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Assessing the impact of research in Social Science and Humanities: A Comparative Perspective on National Evaluation Systems in France, Germany and Spain

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- Aim of the work;
- Theoretical background;
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AIM OF THE WORK

The aim of this paper is to investigate how the evaluation of impact is implemented in national R&D systems, trying to understand how the configuration of the research systems in different countries can influence the perception of social impact of research in Social Science and Humanities among insiders (researchers, policymakers and research managers).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

New elements are involved in considerations about public investment in R&D (Penfield et al., 2014):

- need 'evidence-based justification' to sustain R&D through public funding;
- capability of the research to address grand challenges for sustainable development and innovation;
- aptitude of the R&D activities to produce an impact on society, economy and policy.

Other factors suggest to consider impact assessment not only for the scientific profile. Among the others, the possibility to maximize spillover effect of research and the possibility to influence policymakers equilibrium between political consensus and R&D quality in the decision on research funding (Penfield et al., 2014; de Jong et al., 2014).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Political system can have an ambiguous but deep influence on research system. Several dimensions are considered:

- Vertical dispersion of authority (Bleiklie and Michelsen, 2013);
- Horizontal coordination at central government level (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2003);
- Administrative and cultural traditions: Napoleonic state vs German state (Peters, 2008 and Painters and Peters, 2010)
- The characteristics of intermediary organizations between policymakers and researchers (Ferlie et al., 2009).

HYPOTHESES

- In centralized and coordinated countries like France both policymakers and academics could consider research as something that is fully integrated in society. Social impact assessment in SSH could be seen as something that can be applied to the results of public research system.
- In decentralized and fragmented countries, like Germany, different autonomous components of the system, either policymakers and researchers, could consider research, policy and society as separate spaces. Social impact assessment in SSH could be hindered by the presence of different concepts elaborated by autonomous actors in the system.
- In a country where a strong centralized tradition cohabits with a recent large autonomy of local communities, like Spain, comparisons between researchers and policymakers could be facilitated by the multiplication of actors involved in research policy but the fragmentation of research in several parallel research systems seems to guarantee the exchange only between actors within the same system.

METHODOLOGY

Comparison of three case studies, French Research System, German Research System and Spanish Research System, on the effect that configuration of the state structure and administrative culture of each country have on the implementation of the evaluation of R&D impact.

Four points of analysis are considered:

1. the importance given to the ex-ante R&D impact assessment vs the ex-post one;
2. the actors involved in impact assessment and the autonomy they have with respect to the state and the performers;
3. the indicators and metrics used or supposed to be used;
4. the association between the R&D impact assessment and the R&D funding.

METHODOLOGY

The analysis considers the involvement in evaluation of research results and on the perceptions of social impact of research of actors with different role in the R&D system in France, Germany and Spain. The base of the comparison are the interviews to eight representatives per country, selected for the IMPACT-EV Project, among following categories:

- Research Evaluator for the purposes of funding and/or accountability in charge of SSH evaluation;
- Research Manager within a research funding agency;
- Policymaker/politician/budget holding civil servant;
- Academics.

CASE STUDY: FRANCE

French Research System is organized around four axes:

1. Identification of the research aim, definition of the objectives and assignment of general budget (Ministry of Education and Research, MENESER).
2. Definition of the thematic priorities and the resources (National Research Agency, ANR).
3. Research activity (Universities and national research organizations like French National Centre for Scientific Research, CNRS).
4. Evaluation of research and optimization of resources allocation (High Council of Evaluation of Research and Higher Education, HCERES).

In addition to these axes there are the regional research systems: their role is complementary to the national research system and their organizations is transverse to the previous points.

CASE STUDY: FRANCE

Sample of respondents	
Policymakers	A representative of MENESER and a Regional Research and Technology Delegate (DRRT).
Research Manager	Three subjects involved, two from HCERES and one from ANR.
Research evaluators	A research evaluators from CNRS
Academics	Two academics, both from *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Science Sociales* (EHESS)

CASE STUDY: FRANCE

Main results:

- All the respondents mark the difference between social impact and transfer of knowledge. Only the second one is present in French research system.
- Experts from universities and research organizations are sceptics about possible effects of research on social and political sphere.
- All the experts involved in case study agree on the necessity to find a way to evaluate the social effect of research.
- Social impact needs to be evaluated in a different way respect to scientific impact of research (e.g. counterfactual analysis).
- A possible way to measure social impact could be the enlargement of research activity to social stakeholders.

