



Sense of community in the work context. A study on members of a co-operative enterprise

Bruna Zani, Elvira Cicognani

Department of Sciences of Education "G.M. Bertin" University of Bologna (Italy)

bruna.zani@unibo.it, elvira.cicognani@unibo.it

Abstract

This study investigates the psychological relationship between the individual, the work organization and the community context. In particular, the influence of organizational (Organizational Sense of community, Organizational identification, Organizational efficacy, Perceived Organizational values) and community variables (Sense of community referred to the local community) on workers' psychological well being was assessed, taking into account a particular work context: the co-operative enterprise.

A questionnaire was submitted to 805 workers of a large co-operative enterprise with different work status and tenure (67.7% partners and 32,3% employees). Results confirmed that partners (vs employees) perceive the cooperative as more committed to its stated core values and acting consistently with them. Moreover, partners show a higher level of Organizational efficacy, Identification with the cooperative and Organizational Sense of community and a higher Sense of community referred to the local community. Workers with more than 10 years of tenure perceive the cooperative as more committed to its values and show a higher Identification with the cooperative and a higher Sense of community compared to younger workers.

Workers' psychological well being decreases with length of service and is positively influenced by Sense of community referred to the local community; however, organizational variables positively contribute to well being only among partners.

Key words: Organizational sense of community, Organizational identification, Organizational values, Co-operative enterprise, Workers' well being.

The work organization as a "community"

Today individuals often find sources of meaning, identity and support in the workplace since it is where they spend most of their time. From a Community Psychology perspective, a workplace community is identified both as a geographic locality and as a formal and informal networks of individuals who share a common association (Burroughs & Eby, 1996; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991; Lambert & Hopkins, 1995).

The study presented in this paper addresses the psychological relationship between the individual, the work organization and the community context; in

particular the influence of organizational and community variables on workers' psychological well being was assessed. The work context considered is a co-operative enterprise.

Describing the psychological relationship between the individual and the work organization: theoretical constructs

The psychological relationship of individuals with the work organisation can be described by different indicators; in this context we focus on Organizational Sense of community, Organizational identification, Perceived Organizational efficacy and Perceived Organizational values.

Organizational sense of community

Sense of community has been described as the extent to which a person feels part of a readily available, supportive and dependable structure; that one belongs to somewhere. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), Sense of community is “a feeling that members have of belonging and being important to each other, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met by their commitment together” (11). For these authors, sense of community includes four dimensions: belonging, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and emotional connection.

Research studies on Sense of community have focused the attention on different types of communities (e.g., town, school, virtual communities). A consistent finding is that SoC positively contributes to individuals’ well being (e.g., higher life satisfaction, lower feelings of loneliness) (Prezza et al., 2001). Moreover, research studies indicated that people who have resided in the community the longest tend to have the highest indicators of Sense of community; this may be related to the extent of residents’ current involvement as well as to past memories of their life course.

Besides residential communities, other contexts are important in individuals’ lives and may be experienced as “communities”; one of these is the workplace. According to Burroughs & Eby (1998) a psychological Sense of community can be created by individuals who choose a referent (e.g., a business organization) to bring structure and meaning to their life.

Workers with a high Sense of community recognise that their organization meets their needs, provides them with enhanced quality of life and expects them to be responsible citizens in the organization and in the society. Workers are more likely to experience Organizational SoC when supervisors are sensitive to their needs, supportive, the organization is fair in allocating promotions, provides challenging jobs, encourages interaction among workers, enables job mastery (Lambert & Hopkins, 1995). Workers with high Sense of community recognise the importance and the value of the welfare of the organization for the collective well being, and are less likely to feel isolated and alienated (Burroughs & Eby, 1998).

Organizational identification

From a Social identity perspective (Mael & Ashforth, 1989), Organizational identification may be defined as the extent to which individuals define the self in terms of membership in the organization; the

perceived oneness between self and organization. The more individuals identify with an organization, the more organization’s interests are incorporated in the self-concept, and the more likely the individual is to act with the organization’s best interests in mind.

Employee identification with the organization is thought to have a number of potentially important benefits both for the organization and for employees themselves. Employees who identify with their organization are presumed to be more likely to buy in to the organizations’ goals and activities and to be more motivated to work hard to achieve these goals. Organizations with high levels of employee identification can be expected to benefit more from a more cohesive work atmosphere and greater levels of cooperation and altruism, including greater levels of citizens’ organizational behaviour and support for the organization. Employees can benefit from positive self esteem and the satisfaction of the human need to belong.

