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Social Capital and Innovation Dynamics in District-based Local systems♥

Giulio Cainelli♣, Susanna Mancinelli♦ and Massimiliano Mazzanti♠

Abstract

In the socio-economic literature social capital generally emerges as an individual attitude with the characteristics of a public good: it does not imply privately appropriable benefits. By contrast, the main idea behind this paper is that SC might and should be interpreted as a component of an investment which implies private and public benefits entangled with each other. In order to put forward this idea, a theoretical framework that considers social capital as the public component of the impure public good R&D is developed. It shows that the 'civic culture' of the district area in which a firm works is not sufficient as an incentive to increase its investment in social capital, because this investment strictly depends also on the economic convenience of investing in the R&D. Social capital /networking dynamics might positively and complementary evolve only if the opportunity cost of investing in innovation is sufficiently low.

We consequently focus our attention on a specialized industrial district located in the Emilia Romagna region – the biomedical district of Mirandola (Modena) – characterised by a strong pattern of innovative activity. Using a proxy for innovative activity as dependant variable, we observe that R&D and networking/social capital arise as complementary driving forces for innovation outputs. When empirical evidence confirms that this complementarity plays key role, and consequently strong links exist between market and non-market dynamics relating to firms, the role for policy actions targeted to social capital is larger. The policy effort should be targeted toward both market and non-market characteristics taken together, rather than solely to the production of (local) public goods (social capital) or innovation inputs as independent elements of firm processes. The input of SC alone is not sufficient to ensure innovation and growth: economic incentives matter. On the other hand, whenever SC dynamics are crucial for R&D private investments, the effect of economic incentives depends on the presence and degree of their complementarity.

Keywords: Social capital, R&D, technological innovation, industrial districts, local systems

JEL: O32, D92, H49

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1. Introduction

In the socio-economic literature social capital (SC hereafter) generally emerges as an individual attitude with the characteristics of a pure public good: it does not imply privately appropriable benefits.

By contrast, the main idea behind this paper is that SC might and should be interpreted as a component of an investment which implies private and public benefits entangled with each other.

In order to put forward this idea, a conceptual theoretical framework is presented, in which SC is considered the public component of an impure public good[1].The theoretical analysis comes to the result that, when complementarity between SC and R&D is considered, the 'civic culture' of an industrial district is not sufficient as an incentive, to increase investments in SC by any single firm joining the district, because this investment also depends on the economic convenience in investing in R&D. Hence, in our opinion, the pre-existence of a community of people, of richness in social links and a common cultural background, as it may be intended by Putnam (1993), is a necessary but not sufficient pre-condition for the accumulation of SC.

The subsequent empirical analysis allows us to assess the degree of such complementarity between SC and R&D, in a specific district-based industrialised context, using original survey data. In particular, we focus our attention on a Marshallian industrial district located in the Emilia Romagna region – the biomedical district of Mirandola (Modena) – which is characterised by strong innovative activity. Using original survey data on firm innovation practices, investment strategies, and cooperation efforts concerning firm relationship and networking within and outside the district, a complementary positive effect between SC and R&D investments is detected, by estimating different econometric specifications of an "innovation equation".

A main conclusion of the paper is that if and only if the economic conditions, which determine a favourable environment for the investment in the impure public good, improve,

[1] In the economic literature, an impure public good, or mixed-public good, is a good which jointly gives private and public benefits. A typical example is that of an individual who, by being inoculated against an infectious disease, confers both a private benefit on himself and a public benefit by reducing the risk of spreading the disease through the community. In this case inoculation is the impure public good. The definition of impure public good well applies "to an activity like philanthropy, where charitable activities provide private as well as public benefits to contributors" (Cornes and Sandler, 1984, p. 580). "The acquisition of certain types of education is often asserted to have benefits for society at large, in addition to purely private benefits generated for students. […] The acts of charity and of saving and the activities of military alliances are a few of the many instances that have been claimed as examples of the joint production of both a public and a private benefits." (Cornes and Sandler, 1986, p. 115).

then investments in SC by district firms are likely to increase. SC/networking dynamics may only positively evolve if the opportunity cost of investing in innovation is sufficiently low.

The paper is organized as follows. In section two, we comment on and describe some of the main results of the recent SC literature. The most relevant definitions are presented and discussed. Hence a conceptual framework for SC is provided, essentially based on the concept of 'intensity of networking activities' concerning network-involved agents. The framework largely draws upon works of impure public good production and non-cooperative agreements. In section three, a theoretical conceptual analysis is presented, wherein the accumulation of SC is considered as the public component of the impure public capital R&D, and the main issues of the analysis are discussed. In section four, we present our empirical exercise. Estimating an innovation equation, we detect a positive rapport between the intensity of SC (measured by a firm's specific index of cooperative intensity within the district) and the level of innovative actions observed. Moreover, R&D and SC/networking arises as complementary driving forces behind innovative activity. The last section concludes the paper.

2. On social capital: the economic arena and the microeconomic framework

The main problem concerning the economic analysis of what has been termed 'SC' is that the literature is strongly heterogeneous, and the notion of SC is not always clearly assessed and described to be operative on theoretical and applied grounds. This is probably caused by the past emphasis on inter-disciplinary research, which has characterised the SC arena over the nineties, and was definitely necessary in the initial phase to generate a conceptual and theoretical debate.

