WEAVING COHERENCE
AUTHENTICITY IN TIME AND PLACE

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Abstract

This paper addresses the topic of authenticity at work, in the eyes and through the words of a set of Italian craftmakers. The debate on authenticity in management and organization studies is mostly focused on identifying authenticity in terms of claims, which are recognized by audiences and hence constitute a key competitive advantage for the organizations which efficiently construct them. However, these studies portray a static and functionalist view of authenticity, which miss to consider authenticity as exerted by organizations and individuals in continuous becoming (authenticity work). The continuous process of construction of coherence for authenticity work is what this paper intends to focus on. In particular, we ask: how is authenticity work played out in one's everyday work? How do actors construct coherence in their work, and to what? To respond to this question, we analyze "craft histories" of craftmakers in two different Italian settings, according to a qualitative methodology. We find that actors weaves coherence in their job through different modes, which evolve around three main instances: the *maker* (i.e. the 'individual'), the *making* (i.e. the 'performance'), the *made object* (i.e. 'the object'), and that issues of coherence between past/present/future (*coherence in time*) and in relation to a specific place (*coherence in place*) are an important matter of concern.

Text

I don't want to become a museum where people come and say "this is authentic!" Screw it! I mean, I want to be really authentic. So sometimes I put a chain on my door, I lock myself in, I really need to set a limit. […] It is not easy. This is the distress of our generation and of nowadays society. For certain aspects you need to play with it, but for others you need to be righteous and autonomous. In my opinion, one needs to be coherent as much as possible. […] Maybe this authenticity lays on this concept of coherence, maybe one's coherence, which allows one to feel good. In the moment in

Introduction

This paper addresses the topic of authenticity at work, in the eyes and through the words of a set of Italian craftmakers. The debate on authenticity in management and organization studies is largely focused on identifying authenticity as a matter of correspondence of a given entity (an object, an individual, an organization, a performance, etc.) to a specific referent (the entity itself, a norm, a category, a time, a place etc.) (Lehman et al., 2019), and on scrutinizing the production of authenticity claims by organizations (Beverland, 2005; Voronov et al., 2023), and their effects in relation to their audiences. This reflects a rather static view of authenticity, almost portrayed as a tool for success or at least for recognition by an audience. We sense that there is more to it though. In our view, authenticity can only be in becoming: a historical shop is authentically historical not inasmuch as it claims to be respondent to a category, but inasmuch as it is lived as a historical shop by its members in the first place (Ferri & Lusiani, 2021); an accredited business school is authentic as a business school not so much for its claimed and proven repondence to a norm, but inasmuch as it embodies and lives in practice its being a business school. All this underlies an idea of a continuous process of construction of coherence in one's job.

This continuous process of construction of coherence is what this paper intends to focus on. In particular, moving away from a view on the effortful actions of construction of authenticity claims, we ask: how is authenticity work played out in one's everyday work? How do actors construct coherence in their work, and to what?

To respond to this question, we focus on the setting of craftmaking. The expectation of authenticity is somehow connaturated with the very notion of craft, which makes us believe that authenticity work might be especially salient in this setting. In particular, we set out to collect a set of 'craft histories' that we will treat as different accounts of authenticity work. In collecting our craft histories, we will range from more industrial to more artistic experiences, from more traditional to more innovative ones, and from more touristic to less touristic settings, in order to account for as much variety as possible. In each one of these craft histories we will look for the specific modes through which the actors construct coherence in their job.

Background

In our post-modern world the quest for 'authenticity' has become increasingly prominent for our societies, organizations and individuals. People look for authentic places to settle their lives, organizations look for individuals expressing their authentic self at work, while seeking to project an authentic image towards their audiences, tourists look for authentic experiences in their travel destinations. But what is this claimed authenticity? Common

knowledge identifies as 'authentic' something that is true (versus 'fake' or 'contrived'), sincere, original, genuine, traditional (Lehman et al., 2019). However, even if there seems to be a common consensus around its meaning, a deeper analysis shows much more confusion around the concept (ibid).

