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The transformative paths of social technologies: influences back and forth between Quebec and South America

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Introduction

In turbulent times as we are experiencing in the second decade of the XXI century, with increasing social inequalities and environmental disruptions worldwide, the emergence of new forms of organizing that try to respect human beings and nature in a balanced manner are much wished. At the heart of social innovations is the attempt to go beyond customized “solutions” to social problems by the promotion of profound social changes. Social innovations that promote social change are, before all, political movements.

Social innovation is essentially transdisciplinary, the critical mass of studies coming from a variety of disciplines, including urban and cultural studies, social and political science, spatial studies and design, public policies and management. Our work is mainly located within the last field, and two main streams characterize the literature on social innovation from a management perspective (Bouchard, 2012). The first tries to propose alternatives to major social problems through business initiatives, mainly focusing on philanthropy and individual or corporate responsibility (e.g., Austin et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2012). The second seeks to understand what processes might lead to social change and with what consequences (e.g., Zald, 2004; Bouchard, 2012). According to this second stream, social innovation concerns the implementation of “new social and institutional arrangements, new forms of resource mobilization, new answers to problems for which available solutions have proven inadequate or new social aspirations” (Klein et al., 2012: 11). They are analyzed according to three main dimensions: (a) the satisfaction of unmet human needs, (b) the changes in social relations, particularly in forms of governance and stakeholders’ participation, and (c) empowerment, i.e., socio-political capabilities and access to resources (Moulaert et al., 2005; Persais, 2013).

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In line with the second stream, in this article we present a body of literature that has been developed in South America and that recognizes social innovations as *social technologies*. We start by locating the social technology research tradition regarding the literature on social innovation. Then, we try to fill a conceptual gap on the studies on social technologies by proposing an actionable theoretical framework that might help to advance the analyses and the conceptualization of empirical investigations. The main contribution of this article is to propose a theoretical lens for theorizing social change by focusing on the identification of *transformative paths*. We extend recent work published by Martha Feldman (2012) on resourcing theory and change agency, by integrating conceptual ideas that come from seminal work of structurationist inspiration, like Bartunek (1984) and Orlikowski (2000), from social innovation transdisciplinary literature (Moulaert et al., 2013), particularly the South American view on social technologies (Pozzebon, 2015).

In order to illustrate the framework, we present a nonprofit organization – *Parole d'exclues* – that was born in Quebec but that was strongly influenced by social movements taking place in Brazil and Argentina in the beginning of 2000 (Heck et al., 2015). We analyse *Parole d'exclues* from a *social technology* lens and we apply our framework to foster our understanding of its transformative paths. This analysis is seen as a first step to reflect about its potential reapplication to South America contexts, particularly the Brazilian one. In this vein, we are looking at the back and forth of influences between emerging and developed contexts regarding the very same goal: to find alternatives to fight poverty and social inequalities.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A South American approach to social change: social technologies

In our investigation about South America writings on social innovation and solidarity economy, we found a vast and rich literature describing, analyzing and theorizing grassroots social innovations. It underlies the arrangements among people, artifacts and practices that bring an interesting view to the relationship between technology and society. It concerns initiatives linked to social and solidarity economy movement developed as political processes by which practices and tools are mobilized by social groups with the intent of addressing local social demands or problems (Pozzebon, 2015). The term *tecnologia social* – the correspondent expression in English is *social technology* – is applied to refer to those sociomaterial arrangements or assemblages which goal is to promote social transformation. It concerns initiatives linked to social and solidarity economy movement developed as political processes by which practices and tools are mobilized by social groups with the intent of addressing local social demands or problems.

Pozzebon (2015) revisits the concept of social technology by emphasizing its inherently political character. Social technology is a South American view that has a long history, it is political and critical, and might contribute to the understanding of social transformation paths (Pozzebon, 2015). It is a political processes of socio-technical reconfiguration – collective, participatory and democratic – by which sociomaterial arrangements are mobilized and reassessed by social groups with the intent to produce social change. Therefore, social technologies address social problems and demands necessarily through a process of social transformation, avoiding instrumental views often put forward by

“caring” capitalist thinking of just alleviating the symptoms of deprivation and inequality (Escobar, 2011).