Among the various definitions we came across in the literature, the following are the most relevant for defining the boundaries of the issue: (i) "A variety of different entities with two factors in common: they all consist of some aspects of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions – whether personal or corporate actors – within the structure" (Coleman, 1988); (ii) "Those features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinate actions" (Putnam, 1993); (iii) "A glue that holds societies together" (Serageldin, 1996).

Taking into account the above definitions, SC is possibly identifiable with the 'culture' of a group of agents, a culture of economic reciprocity and cooperation. More generally, two key issues arise up from the socio-economic literature, those of 'trust' and 'ease of cooperation'.

Paldam (2000) specifically provides meanings revolving around the notion of trust, cooperation and network. The author correctly defines SC as the glue generating excess cooperation; we here add 'in excess' with respect to an equilibrium intended in a Cournot-Nash meaning. Trust and ease of cooperation are two factors that simultaneously interact in the production of private and public goods, or forms of capital.

We argue it is essential to move away from 'associative' based concepts of SC as presented in Robison *et al.* (2002) and Putnam (1993), and from analysis of trust and cooperation relying on 'honesty' treated as a sort of public good, toward frameworks where SC is conceived as an intangible capital stock with some public good-like properties, worth investigating further[2].

A contingent definition of SC emerges strictly linked to the concepts presented above: SC is an intermediate capital good privately and intentionally produced, which endogenously accumulates from the flow of agents investments in voluntary cooperative effort. SC might be also conceived as the stock of the public component of an impure-public good, sustained by a set of private incentives. Its 'production' and accumulation are self-enforcing and sustained by reciprocal benefits of cooperation (Mancinelli and Mazzanti, 2004; Galassi and Mancinelli, 2004).

It is clear that the above definition hints at a microeconomic approach, differentiating the present analysis from that mostly found in the literature so far. It thus lies within the 'narrow' definition of SC, following the World Bank (1997) terminology for microeconomic approaches[3], in opposition to wider meso and macro approaches.

As far as the capital-like properties are concerned, SC as defined above has a transformation capacity, in the sense that its accumulation is targeted toward the production of other forms of capital (man made or organizational) or final outputs[4]. It endures as long as incentives exist to

[2] Along this line, social capital emerges as a form of "relational organizational capital" and may be included within the set of high-performance practices adopted by firms. It is embedded both in social relationships developed in the organisation (Tomer, 2001) and in networking territorial relationships. Recent works (Oughton-Wittam, 1997; Westlund-Bolton, 2003), adding insights to the most consolidated literature concerning Marshallian district spillovers, have emphasises the role played by networking cooperative based dynamics for innovation changes. We may affirm that some innovative directions are more likely to occur where networking dynamics act as a driver of new techno-organisational paths emerging from previously non existent or separated elements of innovation/knowledge.

[3] Wherein SC is included and studied as the 'missing link', or residual and intangible capital factor, in explaining growth and development of economic systems. SC is the fourth form of capital, after man made, natural and human capital, in other words the 'glue' that (i) may enhance other factor's productivity, (ii) reduces problems associated to 'common property resources' and (iii) generically helps development to occur on a sustainable basis (Cote and Healy, 2001). For a heterodox view on SC see Fine (2001).

[4] The definition of SC as a stock of intangibles is not a completely shared vision. For instance, Arrow (1999) and Solow (1999) sharply conclude that the emphasis on capital is probably misplaced. SC derives instead from an association to the concept of human capital. In their view, the fact that factors such as trust, cooperativeness, and

sustain it. In our case, the degree of durability is such that the stock elapses with the cooperative agreements established for specific objectives. Then, the breaking down of a coalition ends the value of the stock. Furthermore, SC accumulates or de-cumulates depending on the structure of individual incentives (benefits and costs), and it is subject to decay as a renewable 'collective resource'. In fact, decay depends on endogenous factors such as easy riding (non consistent actions of investment between agents) and on exogenous factors; investment flows are thus necessary to maintain the stock. Contrary to Sandler's analysis of intergenerational club goods (Sandler, 1982 and 1992), depreciation occurs because of a lack of strategic investment (reduced investment) in cooperation at any time *t*, rather than as a direct consequence of capital 'use' (crowding externality). In other words, depreciation derives from 'non use' rather than excessive use, as for many forms of collective manmade capital. Depreciation reflects the fact that much of SC investment is community-network specific.

The only capital-like property SC lacks is alienability, since we have shown that the stock of SC is intrinsically a relational dependent stock, consistent with Coleman's vision. It is not owned by individual agents or by the agents as a group, it is 'asset specific' and an instrument for the alliance purposes[5]. Nevertheless, we argue that 'inalienability' is the main specificity of SC indented as an intangible real asset. Inalienability is linked to non-marketability, in that agents invest in some imperfectly observable assets: in respect to investment decisions, costliness and imperfect observability are the main factors responsible for the systemic easy riding. Thus, in respect to our definition, is SC a real form of (intangible) capital? We believe it is.

Moreover, in the definition proposed above SC is not simply considered as a public good, but as the public component of an impure public good, in which agents invest.