In management and organization studies a bulk of research developed on the topic of authenticity. Authenticity is an ill-defined concept related to the subjective perception that an entity (e.g., person, place or thing) is real (Carroll & Wheaton, 2009),credible (Peterson, 2005) or both (Lehman et al., 2019), and that the lineage of that entity can be verified (Lindholm, 2008). Lehman and colleagues' (2019) literature review reveals that authenticity has always something to do with the respondence of an entity to a specific referent: (1) the consistency between an entity's internal values and its external expressions, (2) the conformity of an entity to the norms of its social category, and (3) the connection between an entity and a person, place, or time as claimed.

In particular, some scholars focused on 'authenticity work', identifying the various strategies through which organizations construct authenticity claims (Beverland, 2005; C. Jones et al., 2005; D. Jones & Smith, 2005; Voronov et al., 2023). Authenticity work is defined as organizations' effortful projection of being authentic to their audiences (Peterson, 2005), or as the organizational efforts to develop and sustain believable authenticity claims (Voronov et al., 2023). What derives from this bulk of literature is that authenticity relates to the respondance of an entity to a referent, that this is something explicitly claimed, effortfully sought, and mainly audience-dependent, especially for strategic purposes such as competitive differentiation advantages (Cattani et al., 2017; Voronov et al., 2023), commercial success, or brand recognition (Beverland, 2005; Koontz, 2010). However, how authenticity is played out in everyday practice, and not only claimed, remains somewhat unaddressed.

Methods

In order to understand how 'authenticity work' plays out in one's everyday job, we chose to collect different "craft histories" among a set of Italian craftmakers. The context of craft seems a particularly relevant one for the study authenticity since craftmaking naturally embeds an idea of authenticity, which is rooted in the values of craft as an alternative to mass production that characterizes modernity. We focused on two locations, Venice and Bassano del Grappa/Nove, both craft-intense settings, but with different patterns: the former a well-known tourism destination and the latter a specialized industrial district. Spanning different materials (ceramics, wood, wax, brass, glass, paper, cloth, stone), techniques, and production

types (traditional, innovative, artistic and semi-industrial), we visited 28 craftmakers[1] in their work places, and we collected narrative interviews, asking about their job, their path, their relationship with the materials and techniques employed, their ideas about the future of their business and of craft in general. Table 1 reports an overview of the collected cases, which is still in progress.

Table 1 – cases description (data collection is in progress)

n.	name	business name	description	industrial/ artistic	traditional/ innovative	tourist/non tourist
1	CG RS	Hello Cuko	Sex toy producers	industrial	innovative	non tourist
2	AB	associazione nove terre di ceramiche	Ceramic decorator	artistic	innovative	non tourist
3	PP	Own laboratory	Ceramic artist	artistic	innovative	non tourist
4	DP	L'Albero della Vita	Ceramic sculture maker	artistic	traditional	non tourist
5	GB	Ceramiche barettoni Nove	ceramist	industrial	traditional	non tourist
6	ER	Tera Design Studio	Ceramist and designer	artistic	innovative	non tourist
7	MM	Fiskoceramics	Ceramic artist	artistic	innovative	non tourist
8	CP	Botteganove	Artistic floor maker	industrial	innovative	non tourist
9	MV	VBC CASA	ceramist	industrial	traditional	non tourist
10	GC MT	Own laboratory	ceramist ceramist	artistic	traditional	non tourist
11	MCB	Own laboratory	Cloth maker	artistic	traditional	semi-tourist
12	CR	Il Pesce Rosso Ceramiche	ceramist	artistic	innovative	semi-tourist
13	MB	Relight Venice	Souvenir maker	artistic/semi -ind.	innovative	very tourist
14	MC	MadeInMad	ceramist	artistic	innovative	very tourist
15	CM	Sunset Yogurt	Glass jewels maker	artistic	innovative	very tourist
16	GdG	Own laboratory	ceramist	artistic	innovative	very tourist
17	VS	VS Ceramics	ceramist	artistic	innovative	very tourist
18	SG	Paperoowl	Paper jewels maker	artistic	innovative	very tourist
19	NP	Pavan Wood Work	Wood artist	artistic	innovative	very tourist
20	PD	Forcolaio Matto	Oarlock makers	artistic	traditional	very tourist
21	FC	Kartaruga	Mask maker	artistic	traditional	very tourist
22	SdM	Verderame Pottery	ceramist	artistic	innovative	very tourist
23	AB	Berengo Studio	Glass artist	artistic	innovative	very tourist

