Innovation and citizen participation in social work.
- A review of the literature in the social work research field

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Abstract

This work in progress paper focuses on how citizen participation has been used as an approach to innovate the social work practice in the public sector. With a focus on the linking between innovation in social work and citizen participation or user involvement this paper provides a review over the literature in the social work research field. The review is a combination of a systematic and narrative review focusing on previous research in the field and on analyzing the link between the two phenomena. To conduct the systematic review international databases of political and sociological science (SCOPUS) are used. 80 relevant articles were found related to innovation in a social work context, while 17 articles were found concerning citizen participation or user involvement in the innovative social work. The articles about innovation in social work referred to specific cases or approached in the social work, others discussed the concept of innovation and different forms and sources of innovation and only few of the articles referred specific to research on social work innovation with focus on citizen participation. The review synthesizes the previous literature with the purpose of reaching new forms of understanding of the phenomena innovation and citizen participation as it is represented in the theories and the interpretations within the context of social work.

Keywords: innovation, social innovation, user innovation, citizen participation, user involvement and social work

Introduction

Innovation, social innovation, user innovation and citizen participation are phenomena, which illustrating the ways many public sectors today are trying to respond to the economic crisis of their welfare systems. Innovation in the public sectors is government priority in many European societies, who are facing common challenges such as demographic change, change in family forms or life styles, migration etc., which stretch the existing systems to their limits and challenge them to develop new, better and more adequate ways of social services. To meet the challenges new ways of social services are discussed in the light of concepts as “innovation” and “social innovation” (Jæger 2013, Eurich & Langer 2015: 81).
Innovation is a relatively new phenomenon, and has in the public sector often been connected to technological solutions to welfare services as for example using robots in the human and health care services to feed or wash older disable people. Thus the technological product development has been in focus, innovation associated with welfare can also include societal improvement in the public sector regarding for example education or healthcare (Denvall 2010). Regarding innovation within the social work in the public sector, we know very little of how the concept innovation has been understood and used. Innovation is in general a concept with many faces. It is in some connections a buzzword, a term in vogue, used in many different contexts - private as well as public organizations - why the meaning of the concept can be fuzzy and unclear (Pol & Ville 2008, Brown 2010). The concept has achieved the status of what Pollitt and Hupe (2011) have called “magic concepts”, which involve a “high degree of abstraction, a strongly positive normative charge, a seeming ability to dissolve previous dilemmas” (2001, p. 641). This give the concepts, which also includes for example “participation” and “governance”, their “magic” (Pollitt and Hupe 2011, Laurence, E. 2013). Who would not like to be innovative? Because innovation is a relatively newly used concept in the social work field (Brown 2010, 2015), not yet rooted in theory, it is relevant to explore the use of the concept in previous research to gain knowledge of what is known and to identify gaps of knowledge or problems, which still need to be addressed in further research on the topic.

Regarding the source of innovation, user involvement is seen as a key source of innovation within the public sector, where citizen are supposed to play a role in creating innovation within the public services (Jæger, 2013, Farr 2013). This approach roots in the idea of the active citizenship and brings a focus on the citizen not only being a user of the welfare system, but an active actor finding solutions to the problems (Agger & Lund 2011). In a social work context citizen participation has been and still is a key value and ethical issue in social work (Matthies 2010) Since the mid-1990s debates on user involvement have become part of broader welfare politics and social policy and today there is a wide spread agreement that citizen participation is an approach which social work is ought to follow (Matthies 2010). However, it is not very clear how this should be done in practice and the political elite and the citizens often seem to have different expectations and understandings of the conditions, meanings and purposes of citizen participation. Citizen participation is therefore known as one of the most difficult and important challenges in social work (Matthies 2010). Because of the new focus on citizen participation under the agenda of innovation and because of these continuous challenges of citizen participation in social work practice, it becomes relevant to investigate how citizen participation has been used as an innovative approach in social work.

The involvement of service users in the innovation process of social work seems un-theorized. User-centred innovation and co-creation are terms that are developed within private sector innovation literature to explore how innovation can be created through dynamic interactions.
Because this variation of innovation has been developed within the private sector and then applied to the public sector, it can overlook for example the role of power relations in decision-making, and in general, the dilemmas associated with political and democratic nature of citizen and service user participation (Farr 2013). These dilemmas become particularly important in this context, because social work primarily concerns marginalized groups characterized with lack of resources (capitals) and lack of power (Bourdieu 1982), which can affect their possibilities of being involved in the process of innovation of the social services. Trying to capture the essence of the way service users has been involved in making innovations in the social work context it therefor seems valuable to explore how and to which extent the two phenomena: Citizen participation and innovation has been connected in the social work with marginalized groups. That is why a review over the previous research of the field becomes relevant making an overview of the knowledge of the citizen participation in the social work under the agenda of innovation.