For instance, the environment faced by firms located within an industrial district may be depicted as follows: on the one hand, a firm has the option of investing either in standard technology or in incremental innovations which do not require cooperative efforts (the firm internalises investments and associated returns). Both options may be termed as 'Business as Usual' (BAU) scenarios. On the other hand, the firm may invest in R&D which implies innovations that involve structural breaks from the BAU (discrete changes concerning technological/organisational development) and that involve the concepts of skill, knowledge

propensity to invest in a common effort have on the one hand a clear cut effect on total productivity, but on the other hand economics cannot consistently deal with SC as a proper form of capital. Other authors (Stiglitz, 1999) are more in favour of the SC consistency within economics.

[5] It is network-specific, as organizational relationships internal to the firm are not easily replicated and are defined as "firm-specific organizational capabilities" (Tomer, 2001, p.71).

and competences, which are only partially owned by the firm. In this case, the innovation change requires a cooperative effort, and the investment may be thought of as one in an impure public good, that is each unit of investment produces some percentage units of private benefits and some percentage units of public benefits. Private benefits are, for instance, technological amelioration appropriable by the firm and public benefits derive from the cooperative agreements among firms.

The framework highlights the fundamental need for agents to join their efforts to achieve benefits which derive from and build on public-like forms of investments. The most common and relevant benefit deriving from firm cooperation is that associated to the development of technological (process and product-based) innovations. This necessary joint effort to establish voluntary cooperative schemes, to achieve goals specific to the network but appropriable by participants, characterises most forms of (i) voluntary agreements, (ii) inter-firms intra district cooperation, (iii) inter-firms inter-districts cooperation. The relevance of points (i)-(iii) as engines for innovation and growth at a regional level has increased over the last decades, following both the less prominent role of the State as 'regulator' (top down approach), and the reshaping of governance and business strategies within the post-fordist society. Indeed socio-economic changes occurring in the post fordist (post-industrial) era shift the focus of interest from man made forms of capital to human, environmental and SC assets. Furthermore, market and non-market 'horizontal' networks play a major role with respect to 'vertical' and hierarchical relationships, creating a new scenario described by a cultural change in local and national production. The community benefits from positive network externalities. Nevertheless, in contrast to pure exogenous spillovers, the voluntary and intentional production of joint social benefits is costly: therefore incentives are crucial.

The public element of welfare function of one firm participating in the network agreement is, in our framework, the stock of SC on which the decision of action relies. SC is nevertheless strictly connected to private components of welfare (it is not a pure 'independent' public good), by a complementarity relationship.

It is worth underlining the voluntary element of the agreements in cooperation and production: SC is self-enforcing, self-financing, in opposition to third-party enforcement frameworks. Thus, we may say that our SC environment belongs to a Coasian-like framework characterised by horizontal relationships, in opposition to third-party top down-oriented enforcement institutional frameworks.

As far as the measurement of SC is concerned, there are three main ways of approaching SC quantification at microeconomic level[6]: by using (i) regional/national official datasets; (ii) revealed preference approaches (observing agent's behaviour), which includes both quantifying by observing choices (i.e. investment choices, participation rates, etc.); (iii) stated preferences methods (directly revealing behaviour when observation is difficult or we lack behavioural 'tracks'), which include quantifying SC by direct methods (i.e. interviewing economic agents).

The main obstacle in using the first method, generally less costly, is that SC features are usually non-market and non-accounted in regional and national dataset[7]. Thus, the only consistent way to elicit the SC private and public characteristics is often by implementing survey-based approaches aimed at eliciting specific information by structured questionnaires. The questionnaire should attempt to gather information consistent with conceptual definitions, by recovering data on SC factors, R&D dynamics and other firm-specific factors possibly affecting innovation, which we may use as "control" variables.

3. Private and public benefits from social capital

In the analysis set out in the previous section, SC does not emerge as an individual attitude towards something which implies only public benefits; by contrast, SC emerges as the public component of an investment which implies a share of privately appropriable benefits[8].

The aim of this section is to present a theoretical framework on the accumulation of SC by district firms, where SC is considered as the public component of an impure public good (the R&D investment) following the example depicted in the previous section.

The social capital setting we here frame is a specific application of the more general theory referring to impure public goods, developed within the arena of modern welfare economics. In fact, pure public good and private good theories are the poles of a continuous spectrum. The impure public good theory is the more general one and can accommodate diverse specifications

[6] We do not follow the macro-economic direction, which has dominated until recently the empirical measurement of SC, for two reasons. First, the conceptual focus is here strictly microeconomic. Secondly, the weaknesses of that research direction (specifically the weak conceptual framework for SC) have recently been extensively highlighted by various authors, who claim the greater added value of a microeconomic applied research direction (Sobel, 2002; Durlauf, 2004; 2002).

[7] For this reason, most studies on SC using official data adopt SC proxies, which lack robustness in terms of conceptual and /or theoretical foundations. See, among the others, Guiso, Sapienza and Zingales (2000) who introduce some ad hoc SC proxies as determinants of financial development.

[8] The idea that investment in SC is linked to economic factors, which imply private benefits, has already been investigated in Galassi (2001).

referring to real-world phenomena characterised by intrinsically joint production of private and public goods.

The steps of voluntary cooperation may be represented as follows: at a first stage agents voluntarily join to share the production costs of a good or service, of private and /or public nature, expecting to receive a vector of dynamic benefits[9]. This constitutes the main trade off between present costs and future benefits. We suppose that the agents are N firms who voluntary join a district.