[1] In a total of 25 different businesses, 13 in Venice and 12 in Bassano and Nove (Vicenza). Data collection is in progress.

| 24 | AS | proprio laboratorio | ceramist | artistic | innovative | very tourist |
| 25 | SV / GA | Vianello Pavimenti | Venetian floor maker | industrial | traditional | very tourist |

An inductive and explorative analysis of these craft histories is in progress. What is emerging is that the craft histories revolve around three main instances: the *maker* (i.e. the 'individual'), the *making* (i.e. the 'performance'), the *made object* (i.e. 'the object'), and that issues of coherence between past/present/future (*coherence in time*) and in relation to a specific place (*coherence in place*) are an important matter of concern. We hence identified some modes (Table 2) explaining the continuous process of weaving coherence by craftmakers in their day-to-day activities, which we identify as authenticity work.

Illustrative findings

Table 2 – summary of the findings (tentative)

	Weaving coherence in Time	**Weaving coherence in Place**
maker	• Drawing a red thread among makers' past experiences and imagining a bigger picture for the future; • Identifying one's own way within the past cultural baggage	• Creating relationships with people grounded on shared values; • Taking root of one's own business because of the territory
making	• Mixing the old and the new as for materials, techniques, final objects; • Connecting the past to the future by transmitting knowledge	• Networking with local craftmakers in the production process; • Networking with local craftmakers to solve problems
made object	• Embedding makers' past and present identity in the object; • Adding present meanings and functions to old ones	• Relating object's features to the place; • Creating objects for the territory

Weaving coherence in Time

The maker

Drawing a red thread among maker's past experiences and imagining a bigger picture for the future. For some artisans, craftmaking was not the first choice in terms of career, but came as a result of multiple, different experiences, in various contexts, e.g. education or travels. Nevertheless, these experiences have been fundamental for them to become who they are as craftmakers in the present. In their accounts, they tend to weave together – consciously or unconsciously – elements of their past into their current practice, allowing them to be projected towards the future of their business, imagining it accordingly. This does not mean that their paths are necessarily coherent, but that they could find their own personal way to connect the dots and feel coherent as makers in the present. For example, MB (craft souvenirs maker, Venice) opened her shop after a number of experiences abroad in the fields of art,

design and volunteering. All of them helped her to create her own concept of craft based on her passion for travels, traditions and stories from different worlds, and combination of different techniques and materials, which she would like to expand in the future also beyond her Venice atelier.

Identifying one's own way within the past cultural baggage. Many craftmakers, especially those born in the industrial district of Nove, have family members in the craft industry. This often poses an issue between the development of the craftmakers' own identity and the still present cultural legacy deriving from the past. ER (ceramist and designer, Nove) well explains this tension:

> "I have always lived this thing, and I still do it, in a double way: on one side I feel very lucky and I perceive this as a big richness […], but on the other side I have always asked myself: 'what can I give more, with at my backs some people who already gave a lot and who have a very important own personal style?' The truth is that sometimes one needs to let it go and try to do the things at best, carrying one's own sensibility and without emulating".

From their families, craftmakers take lessons on discipline and attitudes at work, but develop independently - not without difficulties - their own technical style as to take distance from the past and move towards the future of their business and their work. This brings satisfaction and external validation, too (DP, ceramic sculptures maker, Nove).

