

T12P03 / Linking social innovation and empowerment: A public policy role?

Topic : T12 / GENDER, DIVERSITY AND PUBLIC POLICY

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

Open debates in the Welfare State include social investment, equality of opportunities, diversity, equity, or gender equality among others. Recently, **social innovation** in these areas has raised questions not only on citizens' **empowerment**, but also on the capacity of existing **public policies** to address new demands and challenges in an increasingly complex and uncertain context (Barbieri *et al.* 2019, Gallego 2019). However, the connection between the research on social innovation and empowerment and the research on public policy has been scarce. We argue that the **capabilities approach** may help formulating research questions that integrate both strands.

Most of the literature has linked “**social innovation**” and “**empowerment**” together, as two sides of the same coin (Moulaert *et al.*, 2016). Social innovation includes practices that generate provision models different from institutionalized public and private sectors, and which are supposed to empower citizens (Grimm *et al.* 2013). In theory, social innovation aims to empower the communities and the individuals who are involved in its activities (Baglioni and Sinclair, 2015), but this does not necessarily always occur in practice (Blanco and Leon, 2017, Maestriperi, 2017a). Empirical results from studies on the relationship between women's empowerment and involvement in social innovation have given contrasting results (Cukier, 2018, Maestriperi 2017b).

The **missing link** between social innovation and empowerment has been a concern in the research on social innovation and on women's empowerment from a **capabilities approach** (Cornwall 2016, Maestriperi 2017a,b, Lindberg *et al.* 2015). Capabilities refer both to the potential and to the actual power of what a person is able to do and achieve in terms of valued choices, and indicates a person's well-being (Gangas 2016, Sen 1985). Empowerment is conceptualised as an increase in women's capabilities and is operationalized through the relationship between three elements: resources, agency and achievements (Ibrahim and Alkire, 2007). Citizens' resources are preconditions that influence their agency, which in turn influences their achievements (outcomes) (Chiappero *et al.* 2017). Thus, social innovation empowers only those with sufficient resources to participate in it, which deepens inequality a context of retrenchment (Oosterlynck *et al.* 2013). Therefore, as Ziegler (2018) points out, we need to pay attention to the **capabilities conversion factors**, among which **public policy** plays a central role.

Research questions:

How can public policy enhance citizens' collective and individual capabilities to promote social innovation?

Is public policy intervention a contradiction *in terminis* with the aims and means of social innovation?

What can public policy learn from social innovation?

Hypotheses:

Hp1. Social innovation leads to inequality when it occurs in a context of welfare retrenchment and reduction of public intervention.

Hp2. Social innovation can have a beneficial spillover over public policy, if it complements the action of the public, raising awareness on potential social needs not covered by current welfare provisions.

Hp3. Social innovation generates women's empowerment if women are actively involved in the definition of the scope and goal of the social innovation and social innovation occurs in a favourable institutional context in which public policies learn from socially innovative projects.

CALL FOR PAPERS

We welcome papers investigating the **relation between social innovation and public policies**, in particular those exploring the potential beneficial spillover over policy learning and which type of institutional context is favourable to social innovation. We also welcome papers on **how public policy may promote social innovation** without compromising either its social or its innovation dimensions, but avoiding, at the same time, adverse consequences such as the reproductions of inequality structures. In particular, we would like to assess the

capacity of social innovation to empower women and promote diversity, using an intersectional analytical framework in which gender is only one (intersecting) axes of inequality, which is inseparable from other potential structures of inequality. As per **intersectionality theory**, gender, age, social class, ethnicity, locality and other statuses are not only closely tied to each other but also cumulative over the life course. Social innovation is in theory capable to intercept the complexities of social needs more easily than public policies as its scopes and goals are defined in a bottom-up process of negotiating among participants and beneficiaries. We are particularly interested in research that explores to what extent social innovation is able to acknowledge the co-existence of multiple forms of disadvantage across women and its capacity to scale up through the leverage of public policies.

We **welcome all approaches** - theoretical and empirical, substantive and methodological, micro and macro, qualitative and quantitative, as well as geographically specific research or comparative studies-.