Identity and pluralism: studying the experience of a public network aimed at redesigning social services

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Abstract

Nowadays the provision of social services represents one of the most relevant challenges for a Municipality, due to the growing needs of people asking for more care and to the reduction of available resources. The present research analyzes in-depth the experience of a public network created among a group of small Municipalities in Veneto Region, in North-East of Italy, to redesign these services, with attention to both effectiveness and efficiency. It started in 2012 and it is still ongoing towards its complete definition.
Specifically, the study focuses on the role of the different identities involved into the whole process, from the first stage aiming to define the conditions of a new pluralistic configuration for social services based to the development of a strategic and operative alliance.
The case study is an interesting example for public institutions engaged in winning the challenge for a better government in time of resource constraints and institutional pressure towards such kind of initiatives.

Keywords: identity, pluralism, public network, social services

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1. Introduction

The provision of welfare services represents nowadays one of the most relevant challenges that a Municipality has to face. Two phenomena are influencing this situation: on one hand, it is observed an increase in the quantity and quality of needs from people asking for more care services; on the other hand, available resources are becoming limited and scarce, so that it is difficult to offer appropriate responses (Frieri et al, 2012). This is particularly true in small Municipalities, for evident reasons connected to their peculiar situation (Carrosio 2010: Casula 2016).

Some years ago, a group of small Municipalities in Veneto, a region in North-East of Italy, began in discussing the possibility to manage these specific services in a shared way through the creation of a network with the declared intention to improve their quality and quantity. We think that this experience is worth to be studied.

Many reasons can be suggested to explain the interest in this choice. First of all, the specific context in which the network is indicated as a possible solution, different from a "Union of Municipalities" (Caringella et. al. 2007; Frieri et al. 2012: PAQ, 2013). A public administration (PA) decides to build a strategic and operative alliance with other similar administrations and to enter that path starting from a complex frame of involved identities (every Municipality has its own). This offers a particular occasion to analyze which is the role of each identity and of its constitutional elements into the process of unification of the management of one of their basic tasks (the provision of social services).

Secondly, the possibility of a new configuration for social services has to be verified and surely asks for new and stronger relationships among partners and shared procedures. Then, at the same time, attention to pluralism has to be paid to protect peculiarities in interests and responsibilities by politicians, in styles and habits of professionals in charge for these services, in relationship with specific territorial identities and features.

The choice to head towards a strategic alliance to balance uncertainty in resource (for each Municipality) and need for control on the way responses are provided confirms the real commitment to find a solution by the involved subjects (Capaldo, 2004; PAQ, 2013).

Coming from these premises, the decision to verify if it could be possible to create a public network sharing welfare services gives the launch to a complex process, starting from 2012 and still ongoing.

In this perspective, this case study is an interesting example and it can become a best practice for public institutions engaged in winning the challenge for a better government, in time of resources constraints and institutional pressure towards such kind of initiatives, *a priori* classified as convenient.

Coherently, the main goal of the present research is to deepen this experience of a public network created among a group of small Municipalities in Veneto, a region in North-East of Italy, with the purpose to redesign the social services, which each

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Municipality has to provide to its inhabitants, according to its institutional mandate and with increasing attention to both effectiveness and efficiency.

In order to pursue our goal, the paper is organized in the following manner. First, we present the theoretical framework, useful to better understand our case. Then, the case itself - its history and its features – is summarized to put in evidence the most relevant outcomes, consistently with the chosen focus. In detail, it is: the inter-organizational relationships, their characteristics and the definition of a common procedure for services provision for the whole population living in the territory. Finally, some considerations about managerial implications for public management are discussed to suggest future development for research, so to overcome current limitations, *in primis*, the partial progress reached till the moment of writing of the article.

2. The theoretical framework

A long tradition of studies has focused on the construct of *identity*, which received attention from a number of disciplines. First investigated by philosophers like Locke, Hume and Hegel (Bizjak et al., 2017), in the last decades it has been representing an interesting field of research for psychologists, sociologists and organizational scholars leading to the identification of two main streams of research: the *identity theory* (Burke and Stets, 1998) and the *social identity theory* (Hogg et al., 1995). Whilst the former takes its origins from the sociological studies (i.e., Burke, 1980), the second rather comes from a socio-psychological perspective (i.e., Turner et al., 1987). What it is important to remark is that, according to both theories, identity is a social construction, meaning that it is influenced by society and its structure, and derives from repeated interactions with others.

