Does Social Innovation Matter for Government?
An Exploratory Study

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Abstract. Social innovation scholars and sociologists regard shocks and crises that impact heavily on social systems as opportunities for self-reflection and as windows of opportunity for the emergence of new ideas and possibilities. In this sense, the social systems recovery in the new normal post-Covid19 era can open new opportunities for the spreading of the transformational impact of social innovation. This will concern also public administration organizations since social innovation can also be seen as a particular perspective on how the public sector should be reformed. Hence, social innovation should be a topic of particular interest for public administration scholars. The aim of this exploratory study is to investigate whether and how social innovation has been considered in the top academic public administration journals. The study confirms that the topic is still underexplored in this literature and highlights some possible research directions that can contribute to bridge this gap.

Keywords: Social innovation · Public administration · Literature survey · Collaborative governance · Coproduction

1 Introduction

In the current fast-changing world, more than in any previous period, socio-economic and environmental problems are acting as a brake on sustainable economic growth, leading to inequality and instability in society, and impinging upon the general well-being of people and communities. Addressing economic and environmental sustainability, social exclusion, discrimination, and various forms of inequalities is today a crucial challenge for social systems, one that requires new ideas and innovative approaches. Social innovation is a response to these challenges that offers new solutions, new methodologies and new conceptual frameworks [1].

According to [2], "social innovation relates to new responses to pressing social demands by means which affect the process of social interactions. It is aimed at improving well-being. It covers wide fields which range from new models of childcare to web-based social networks, from the provision of domestic healthcare to new ways of encouraging people to exchange cars for bicycles in cities, and the development of global fair-trade chain" (p. 6). Such and extensive definition of social innovation helps understanding the continuously growing popularity of the concept. As observed in [3], this depends

also on the fact that the concept of social innovation can be considered as a 'magic concept', i.e. a key term that, like 'governance', 'accountability' and 'networks', seems to be pervasive among both academics and practitioners [4].

Inspiring as it could be, the concept is still weakly conceptualized, also due to the predominance of grey, policy-oriented literature [5]. However, especially from a public sector reform perspective, the promise of social innovation is too compelling to be ignored. As pointed out by [6], social innovation is "a particular perspective on how the public sector should be reformed. Reforms should be done via 'social innovation'" (p. 61). Social innovation is a 'game changer' for government, it requires government to redefine its role within social systems. Hence, understanding the role of institutions on multiple levels for the creation of social innovations is a crucial question, also to avoid using the existence of social innovation in the private and third sectors as a justification to reduce public sector efforts to support social innovation and large-scale social change [7].

Given the central role of social innovation for the public sector, it is relevant to investigate whether and how social innovation has been considered in the academic public administration literature. This is the objective of this exploratory study that aims to investigate how social innovation has been discussed in papers published in top public administration academic journals during the period 2000–2020.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: in the next section, the transformational impact of social innovation on social systems is discussed and the need is highlighted for an academic reflection on how such an impact can also have consequences for the public sector. In the third section the objective of the paper is stated and the methodology for the exploratory study is described. In section four, the selected literature is analyzed and the main topics emerging in it are highlighted. Section 5 critically discusses the results of the exploratory study and identifies some relevant research directions for the public administration academic domain. The final section drives some conclusions and highlights some limitations of the study.

2   Social Innovation as a 'Game Changer'

According to the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) social innovation "refers to a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than current solutions. The value of social innovations accrues primarily to society rather than to individuals" [8, p. 13]. Hence, the fundamental goal of social innovation initiatives is not only to identify and satisfy traditional social needs (e.g., poverty, marginalization and exclusion) but also to cope with new and emerging social themes, like sustainability and the quality of life and work [9]. Engagement of citizens and organizations in innovation, criticism of dominant business models and narrow economic outlooks on development, extensive declines in public spending, and the needs to develop economies where innovation is not about cutting-edge technology but about solving social problems are among the major trends behind the growing interest in social innovation [7].

Mulgan, Ali, Halkett and Sanders define social innovation as "the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs"

[10, p. 13] that are predominantly developed and diffused through organizations whose purposes are social [11]. According to [12] social innovation amounts to a "complex process of introducing new products, processes or programs that profoundly change the basic routines, resource and authority flows, or beliefs of the social system in which the innovation occurs" (p. 2). [13] describes it as "the attempts to transform the way societies address social problems and produce public goods and services (…) in order to improve social outcomes and creating public value" (p. 4).