In the research literature there is evidence of the role of Organizational identification in affecting turnover intentions; limited attention has been devoted to the study of employee outcomes like psychological well being (Harris & Cameron, 2005).

Perceived organizational efficacy

Organizational Efficacy (OE) is a generative capacity within an organization to cope effectively with the demands, challenges, stressors, and opportunities it encounters within the business environment. It exists as an aggregated judgement of an organization’s individual members about their (1) sense of collective capacities, (2) sense of mission or purpose, and (3) a sense of resilience (Borgogna, Petitta & Steca, 2001). Organizational efficacy has been investigated as a product of leadership style (Bohn, 2002); we have less information on the impact of OE on job-related and worker-related outcomes.

Perceived organizational values

Organizational values are beliefs and ideas about what kinds of goals members of an organization should pursue and ideas about the appropriate standards of behavior members should adopt to achieve these goals. Organizational values are related to organizational norms, guidelines or expectations that prescribe appropriate kinds of behaviour by employees in particular situations and control the behaviour of organizational members towards one another.

A critical issue in understanding the role of values for employee outcomes is the relationship between

Organizational values and personal values of workers. According to Maslach and Leiter (2008), personal values are the ideals and motivations that originally attracted people to their jobs, and thus they are the motivating connection between the worker and the workplace, which goes beyond the utilitarian exchange of time for money or advancement. When there is a values conflict on the job (a gap between individual and organizational values) workers will find themselves making a trade-off between work they want to do and work they have to do. Conflict in values is related to burnout and decisions to leave the organization; consistency between organizational and personal values is associated with greater professional efficacy.

A particular work organization: the co-operative company

The co-operative company can be defined as an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise. A cooperative may also be defined as a business owned and controlled equally by the people who use its services or who work at it.

Cooperatives are based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy and equality. In the tradition of their founders, cooperative members believe in the ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

They are also legal entities with a range of unique social characteristics. Membership is open, anyone who satisfies certain non-discriminatory conditions may join (by contributing to its capital). Economic benefits are distributed proportionally according to each member's level of participation in the cooperative.

The context of the study

The cooperative under study (C.) is a limited liability (producer) co-operative company, located in North Italy with 918 employees, of whom 585 are partners (e.g. contributed financially to become partners).

It is a leader enterprise in promoting and creating important and extensive projects: large-scale urban re-planning works; shopping, business centres and those for recreational purposes; logistic centres. It also builds infrastructures, i.e. it deals with the production of prefabricated structures, window and door frames, railway superstructures and office furnishing where it has reached the very top of these sectors, being able to offer high level proposals

appreciated in Italy and throughout the world.

The partners (as co-owners) are the ones who make the basic decisions for the company. Each partner is entitled to vote regardless of the company capital he has paid. Most of the profits are usually added to the indivisible reserve, to back company developments and create new business opportunities. The assets are handed down from generation to generation, contributing towards the growth of the communities in question.

Its Mission is stated as follows: "Promote and implement projects able to improve the quality of people's life in the cities and places of work. Interpret society in its complexity and future, turn built-up areas to account, harmonise the needs of the environment, the social and cultural aspects and the economy".

Aims and Hypotheses

The first aim of the study was to investigate the quality of workers' relationship with the co-operative (Organizational Sense of community, Organizational identification, Perceived Organizational efficacy, Perceived Organizational values). In particular, we wanted to assess the differences between partners and employees and according to tenure (length of service).

Hypotheses were that organizational variables (Organizational Sense of community, Organizational identification, Perceived Organizational efficacy, Perceived Organizational values) should be higher among partners than employees (Hyp.1) and should increase with length of service (Hyp.2).

The second aim was to assess the impact of organizational variables (Organizational Sense of community, Organizational identification, Perceived Organizational efficacy, Perceived Organizational values) and Sense of community referred to the local community (town) on partners/employees' psychological well being.

Hypotheses were that organizational variables should enhance psychological well being only among partners (Hyp.3), whereas Sense of community referred to the local community should enhance psychological well being both among partners and employees (Hyp.4).

Method

Instrument

The instrument was a on-line self-administered questionnaire including the following sections.

Organizational Sense of Community. It was assessed using 19 items adapted from the Psychological Sense of Community at Work scale (Burroughs & Eby, 1998). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree ($\alpha = .87$).

Organizational identification. Identification with the co-operative company was measured using an adaptation of the Organizational Identification scale (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Its 6 items add up to a single identification index which is strongly focused on the affective/motivational side and less on the cognitive one. Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree ($\alpha = .82$).