The concept of *Organizational Identity* (OI) was introduced later within the general identity debate. Studies on OI take their origins from the existing and long-lasting debate on individual identity. OI, first introduced in the seminal work of Albert and Whetten (1985), is characterized by three key attributes: central, enduring and distinguishing (so-called CED attributes), which differentiate an OI from those of other organizations. This definition implies that OI is a durable and unalterable 'entity', which - as Whetten (2006) later suggested - "can be recognized especially in moments of crisis of the organization" (Whetten, 2006: 220).

According to Gagliardi (1986: 124-125) organizations "usually change to remain what they have always been". However, he adds, they "must change in order to preserve identity". In this vein, a distinction has to be done between two schools of thought: one promoting enduring identity and another considering the sense of continuity that may characterize it. While in the former perspective, identity remains the same over time, in the latter one's identity is considered as a shifting construct, in which interpretation of values and meanings is not necessarily fixed or stable, and only core beliefs and values are retained. This second perspective leads us to agree with what was suggested by Gioia and colleagues (2000), according to whom "identity is not, and indeed cannot be, enduring in any strict sense, even though it apparently

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retains continuity in its essential features" (Gioia et al., 2000: 65). The same authors suggested that OI evolves and retains over 'time' and 'context', meaning that these two variables are at the core of this shifting process. Further, some authors remark that organizations need to change in order to preserve their identity (Corley and Harrison, 2009).

It was also proposed that the identity formation is a process through which organizations gain legitimacy across the consensus of their context (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005) and the recognition of them as distinctive and unique entities (Pedersen and Dobbin, 2006). In short, as suggested by Gioia and colleagues (2010), the process of identity formation "is likely to involve attempts both to attain legitimacy through mimetic processes and to construct some dimensions of distinctiveness within the organizational field, as well as a receptive external context for those efforts." (Gioia et al., 2010: 3).

Within this dynamic debate, identity takes its form of being not simply an individual issue but rather a collective one, arising from the interaction between individuals and organizations and with reference to the specific context in which it is introduced (Lutgen-Sanvik, 2008).

Indeed, it is suggested that each organization has a number of identities that is equal to the number of its members (Harrison, 2000). This perspective puts in evidence the plural levels of identity, which can be examined with regard to the OI itself. So far, in the same theoretical domain, some studies, specifically concerned on identity formation, emphasize that people, groups as well as organizations tend to identify themselves according to category membership (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) thus suggesting a sort of 'mimetic mechanisms' in the foundation of identity construction (Scott, 2001).

In some studies related to organizational changes arising from mergers and acquisitions (e.g., Clark et al., 2000), it was demonstrated that since mergers involve multiple actors – e.g., top managers, employees - there are several OI issues, which can affect the merger success (or failure). For example, ambiguity on new origination's identity may reduce institutional trust (Maguire and Phillips, 2008), the issue of role identity at the individual level may rise high levels of tension and severe conflict (Vaara, 2008). In their study, Clark and colleagues (2000) put emphasis on the importance of the interpretation of OI in a change process and the role of top managers in 'making sense' to pursue their own action and later 'giving sense' in order to influence other's constructions of meanings.

At the same time, identity formation and mergers may be considered as a complex process affected by multiple forces, since it involves the interactions among members, as well as interactions between insiders and outsiders.

The construct of pluralism is structurally connected with the presence of many identities. Indeed, it is necessary to introduce this perspective to understand how different identities can relate to each other and can build positive relationships, so to favor the emergence of a new identity, in which all the participant could recognize themselves. In this sense, pluralism is a relational dimension: it exists when actors maintain multiple kinds of relationships among one to another and develop multiple identities as a result. The outcomes of this relational pluralism can include greater

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flexibility in building network ties, more stable exchange relationships, and the ability to adopt tailored innovations, which is exactly what seems to arise from the experience we are examining in this article.

3. The empirical research

In this paragraph, we enter the heart of our research. First, we present approach and method used to face the case and then we describe the history and its development, underlying the role of the actors and of the turning points in the long path they lived to reach the first formal result of having a network and to begin the effective operational phase.

