

Research Introduction

The practical context

This research would focus on several long-term projects situated in rural areas. On micro levels, such as a street, a village, a neighbourhood or a specific region, these projects aim to support both grass-roots movements and social institutions. Different contributors collaborate on topics such as sustainability, living, care and welfare. This is done at specific physical locations. The projects are deliberately used to create (new) encounters and connections between all sorts of people. During these encounters the sharing of stories is promoted. These stories provide the individual's view which, through active sharing within the community, are used to learn about and from one another. In this process, the focus is on the everyday life context of people. More specific, organisations, municipalities, residents, and professionals are encouraged to come together and actively engage in conversations to share their individual view on concerns and issues taking place in their shared context. Thus, establishing new connections. The operational perspectives resulting from the project are explored and implemented on-site.

Social innovation

The above described projects could be perceived as social innovation. Social innovation is an increasingly important, but contested quasi-concept without a universally agreed definition (Oosterlynck et al., 2016). Though, from a theoretical perspective social innovation is, in comparison to for example business innovation, an under-researched field in the innovation discipline (Schweitzer, Rau, Gassmann, & van den Hende, 2015).

Following the definition of social innovation as a paradigm of social intervention it highlights multiple dimensions: Actions and initiatives aimed at the satisfaction of social needs that are not adequately met by market and macro-level welfare policies (content dimension) through the transformation of social relations (process dimension), which involves empowerment and socio-political mobilization (political dimension linking the process and content dimension (Oosterlynck et al., 2013).

Also, the cultural dimensions of these dynamics should be considered. Recent progress in Cultural Political Economy and in discourse analyses has highlighted the role of discourse in the (re)making of urban regimes, hegemonic projects and counter-hegemonic movement (Christiaens, Moulaert, & Bosmans, 2007).

The focus on social innovation, as concept and practice, has emerged when the idea of the nation state came under pressure due to various socio-economic and demographic factors. Perceiving social innovation as welfare state restructuring, these factors present a series of new challenges. Major welfare state reforms foresee new configurations in which multiple scales and multiple actors start to play a growing role (Kazepov, 2010).

First, this development provides the opportunity to explore the internal dynamics of a diverse set of 'chance movements' or 'bottom-up initiatives'. As Moulaert et al. (2013) argues these movements follow a life-cycle pattern due to the interaction between civil society and political agents, as well as an expression of the internal dynamics of 'chance movements' itself. Because of limited human resources and often also dependence on external finance, these movements recurrently face the need to formulate survival strategies.

Even though local social innovations take place in the everyday life context of people, they mostly mobilise resources, actors and instruments situated on different scales. In this line of thought, it

secondly provides an opportunity to aim to understand the governance dynamics of local social innovations and how they are informed by the contexts of specific regions. This research could provide insights in institutional innovation and innovation in terms of the role of actors involved in actions and in policies.

How context matters

Social innovations are the product of social actors who act in specific contexts. Those contexts influence the nature, implementation and reach of innovations. They comprise a dynamic including, “path dependency”, the dependency of actors on the way in which they were socialised and their ability to act according to the rules of an established framework, and “path building”, the ability of actors to break this regulatory framework and built another one (Klein, Fontan, Harrisson, & Lévesque, 2012). Instead of solely looking for barriers it opens the possibility to search for opportunities as well.

Still, social innovation has a very strong politico-ideological significance. Following the argument social innovation will find its fundament for change in the “existing and lived tissue of the neighbourhood” or more broadly, the everyday context of people to be affective, should not solely be a top-down endeavour steered by the local public authorities and their agencies (Christiaens et al., 2007). Neither should it be a purely bottom-up perspective. If social innovation wants to satisfy the basic needs of society by transforming social relations it wants to do so by transforming social relations through social learning, individual and collective awareness raising and socio-political mobilisations (Oosterlynck et al., 2013).

At the same time the theoretical recognition of governance is not just providing the context for social innovation but is a field of social innovation itself. Attention could be given to the different ways in which welfare regimes impact on specific local governance frameworks in rural areas and thus follow a so called multi-scaler approach. This could also be perceived as an alternative to a simple opposition between top-down and bottom-up approaches (García, Eizaguirre, & Pradel, 2015). Further, considering the content dimension it could be of importance to look at rural localities whose decline due to socio-economic problems has gone unnoticed over the last decades (Moulaert, MacCallum, & Hillier, 2013).