Social identification as a partner. This section of the questionnaire was administered only to co-operative partners and it was based on 6 items adapted from the Social Identification scale (Cameron, 2004). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree ($\alpha = .72$).

Perceived organizational efficacy was measured by the Perceived Collective Efficacy Scale for Producers Organizations (Borgogni, Petitta & Steca, 2001), measuring global efficacy and including 7 items. Response alternatives are provided on a seven-point scale (1 = completely disagree; 7 = completely agree) ($\alpha = .84$).

Perceived organizational values. The perception of the extent to which the co-operative company lives up to its values was assessed by 32 items ad hoc created from the results of a pilot focus group study (e.g., "Everybody here can express his/her opinion, regardless of his/her role", "Taking part in decisions is a right of all partners which is expressed by voting"). Responses were given on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

Sense of community referred to the local community was assessed by Multidimensional Scale of Sense of Community (Zampatti, Prezza & Pacilli, 2007) including 26 items. Response alternatives are provided on a five-point scale (1 = completely disagree; 5 = completely agree) ($\alpha = .90$).

Psychological well being was measured by Ryff & Keyes's (1995) PWB, short version (18 items), measuring positive psychological functioning (response alternatives from 1 = completely disagree, to 6 = completely agree) ($\alpha = .80$).

Participants

Participants included 805 workers (90% of the total population); 67.7% were partners and 32.3% employees. 76.6% were males and 23.4% females. As regards age, 13.3% were less than 30 years old, 28.6% were in the 30-39 years old range, 33.1% were 40-49 years old and 25.0% more than 50 years old.. 45.5% were employed for less than 10 years and 54.5% from more than 10 years (Table 1). As regards level of education, the distribution of the sample was the following: Primary school 26.8%; Secondary school 52.8%; University degree 19.8%.

Table 1 Participants

	Length of service		Total (%)
	Less than 10 yrs (%)	More than 10 yrs (%)	
Partners (%)	168 (21.1)	372 (46.6)	540 (67.7)
Employees (%)	195 (24.4)	63 (7.9)	258 (32.3)
Total (%)	363 (45.5)	435 (54.5)	798 (100)

Results

Organizational efficacy, Organizational identification, Organizational Sense of community

Table 2 shows mean scores and standard deviations in organizational variables. Significant differences were found in all the variables according to work status: partners score higher than employees on Organizational efficacy, $t(800) = -5.725, p = .000$, Organizational Identification, $t(801) = -7.905, p = .000$, and Organizational Sense of community, $t(799) = -3.270, p = .001$. Moreover, Organizational Identification increases with length of service, $t(796) = -3.257, p = .001$.

Table 2 Organizational efficacy, identification, sense of community: Means and SD

	Organizational efficacy _a		Organizational identification _b		Organizational SoC _b	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Partner/Employee						
Partners	5.81	0.79	3.93	0.69	3.49	0.52
Employees	5.44***	1.04	3.49***	0.82	3.35***	0.60
Length of service						
< 10 yrs.	5.63	0.90	3.70	0.78	3.43	0.57
> 10 yrs.	5.74	0.89	3.87***	0.73	3.46	0.55

_a range 1-7; _b range 1-5 * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Among partners, social identification as a cooperative partner increases with length of service, $t(535) = -2.081, p = .038$ (Table 3).

Table 3 Partner social identification (only partners)

Length of service	Partner social identification _a	
	M	SD
< 10 yrs.	3.78	0.62
> 10 yrs.	3.87	0.59

_a range 1-5

Perceived organizational values: factor analysis

Factor analysis conducted on the 32 items lead to the extraction of the following factors:

- a) Cooperative democracy (6 items, $\alpha = .75$); e.g. "Everybody here can express his/her opinion, regardless of his/her role";
- b) Sustainable development and intergenerationality (6 items, $\alpha = .70$); e.g. "This cooperative enterprise looks into the future";
- c) Collective entrepreneurial subject (CES) (5 items, $\alpha = .59$); e.g. "Taking part in decisions is a right of all partners which is expressed by voting";
- d) Perception of negative elements (4 items); e.g. "As the cooperative grows bigger, it gets harder and harder to be consistent with cooperative values". This factor will not be considered in further analyses.