The making

Mixing the old and the new as for materials, techniques, final objects. The inherent process of making of craft is made coherent through time by combining materials, techniques and objects in a way in which the past is preserved but also projected towards the future through innovations. Craftmakers carry out and balance this mix between the old and the new in different ways. For example, traditional techniques and materials are employed to create new objects, which would never have been produced in the past, such as sex toys in ceramics (HC, sex toy makers, Nove) or brass jewels obtained from the scraps of lamp making (MB, souvenirs maker, Venice). Vice versa, traditional objects are made with new techniques and materials, such as 'cuchi', traditional bird-shaped whistles made with colored clay (DP, ceramic sculptures maker, Nove). Or also, new and more advanced materials are inserted in traditional manufacturing, as in the case of modern Venetian floor made with concrete and modern glues (VP, stone floor makers, Venice). New and old materials and techniques can be finally be blended for the creation of a new final product, as ER (ceramists and designer, Nove) shows through her idea of "temporal hybrid", which she explains through these words: "ceramics, ancient tradition, plastic, which is a new, modern concept, old production method – through lathe and founding - and instead new technologies, 3d printing. This is all a matter of finding a balance, a dialogue between what we were and what we will be" (Picture 1).

Picture 1 – "temporal hybrid" products (ER, ceramist and designer, Nove)

Connecting the past to the future by transmitting knowledge. Many artisans stress the transmission of craft knowledge for its preservation and continuation in the future. Some of them purposefully act in order to teach young employees old techniques so that they can be replicated over time. Not only, they do dissemination on artisanal making in schools, organize craft laboratories or even interact with children when they work (VP, stone floor makers, Venice). Others undertake themselves the job in order to bring forward the technique and feed the culture in which that job is reflected, even if sometimes this could be judged "crazy" by external people, as in the case of PD (oarlock maker, Venice – on the choice of the name "The crazy oarlock maker" for his business).

The made object

Embedding makers' identity in the object. The main mode through which an artisanal product is judged authentic by its own maker is the coherence between the makers' identity and the product itself. The product has to reflect makers' attitude, values, and thoughts, in its aesthetic or in its spirit/functionality: "we have a personality and we wanted a product with an irreverent but not gross personality" (HC, sex toys makers, Nove). Furthermore, coherence is created more internally than externally, that is craftmakers care more about their internal judgment of coherence than the external one (e.g. from costumers): "we do not think about what people think, I do not think 'Will people understand?' 'Will people like it?', but we come and say 'this is what we think'" (ER, ceramist and designer, Nove).

Adding present meanings and functions to old ones. The products made by artisans nowadays are often deriving from traditions of the past, but are re-contextualized in the present with new functions to allow the business to be economically sustainable for the future. This is the case of the oarlock, born with an unique function, the one meant for traditional venetian boats, which has then been flanked by a more aesthetic and artistic one (for exhibitions, home decor). Coherence here is made by finding – not always with ease - a meaningful balance between the new and the old function, so that they can coexist and not exclude one another,

as reported by PD (oarlocks maker, Venice): "our job has this two facets, the one purely functional to the city, which is an element that I do not want and I cannot disregard, because it is the motivation why I opened my laboratory […] However, on the other point of view it is oxygenating but it is also a stimulus, and a responsibility too, if you sell the oarlock as a piece of furniture, for example to a Californian tourist who understand the authenticity of the oarlock […] I would like the oarlock to be the carrier of an idea which is ancient but also revolutionary, in the sense that it could be the key for a sustainable city, for a future which is not an obsolete past but that can be lived better, in my opinion".

Weaving coherence in place

The maker

Creating relationships with people grounding on shared values. Coherence is also created through place and with place by cultivating relationships with people that are gravitating around the craftmakers and their ateliers, who they share the same values with. They are not necessarily colleagues (see "making"), but local residents of the street and the neighborhood, or even tourists, with whom craftmakers create an interaction that results to be fruitful in one way or another. For example, PD (oarlock maker, Venice) says: "I have at heart this artisanal dimension of the street […] creating an external artisanal hub would be an own goal, because they would take out from the streets the social bound which an atelier intrinsically has, which is maybe the nicest thing. A while ago a woman passed by and said hello, a person may need to cut some wood, with another one I go to take a coffee. An exchange is created, and sometimes you lose time, but at the end it is never like that, there is always an interaction". This can happen even with tourists, "curious travelers" who move away from the beaten tracks and find craft shops where is possible to have a chat with the maker and cultivate a relationship which, even if short, enriches both sides (MB, souvenir maker; SG, paper jewels maker, Venice).