3.1 Approach and method

As just introduced, the present research is focused on a specific case study – which we had and have the possibility to know, deepen and analyze[1], during the various phases of its development – regarding the network construction by a group of six small Municipalities. As literature suggests, a case study (Stake, 2005) is appropriate for in-depth analysis when the observed phenomenon presents an innovative content, which asks for understanding of its complexity (Mayan, 2009).

The research has been developed through 13 face-to-face semi-structured interviews to different stakeholders involved (in detail: five majors, one council member, three staff members, two social workers, one educator, one consultant) necessarily playing different roles in the project in coherence with their professional position. Each of these interviews lasted more or less 40 minutes; all of them were recorded, with the consensus of the interviewees, and then transcribed, so to have at disposal accurate research material to analyze and compare.

3.2 Description

As previously indicated, the examined case concerns the collaboration among six small Municipalities of the eastern Veneto region finalized to the creation of a shared management of their social services.

This initiative has certainly an important reference in the law. Precisely, Legislative Decree n. 267/2000 aims to foster forms of local associations to guarantee and improve social services provision in those situations in which numbers of population (total and in need) and of municipality capabilities (both human and financial) are limited. However, it would be very simplistic and not completely true to bring the process decided and implemented by these municipalities back to the reference of a regulatory framework. It seems indeed more appropriate to place it

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[1] We wish to thank all the participants to our research for their availability and their passion in telling their experience and their point of view, contributing to build the case.

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into a social, cultural and ethical change, albeit prompted by the crisis of the socio-economic system that we witnessed at the beginning of this millennium.

Shortly, the history of this inter-organizational network begins in 2012 when some Mayors, under the boost of one of them, more attentive to the present challenges, asked themselves and discussed the possibility to define a unification strategy for the management of social services to make them more effective and efficient. During the first phase (lasted from 2012 to 2014), this idea was examined at a political level. In the second phase (which can be indicated in the years 2015–2016) a feasibility study was defined. To do it other actors - i.e. internal human resources and non-profit organizations (NPOs) having in charge the operational service provision - were involved in the development of the study, with the support of an external expert. This last professional figure came from a private consultancy company, appointed on one hand to mediate and on the other hand to maintain a high commitment toward the final goal. The third phase began in 2017 and finished in 2018: the principal outcome is an agreement, signed by Councils of the six Municipalities. The last phase, the shared management of social services that shall enter into force following all the signatures, is still ongoing. It will be the real moment of truth.

The main acquisition in a preliminary phase was the consensus created at the political level. It was a result of the strong commitment of one major, the promoter, who succeeded in selling his idea as the best possibility to maintain quality and quantity for this important task. After this fundamental moment, it was necessary to enter in-depth all the aspects of the project, from the procedural and operational points of view, dealing with the different approaches normally used in each Municipality, according to the different styles played by the various actors and so on.

So, people having a role in the process of provision of social services were involved to analyze, study and propose what to do together and how to do it. The activities were developed under the supervision of the external consultant, who has the precise mandate to help in focusing on the goal to reach, being become evident during the long discussion on how to decline the main idea that, without an external aid and a without a look (less conditioned by the path on the discussed topic), participants were not able to find a way to go over their personal experience, and perspective, their habits, and routines so to head towards an innovative way to consider the situation.

In this vein, a social assistant told to the interviewer: "This agreement arrived late; at the beginning the climate was obstructive, numerous rigidities emerged; I was afraid that it would never happen". This phase required the actors to move to a pluralist logic, trusting each other and sharing their knowledge, and further trying to achieve the integration of their particular professional tasks. The imagined network asked for inter-organizational collaborative relationships at different levels, achieved thanks to an adaptive evolution from individual identity to the recognition of plural identities. People, in fact, have to work in inter-functional teams and to learn how to manage the complexity of inter-organizational problems and processes, aspiring to the goal of improving the efficiency of social services. Moreover, simplification, which can be realized through the processes mapping and the related redesign, helps to streamline the so-called "bureaucratic" activity.

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The final result is the detailed project of a communal regulation of social services (which approval is still been processed and experimentation are pending), it includes rates and contribution thresholds and a homogenization of social services management to apply in the next year's budget. Some of the staff of the technical office commented in this way during the interviews: "The agreement is valid, and the creation of a single procedure is an important signal, now only the single service unit is missing", and also "The agreement is fundamental, it increases our power and strength; personally, I really appreciated it. Now we need to give an operational follow-up". Then, we can conclude that the premises are good, and they bode well.