The theoretical underpinning

To explore the different dynamics of the social innovation process, this research looks at the role of structural dynamics, the function of micro behaviour in specific situations as well as the relationships between both. Within this, the grand theory of Giddens (1991) could be used as theoretical guideline since it differentiates between structural dynamics and individual behaviours. In theoretical terms this research looks at the mediation between structure and agency.

In this mediation, discourse plays an important role. Especially cultural dynamics, in which discourse is central, is essential to the mediation between structure and agency. Cultural dynamics explain why people in certain circumstances behave according to specific codes, routines or norms. While in other, similar circumstances, they will act in a spontaneous way, in an individual or collective way (Moulaert & Mehmood, 2013).

Theory has addressed many issues related to social innovation. Middle-range theories have been used to define which types of individual and collective action and transformation in social relations are needed to respond in an appropriate way. Today, a host of theories address, for example empowerment, improvement of governance structures, creation of human development agencies, modes of participation and shared decision making (MacCallum, Moulaert, Hillier, & Vicari Haddock,

2009). In addition, different theories are concerned with the relationship between agency, structure, institutions, culture and discourse, which Moulaert, Jessop and Mehmood (2016) have summarised in their ASID model.

Research and practice

Since there are different dimensions in the social research process it is important to look at the impact of the intrinsically societal character of the research subject (e.g. social innovation as a social relation, as agency, as empowerment). There is a need for theory to be inter and transdisciplinary and for case-studies and their methodology to reflect this (Moulaert, MacCallum, Mehmood, et al., 2013).

By comparing different cases, their similarities, dissimilarities, commonalities and diversities, this research moves beyond a sole local perspective. But how do similarities relate to diversity while still guaranteeing comparability? Therefore, this research must also identify different concepts allowing a comparative analysis. Taking a closer look at the literature different concepts could be used to analyse social relationships and processes. To identify applicable concepts, themes and potential relationships between them, theory is needed. Moulaert et al. (2016) explains the role of meta-theoretical structures and finds them helpful in choosing suitable middle range theories that could provide concepts for comparison to

A concept for comparison

One concept that could be used within this research is identity. Pinxten and Verstraete (2004) developed an analytical framework on identity and conflict. They argue an analytical framework is needed which can serve as an instrument to consider the different dimensions of identity. Identity dynamics are held to be characteristic of processes of growth, decay and change in the self-image and the interaction potentialities of **individuals, groups and communities**. These are three types of agency, which are distinguished from one another by the set of interactional relationships. At each of these levels identity dynamics are at work, **personality, sociality and culturality**. Culturality is the dimension, which comprises all the processes producing meaning. Additionally, they distinguish between two vehicles for identity construction and marking at each level: **narratives and labels**. Through narratives an individual, a group or a community secures integration over time. That is, the constant manifestation of identities in ever-changing contexts is accomplished by narratives, which enable the actor to position and reposition him-/herself. Especially in the development and the management of conflicts, narratives and labels can work as vehicles indicating escalation or de-escalation.

Looking at social innovation processes different narratives at local and supra local levels may be perceived as expressions of quite different readings of contextual and intrinsic aspects of the changing circumstances in yet different identity terms. Of course, labels and narratives cannot in themselves be a nucleus to a conflicting situation. Rather, they are indicative and can offer relevant entries for studying the situation. In this case, like the concept of social solidarities, identity is used in the plural. This way a concept such as identity could help to explore which different sets of dynamics are at work in social innovation processes, using diverse and sometimes oppositional narratives.

First questions

Considering social innovation is about shared views of the future it research focusses on gaining a better understanding of the role of different actors and stakeholders in social innovation processes. How do they contribute to structuring the system of opportunities and the structure-agency dynamics? First questions for this research could be:

- How does reflexivity mediate the agency-structure dynamics in social innovation processes?
- What is the role of narratives in the social innovation process?
- What is the role of identity dynamics in the social innovation process?

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