Taking root of one's own business because of the territory. Many craftmakers decided to change career path to come back to their birthplace, or move to a new one, and start their own craft business. This is often connected to the cultural heritage of the territory itself (whatever Nove or Venice, in our cases) which acts as an attractor and favourable point of installation of an activity. The place is chosen not necessarily because of better economic or working conditions (e.g. many craftmakers reported difficulties in finding a space for the activity to rent or to buy) but because it is inherently and coherently connected to the maker's identity and production. Place provides not only materials and work connections (see "making"), but coherent background for one's own job, in terms of culture (e.g. familiar culture, for ER ceramist and designer, Nove; rowing culture, for PD, oarlocks maker, Venice), inspiration (e.g. the one

given by nature, for VS and MC, ceramists, Venice, PP, ceramic artist, Nove), and presence of a community of peers to which find a more spiritual connection, beyond the practical one.

The making

Networking with local craft makers to make the final object. The construction of coherence in the craft making process is often given by a collaboration between artisans of the same territory which allows the delivery of an inherently 'authentic' final product. In her story, MB (souvenir maker, Venice) often points out her deliberate choice of producing her pieces by engaging a local foundry, by re-using wood discarded from the oars making process, and by collaborating with the jail – even if not convenient from an economic and a practical point of view. Nevertheless, this allows her to produce a 100% territorial product, which is claimed to be not only authentic but also sustainable because capable of supporting local economy. Furthermore, craft makers give value to the collaboration with local suppliers due to a better ability of understanding each other given the similar small dimension, the tailor-made production, and the high quality of the materials (e.g. PD, oarlock maker, who states to prefer a small venetian wood producer instead of industrial ones).

Networking with local craftmakers to solve problems. Coherence is also created by a supporting environment which allows the final product to be the result of a shared making process in which craft maker receives support by other artisans for solving problems of different nature. The case of HC (ceramic sex toy makers) is emblematic, since the project creators, despite born in Nove, had no competences in ceramics. But this has not prevented them to realize their project by overcoming many difficulties encountered in the production (given by the shape of the object) thanks to the connections they had on the territory:

> "*when we had the idea, being surrounded by friends and people that we know, who works in the sector, we went to this guy and we asked to create two or three of them and let's see if it works. […] We did many trials, we had a problem with the support of the object [...] it was stressing […] then after one year we found this artisan who cared about the project and could work with the standards we were asking for".*

The made object

Relating object's features to the place. In the made object, coherence is created by connecting the object's feature with the place in different ways. As MB (souvenir maker, Venice) explains: "it has an authentic shape, it is made by an authentic person of the territory, […] the story comes from the territory, the materials comes from this territory, what is not authentic in my objects?". The aesthetic of the objects often recalls venetian buildings famous facades, too, as showed in picture 2.

Picture 2 – craft souvenirs recalling Venice building facades (MB)

Creating objects for the territory. Coherence is finally also made explicit in the creation of objects at the service of the place and the territory, as it is in the case of the oarlock for Venice, in order to preserve the rowing culture, or in the case of "cuchi" in Nove, as a territorial tradition (DP reports that the majority of the selling of his works are done during the local fair, to local people).

Conclusions (preliminary)

What is emerging from this preliminary analysis is that, surprisingly, explicit authenticity claims are completely stranger to the discursive landscape of craftmakers, in that their narratives are entirely focused on the making, the maker, or the made object without apparent authenticity concerns. And yet, all these craft histories reflect craftmaking as a continuous process of construction of coherence. The construction of coherence captured through these craft histories is essentially woven between a past, a present and a future ('weaving coherence in time'), and between the maker/the making/the made object and a specific place ('weaving coherence in place'). Moreover, the coherence thus emerging seems to be conducive to a form of moral integrity which gives meaning to the job (see the opening quote: "maybe one's coherence, which allows one to feel good"). In other words, these actors 'do authenticity' as they work, without claiming, or even realizing it, and they do it essentially for their subjective wellbeing.

These findings may contribute both to the literature on crafts, advancing our knowledge of its mode of organizing as inherently related with the ethics of care (Gasparin & Quinn, 2021; Hjorth, 2022), and to the literature on authenticity in organization studies (Lehman et al., 2019), moving the notion of authenticity closer to the intimate dimension of the doing, rather than the claiming.

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