At a second stage the firms, which have joined the district, consider both private and public benefits arising jointly from cooperation, and each district firm invests in two kinds of capital. The first one has private characteristics only (it has no effects on the other district firms). The second one, on the contrary, has the characteristics of an impure public good: it has either a private characteristic (which has no effect on the other firms) and a public characteristic (which also affects the other firms). The investment in the private kind of capital can represent an investment in what we have previously termed BAU (business as usual) capital stock, and the investment in the "impure public" capital can represent an investment in R&D. In this case we can take as example of the private component the technological amelioration appropriable by the firm, and as example of the "public component" the formation of voluntary and self enforcing agreements among firms.

Therefore, the public component is consistent with the definition of SC presented in section two. It is an intermediate capital good produced privately and intentionally, which endogenously accumulates from the flow of agents investments in voluntary cooperative effort; and it is also the public component of an impure-public good.

Since R&D has the characteristic of an impure public good, it is then possible to assert that whenever a district firm invests in one unit of R&D, its investment is in some percentage an investment in a private asset (the technological amelioration appropriable by the firm), and in some percentage an investment in social capital.

Since each firm's choice regarding SC has effects both on the firm's own benefits and on the other firms' benefits, an investment of one firm in an extra unit of the impure public capital stock (R&D) has three effects: (i) an increase in the firm's private benefits due to the private component; (ii) an increase in the total amount of the public component, SC, available to any district firm; (iii) an increase in the firm's private benefits due to the public component

[9] Notice that in our framework the economic analysis on SC refers to situations wherein an economic relationship among agents exists and the cooperative behaviour of economic agents is intentional and voluntary.

(social capital). And this is true for every firm inside the network, so that each firm's benefits depend either on its own choices and on the other firms' choices concerning R&D and SC.

Since R&D is here considered as an impure public capital, we can assert, following Cornes and Sandler (1984, 1986), that the private and public characteristic are complements. Therefore an increase in one of the two characteristics increases the benefits of increasing the other (Milgrom and Roberts, 1995).

Moreover, we can consider the opportunity cost of the impure public capital R&D equal to the value of the private capital (BAU).

3.1 The accumulation of social capital inside an industrial district

From the considerations made in the framework depicted above, it is possible to infer some results about the accumulation of R&D and SC by the district firms in a certain lifespan of some periods.

First of all, it is expectable that, in each period the district firms' optimal level of investment in R&D decreases at the increasing of the opportunity cost of R&D.

Moreover, the relationship of complementarity between the private and the public components of the good considered as impure public (R&D) deserves, in our opinion, some consideration.

Complementarity theoretically enhances the probability of achieving a social optimum outcome, affecting the sign and slope of the reaction functions[10]. Intuitively, since for each firm the two components of the impure public capital are complements, an increase of the other firms' investment in the public component (SC) increases the benefits of accumulating the complementary private component (technological amelioration appropriable by the firm only). Therefore, the single firm now wishes to increase her own investment of the private component and, hence, of the impure public capital (R&D). In this way, through the extra investment in R&D, the single firm necessarily determines an increase of her investment in SC too. Hence her "reaction curve" may have positive slope, with evident positive implications on the free riding problem. It means that each firm inside the district reacts positively to the other firms' investment in SC. None relies on the others' contributions to SC, but, on the contrary, through the relationship of complementarity between the private and the public components of R&D,

[10] The reaction curve relates the reaction of an agent to the other individuals' choices of public good. It is generally characterised by negative slope, to indicate the free riding problem.

the investment in SC by each firm is increased by the other firms' investments. This necessarily leads to an individual equilibrium choice of SC closer to the optimal social choice.

If we consider high levels of investments in SC by district firms as strictly associated to the level of 'civic culture' of that district, the result of the model confirms what part of the literature on SC asserts. That is, the level of investment in SC by an individual economic agent is positively boosted by the civic culture of the geographic area in which the economic agent acts. We refer to that line of analysis which mainly stems from the famous contributions associated to the works of Fukuyama (1995) and Putnam (1993). The interest of both approaches is on 'culture' and 'institutions', but no attempt is made to analyse what the causes of SC formation and development are. The interest is on SC "effects" and on comparative analyses between areas and regions[11]. What often emerges from this approach to SC is that geographic areas in which investments in SC are low are typically characterised by a low level of 'civic culture'. The reasons behind accumulation are not explored and, as a consequence, the economic incentives behind the investments in SC are not investigated.

Nevertheless, in our framework, this virtuous circle from "civic culture" of the district to increases of the single firm's investment in SC occurs only when the opportunity cost of the impure public capital is sufficiently low: if the opportunity cost of R&D is too high, the single firm will not increase her investment in R&D and as a consequence, will not increase her investment in SC, even if the availability of SC provided by the other firms is high.

Hence, if SC is definable as the public component of an impure public capital, the 'civic culture' of the district area to which the firm belongs is not sufficient to increase her investment in SC, because this investment depends also on the economic profitability in investing in the impure public capital. This is true for each firm inside the industrial district. Therefore, the whole level of investment in SC inside the district tends to be correlated to the costs of the economic actions. In the case depicted above, the higher the opportunity costs of R&D (conversely, the lower the profitability of innovation), the lower the stock level of SC.