4. Main findings

From the above reported synthesis of the path, it is possible to put in evidence some crucial transition points. In the first phase, only some Municipalities' Mayors had a clear idea of the economic and organizational difficulties of the social services in their territories and understood the need to build a network to continue in regularly supplying them, improving at the same time quality as it is necessary in the present context. A relevant starting point, useful to create a positive attitude, was that they had another experience having already shared the local Police service with satisfaction. So, the first little group dragged the others, less convinced of the practicability of the solution is the topic so different and delicate.

In this first phase, for any Municipality, it can be observed the presence of a triple political level, based on the Major (at the same time a political and an administrator), the Council Member (with a double identity, too) and the Council (a collective authority with a specific own identity). All together, they had to maintain public policies, harmonizing them with new criteria of efficiency and management control of expenditure, preserving equity (which is very important in the field of social services). The strategy decided by politicians had then to be shared with technical managers and especially with operative people, i.e. social workers, who were directly involved in the issue object of attention and who had their own professional identity influencing their way of working.

In the second stage, the resistance to change emerged very strongly from both the political and the technical parts of each organization. It was evident the decrease of trust, according to Maguire and Philips' suggestions (2008); this happened especially for those Municipalities where social services were already well structured. According to Burke and Turners' theories, resistance manifests at a sociological and psychological level, i.e. in skeptical behaviors and declarations, in mutual distrust, in strong personal oppositions, starting from the underlining the intrinsic identity differences of each organization and the distinctive structures of the several offices in the various Municipalities; so that the resulting situation seemed unbridgeable. Also, criticalities were found, for example, the "leaks forward" (as defined by an interviewee) of some administrators and the non-homogeneous renewal, for different times and political guidelines, of the various municipal administrations.

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When complexity increased and critical issues emerged, following Whetten (2006), a fear about recognizing identity arose in involved people, in particular in the operative category. It was, therefore, necessary to hire an external professional having the task to work on the definition of mission and vision of the group of social workers, helping them to highlight their professional needs to serve people (and not to preserve procedures and habits) and to facilitate mediation among them and with the directors. Only in this way, according to Gagliardi (1986), actors can really preserve their identity: this was exactly what it was necessary to make them to understand. This group, instead, triggered a dynamic challenge in defense of their organizational culture, based on the system of values that each organization had, in line with Gioia's theory (2000). Inevitably, the external consultant's role was to favor dialogue at both political and technical levels, and when necessary intervening forcing decisions. Little by little, all actors, feeling respected and listened to, changed their attitude and asked the administrators to do the same.

Slowly, relationships improved, and people began to appreciate the opportunities of learning and of enriching their professional approach starting from their respective diversity. All the interviewees confirmed that the start of a dialogue, the desire to better and deeper know each other favored an increase in mutual trust, solidarity, and an altruistic attitude, too. The opportunity to find common rules to get to approve a unique regulation of social services was shared among all actors, and so the debate was extended to define standard rates, criteria, and access requirements, in addition to the attention to preserving the quality of services.

By the interviewees, it was also underlined the importance of defining and consolidating a system of pre-existing values, which were certainly challenged and discussed in the reorganization, but also adapted and redesigned to become the founding values of this new inter-organizational network; according to Pedersen and Dobbin (2006), they recognized their distinctive and unique entity. From this moment, many opportunities and possibilities for improvement arose.

Firstly, the sharing of a long path of co-planning, operating in neighboring so similar territories, developed a synergy between the different roles, in particular between politicians' and technicians' ones, according to what was previously suggested by Lutgen-Sanvik (2008); in particular, operative roles reduced the fear of change, becoming and considering themselves protagonists of the change process. People, looking at the same goal, i.e. the common good, got involved and then mediated between their own and others' cultures, abandoning in part the idea of identity as reassuring immobility in favor of its change, to preserve the identity itself (Gioia, 2000; Pedersen and Dobbin, 2006).

Secondarily, people opened up to the members of other organizations thanks to fear reduction and trust increasing; they could appreciate the positive consequences arising from the interactions with different people (by role or organization of belonging). An interesting example is proposed by the knowledge transfer from consulting enterprise to PA and vice versa following a sort of mimetic logic (Gioia, 2000). We could observe that a greater trust in others allowed involved people to renounce to something of their own identity so to create a solid and pluralist one: everyone explained its own way to conduct his/her tasks to compare them and chose

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the most efficient. Even starting from different visions, the relational network made possible the achievement of a unitary agreement about human resources that the Municipalities would have put in common, as regards both the administrative figures and the social workers.