In more general terms, [14] defines social innovation as innovation in social relations based on values of solidarity, reciprocity and association and ethical practice for meeting needs, transforming social relations, and collectively empowering communities to shape the future. Hence, social innovation entails new organizing modalities based on the development of collaborative relationships involving those who design and implement innovative products and services, but also the beneficiaries of those products and services. In other words, innovation becomes social innovation when it activates the engagement and participation of a multiplicity of subjects, first of all the beneficiaries of the innovation [9]. From this point of view, social innovation is intended to both enable and foster social transformations in the ecosystem in which it takes place by improving the system efficiency in promoting social development, increasing welfare and reducing inequalities [15]. As such, social innovation should be understood as a process of dynamic change involving the reconfiguring of co-operating groups [16], the political transformation of society and the restructuring of power relations [17].

To achieve a transformational effect on social systems, social innovation requires the collaborative efforts of a multiplicity of social agents, first of all government organizations, social enterprises and other third sector organizations. As pointed out in [18], this is reflected in the policy emphasis emerging in the United States and within the European Commission on social enterprises and non-profits as creators and diffusers of social innovation (p. 647).

Although the two concepts are often treated as almost equivalent, social innovation should not be confused with social entrepreneurship. According to [8], social entrepreneurs are social actors who pursue social objectives through their "ability to realize new ideas and concepts on how to produce and deliver products and services that have not been sufficiently provided by the public or traditional for-profit private sector but are socially desirable, and to earn income through creativity, innovation, risk taking, ability to plan and manage projects and solve problems" (p. 13). Social entrepreneurship "encompasses the activities and processes undertaken to discover, define, and exploit opportunities in order to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organizations in an innovative manner" [19].

Social innovation and social entrepreneurship can be distinguished based on their different strategic visions. Social entrepreneurs aim at creating new ideas or products to satisfy unmet needs through a scaling-out process [20, p. 254] to reproduce and disseminate programs, products and ideas in order to reach more and more subjects and to cover wider geographic areas. Instead, social innovation "not only introduce innovation, but also manage the broader context, in such a way that the innovation has a chance to flourish, widening the circle of its impact" (ibidem). Social innovation involves a scaling-up process that entails "identifying opportunities and barriers at broad

institutional scales, with the goal of changing the system that created the social problem in the first place" (p. 237).

Social innovation programs are both social in their ends and in their means [21]. As observed above, this can have implications for existing institutional arrangements and settings [22]. Different from social entrepreneurship, social innovation entails (at least tendentially) far reaching consequences and impacts on the structure, relationships and interaction patterns within the social system as a whole: it tries to act as a 'game changer', breaking through 'institutional path dependencies' [3, p. 228]. This 'transformational' aspect of social innovation that relates it to new social relations and mobilization-participation within a changing macro socioeconomic environment, and resulting social impact is now somewhat of a common ground for sociologists, economists and management researchers, and urban and regional specialists [7, p. 1925].

Social innovation refers to breaking up the monopoly in producing new ideas and approaches that are 'good' for society [6], it entails the allocation and/or re-allocation of public values that are to be achieved, which can challenge the privileged role of government within social systems. Social innovation does not take place in an institutional void and implies that roles of actors and rules of the game need to change as well. This does not imply that the role of government is obsolete, but little is still known about how social innovation can effectively and legitimately develop in interaction with existing political and governmental institutions [3].

The paper intends to contribute to bridge this gap by exploring how social innovation has been discussed within the Public Administration academic literature and whether and how the transformational impact of social innovation on government has been considered in it.

3   Objectives of the Paper and Research Methodology

As observed, much of the literature on social innovation amounts to grey policy-oriented literature, whereas in the academic literature the concept has been investigated mainly in the areas of sociology, urban and environmental studies, business management and in journals related to the social and solidarity economy [17, 18]. The topic has been much less discussed in the Public Administration academic journals. For this reason, in the paper a systematic (although still limited in coverage) survey of this literature has been performed with the aim of investigating how social innovation has been discussed in the top Public Administration academic journals.

From a methodological point of view, the paper adopts an exploratory survey methodology [23, 24] with the aim of laying the basis for further in-depth investigations on the conceptualization of social innovation from the point of view of its potential transformational impact on public administration.

The study is based on the results of a search performed on *Scopus* on January 2021. The search has been limited to the journals tagged with Public Administration in the subject area field. The search has been further restricted by considering only journals ranked in the top 10%. This gave the list of the 28 journals reported in Table 1. A full text search has then been performed on those journals using "social innovation" as the search term. The search found 150 papers (step 1). All the 150 papers have been considered by

analyzing the abstract and, when needed, the whole paper to exclude papers in which the term "social innovation" is only mentioned, including papers in which the term occurs only in the references (step 2). At the end of the refinement process, a set of 35 papers has been identified as relevant for the exploratory study. The selected papers are listed in the Annex (in what follows the papers are identified by their numbering in the Annex).