As a conclusion, if and only if the economic conditions, which determine a favourable environment to the investment in R&D improve, it is possible to expect an increase of the investments in SC by economic agents. If SC is assessed as the public component of an impure public good which is a crucial intermediate capital good for firm performance and innovation

[11] The main risk of this approach is to explain social phenomenon only by the (observed) status quo culture, with minor attention to economic and political dynamic elements. Warner (2001) is precise when she states that while Putnam claims that communities with larger stocks of "horizontal" SC exhibit better development outcome, he also fails in providing evidence for the *constructability* of that SC stock.

practices, the incentive devices to invest in SC are also economic-based, and not only linked to the exogenously determined 'civic culture' of the geographic area.

The aim of the following empirical analysis is to test the assumption of complementarity between SC and R&D in a specific Italian industrial district: the biomedical district of Mirandola (Modena). The study is grounded on original information elicited from firms belonging to an industrial district where innovation is the predominant factor for boosting growth and economic performance in the local environment. It is worth noting that the applied analysis is meant to be a first empirical test, circumscribed to the district under investigation, without the attempt of achieving any generalisation of results. In this sense our empirical analysis is preliminary in scope, suggesting a direction for further research.

4. SC and R&D investments as complements: an empirical test

4.1 The data-set

The framework depicted above characterises different real-world situations where inter-firm cooperation is the primary and leading key to the successful performance of industrial districts. Along this line, networking is a capital good and an intermediate input to production. Although we underline that the present analysis is highly specific concerning the elicited data, recent works taking a similar perspective are, among the others, Cassiman and Veugelers (2002), Becker and Dietz (2004), Fritsch and Franke (2004), Negassi (2004). These papers deal with innovation activities, R&D cooperation and (knowledge) spillovers, taking different perspectives and research directions. Summing up, they attempt to identify what the determinants of R&D intensity, R&D cooperation and innovation activities are, by specifying diverse reduced forms[12]. Building on that research, we here attempt to focus attention on the nexus of complementarity between networking and R&D as joint inputs for technological innovation.

Now let us show how we prepared and designed the case study analysis for the biomedical industrial district of Mirandola (Modena). The empirical identification of the manufacturing firms belonging to this industrial district was carried out taking into account two different dimensions: (i) productive specialization and (ii) geographic area in which firms are located. In

[12] Becker and Dietz (2004) estimate reduced forms for input and output innovation measures regressed over R&D cooperation and networking proxies. Fritsch and Franke (2004) use patent datasets to estimate the effect of both R&D intensity and R&D regional spillovers. Cassiman and Veugelers (2002) try instead to use R&D cooperation as dependant variable, explained by spillovers measures. Negassi (2004) exploits information concerning the budget spent on R&D cooperation and turnover based innovation measures.

regards to productive specialization, all the manufacturing firms belonging to the ATECO classes 33.10[13] (*Manufacture of medical and surgical equipment and orthopaedic appliances)* were included in the initial firm population. Concerning the localization area of the district, we took into consideration the following seven municipalities of the *Provincia* of Modena[14]: Mirandola, Medolla, Concordia, Cavezzo, San Felice sul Panaro, San Possidonio and San Prospero. The reason behind this choice is that these municipalities are associated with a concentration of biomedical firms. We identified the 'biomedical district of Mirandola' by taking into account only those firms that satisfied the following requirements: (i) operating in the sector 33.10 *Manufacture of medical and surgical equipment and orthopaedic appliances* and (ii) headquarters are located in one of the seven municipalities already listed.

We then identified a universe population of district firms that was identified during an extensive research project carried out years ago on this district (Baracchi and Bigarelli, 2001)[15]. Interviews were held with firm managers over a two-months period (February-March 2004) on administering a short but structured questionnaire, in order to elicit data on innovation practice, R&D investment, and cooperation efforts concerning firm's relationship and networking within and outside the local district. The selected period of reference is 2000-2002. As far as R&D data is concerned, it was reasonably possible to ask firms for annual data covering the years 2000 to 2002, while all questions regarding networking activities and innovation practices were set to determine a 'trend' over the 2000-2002 period[16]. We decided not to elicit information on performance to minimise the rejection rate; furthermore, survey data on performance is known to often lack reliability. The first section of the questionnaire deals with general features of firms, the second section focuses on innovation practice, the third section on networking activities. The final dataset accounts for 40 of the 70 firms making up the district 'population'. Some firms refused to take part, most of the data losses derived from firm shutdowns, especially smaller establishments. As it turns out from Tables A.1, A.2, and A.3 in Appendix 1, the coverage rate of our dataset appears to be quite good. This is true both when considering all the

[13] Economic activity classes defined by the Italian National Statistical Institute (ISTAT).

[14] Modena is a central Province of the Emilia-Romagna Region. Emilia Romagna is an area of Italy characterised by a high density of industrial districts, a GDP per capita (about 27000€ in 2003) higher than the Italian average and with four millions residents represents the 7% of the Italian population.

[15] We argue that the main added value of current empirical analysis on SC may derive from focused survey study eliciting specific and often 'latent' information which are not accounted for in market transaction and official data (i.e. Community Innovation Survey, national or regional statistics). With this respect, our analysis differs from studies using large, public but not focussed dataset (Cassiman and Veugelers, 2003).

