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Collectives of continuing vocational training (CVT) entrepreneurs: between the need to preserve entrepreneurial freedom and the need to act collectively.

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Context, issues and problematisation of the subject

Representing nearly 15 billion euros, continuing vocational training (CVT) is a special area of analysis that has developed at the intersection of economics, education and labour economics (Voisin, 2017).

The field of CVT, protean and multidimensional, in that the players operating within it are subject to multiple and sometimes contradictory logics (Jaffré, 2017). This is reinforced by the very large number of individual entrepreneur-type players operating in the field. Individual CVT entrepreneurs are key players, and the literature does not seem to take sufficient account of them. However, to understand the field of CVT, we also need to understand how the vast majority of the players in it operate, first and foremost individual contractors.

In recent years, the CVT field has been structured around market principles, subjecting its many players to significant competitive pressures. The field has been described as a market (Voisin, 2017) since the laws liberalising the sector came into force in the 1960s. In order to regulate this sector, the public authorities have subjected CVT providers to increasingly complex regulatory constraints. While certification systems seem necessary, these regulatory pressures seem to be weakening individual CVT entrepreneurs.

As a result, in order to respond to changes in the sector, individual CVT entrepreneurs seem to be driven to co-operate with their peers. However, this cooperation is subjecting the individual entrepreneur to new tensions. Between maintaining their entrepreneurial freedoms and the need to provide collective responses, these individual entrepreneurs seem to be hybridising, moving towards the formation of groups capable of acting collectively within cooperative structures.

Literature review

The literature provides some answers by specifying that the interest of the cooperative rests on questions of governance and values as well as an ability to absorb tensions linked to the expression of plural institutional logics (Petrella, 2019) and to competitive (Hannan and Freeman, 1977) and coercive (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) isomorphic pressures. To adapt to these different factors, cooperatives need to be able to regulate decision-making through values and operating principles (Petrella and Richez-Battesti, 2013) in order to meet social challenges while remaining economically viable (Battilana and Lee, 2014).

These questions of values echo a related literature that explains cooperation by a desire for actors to achieve their goals (Levine and White, 1961), thus making the cooperative relationship necessary (Turk, 1973). However, for actors, cooperation can only take place through a shared operational understanding (Smets and Jarzabkowski, 2013), the main point of reference for which is found within a value system (Parsons, 1956). Finally, this cooperation enables the players to take part in a legitimisation process.

When exogenous shocks occur, the potential for cooperation increases. However, cooperation is not necessarily triggered by crises. Other circumstances have been identified, including the need to solve a problem that seems insoluble on an individual scale. Cooperation is therefore a viable and necessary approach to tackling complex problems (Gray, 1985). Competition between players in a given economic field is always based on shared interests with commonly accepted rules, and moreover this competition does not take place in a jungle, but in a society on which a given economic field depends which, moreover, is supposed to be at the service of society as a whole (Morgan and Hunt, 1994).

The set of goals that are expressed among individuals essentially revolve around the characteristics of cooperation, such as access to resources or expertise, risk sharing, increased efficiency, learning, etc. Similarly, the goals also depend on the way in which cooperation takes place (Vangen and Huxham, 2013). "*Individuals work cooperatively to solve problems that affect them all*" so that problem solving benefits each of the partners (Waddock, 1989). This cooperation can give rise to collective skills.

Methodology

The thesis project is part of a radical constructivist epistemology (Le Moigne, 2012). Within the framework of this epistemology, the research theme is likely to evolve as data collection

progresses (Eisenhardt, 1989). It is for this reason that the choice of a population is essential and should be based on case studies.

The case study is an empirical method that explores in depth a contemporary phenomenon set in a context; the aim is to identify the elements that belong to the context and those that belong to the phenomenon (Yin, 2009).

Generally speaking, the aim will be to consider the stakeholders as active partners in the research (Balogun, Sigismund Huff and Johnson, 2003). It will also be a question of adopting a research-intervention approach, for ethical reasons in relation to the groups studied, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of how a system works while helping it to evolve, and to work with the stakeholders in a collective learning process (Arnoud and Habib, 2021).

The case study will involve providing support over three years to a pre-collective made up of five trainers who operate mainly in the South Est of France and who wish to formalise their cooperation through the creation of a cooperative structure. A processual and longitudinal analysis will be carried out in order to understand the logics of cooperation and its formalisation.

The analysis of the data will attempt to shed light on the trajectory of the collectives within a monograph, using a processual analysis (Pettigrew, 1987) and identifying tipping points and sequences for each case (Abbott, 1990; Bidart, Longo and Mendez, 2013). A tipping point is a particular moment in a trajectory that involves significant changes leading from one sequence to another (Bidart, Longo and Mendez, 2013). Each sequence can be characterised by a configuration of several elements (Bidart, Longo and Mendez, 2013) which give rise to a certain homogeneity in relation to the themes specific to the collectives studied.