The foundation of social technologies have been strongly influenced by ideas produced by Latin-American thinkers like Amilcar Herrera, Oscar Varsavky, Jorge Sabato and Paulo Freire, with elements from the critical theory of technology of Feenberg (Pozzebon, 2015). Processes of technology development are seen by those authors as political struggles, where dominant social groups shape their trajectories based on their interests. In contrast to mainstream ideas on technology development, social technologies are developed and implemented from the interaction with and based on the interests and needs of local communities to promote social transformation. Agency is local and collective, which means that the process is carried out collectively by the actors interested in promoting a given change. Political struggle often emerges as different political agendas come into play. It represents a political process of empowerment to prompt ordinary citizens to create alternatives of local development in public spaces. New meanings are built in a participatory form. Social technology thinkers talk about the construction of socio-technical citizenship (Thomas and Buch, 2013).

At the heart of the social technology concept lies the process of *socio-technical reconfiguration or reframing*, a process by which different social groups, both local and non-local, combine technical and local knowledge, redefine social practices and, inseparably, reinvent tools, methods and devices – *sociomaterial arrangements* – with the intent of addressing social problems or demands with a view towards social transformation. Often, non-local or external groups bring technical knowledge while local groups bring local, contextual, indigenous, practical knowledge. However, this may vary from one context to another, since nothing prevents local groups from having technical knowledge. The socio-technical reconfiguration seeks the creation, recreation, redefinition of social practices and technologies involving tools, devices, artifacts, methods, procedures, etc. This makes it clear that the concept of social technologies goes beyond the “hard” or “soft” definitions of technologies and covers the involved social groups, heterogeneous knowledge and social practices they mobilize. This conceptualization also calls for the identification of the key principles characterizing a given social technology, i.e., the combination of social practices, tools, methods and devices – social arrangements – without which social transformation cannot be achieved.

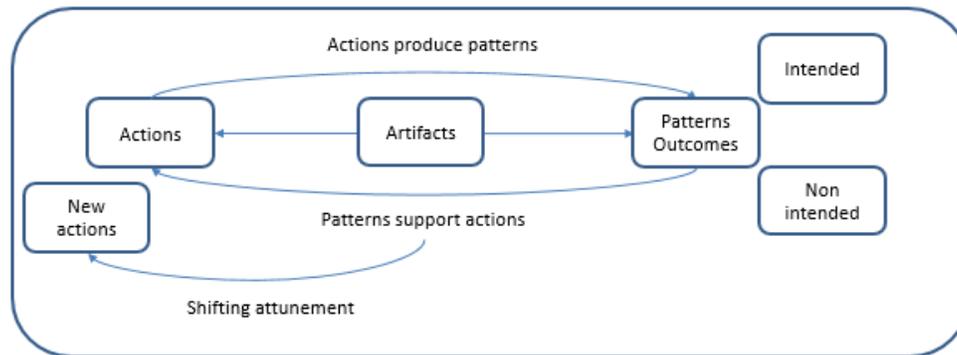
By revising and enriching the concept of social technology, we are looking for to conceptualize a theoretical model of *transformative paths*, which means, how to understand the action models operating behind social technologies that lead to social transformation. In this article, we propose a framework that seek to identify the transformative paths operating behind social practices and that might lead to social change (Pozzebon and Tello-Rozas, 2016).

The work of Martha Feldman on resourcing and change theory

An important theoretical influence to the conceptualization we are elaborating comes from recent work on practice theory, particularly those focusing on interconnected people, artifacts and ideas. In a recent chapter on generative approach to change agency, Feldman (2012) proposes an analytical model based on the intertwined connection between

resources (both material and nonmaterial), actions and patterns. As Figure 2 illustrates, actions produce patterns that support actions, mediated by artefacts, which are intrinsically connected, forming sociomaterial assemblages. Human actions are inseparable from artifacts and the skills needed to mobilize those artifacts. Patterns (e.g., structures, institutions or routines) are enacted by human actions, therefore producing intended and non-intended outcomes (Feldman, 2012). We can easily recognize the influence of seminal ideas from Callon/Latour and Giddens in Feldman’s conceptualizations, but the emphasis on the sociomaterial assemblages (actions/artifacts are inseparable) comes from a more recent views of practice theory, namely sociomateriality (e.g., de Vaujany and Mitev, 2013).

Figure 2 – Actions/Patterns’ model (adapted from Feldman, 2012)



A framework based on the identification of transformative paths

Blending the actions/patterns model of Feldman’s (2012) sociomaterial view with Pozzebon’s (2015) reconceptualization of social technologies, we produce a new theoretical model that aims to help understanding social change, particularly at the community level. The framework is informed by a practice-based view with its focus on social life as an ongoing production that emerges through people’s recurrent actions (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). Figure 3 presents the main concepts articulated in the framework.