[16] This is a key problem for empirical analysis concerning innovation and SC dynamics, since such data are difficulty, if not impossibly, revealed on an annual basis by firms.

firms (Table A.1), firms producing for final markets (Table A.2), and sub-contractors (Table A.3).

4.2 The empirical analysis

This section illustrates the econometric methodology used to empirically test the aforementioned complementarity between R&D and SC/networking. In order to perform this exercise, we estimate an innovation equation, which expresses the relationship between innovation output and innovation inputs within a 'conceptual framework' of a knowledge production function (Griliches, 1979; Fritsch and Franke, 2004). The estimable reduced form we use is:

$$(1) \qquad \begin{aligned} &\mathrm{INN}_{i,t} = 1 \qquad \text{if} \quad \mathrm{INN}_{i,t}^{*} = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 \cdot RD_{i,t-1} + \alpha_2 \cdot NET_i + \mathbf{X}_{i,t-1}\beta_1 + u_i \\ &\mathrm{INN}_{1,t} = 0 \qquad \text{otherwise} \end{aligned}$$

A brief description is necessary. $INN_{i,t}$ is a binary variable taking the value of 1 whether the firm *i* introduced product and/or process technological innovations over the 2000-2002 period[17]. RD_i is the Research and Development expenditure per employee of firm *i*.

In order to cope with endogeneity, we decided to use the 2000 value as independent variable proxy for R&D. NET_i is a variable capturing the networking effect concerning the SC oriented activity of firm *i*, which was addressed by a specific and focussed part of the questionnaire. More specifically, two different dummies are introduced: one is a specific proxy for SC, the other is a variable mainly capturing the information spillovers between district firms[18]. The first takes the value of one when a firm is associated to formal or informal networking relationships, dealing with production issues, innovation issues and market strategies. The second dummy takes the value of one if a firm exploits other firms belonging to the same district (exchanging flows of critical information)[19] as a main source of information. The vector $\mathbf{X_i}$ includes a set of

[17] See Negassi (2004), among others, for a critical debate over the various innovation proxy measures, on the input and output side.

[18] We observe that this second networking variable is weaker as SC proxy, compared to the first. It is included since it captures relevant firm networking aspects, mostly related to district-specific information spillovers. It may thus act as a sort of control variable, mitigating any problem of omitted information when the aim is to test the 'direct' effect of networking relationships.

[19] See Cassiman and Veugelers (2002) for a discussion on the role of incoming (information) spillovers as an engine for R&D cooperation and, indirectly, for innovation.

control variables (firm's typology, size, age, and export propensity) which we included to better specify the vector of innovation inputs. Otherwise, the effect of R&D and networking could be overestimated. Finally, u_i denotes the error term with the standard statistical properties. It is worth noting that all the explanatory variables are expressed in natural logarithms.

Before showing and commenting the findings of the econometric investigation, we first present some results of the field survey (Tables 1 and 2) and then some descriptive statistics concerning the variables used (Table 3).

Table 1 – Firm size and R&D

Size classes	*Firms*	*Firms*	*Employees*	*Employees*	*R&D per employee*
	N.	%	N.	%	€
0-19	21	52.5	190	7.5	1,323
20-49	10	25.0	257	10.1	530
50-249	6	15.0	659	26.1	2,138
>249	3	7.5	1,424	56.3	6,017
Total	40	100.0	2,530	100.0	4,097

Table 2 – Innovations and networking

Size classes	*Final firms*	*Product innovations*	*Process innovations*	*Innovations*	*Networking*[(a)]	*Networking*[(b)]
	%	%	%	%	%	%
0-19	90.9	38.0	38.0	57.1	85.7	28.6
20-49	50.0	20.0	20.0	30.0	30.0	10.0
50-249	100.0	83.3	83.3	83.3	100.0	0.0
>249	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	66.6	33.3
Total	60.0	45.0	45.0	60.0	72.5	20.0

(a) This dummy takes value 1 if the firm is characterised by formal or informal networking relationships dealing with both production issues, innovation issues and market strategies.
(b) This dummy takes value 1 if the firm exploits and receives critical information from agents belonging to the same district.

From analysis of Tables 1 and 2 it emerges (i) that the percentage of innovative firms in this industrial district is quite high and, (ii) that this tendency increases in accordance with the firms' size. Taking into account the first networking variable, one notes that also in this case a high percentage of district firms are involved. The second networking variable instead does not show the same pattern. In fact, this latter networking factor, with the exception of small-sized firms, seems to be less widespread.

The R&D per employee increases by size, confirming the expected positive correlation between the two variables. In comparison, the italian industrial R&D value (year 2000) elicited by the Third Community Innovation Survey is about 3000€ for only formalised R&D, and more

than 8000€ including expenditures on innovative man-made capitals, skilled labour training and acquisitions of know-how.