Mean scale scores were calculated for each factor. Results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4 Perceived organizational values: means and SD

	Organizational Values _a					
	Cooperative democracy		Sustainable development		CES	
Partner/Employee	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Partners	3.48	0.73	4.28	0.51	3.96	0.59
Employees	3.33**	0.75	3.85***	0.61	3.66***	0.58
Length of service	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
< 10 yrs.	3.44	0.70	4.08	0.57	3.77	0.58
> 10 yrs.	3.43	0.77	4.20**	0.57	3.94***	0.62

_a range 1-5 * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Significant differences were found in the scores of perceived Organizational values according to work status: partners, more than employees, think that the co-operative acts consistently with its values, such as Cooperative democracy, $t(802) = -2.695, p = .007$, Sustainable development, $t(802) = -10.663, p = .000$ and CES, $t(802) = -6.757, p = .000$. Workers with over than 10 years of service, more than others, think that the co-operative adheres to the values of Sustainable development, $t(797) = -3.108, p = .002$ and Collective entrepreneurial subject, $t(797) = -3.883, p = .000$.

Sense of community

Mean scores of SoC are shown in Table 5. Results indicate that Sense of community referred to the local community is higher among partners, $t(796) = -5.020, p = .000$, and increases with length of service, $t(791) = -3.937, p = .000$.

Table 5 Local Sense of community and Psychological well being: means and SD

	Sense of community (local community) _a		Psychological well being _b	
	M	SD	M	SD
Partner/Employee	M	SD	M	SD
Partners	3,73	0,51	4,45	0,56
Employees	3,52***	0,59	4,40	0,60
Length of service	M	SD	M	SD
< 10 yrs.	3,58	0,54	4,56	0,60
> 10 yrs.	3,73***	0,54	4,34***	0,50

_a range 1-5 _b range 1-6 * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Psychological well being

As displayed in Table 5, Psychological well being is quite similar in all the workers (partners and employees), and decreases with length of service, $t(784) = 5.458, p = .000$.

Impact of organizational and community factors on individual well-being

Hierarchical Regression Analysis was conducted to test the influence of organizational and community variables on well being. Analyses were conducted separately for employees (Table 6) and partners (Table 7).

Table 6 Regression analysis on Psychological well being (Employees)

	Psychological well being			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Block 1				
Length of service	-.27***	-.22***	-.22***	-.24***
Block 2				
Cooperative democracy		.11	.09	.10
Sustainable development		.17*	.16*	.13
CES		.04	.02	.00
Block 3				
Organizational efficacy			-.03	-.02
Organizational identification			.08	.05
Organizational SoC			.01	-.11
Block 4				
SoC				.31***
R ²	.07	.14	.15	.22
F	19,983***	10,230***	6,028***	8,353***
Df	1,250	3,247	3,244	1,243
F change	19,983***	6,537***	.506	21,144***

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Table 7 Regression analysis on Psychological well being (Partners)

	Psychological well being			
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Block 1				
Length of service	-.19***	-.22***	-.22***	-.25***
Block 2				
Cooperative democracy		.10	.05	.05
Sustainable development		.07	.07	.05
CES		.08	.06	.05
Partner social identification		.26***	.13*	.09
Block 3				

Organizational efficacy				-.04	-.04
Organizational identification				.13*	.11*
Organizational SoC				.15*	.08
Block 4					
SoC					.25***
R ²	.03	.21	.23	.27	
F	19,136***	27,736***	19,475***	21,794***	
Df	1,528	4,524	3,521	1,520	
F change	19,136***	28,876***	4,721**	31,291***	

*p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001

Results show that, among employees, predictors of psychological well being are length of service and Sense of community referred to the local community. Among partners, significant predictors include also Organizational identification. Organizational Sense of community is no more significant when Sense of community referred to the local community is entered into the equation.

Discussion

The first aim of this study, involving the whole worker population of a large co-operative company (both partners and employees) was to test the differences in organizational variables (Perceived Organizational values, Organizational efficacy, Organizational Identification and Organizational Sense of Community) according to workers' status and length of service.

Results confirmed that partners (vs employees) perceive the co-operative as more committed to its stated core values and acting consistently with them. Moreover, partners, compared to employees, show a higher level of Organizational efficacy, Identification with the cooperative and Organizational Sense of community and a higher Sense of community referred to the local community (Hyp.1). This finding is consistent with the higher personal involvement and investment (economic, emotional, etc.) of partners into the co-operative and the more "binding" relationship they have with it.

Considering differences according to length of service, workers with more (vs less) than 10 years of service perceive the co-operative as more committed to the values "Sustainable development" and "Collective Entrepreneurial Subject" and show a higher Identification with the cooperative. Moreover, workers with more years of service have a higher Sense of community referred to the local community

(Hyp.2).