Thus this paper comprises a literature review exploring the following questions: 1) How has innovation been conceptualized in a social work context? and 2) In which way and to what extent has innovation been linked to citizen participation in social work? The overall purpose of the literature review is to reach new forms of understanding of the phenomena innovation and the linking with citizen participation, the theories and the interpretations of the concepts and their connections within the context of social work.

This work in progress paper builds on the methodology of the systematic review. First the purpose and the methodology of the literature review will be presented, and then the results of the search process of the literature will be described and illustrated. In the last section, I will present some of the analytic results regarding the definition of innovation, the different type of innovation and the research concerning innovative approaches in the social work context. In the last section, an outline of the ideas for the further work with this paper and the following analysis will also be presented.

**The literature review; Purpose and methodology**

In this literature review, I present an overview of previous research about the topic related to the two research questions mentioned above. The overview will contain what is known, and what is not yet known about innovation in social work and how it is linked to citizen participation. With the review, I try to answer my research question in the light of previous research. Hence I will do a systematic review with the purpose of identify and synthesize all relevant studies related to the topic in order to answer the research question (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). To do so I use the literature as data, which will be systematized, analyzed and synthesized to reach overall conclusion.
Furthermore this review also have the purpose of gaining understanding of the linking between the phenomena innovation and citizen participation in the specific field of social work. With my research questions, I am not only looking at effectiveness of interventions, which is common in the systematic review, but I am looking at the factors that might influence the innovation in social work. Therefore a narrative synthesis is also relevant as an approach to this literature review. The narrative synthesis is an approach which can be incorporated into the systematic review process and involves using text and words to present the ‘stories’ of the studies being reported (Ridley 2012: 188-197). This approach is helpful when the studies being reviewed are diverse in nature and/or report on qualitative research, which is the case concerning this research field. With the narrative synthesis, I can clarify the nuances and taken-for-granted assumptions in ways that can bring new insights and understanding of the topic.

The systematic review and the selection of literature for review

In the systematic review, I primarily used the databases of Scopus, an electronic database of peer-reviewed publications in the fields of social science, technology, medicine and arts and humanities. Secondly these research results was checked and compared with the findings in Sociological Abstracts, a database including publications from the international literature in sociology and related disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences, and JSTOR, a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary sources. Thirdly I used the snowball technique, following up references from the bibliographies of the texts I have read (Ridley 2012: 56). This was done both manual and by tracking forward citations in the electronic databases and journals.

This work in progress paper introduces the results from SCOPUS and the analysis concerning the first research questions: How has innovation been conceptualized in a social work context? To identify the literature to the review the keywords: Innovation, Social work and Citizen participation was used in the search.

At first I made a search in the databases on “Innovation” combined (AND) with “Social work”. Because of the many faces of innovation a category or a “block” containing all different aspects of the concept was made. This category included: “public innovation” OR “welfare innovation” OR “social innovation” OR “user innovation”. I also included the terms “innovation” and “innovative” to the category. Then the category includes all kind of innovations and innovative approaches. Social work as a concept was also made into a category; “Social work” including all hits on “social work”, “social services” and “front line service”. The searching was carried

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2 The findings of the other databases as well as the analyses of the findings regarding research question 2: In which way and to what extent has innovation been linked to citizen participation in social work are not included in this work in progress paper. In my presentation on the ECPR joint session workshop I will represent the analysis concerning research question 2.
out in *Article title, Abstract and Keyword*. To make sure the searching only included relevant hits, I limited the subject area in SCOPUS to include hits only related to “Social sciences”. Afterwards articles that were not printed in English were excluded. Then the rest of the articles was included in a screening for relevance in the title, abstract and keyword for. Table 1 demonstrates the findings (number of hits) and figure 1 illustrates the process of the searching and the inclusion and exclusion of the publications.

**Table 1: The result of the searching on innovation and social work (February 2015)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic for searching</th>
<th>Number of hits</th>
<th>Limit to Social sciences (sub area)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Innovation”</td>
<td>236,238</td>
<td>40,012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Social work”</td>
<td>46,351</td>
<td>21,559</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Social work” AND “Innovation”</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited to articles in English</td>
<td></td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected articles screened via title, keyword and abstract</td>
<td>126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Screening in full text</td>
<td></td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: Illustration of the search process in SCOPUS**

To review the literature concerning the linking between innovation in social work and citizen participation regarding research question 2: *In which way and to what extent has innovation been linked to citizen participation in social work*, I made a search on “Innovation” combined with (AND) “Social work” AND “Citizen participation”. As innovation *Citizen Participation* is a
complex concept with many synonyms. This concept was therefore made into a category: “Citizen participation” including the following concepts: “citizen participation” OR “civic participation” OR “public participation” OR “user involvement” OR “service user involvement” OR “citizen involvement” OR “civic engagement” OR “citizen engagement” OR “user engagement” OR “co-production”.

