observable outcome reflects the third sector tradition in measuring its accountability (Murray et al., 2009). The use of agreement contracts has become frequent in the public administration practice, and the recourse to unilateral or authoritative measures has been gradually abandoned: in Italy today a public university can stipulate framework contracts or a memorandum of understanding with other universities and their departments, or with other public or private societies to engage in coordinated activities in the fields of scientific research, didactic, and consultancy.

The agreements activated by several Universities with Tice Social Cooperative relates to: internship practice, executive doctorates or higher education apprenticeships, and joint provision of training courses. Table 1 outlines and quantifies the collaboration settled by Tice Cooperative with the university sector, so that some preliminary considerations can be gathered.

Year	Agreements (cumulative data)*	Trainees	PhD students	Master students
2007	3	7	0	0
2008	3	7	0	0
2009	4	7	1	0
2010	4	5	0	0
2011	7	11	0	1
2012	9	22	1	12
2013	14	25	4	19
2014	20	29	2	22
2015	21	27	3	26
2016	23	30	2	34
2017	25	35	2	19

\* CURRICULAR/EXTRACURRICULAR INTERNSHIP AGREEMENTS. This category includes all agreements signed with Italian public or private Universities which regulate the traineeship experiences offered by the different study courses. Measurable outcomes are represented by the number of trainees accessing the Cooperative with trainings between 150 and 1.000 hours a year.

Table 1. *Number of agreements (cumulative data) and number of interns, PhD students, master students in Tice per year.*

The increase in number of agreements over the years parallels the growing number of students who chose to do an internship, which makes the process of exchange in practices and academic training "alive" and meaningful. The engagement of university students represents a significant marketing strategy for the Cooperative, both in terms of attractiveness for its target users and for the training courses organized with the universities, and it represents a functional tool to use talents "for free". With respect to the data referred to PhD students, the Italian Berlinguer Reform adopted in 1998 and the Bologna process contributed to a transformation of the traditional "academic internship", which started to open up to a more structural collaboration with the business sector. Nevertheless, this form of entrepreneurial internship bears the typical gap of the Italian culture: other Countries register a long-standing tradition of academic openness (through doctorates) to the territory and the market, thanks to innovative model of research-job alternation, such as the industrial doctorate in Denmark or the professional doctorate in UK. The Italian doctorates are still conceived as a linear *viaticum* to access the research or the academic practice, even though only 1 out of 4 PhD graduates successfully enters the academic career, while the "industrial doctorate" model introduced in 2013 has not become

a common training practice yet, both because of the stringent accreditation criteria set by the national agency for the ANVUR - evaluation of the university system, and because of the bureaucratic limitations imposed to companies.

In 2013, Emilia Romagna Region gained the 2<sup>nd</sup> national place for the highest number (i.e., 61) of research doctorates registered in the higher education catalogue: data provided by the Region said that only 19 students were effectively admitted to current higher education and research doctorates (out of the total number, 3 regional doctorates were activated by Tice Cooperative). Besides the lack of scientific observations on the effects produced by the inception of specialized, research-related competences in the Italian business sector (BIB), the present study demonstrates a strict connection between the contamination process and the innovation process. Table 1 outlines the outcomes produced by post-graduation trainings, specialization, and master courses in terms of number of students welcomed as interns inside the organization (Cavallini, Carpitelli, Cihon, & Corsano, 2019), as to testify the effect produced by training courses which are structured as a joint theoretical and on-the-job training experience, and with a special consideration of the effects of the trainings on the occupation status of students.

A significant percentage of students who attended a training course based on a convention between the University and Tice Cooperative, opened a start up company, or a *Srl* (similar to a limited liability company), or other forms of organization right after the end of the course. Students were then able to replicate the business educational model in other regions and cities. The organizations launched by former students have no economic and financial bounds either with the University or with Tice Cooperative: their organizations adopted and replicate Tice business model but none of them significantly invested in networking activities or direct collaborations with the University, except for a few cases of curricular internships.

The authors of the study then asked themselves "Does the collaboration with the University, measured as number of conventions established and exchange of human capital, promote the economic growth (on the private market) of a social cooperative?". To answer this question they tried to compare data from the first four years of turnover since the foundation of the Cooperative (years between 2007 and 2010) and the same data applicable to 4 selected start-up companies (3 Social Cooperatives and 1 *Srl*) launched between 2013 and 2015 by practitioners who attended a higher education training course co-organized by Tice and the University of Parma.

Start up company 1 is a Social Cooperative located in Toscana Region, Start up company 2 is a Social Cooperative located in Lombardia Region, Start up company 3 is a *Srl* located in Lombardia Region, and Start up 4 is a Social Cooperative located in Calabria Region. The "turnover" analysis focuses on

the proceeds from services supplied by the organizations to privates (families or individuals) (see Table 2).