As regards the second aim of the study (to assess the impact of organizational variables on workers' psychological well being), results show that length of service is an important contributor to well being both for partners and employees: for both groups an increase in the years of work is associated with a reduction in psychological well being. A possible explanation of this finding is that length of service co-varies with workers' age, and the latter has been found associated with a decrease in scores of psychological functioning (Ryff & Keyes, 2005).

A significant result is that organizational variables are irrelevant for employees' well being, whereas for partners, Social identification with the co-operative positively affects psychological well being (Hyp.3). Previous research investigating the role of Organizational identification on indicators of employee well being indicated that OI had limited impact on general well being (e.g., life satisfaction) (Cameron & Harris, 2005). This study positively adds to this literature showing that, in this specific kind of organisation, partners' well being positively benefits from a high-quality relationship with their work organisation. Perceived organizational efficacy of the co-operative, even though higher among partners, does not affect their psychological well being.

Of particular interest is the role of Organizational Sense of community: Organizational SoC positively affects psychological well being among partners, but is irrelevant for employees. As regards Sense of community referred to the town of residence, results indicate that it is important for both partners and employees, thus confirming existing research literature that indicates that Sense of community positively contributes to individual's well being (Prezza et al., 2001). For partners, the introduction of this variable reduces the impact of Organizational SoC suggesting that, in this group, a more complex relationship between different levels of belonging (town and work organisation) exists, requiring a deeper investigation. For example, it is important to consider the aims of this co-operative enterprise, which explicitly focus of the promotion of quality of life of people within different community contexts (as stated in its Mission: Promote and implement projects able to improve the quality of people's life in the cities and places of work), and the attention toward the local community, in its social, cultural and environmental dimensions (e.g., harmonise the needs of the environment, the social and cultural aspects and the economy). All this suggests that this work organisation conceives of itself as strongly embedded

into the local community and as a contributor to its growth in a global sense.

To conclude, organizational variables influence psychological well being only among partners further supporting the significant role of the ownership ("partnership") of the co-operative company. The impact of Sense of community referred to the town on well being is consistent with expectations and with the literature (cf. Prezza et al., 2001).

These results emphasise the relevance and usefulness of further investigating the construct of Sense of community also in the organizational context (cf. Burroughs & Eby, 1998; Pretty & McCarthy, 1991; Lambert & Hopkins, 1995).

References

- Bohn, J.G. (2002). The relationship of perceived leadership behaviours to organizational efficacy. *The Journal of Leadership Studies*, 9, 2.
- Borgogni, L., Petitta, L. & Steca, P. (2001). Efficacia personale e collettiva nei contesti organizzativi. In G.V. Caprara (Ed.), *La valutazione dell'autoefficacia* (pp. 157-171). Trento: Erickson.
- Burroughs, S.M. & Eby, L.T. (1996). Psychological sense of community at work: a measurement system and explanatory framework. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 26, 6, 509-532.
- Cameron, J.E. (2004). A Three-Factor Model of Social Identity. *Self and Identity*, 3, 239-262.
- Harris, G.E. & Cameron, J.E. (2005). Multiple Dimensions of Organizational Identification and Commitment as Predictors of Turnover Intentions and Psychological Well-Being. *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science*, 37, 3, 159-169.
- Lambert, S.J. & Hopkins, K. (1995). Occupational conditions and workers' sense of community: Variations by gender and race. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23, 2, 151-179.
- Mael, F., & Ashforth, B.E. (1992). Alumni and Their Alma Mater: A Partial Test of the Reformulated Model of Organizational Identification. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 13, 103-123.
- Maslach, C. & Leiter, M.P. (2008). Early Predictors of Job Burnout and Engagement. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93, 3, 498-512.
- McMillan, D. & Chavis, D.M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of*

- Community Psychology, 14, 6-23.
- Pretty, G.L.H. & McCarthy, M. (1991). Exploring the psychological sense of community among women and men of the corporation. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 19, 351-362.
- Prezza, M., Amici, M., Roberti, T. & Tedeschi, C. (2001). Sense of community referred to the whole town: Its relations with neighbouring, loneliness, life satisfaction and area of residence. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 29, 29-52.
- Ryff, C. & Keyes, C. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 69, 719-727.
- Zampatti, E., Prezza, M. & Pacilli, G. (2007). Una nuova scala multidimensionale per il senso di comunità territoriale (MTSOCS). Paper presented at the VIII Congress of the Italian Association of Social Psychology, Cesena, 24-26 Sept.