Table 1 summarizes the results of the search and the refinement process:

Table 1. The results of the search on Scopus

Top 10% journals in the "Public Administration" subject area on Scopus	Papers found in step 1	Papers excluded in step 2	Selected papers
Administrative Science Quarterly	6	6	0
Journal of European Public Policy	1	1	0
Public Administration Review	13	13	0
Policy Studies Journal	4	4	0
Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory	6	6	0
Administratie si Management Public	0	0	0
Public Management Review	25	18	7
Criminology and Public Policy	2	2	0
Policy Sciences	8	5	3
Review of Public Personnel Administration	2	2	0
Governance	4	2	2
International Review of Administrative Sciences	7	3	4
Journal of Policy Analysis and Management	3	2	1
Regulation and Governance	1	1	0
Educational Administration Quarterly	0	0	0
Information Technology for Development	5	3	2
Journal of Public Relations Research	0	0	0
Journal of Information Technology and Politics	3	3	0
Public Administration	5	4	1
Policy and Politics	3	0	3
Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space	23	20	3

Table 1. (*continued*)

Top 10% journals in the "Public Administration" subject area on Scopus	Papers found in step 1	Papers excluded in step 2	Selected papers
Policy and Internet	0	0	0
Area Development and Policy	2	2	0
Government and Opposition	0	0	0
Policy and Society	8	3	5
American Review of Public Administration	9	7	2
Administration and Society	8	6	2
Globalizations	2	2	0

Due to the exploratory nature of the research, no iteration of the search through backward or forward snowball has been performed. This means that neither the references of the selected papers, nor works citing them have been considered for possible relevance. For the same reason, the results of the search do not include papers in which the key-terms occur only within the references.

4   Exploratory Analysis of the Sample

The first and most evident element emerging from the survey is the quite reduced reference to social innovation within the selected literature, which confirms what has been observed in [5]. A full text search on Google Scholar performed on April 17, 2021, gives about 212.000 results for the term "social innovation"; about 76.000 results for the combination "social innovation" & government; 31.000 for the combination "social innovation" & "public sector"; and 20.000 for the combination "social innovation" & "public administration". Compared to these results, the 150 papers found in the selected literature represents a quite poor result.

The survey also confirms that "social innovation" is widely used as a 'magic', weakly conceptualized and 'umbrella' concept. Actually, most of the 115 papers that have been excluded from the sample during the refinement step, only mention episodically "social innovation" with reference to the most varied of topics. Some of the papers in the selected sample explicitly and critically refer to social innovation as a magic concept (A2, A27, A33), a buzzword (A4, A13, A15, A24, A28) and a vague concept that lacks clarity (A9, A13, A24). Moreover, in 12 of the selected papers, the concept is only mentioned quite pretextually. Social innovation is mentioned as an effect of co-production/co-creation initiatives (A7, A8); as a general aim for public policies and their design (A3, A8, A12, A14); and as a result of the activities of social entrepreneurs and social enterprises (A11, A6, A21). In a case (A25) the term is mentioned in the keywords and no more referred to in the paper.

That the concept has not been extensively studied yet in the Public Administration academic literature is also confirmed by the fact that only in two papers in the selected sample the concept is discussed based on a review of the literature (A2, A29). However, in both cases social innovation is not the specific object of the survey, but it is considered in relation to concepts it can be somehow related: namely, innovation networks (A29) and co-production (A2).

Co-production and co-creation are among the concepts most often discussed with social innovation within the papers in the sample (A2, A6, A7, A10, A11, A20, A21, A31, A33). In (A2) a systematic survey of 122 articles and books on cocreation/co-production with citizens in public innovation is conducted, and the conclusion is reached that co-creation/co-production can be considered as a cornerstone for social innovation in the public sector. This mainly depends on the active involvement of citizens in the design, implementation, and evaluation of public services (A6, A7), which can require government to change its mode of operation and its relationship with citizens. This point is stressed in almost all the papers that relate social innovation to co-production/co-creation, since co-production/co-creation imply shifting public service design, implementation, delivery, and evaluation away from an expert-driven process towards enabling users as active and equal idea contributors (A7) and as entrepreneurs (A6).