Tabel 2 demonstrates the results of the systematic searching on citizen participation, citizen participation AND social work, citizen participation AND Innovation, and the link between the three phenomena. The single parts and results of the searching on the different combinations (for instance “Citizen participation” AND "Social work") is included in this section to show the extent and relevance of the connection between the different phenomena in the literature. These results indicate for instance that Citizen participation to a highly degree has been described in relation to social work. Figure 2 illustrates the process of inclusion and exclusion in the search process. Only 17 articles were found combining citizen participation and innovation in social work. Because of the few hits I review all of the articles.

**Tabel 2. The result of the searching on innovation and social work and citizen participation:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic for searching</th>
<th>Number of hits</th>
<th>Limit to Social sciences (Sub area)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Citizen participation”</td>
<td>19,172</td>
<td>8,156</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Citizen participation” AND “Social work”</td>
<td>2,735</td>
<td>1,599</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Citizen participation” AND “innovation”</td>
<td>1,140</td>
<td>488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Citizen participation” AND “Social work” AND “Innovation”</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2. Illustration of the search process in SCOPUS**

"Citizen Participation"

"Social Work"

"Citizen Participation" AND "Social Work"

"Citizen Participation" AND "Social Work" And "Innovation"

"Citizen Participation"

"Innovation"

"Citizen Participation" AND "Innovation"
Innovation in social work – the findings

In the review of the literature regarding innovation in social work, 80 articles are included. To systematize and make an overview of the literature, the articles were at first categorized after their content. Reading the articles four categories of content emerge in the light of the research questions: 1) Definitions and debates about the term innovation in the social work field. 2) Research projects (and case studies) about innovation in social work 3) New and “innovative” approaches in social work 4) Citizen participation and user innovation as innovative approaches in social work. In the following section, a first draft of the analysis is presented. Table 3 in the end of this paper represent an overview of the included articles in the review and their content related to the four categories.

Definitions of the term innovation in the social work field

Almost all of the article defines and discuss the term of innovation. This indicates that the term still does not have an ambiguous definition or that there is a common understanding of the term in the field of social work. In general, all of the understandings of innovation involves the application of new developments. The term is often used in two ways – describing the new developments themselves or the process of innovation. The definitions of innovation in the articles involves in general: changes or developments, something new, which has effects or give value to the organization, the society or the system.

In the most relevant articles, those who are directly concerning innovation in the social work field, the definition of the concept builds on Miles (1964) definition of innovation concerning the social systems or Moore’s definition concerning innovation in policing. Miles described innovation as “a deliberate, novel, specific change, which is thought to be more efficacious in accomplishing the goals of the system” (Miles 1964, 14, Denvall 2010: 308). This definition was made over fifty years ago, but, according to Denvall (2010) it includes the same criteria presenting innovation today: “a specific change”, something new (at least locally) that improves goal achievement at the system level (Denvall 2010: 308-309). This way of defining innovation is closely associated with Moore’s definition, which Brown utilizes in her articles regarding innovation in social work practice:

“Those changes worth recognizing as innovation should be globally (or at least locally) new to the organization, be large enough, general enough and durable enough to appreciably affect the operations or character of the organization” (Moore et al., 1997: p. 276, Brown 2010: 18, Brown 2015: 140).

This definition involves the same criteria as Denvall mentions and has as many other focus on innovation as something new. This has in the sociology of innovation been described as
innovation as newness. This understanding of innovation is used in the INNOSERV project\(^3\) as one of three aspects of innovation: 1) “Newness in the process of service delivery or in the content of service. Do the services appear to do something new in the field of social services?” (Eurich & Langer 2015: 84). To identify innovation at a practical level the INNOSERV project has applied two other dimensions to identify innovation: 2) Effectiveness and 3) Level of costs. Some of these dimensions are in line with the dimensions in the criteria pointed out by Denvall and with the dimensions of the other definitions mentioned here. However, the differences lies especially in whether there is an obvious focus on effectiveness and costs. Sometimes these criteria lies implicit in the theoretical definitions, where the INNOSERVs definition is very clear because its focus on the practical level, trying to measure innovation.