The starting point are social interactions involving social actors and resources (Feldman, 2004). Social actors are not taken individually, but as part of subgroups, coalitions or teams. People are knowledgeable and reflexive actors that do not act in this word in isolation, but related to the social groups they take part (Pozzebon et al., 2009). In her work on resources, Feldman (2004) recalls the definition of structure put forward by structuration theory: rules and *resources* recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. In this framework, we pay particular attention to the mobilization of resources (or *resourcing*), which could be material (e.g., tools, devices and artefacts) and nonmaterial (e.g., knowledge and methods).

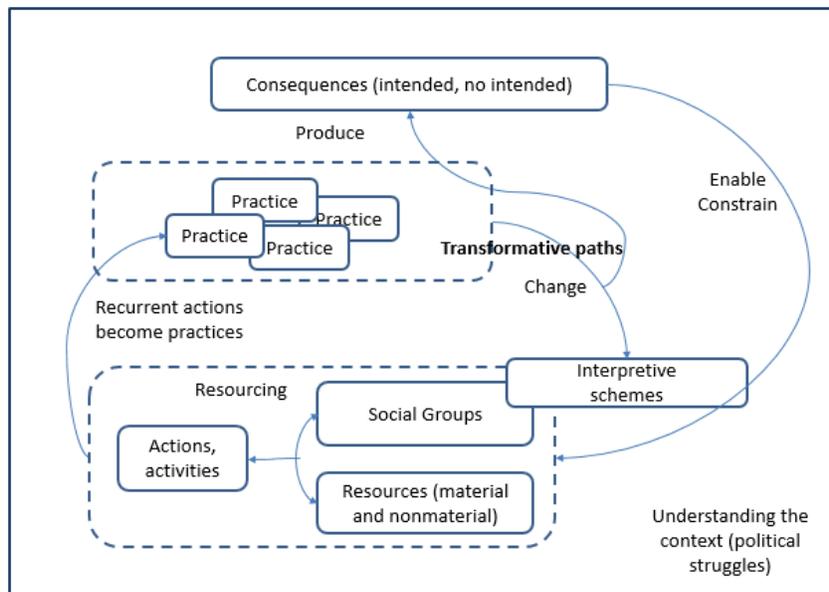
Two main reformulations regarding the original model proposed by Feldman (2012) are outlined. The first is that human actions are not taken in isolation. They are imbricated with social groups (local and non-local) and resources (material and non-material) – sociomaterial assemblages – that are dynamic and provisional, always facing pressures of

contextual political struggles. The second is the identification of an intermediary step between actions and outcomes, the transformative patterns. Transformative patterns are related to the new ways individual and groups develop new resources, or mobilize the existing in new ways, leading to social change.

The assertion that people within a social group are likely to share a set of assumptions leads to the concept of interpretive frames. People act in the world on the basis of how they interpret and re-interpret it. Interpretive frames are mental models that shape people's interpretations, influencing their actions and decisions. The idea of interpretive frames is similar to those of *interpretive schemes* (Giddens, 1984; Bartunek, 1984), *technological frames* (Orlikowski and Gash, 1994; McLoughlin et al., 2000), and *provinces of meaning* (Ranson et al., 1980; Weick, 1993). Table 1 shows previous research on interpretive frames.

The social interactions – that we might also see as sociomaterial assemblages, as the imbrications between the social and the material are difficult to separate, they are intrinsically and relational linked (Orlikowski, 2009) – are expressed in actions and activities. This corresponds to the first approach proposed by Orlikowski (2010) when defining different modes to engage with practice: the recognition of the centrality of people's actions to organizational or societal outcomes (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011). However, not all actions and activities are relevant to understand social change or permanence, outcomes and impacts. While some actions and activities might be seen as ephemeral or non-influential, others might become recurrent or routinized (Feldman, 2004), ending by shaping social practices. Social practices are therefore a categorization of recurrent activities, activities that are somehow permanent, that are structured and institutionalized to different degrees.

Figure 3 - Theorizing social change – the centrality of transformative paths



Finally, social practices are not without consequences, which might be intended and unintended (Orlikowski, 2000). In their turn, intended and unintended consequences enable or constraint social actors in their everyday life, triggering progressive modifications on ongoing actions and activities, a “shifting attunement” according to Feldman (2012). The underlying assumption of this framework is that, more than just identifying social practices shaped by social interactions, we should identify transformative paths (Pozzebon and Tello-Rozas, 2016). We argue that between actions and outcomes we can find some intermediary steps that help understand how social change might be positively produced. Just recognizing actions, activities, strategies, manoeuvres, tactics and micro-practices is not enough. Transformative paths means that each practice do not act in isolation. Different practices enacted by social interactions have an imbricated effect, which could end by explained or making sense to intended and unintended consequences. I argue that transformative paths are the result of the imbrication and interdependent effect of different social practices.