However, also due to a lack of clarity in both the concepts, the relationship between social innovation and co-production/co-creation is not completely clear in the selected papers. (A2) considers co-production/co-creation as a cornerstone of social innovation, implying that co-production/co-creation is a fundamental ingredient for social innovation. (A11) defines co-production/co-creation as a source of social innovation, whereas for (A20) co-production/co-creation represents a particular kind of social innovation. For (A33) co-production/co-creation can go hand-in-hand with social innovation, although the reach of social innovation is wider. The actors of social innovation can be citizens, companies or societal organizations and the hybridization of the social and economic dimensions can generate meaningful returns for groups, communities, or segments of society, and for society as a whole. (A31) follows a different strand arguing for a distinction between co-creation and similar ideas like co-production, collaborative governance and social innovation. According to the authors, social innovation can be seen as the attempt of civil society to correct and supplement the public sector that usually does not play an active role in social innovation, except for its occasional role as a sponsor for social enterprises or local initiatives.

This particular role of public sector organizations to support social innovation (without being themselves actors of social innovation) is considered in some of the papers in the sample (A1, A5, A11, A12, A21, A23). These papers discuss the funding of social enterprises and third sector organizations (A1, A5, A11, A12) and the creation of an appropriate legal environment (A21, A23) to stimulate social innovation.

Another topic widely discussed in the selected papers concerns collaborative and networked governance. Most of the papers point to the creation of networks involving public and private actors as one of the conditions for social innovation (A2, A3, A4, A5, A7, A8, A13, A16, A19, A22, A24, A29, A32, A33, A34, A35). Generally speaking, all the papers that relate social innovation to co-production/co-creation also consider collaborative governance as an important piece of the picture. By discussing the

relation between co-creation, on the one hand, and collaborative governance and social innovation, on the other hand, (A31) stresses a difference between social innovation and collaborative governance. According to the authors, while collaborative governance clearly recognizes the importance of multi-actors collaboration, it fails to bring out the potential link between collaboration and innovation. On the other hand, the notion of social innovation very well captures the innovative dimension of the attempts of social entrepreneurs to involve local citizens in creative problem-solving.

The relation between social innovation, social entrepreneurship and social enterprise (as the tool to exercise social entrepreneurship) has been discussed quite widely in the grey literature. This topic is discussed, although at different levels of detail, also in the selected papers. In (A5) the authors argue that public administration and policy scholars should study research questions related to individual social entrepreneurs, individual and collective social entrepreneurship, government impact on social enterprise through diverse forms of support, social enterprise as an organization and the dynamic interaction among these factors. (A11) observes that a myriad of terms is used in the literature, including social ventures, social purpose enterprises, and social entrepreneurship. This lack of a single and clear definition creates some confusion for policymakers who wish to support social enterprises.

(A1, A11, A19, A21) report a growing interest toward social entrepreneurship and social enterprises mainly due to the need of tackling pressing social issues (A11) and the failure to attenuate them through government interventions (A21). (A1) observes a government enthusiasm for social innovation and social entrepreneurship especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries. This led to the creation of substantial social innovation funds to support social enterprises. The public and private funding of social enterprises is critically discussed in (A12, A19). On the one hand, with a specific focus on nonprofit organizations, (A19) discusses the pressure for accountability and improved performance for their expenditure of public funds. On the other hand, (A12) observes the emerging of forms of 'philanthrocapitalism' – donations of big money by single philanthropists to specific causes with a preference for the use of social entrepreneurship methods – that may force governments to revisit their eligibility criteria for tax receipting privileges.

5 Discussion

From the exploratory survey some interesting elements emerge that represent possible research topics for public administration scholars.

As already observed, the exploratory study confirms that social innovation is still an underexplored topic within the top public administration journals. This could be due to the vagueness and elusiveness of a concept that still needs clarification, both at the level of definition and at the level of operationalization. This is a topic of primary interest for scholars interested in exploring whether and how public sector reforms could be done via social innovation.

In general terms, social innovation can be approached from two different theoretical points of view [21]. On the one hand, given the multiplicity of the domains for social innovation, there is the tendency to favor keeping a variety of approaches on the basis that "there are no reasons for believing that a single theory could explain phenomena

as diverse as family life, urban communities, the evolution of workplaces, identity and conflict, crime and violence, exploitation and cooperation" (p. 24). On the other hand, it can be argued that the ongoing big social changes are systemic and "policy-makers would benefit from a general theory of social innovation to respond to major structural adjustment challenges of the current historical paradigm shift" (ibidem).

At the moment, as it is also confirmed by the exploratory study, it seems that the first approach is the one dominant in the public administration academic literature. Actually, besides those included in the sample selected for the study, numerous papers can be found in the top public administration journals that discuss topics and cases that would be appropriate to label as social innovation, although the concept is not mentioned in them (this is why they have not been included in the selected sample).