Thirdly, according to Clark and colleagues (2000), the system of virtuous relationships at the different involved levels, "made sense" in the process of meanings construction. Majors, directors and consultant led from the simple highlighting of the problems to the search for their solutions, to generate greater efficiency, share successes and the way to reach them and new opportunities for development. For example, in municipalities without an administrative role dedicated to social services, social workers were forced to fulfil bureaucratic tasks, rather than to take care merely of territorial services. In the new configuration, these administrative tasks are centralized and carried out for all by a specific in charge employee, allowing social workers to focus on their job of people care. Another example can be proposed with regard to a more rational organization of the activities, which means to offer opportunities to specialize on a particular kind of service to social workers and to offer this service to a larger population so to optimize knowledge and resources.

In other words, the top-down and bottom-up growth implemented system - in which experiences, knowledge, skills, but also own values were shared - could become an added value for the community. This case realizes the analysis made by the Department of P.A. (2013) "Making a network between P.A. contains multiple meanings: to create shared knowledge and common work practices, to speed up administrative action, to reduce the organizational complexity of services, to be efficient and effective, to disseminate more innovative work tools, and improve services" (PAQ – 2013).[2]

5. Conclusions, managerial implications and limitations

As literature about OI explains, the comparison among similar and different at the same time organizations challenged the usual way of working. Municipalities were able to experience mutual support to improve and consider identity as an evolving feature to preserve specificity in a changing world.

So, our main acquired results can be synthetized in the following manner:
- at a personal level, every participant specifically reflected on their work and its meaning, on professional values and the recognized identity;
- at intra-organizational level, cultural change and identity evolution towards the acceptation of a pluralistic logic improved the organizational context;
- at inter-organizational level, the role-played into the co-shared redesign, thanks to their own identity and competence, led to achieve a common goal.

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[2] Available to the following link: http://qualitapa.gov.it/sitoarcheologico/relazioni-con-i-cittadini/organizzare-uffici-e-servizi/modelli-a-rete-di-servizi/index.html

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Moreover, the presented case study shows how inter-organizational and collaborative relationships may contribute to improve interdependence among different organizations, starting from strong and consolidated identities, and to build a sturdy and shared project. In this sense, the experience could be considered a best practice to propose and follow.

The redesigns of each service structure and the identification of appropriate managerial tools, in fact, requires a lot of attention in order to help professionals in collaborating among them and with other organizations, following different logics, enhancing diversity as resilience source.

Coherently with the present socio-economic scenario, it is observed that the analyzed Municipalities have to develop innovation in the processes they are, used to control, cooperating one to another, in order to provide appropriate answers to the evolving needs of their stakeholders. From political to technical and operative level it seems necessary a new orientation towards partnership that uncover the perspective of value creation for the involved partners, beyond the simple respect of a law indication.

Moreover, due to the several actors involved, an external perspective had a determinant role, according to the interviewees' opinion, to reduce high levels of tension and conflict - that the issue of role of identity at the individual level could arise - and to avoid the reduction of trust.

The paper has some limitations. First of all, we are conscious of the absence of involvement in the analysis of the administrative roles, to whom it would be entrusted the procedural dimension, and of front office people, who manage the relationship with people asking services, that means the more dragged people in change. Equally, services users have to be considered so to enrich the analysis and this will be necessary to deepen the real functioning of the model when it will be in service. Furthermore, the process is still incomplete: five Councils on six approved definitively the agreement and the last one is expected to do the same shortly. So, the operative phase will begin probably starting from October the 1st; the external consultant will go out and difficulties coming from daily work could arise. So, it would be interesting to continue in monitoring the evolution of the project and of its contest. In this way, we hope to develop a longitudinal inquiry within some years, so to follow the continuing experience and its effective situation.

In conclusion, we think that this study may enrich current debate among scholars and practitioners in the field of public management especially looking at the current phenomenon of the definition of networks among municipalities from the perspective of organizational studies, so with attention to the evolving dimension and on the role people play. In this perspective, we highlighted the variables that are in place during a process of organizational re-design and the importance of taking care of them, in order to face the urgent call, among public services, for organizational efficiency and quality.

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