To sum up the content of the debates on innovation in social work, the contents of the definitions are on the surfaces more or less alike. But the differences lies in how the theoretical wordings are interpreted and how it has been used in social work practice. For instance, what does durable [from Moore’s definition] means and how can it be measured? In the next section concerning the research projects and case studies I will compare the way the definitions is interpreted and used in social work practice and try to get closer to the meanings of the more theoretical definitions and the criteria.

Different types of innovation

Another focus in the definition of innovation concerns specific types of innovation. If we look at Moore’s definition, it concerns “policy innovation”, and other of the articles focus on for instance “social innovation” which is mentioned in a big part of the articles which indicates that this type of innovation is commonly connected to a social work context. These articles on social innovation often builds on the definition by Mulgan et al. (2010), where social innovation refers to new ideas that work in meeting social goals. This broad definition is followed up by a somewhat narrower definition of social innovation as: “innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social” (Mulgan et. al. 2010, Sinclair & Baglioni, 2014, Ewet & Evers 2014).

Besides “Policy innovation” and “Social innovation”, other different types of innovation applied in the articles are: “Democrazy innovation”, “Public sector innovation”, “User innovation”, “Public innovation”, “Program innovation” and “Organizational innovation”. These types of innovation often refer to the source of the innovation, where the distinction

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\(^3\) The INNOSERV project is a comparative European-wide study concerning innovation in European social services trying to identify key trends in social innovation in social services. This project will be described in more details later on.
between top-down vs. bottom-up innovation also occurs. The different type or source of innovation refers in the articles to specific fields or a specific way of making innovation and it can be difficult to separate the different types from each other. For instance, it seems like social innovation, democracy innovation and user innovation will overlap in practice. 

Different typologies of innovation has also been made, concerning the “product” and the “process” of innovation. Regarding innovation in the public sector the differentiating between product, process and ancillary innovation can be useful (Walker 2006) as well as the differentiating between the innovation as a result of a discontinuous or transformational change (radical innovation) and an incremental, continuous change (Brown 2015).

The use of the definition of innovation in the articles

Instead of defining the concept and clarifying the specific dimension of innovation in social work in a general way, the literature primarily clarify the use of the concept in very specific settings and contexts describing a local process or project of innovation. Maybe that is why there is so many different types of innovation in this field. Brown (2010, 2015) is an exception and has, in different publications, used case studies to document the use of innovation in social work practice in a general way. In the latest article (2015) she clarifies the process of managing innovation in a social work setting drawing upon case examples of innovation in practice and applying the literature of the process of innovation in general.

In addition, the larger research projects are focusing on the use and definition of innovation in the social work field in for example a European context. Especially the INNOSERV project (Social services innovation) has a literature review of innovation in social services, which includes innovation in the field of health, education and welfare (including social work services). This project will be described in more details in the next section.

The other articles does not have the same focus on innovation in a social work setting as the ones highlighted here, but includes among other things innovation as a result of specific approaches to specific social problems. In these cases different phenomena related to social work in general is described as being facilitators of improvement and development of the social work. These are for example “Empowerment”, “Co-production”, “The third sector” and “Social entrepreneurs”, which are mentioned in the context of being concepts or phenomena, which are playing leading roles in innovations in the social work field.

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4 Here an example from the literature will be introduced.
Outline and ideas for the further work

In the further analysis of the literature, I will focus on The research projects and case studies about innovation in social work. These projects will be described and compared. In the subsequent section, I will focus on the results of the studies and especially the “innovative” approaches in social work will be described and compared. At last the innovations involving citizen participation and/or user innovation will be analyzed in the context of whether they can be characterized as innovative approaches in social work.

To do all of the analyses I use a scheme (Table 3) as a tool to organize the “data”. I will categorize and organize the included articles in regards to specific key information in the scheme illustrated in table 3.

In the further work with the literature review and the search process, the next step is to broaden my searching field to include books about innovation and to check and compare my results from SCOPUS with the findings in Sociological Abstracts and JSTOR. During the search process, I use the snowball technique, following up references from the bibliographies of the texts I have read, and I need to include this literature as well. The new literature, which I might find, will be incorporated into the analysis.

Table 3. Included articles in the analysis – Key Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>About innovation</th>
<th>Research/ methods</th>
<th>Innovative approaches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eurich, J. &amp; Langer, A. (2015): “Innovations in European social services: context, conceptual approach, and findings of the INNOSERV project”.</td>
<td>Social innovation Innovation as Newness Definition at a practical level.</td>
<td>INNOSERV Visuel sociology Literature review Case study: questionnaire to 750 providers of social services. 20 countires Comparative study</td>
<td>167 innovative practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 This is only a draft/example of the table. The rest of the results need to be categorized and organized into the table. I will present more of the results in my presentation at the workshop.
References