Table 3 – Descriptive statistics (explanatory variables)

	N. OBS.	MEAN	STD. DEV.	MIN.	MAX.
Log(employees)	40	2.996	1.435	0	6.526
Firm Typology [(a)]	40	0.6	0.496	0	1
Firm Age (years)	40	13.8	8.811	2	34
Log(export/total turnover) in 2000	40	1.586	1.872	0	4.499
Dummy networking [(b)]	40	0.725	0.452	0	1
Dummy networking [(c)]	40	0.2	0.405	0	1
Log(R&D expenditure/employees in 2000)	40	3.193	3.880	0	10.183

(a) This dummy takes value 1 if the firm sells its products on the final market, 0 if the firm is primarily a sub-contractor.
(b) This dummy takes value 1 if the firm is characterised by formal or informal networking relationships dealing with both production issues, innovation issues and market strategies.
(c) This dummy takes value 1 if the firm exploits and receives critical information from agents belonging to the same district.

From the econometric point of view, the equation (1) estimation poses at least three problems. First, heteroskedasticity, as is often found when cross sectional data are used, may reduce the efficiency of econometric estimates. Thus, all estimates are carried out adopting a 'robust' estimator for the Logit model which addresses this source of bias. Secondly, there is a potential endogeneity of R&D in the regression. In fact, as many contributions have shown, a lagged impact effect between R&D input and innovation output is a general plausible assumption often verified by empirical assessment. We thus use the R&D data for 2000 as an explanatory factor for innovation over 2000-2002, introducing a 'lagged' term into the regression (thus specifying a hybrid cross sectional model)[20]. Third, potential endogeneity may also affect the networking-related variables. According to some contributions on Italian industrial districts (Cainelli and Nuti, 1996; Brusco *et al.*, 1996; Cainelli and Zoboli, 2004), this kind of formal and informal networking relationship, as well as information spillovers, may be interpreted as quasi-fixed factors of 'production', in any case slow evolving over time. This means that those variables can be considered as pre-determined factors, exogenous with respect to district firm innovative activity[21].

Let us now go back to the econometric findings. In Table 4, we report results for various specifications of . In particular, column [1] shows the reduced form when only control variables are included. In this case, all these explanatory variables do not arise as drivers of innovation.

[20] See Huselid and Becker (1996) and Cassiman and Veugelers (2002) for more insights on the issue.
[21] Similar considerations are put forward by Brynolfson *et al.*, 2002 for organizational capital.

Focussing on the extended specifications [2-6] we note that the impact of R&D and networking as inputs of innovation is instead important. It is worth highlighting two points. First, both the networking dummy variables are statistically significant when included separately as added covariate to the control variables of (columns [2] and [5]). Secondly, the two 'inputs' for which we hypotheses a complementarity nexus emerge significant, when both are included (column [4] and [6]). In addition, it is worth noting that coefficient sizes highlight the economic significance of the two effects, which are to be intended as drivers increasing the likelihood of firm innovative behaviour. This is thus an assessment of the joint/complementary driving stimulus provided by R&D and SC. Regressions [4] and [6] also shows the two highest pseudo-R^2. Specifications [5-6] also show a significant effect of firm size. Size nevertheless does not arise a primary force behind innovation.

We may conclude this section summarising the outcome of the econometric exercise. SC investments, proxied by two variables concerning networking activities, emerge as a crucial driving force for innovation. Innovation is also triggered by expenditures in R&D, confirming *ex ante* expectations. Furthermore, and more important, SC/networking and R&D arise jointly determining technological innovation. The outcome is robust as confirmed by different econometric specifications of an innovation equation. Those aforementioned driving forces appear to overwhelm the effect of other explanatory factors of innovation, like firm size, which is usually found as a key driving force of innovation and high-performance practices. Only in considering the second networking variable, the variable capturing the market orientation of firms, firm size results as statistically significant in the regression. This finding, although circumscribed to the district observed, is in contrast to the predominant size effects often emerging from studies on innovation practices, and with other evidence, which also tends to reduce the emphasis on R&D cooperation with respect to size, market share ad other firm-specific characteristics (Negassi, 2004). Further empirical evidence is thus necessary for a generalisation of results.

Table 4 – The innovation equation: estimates

	Dependent variable: *innovation dummy (2000-2002)*					
	[1]	[2]	[3]	[4]	[5]	[6]
ESTIMATION METHOD	LOGIT(1)	LOGIT(1)	LOGIT(1)	LOGIT(1)	LOGIT(1)	LOGIT(1)
Constant	-0.400 [1.303]	-3.090 [2.190]	-0.094 [1.599]	-2.934 [2.242]	-1.483 [1.920]	-1.673 [1.883]
Log (employees)	0.292 [0.337]	0.657* [0.400]	0.175 [0.313]	0.488 [0.325]	0.687** [0.342]	0.645** [0.285]
Typology (c)	2.113 [1.102]	2.082 [1.706]	0.816 [1.215]	0.459 [1.688]	3.292** [1.171]	1.627 [1.083]
Log (Age)	-0.503 [0.586]	-0.297 0.669	-0.613 [0.778]	-0.343 [0.825]	-0.985 [0.752]	-1.061 [1.031]
Log(export/total turnover) in 2000	-0.024 [0.310]	-0.311 0.606	0.163 [0.385]	-0.022 [0.605]	-0.170 [0.327]	0.186 [0.471]
Dummy networking (a)	…	2.350** [1.162]	…	2.470** [1.063]	…	…
Dummy networking (b)	….	…	…	…	3.776** [1.758]	4.168** [1.859]
Log (R&D expenditure/employee) in 2000	…	…	0.303** [0.136]	0.319** [0.157]	…	0.354** [0.173]
N. Obs.	40	40	40	40	40	40
Pseudo-R^2	0.196	0.299	0.293	0.388	0.363	0.469

** significant at 5%; * significant at 10%

(1) Standard errors [in brackets] are computed with the White method in order to correct for heteroschedasticity.