We should identify and understand what effects their interconnection and imbrication produce on individuals and groups in order to lead to some consequences, intended and non-intended. In order to be able, as social innovation researchers and practitioners, to facilitate the enactment of positive social change, we must identify those *transformative patterns* that lay between actions and their outcomes. Transformative patterns are related to the mobilization of resources, material and non-material (Feldman, 2012), that support social change. They improve underprivileged individuals and social groups’ ability to create and handle mental, material, social, cultural and symbolic relevant resources (Andersen et al., 2003). Some examples of transformative patterns are the strengthening of individual self-confidence, the development of particular skills, the creation of solidary links with the local community, the enhancement of the ability to mobilize other members around a common goal, etc.

In the next section, we present the *Parole d’exclues* case, selected to provide an empirical illustration of the theoretical framework. After introducing the context of the *Parole d’excluEs* project, we use the framework to analyse the case. We start by identifying the social groups involved in the implementation and some of the resources – mainly skills and tools – that those groups have at hand. Then we embark in the identification of activities, practices and transformative paths.

EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

Parole d’excluEs is a non-profit organization and movement founded in 2006 to develop innovative ways of fighting against poverty and social exclusion in Quebec (Canada). Based on the viewpoint that poverty and social exclusion are an outcome of political, economic and social developments, *Parole d’excluEs* aims at transforming the societal cultural framework so that it becomes a vector of inclusion rather than exclusion. The organization’s approach, as reflected in its name (litt: word of the excluded), is based on the speaking out and mobilization of those experiencing poverty and exclusion.

Its founder, Patrice Rodriguez, from an immigrant and working-class background, was a pioneer in Quebec’s civil society, and contributed much to the establishment of social

integration initiatives. However, the general shift in Quebec towards individual approaches such as service delivery and employability incited Patrice Rodriguez to look south to learn more about collective and transformative approaches to poverty alleviation. After a sabbatical year in South America, where he visited many initiatives, he produced a documentary film in 2005, entitled *Parole d'excluEs*, which features people describing their paths to overcome exclusion in Brazil, Argentina and Quebec. This documentary served as a tool to critically reflect on ways to counter poverty and social exclusion. Within a year of screenings and discussions, many felt compelled to develop such a new approach, where those experiencing poverty and exclusion are agents of change rather than beneficiaries (Ruelland, Rodriguez and Van Schendel, 2007). This marked the beginning of *Parole d'excluEs*.

Parole d'excluEs needed to work with those excluded and to achieve real changes on the ground. It has developed a territorial intervention model through which it reaches out to citizens and facilitates them expressing their needs. As of today, the organization has sites in three different underprivileged Montreal neighbourhoods. Together with its principal partner, a non-profit housing corporation (SHAPEM) who develops a significant number of social housing in the neighbourhood, they convert one apartment into a community center run by *Parole d'excluEs* and its partners. It serves as a privileged meeting place for citizens to speak out and organize. The model also includes a research unit, the IUPE (university based incubator), which carries out field studies to identify the needs and aspirations of the citizens, and contributes more generally to the project through research and development. Once the needs are identified, an autonomous citizens' committee is formed. From there, collective projects are developed to fight against poverty and social exclusion. Citizens, practitioners and researchers all participate in this process (Heck et al., 2015; Heck, 2016).

Throughout the years, a variety of different projects have emerged, from one-time activities to the creation of enterprises based on principles of solidarity and social economy. The projects span across many different areas such as community vitality, urban planning, health services, food security, and the digital divide, to name but a few. *Parole d'excluEs* has been able to bring together citizens, various civil society organizations as well as researchers to engage in collective action to foster change. It has shown that it is possible to counter social exclusion and poverty by mobilizing those most concerned. However, so far, its impact is very local and small-scale. In order to trigger deeper and wider changes, more advocacy work as well as support and collaboration from institutions and authorities will be necessary (Fontan, 2017).

NEXT STEPS

Methodology: In the first phase of this research project, *Parole d'excluEs* will be applied as an empirical illustration. One of the co-authors has been doing action-research (inspired by Reason and Bradbury, 2008) inside *Parole d'excluEs* for several years. She will bring her knowledge on the action model of *Parole d'excluEs* and together with the two other researchers, they will make the model of transformative paths to advance. The results will be enriched from the discussions with the *Parole d'excluEs* community.

Results: This research is still in progress and the results of our reflection will be shared during the conference. At this point, we have 70% of the preliminary analysis done, but the results should be validate with the local actors. This will be done before the conference, where a first draft of the results will be presented.

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