The preferred method for bringing out these "homogeneous elements" is based on *grounded theory*. "The goal of this method is to discover a theory that has a grip, fits the data and works in real life" (Glaser and Strauss, 2017 in Walker and Myrick, 2006). Grounded theory is based on the combination of two methods, one of which is based on coding and analysing data in order to verify propositions, and the other of which is used to categorise themes in order to produce theories (Walker and Myrick, 2006).

Abductive inference reconciles thought and action by asserting that one induces the other and *vice versa* (Hallée and Garneau, 2019). Abductive inference is therefore particularly suited to

constructivist epistemologies, "*since the epistemological position related to abductive logic requires that we take into account the context of action (a situated action) in which data are problematic and partial*" (Hallée and Garneau, 2019).

Based on these methodological approaches, data can be collected using a range of tools such as the semi-structured interview. The aim is to capture the day-to-day activities of stakeholders by assigning to these observations the meaning that the stakeholders attach to them (Barley and Kunda, 2001). Other tools can and should be used to gather data, such as open and exploratory interviews to gain insight into new issues, participant observations, non-participant observations and *focus groups*, with a view to using all possible means to complete the understanding of the logics that influence the players studied. Participant and non-participant observations (Journé, 2012) help to understand complex and indeterminate situations (Arnoud and Peton, 2020). As for *focus groups*, they provide access to the specific representations of the players being studied, encourage the production of data that more easily links theories to empirical data and *vice versa*, and give the researcher the opportunity to observe in action the collective process of creating meaning (Wilkinson, 1998).

Expected theoretical and empirical contributions

For empirical contributions ;

- To highlight the process of formalising cooperation through the creation of a cooperative structure;
- To develop strategies for legitimising non-market logics within a field dominated by market logics;
- Develop benchmarks for continuing vocational training stakeholders so that they can form cooperative groups;

For theoretical contributions ;

- To understand the phenomenon of cooperation between individual entrepreneurs in continuing vocational training in the light of the logic inherent in the social economy in a highly competitive field;
- Generate knowledge about cooperation processes and formalise these processes.

2.6. THESIS STATE OF ADVANCEMENT

Regarding the thesis project, the research is just at its beginning. I've started my research in October 2023. Therefore, the review of literature is not completed.

Nonetheless, the aim of the ongoing review is to embed the thesis into an heterodox economics theory approach such as the regulation theory. Doing so, I'm trying to exceed the current approach that I'm having using neo-institutional theory. I'm also trying to link a literature focused on cooperatives with a literature on collective competencies. Doing so, I'm aiming to conjecture if specific collective competencies are required for a cooperative to work and if so what makes it specific in comparison with typical organisation. In addition to those elements, I'm exploring the literature on non-market value creation, and social utility.

Parallely, I'm entering research more from the field than from the literature. Thus, many observation and semi-directed interviews (8) have been conducted. Focus groups have been conducted as well (3). Those data still need to be encoded and analysed. The semi-directed interviews were aiming to understand how the actors perceived their field and how they project themselves into a cooperative project. Also, the aim of those interviews was to understand how actors share the same values. The focus groups were here to proceed with research-action and to structure the cooperative project by answering the question : what project do we want all together ?

A big focus is also made on methodology regarding the difficulties of doing a research-action and the complexity of combining different methods in order to increase both internal and external validity. Also, there is a philosophical matter that has to be explored regarding ethics and how the researcher can involve himself in the field and find the right balance. Having a constructivist epistemology obliges myself to find as profoundly as possible how to justify the way I produce knowledge.

On another hand, a quantitative study has been done in order to compare training organisations with training organisations under the cooperative status. The data has been gathered from a public list made available by the government and compiled with data made available by the general confederation of cooperatives.

There are two types of training organisations : those who are certified (which allows access to public funds) and those who are not certified.

There are approximately 120 000 training course providers including 592 cooperatives. 30 millions are trained by certified companies including approximately 600 000 by cooperatives.

The data show that cooperatives versus all of the training organisations have similarities and resemblances. For instance, some training courses are proportionally less given in a cooperative such as *Commercial and Sales*. Also, cooperatives are more likely to give training courses such as *Communication and Journalism*. Yet, cooperatives and non cooperative have in common *HR, Management, IT and relationship skills* training.

Proportionally, cooperatives are more certified than non cooperative (64% versus 34%). Cooperatives outsource twice more than non cooperative and also have twice more trainees per training organisation.

Only 21% of cooperatives have as their main economic activity professional training for adults which means that a very large amount of cooperatives that have an economic activity based on training courses for adults does not base their main activity on it.

Conclusion will be given along the way by analysing the different stages of the realisation of the cooperative. How all those stages occur will give different conclusions and explanations.

It is premature to give elements yet.