(a) This dummy takes value 1 if the firm is characterised by formal or informal networking relationships dealing with th production issues, innovation issues and market strategies.

(b) This dummy takes value 1 if the firm exploits and receives critical information from agents belonging to the same district.

(c) This dummy takes value 1 if the firm sells its products on the final market, 0 if the firm is primarily a sub-contractor.

5. Conclusions

Building on the literature on SC mainly developed during the last decade, the main aim of this paper was to explore new perspectives, based on a microeconomic approach. The analysis conducted helps shed light on the ongoing SC debate, since it investigates the effective role of this capital input in stimulating innovative activity and thus economic performance.

Introducing a nexus of complementarity between R&D and SC, a theoretical analysis has led to the conclusion that when SC is the public component of the impure public good R&D in a district of firms, the 'civic culture' of the district area where the firm acts is not a sufficient explanatory factor to increase the firm investment in social capital, since this investment strictly depends also on the economic profitability (private opportunity costs) linked to innovative strategies involving firm cooperation. In other words, only if the economic conditions, which determine a favourable environment to the investment in R&D, improve, we may expect an increase of investments in SC.

Empirical results confirm the nexus of complementarity between R&D and SC/networking activities, in assessing the effective role of this capital input in stimulating innovation and, consequently, economic growth. We focused our attention on a biomedical industrial district. Econometric analysis shows that R&D and SC/networking consistently arise as complementary inputs for innovation outputs.

It is worth noting that the main outcome arising from the theoretical and empirical analysis – the pivotal role of complementarity associated between R&D and SC/networking on the input side of the production-innovation process – influences the perspective concerning policy action. Whenever empirical evidence highlights this keystone complementarity (though further evidence is needed to generalise the result), consequently, strong links exist between market and non-market dynamics relating to firms, and the role for policy actions targeted to SC should be larger in spirit. The policy effort should be targeted toward both market and non market (i.e. R&D and SC) characteristics taken together, rather than an effort directed to the production of (local) public goods (SC) or innovation inputs as independent elements of firm's specific processes. The difference is not purely speculative, but is important as far as policy effectiveness is concerned. In fact, we argue that SC/networking dynamics might positively evolve only if the private opportunity cost of investing in R&D innovation is sufficiently low. Nevertheless, this (exogenous) economic incentive works as long as complementarity, as here defined, holds. Otherwise, opportunistic behavior concerning cooperation for networking activities may undermine the development of R&D and innovation, even when economic conditions are

favourably evolving (i.e. decreasing opportunity costs). Moreover, SC/networking is not a sufficient driver, as some authors have suggested, for generating innovative behavior and better economic performances, in absence of favourable economic incentives. This perspective leads to new research lines, given the necessity of investigating what the opportunity cost threshold may be in a specific environment.

The results of the analysis conducted in the paper may deserve further empirical tests. Particularly, it will be helpful to compare the accumulation of social capital by firms joining districts situated in two different geographic areas characterized by different opportunity costs of investing in the impure public capital.

To conclude, we argue that more attention should be paid to causality links and endogeneity when dealing with the issue at both empirical and conceptual levels. We think that only a joint theoretical-empirical effort can provide benefit for the SC framework. Otherwise, there is a risk of focussing too much attention on an untested hypothesis as guidance for policymaking. We recommend further work on the applied direction, where there is a high possibility of providing new evidence stemming from specific and micro-oriented survey studies.

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Appendix 1

Table A.1 – A comparison between interviewed firms and population (year 2000)

	POPULATION(*)				*SURVEY*			
	Firms		Employees		Firms		Employees	
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%
Final firm	35	50.0	3,114	85.1	18	45.0	1,812	77.2
Sub-contractor	35	50.0	546	14.9	22	65.0	536	22.8
Total	70	100.0	3,660	100.0	40	100.0	2,348	100.0

Source: Baracchi and Bigarelli, 2001

Table A.2 – The distribution of final firms by employees class (year 2000)

	POPULATION(*)				*SURVEY*			
	Firms		Employees		Firms		Employees	
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%
0-49	24	68.5	461	14.8	12	66.8	184	10.2
50-249	7	20.0	692	22.2	3	16.6	304	16.8
>249	4	11.5	1,961	63.0	3	16.6	1,324	73.1
Total	35	100.0	3,114	100.0	18	100.0	1,812	100.0

Source: Baracchi and Bigarelli, 2001

Table A.3 – The distribution of sub-contractors by employees class (year 2000)

	POPULATION(*)				*SURVEY*			
	Firms		Employees		Firms		Employees	
	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%	N.	%
0-9	11	31.4	50	9.2	7	31.8	23	4.3
10-19	15	42.9	196	35.9	9	40.9	120	22.4
>20	9	25.7	300	54.9	6	27.3	393	73.3
Total	35	100.0	546	100.0	22	100.0	536	100.0

Source: Baracchi and Bigarelli, 2001