However, it should be noted that no general theory of social innovation will be possible without an unequivocal definition of the concept, a clear delimitation of the domain of social innovation and a precise identification of what differentiates the concept of social innovation from (partially) similar concepts. These critical aspects of social innovation have so far received only a limited attention within the considered literature. This has consequences also on the appreciation of what social innovation could mean for government and what role public sector organizations can play to foster social innovation.

There is a strong tendency in the selected papers to discuss social innovation with reference to citizens' involvement in co-production/co-creation exercises. Co-production and co-creation entail the active involvement of citizens in the implementation of new, and possibly innovative, solutions to meet social needs. This seems to make social innovation and co-production/co-creation quite similar concepts. However, with co-production/co-creation exercises there is always the risk that they could mask exploitation behind the rhetoric of engagement and participation. This could happen because the primary objective of co-production/co-creation is to answer social needs (in this sense they seem more similar to social entrepreneurship than to social innovation), whereas the impact on the process of social interactions [2] and the production of social outcomes [13] appear to be only possible (maybe desired) derivative benefits. Social innovation initiatives do not amount 'simply' to initiatives that are both social in their ends and in their means; rather, social innovation involves changing the system that created the social problem in the first place [20]. In this sense, social innovation aims at exercising a transformative impact on the social system, which is not usually intended in the co-production/co-creation initiatives. How such a transformative impact can be achieved and what it can amount to are both topics of relevant interest for public administration scholars.

Since social innovation can have implications for existing institutional arrangements and settings [22], government should play an active role in it. In the exploratory study the role of government has been described as related to the creation of the appropriate legislative environment for social enterprises and social entrepreneurship; the funding of third sector organizations; and the involvement of citizens in co-production/co-creation exercises. Are there further tools government can use to steer social innovation?

Assuming that social innovation represents a particular perspective on how the public sector should be reformed [6], what does a social innovation inspired reform program amount to from the perspective of public governance and public management? On the

one hand, as highlighted in some of the selected papers, social innovation seems to imply a reductionist view of the role of the state, as a continuum of the neoliberal ideology typical of the New Public Management approach. On the other hand, the central role of collaborative and networked governance for social innovation characterizes it as strictly related to the post-NPM reform approaches. How social innovation inspired reform programs can be related to the 'classical' theories of public administration is another topic that deserve attention from public administration scholars.

6   Conclusions and Limitations of the Study

Many scholars from different disciplines have claimed that the Covid19 pandemic is going to act as a game changer with deep impacts on many aspects of social systems. The pandemic hit marginalized communities, entrenched societal inequities, affected every aspect of life around the globe, from individual relationships to institutional operations to international collaborations. Despite this, the pandemic also opened a window of opportunity for the emergence of new ideas and new opportunities to build back a better, more inclusive, resilient, and sustainable society. This can open new possibilities for spreading the transformational power of social innovation. In this sense, further research is needed to better understand not only the role that civil society can play in social innovation, but also how government can play an active role in sustaining processes aimed at transforming existing institutional arrangements and settings, changing the structure, relationships and interaction patterns within the social system as a whole, and redefining new social relations and mobilization-participation within a changing macro socioeconomic environment.

Public administration scholars can contribute to those objectives by providing policymakers and public managers with a clear and unequivocal operationalization of the concept to turn it from a 'magic concept' into a concept that can support the design, implementation and evaluation of public policies; a clear delimitation of the domains of social innovation; and a precise identification of what differentiates the concept of social innovation from similar but not equivalent concepts.

By surveying a significant sample of the extant public administration literature, the study found that all these elements are still underexplored in it, thus confirming the existence of a theoretical gap within the public administration literature on social innovation. This, as well as the highlighting of some possible research directions that can contribute to bridge that gap can be considered as the main contributions of the paper.

The study presents some limitations as well, especially in the way in which the papers in the sample have been selected. First, the search has been limited to papers indexed on Scopus, this means that other important sources have not been considered (first of all, the Web of Science database). Second, only journals in the Public Administration subject area have been considered, which led to exclude from the survey journals like Government Information Quarterly (indexed in the Social Sciences subject area) that published papers discussing social innovation. Third, in the search only the keyword 'social innovation' has been used, which means that other related concepts (namely, social entrepreneur and social entrepreneurship) have not been considered. Fourth, in the selection phase no iteration of the search through backward or forward snowball

has been performed. These, and the limitation of the search to top journals only, could have affected the completeness of the sample considered and limit the relevance of the conclusions of the study.

However, despite these limitations, which are in part inherent in its exploratory nature, the study raises some important questions that need to be addressed if social innovation has to be one of the pillars of the social systems recovery in the new normal post-Covid19 era.

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Annex

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