Year	Start up 1		Start up 2		Start up 3		Start up 4		Tice	
	agreements	interns	agreements	interns	agreements	interns	agreements	interns	agreements	interns
I	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	7
II	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	3	7
III	1	2	1	2	1	2	2	1	4	7
IV	2	4	1	3	1	2	2	3	4	5

Table 2. Number of agreements (cumulative data) and number of internships per year per organization.

Data have been gathered by authors from the public financial statements of the organizations considered for this study. By observing the turnover trends, it is possible to notice significant differences among the Startups and among the Startups and Tice, in particular during the first year of activity: Start up 1 has an initial turnover equal to four times the annual income of the other Startups, while Start up 3 has an initial income of only 8.000 euros.

Besides the existing differences among the observed organizations, which can be imputed to geographical factors and other business solutions not analyzed in this paper, data related to the turnover seem to confirm that the relationship with the university sector does not promote, at least in the initial phase, any important outcome in terms of income growth. Tice willingness to collaborate with the University since its startup phase, previously evinced by the numerous agreements and the number of interns engaged, does not seem to have had an immediate effect on its income either.

Available data (table 3), in this specific case, suggest that the collaboration with the academic sector does not have a determinant influence on a startup company income; future researches might of course investigate the effects of the collaboration on the follow-up business phases or in specific business sectors.

Year	Start up 1	Start up 2	Start up 3	Start up 4	Tice
I	84000	18000	8000	31000	21000
II	173000	47000	40000	80000	64000
III	210000	85000	82000	131000	90000
IV	270000	140000	145000		144000
V	373000				239000

Table 3. Annual income from privates (in euros) per year.

The present analysis further investigates the correlation between the collaboration with the academic sector and the social innovation issue. Referring to the question "Does the collaboration with

university support social innovation?", the selected indicators offer interesting insights. Heiskala and Hämäläinen (2007) and Cottino and Zandonai (2012) try to provide a definition of the complex concept of social innovation and of its measurement: several devices and methodologies can be applied to the assessment of the innovation capacity of a project or a service. Moreover, given the complexity of the subject, the measurement of the social innovation generated by Tice falls outside the scope of the present study. The "exploratory" slant of the paper allows to describe the social innovation of the considered Cooperative by simply presenting awards and recognitions for social innovation received by public and/or private institutions since the foundation of the Cooperative. Future analysis might more specifically correlate the number of awards and an operational measurement of social innovation.

Table 4 illustrates some recognitions granted by public institutions (Province, Region, Union Camere Nazionale - national union of the chambers of commerce), others granted by private societies (Giannino Marzotto Foundation; Perotto Zucca Foundation), while the most consistent number of awards is granted by organizations running different European funds (Spinner, Social Challenge Platform).

Year	Awards and recognitions	organizations/institutions/associations (cumulative data)
2008	- Province of Piacenza innovative enterprise award (5000 euros) - N.1 Spinner scholarship for technology transfer innovative projects (15.000 euros)	0
2009	- N.1 Spinner scholarship for technology transfer projects (15000 euros)	0
2010	- N.1 Spinner scholarship for technology transfer projects (15000 euros) - Gaetano Marzotto award (100000 euros)	0
2011	- N.1 Spinner scholarship for technology transfer projects (15000 euros per scholarship)	0
2014	- Social Sodalitas award (15000 euros in services) - Union Camere Nazionale innovative entrepreneurs award (7000 euros)	5
2015		7
2016	- Perotto Zucca award IX edition (5000 euros)	12
2017	- Emilia Romagna Region responsible innovators award (2500 euros) - Reale Mutua Welfare Together award final selection	16
2018	- EU Social Challenge Platform award, Mindbook project	19

Table 4. Awards and recognitions gained by Tice Social Cooperative throughout the years.

Despite the description and amount of grants received might not represent an "objective" measure of social innovation, it is undeniable that the Cooperative shows a propensity to social innovation which is recognized by third parties too.

The table also presents the number of startup companies launched by former students of training courses run by Tice. Cavallini, Carpitelli, Cihon, and Corsano (2019) point out how replicability, transferability, and scalability of a business model are essential features in terms of social innovation



(Venturi & Zandonai 2016; Caroli, 2015). The replicability and scalability potential become a more evident measure of the innovative character of the Cooperative.

The additional considerations concerning the question "How does the collaboration with university support social innovation?", based on the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data presented, bring to the assumption of a correlation (if randomness is excluded) between the propensity of working with the university and the propensity to social innovation.

This paper presents data which are coherent with the sector-related scientific literature (Easterby-Smith, Crossan, & Nicolini, 2000; Mintzberg, 1994; Boccacin 2009), where elements like the admission of internship and PhD students, and the co-working practice with the university seem to promote the propensity to innovation.

Interestingly, some data related to the companies' economic growth seem to disincentive, at least in the start up phase, the assumption that the university represents an economic or marketing boost.

Future studies might investigate other strategies to measure the qualitative and quantitative relationship between private companies and universities, in order to find different correlations with the social innovation issue and other economic and financial variables.

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