CASE STUDY: GERMANY

German Research System is organized in a binary structure:

- Local institutions (Länder) are responsible for culture and education, including decisions related to universities. Each Länder has its own policy that is developed together with local universities.
- At national level, Federal Government, through the Ministry of Education and Research (BMFB), supervises and finances activity of public research organizations (among the others: The Max Planck Society, MPG and the Fraunhofer Society, FhG). As for universities, also PROs have a complete freedom to manage their research activity.
- Other institutions play an intermediary role between national and local level, providing project funding (Agency for Research Promotion, DFG) or giving recommendations to political institutions on research development (Council of Science and Humanities, WR).

CASE STUDY: GERMANY

Sample of respondents	
Policymakers	A representative of BMFB
Research Manager	Three subjects involved, one from MPG and two from intermediate institutions like DFG and WR.
Research evaluators	A research evaluator from ISI – Fraunhofer
Academics	Three researchers involved, one each for the University of Kassel and the University of Bremen and one from iFQ.

CASE STUDY: GERMANY

Main results:

- All the respondents agree with the fact that research results have a direct impact on society even if there are not procedure to measure this effect.
- Research managers and policymaker consider as social impact all the effects that research has outside the academia. Researchers instead consider scientific effect of research as the first step of social impact.
- Research is likely to produce a social impact: as high will be the quality of research as good will be the impact on society.
- Guarantee the independence of researchers and research institutions is seen as the best way to preserve research quality and consequently to have a positive social impact of research. However there are different views about how to implement preservation of research independence.

CASE STUDY: SPAIN

Spanish Research System is organized in a parallel structure:

- National level: Universities and Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Cientificas (CSIC) are independent by political authorities, but research funding is subject to the assessment of research evaluation institutions.
- Local level: the aim was to incentive the integration of universities and research centers in local socio-economic systems but the result are local research systems that replicate the structure of national system.
- The landscape appears strongly fragmented and the two levels in which is divided the research system do not seem to have many points of contact.

CASE STUDY: SPAIN

Sample of respondents	
Research Manager	Two subjects involved, one from AGAUR and one from CERCA.
Research evaluators	Five subjects involved: two from CNEAI and one each from ANECA, SGR an University of Zaragoza
Academics	A researcher from University Loyola Andalucia

CASE STUDY: SPAIN

Main results:

- Spain subjects involved in interviews gave an elusive definition of social impact;
- University representatives see in the social impact evaluation a useful element to define the purpose of research in SSH.
- Research evaluator seem to have a tougher stance toward the social impact assessment, defining social impacts something of external to research.
- A shared point of view is that the social impact assessment is hardly compatible with current research evaluation procedures: ex post is focused on individual activity od researchers and ex ante gives a limited role on potential effect of research.
- The research system seems to be receptive to some instances of inclusion of the social impact as research evaluation factor from the European community.

COMPARISON FRANCE – GERMANY - SPAIN

	Concepts on research impact	Time of impact evaluation	Actors involved in impact assessment	Indicators and metrics	Use of impact evaluation
France (centralized/ coordinated)	Impact is not a well-recognized concept. Better to speak about transfer of knowledge/effects on society	Ex-post assessment based on the outputs (HCERES) Ex-ante evaluation based on potential effects of research (ANR)	Intermediaries have large autonomy deciding how to design and implement the policy instruments for impact assessment	No established metrics Different indicators from those of scientific quality Inclusion of stakeholders in assessment.	No actual use of impact as a criterion for allocation
Germany (decentralized /fragmented)	Research is likely to produce an impact per se. The better will be the research quality the better will be its impact on society	Time of evaluation is up to the intermediaries research organizations and researchers	Intermediaries' strong and autonomous role in research policy (DFG, WR). Setting instruments for evaluation Researchers, Universities and Public Research Organizations full autonomy and independence from the political power. Setting practices of evaluation	Metrics and indicators do not emerge as a point of concern	No actual or foreseen use of evaluation for allocation purposes Evaluation as a mean for research organizations
Spain (centralized/ fragmented)	Idea of social effects of research is not integrated in research system.	Ex ante evaluation based on potential results of research. Ex post evaluation based on individual research output.	Intermediaries have large autonomy deciding how to design and implement the policy instruments for research assessment, in the same system coexist similar institutions related to different areas.	No established metrics	No actual use of impact as a criterion for allocation but there is a growing interest fuled by external instances.

FINAL REMARKS

- Respect to our hypothesis we have an opposite result: the less centralized country, Germany, considers the idea of social impact as something that is not separable by research activity.
- In Germany the independence of each institutions from the rest of the system seems to stimulate the idea that research activity needs a comparison with other sphere of the society.
- The structure of research system in France does not easy interaction between research and the rest of the system. In fact emerges the need to include social stakeholders to realize impact assessment.
- The concept of social impact is not still been integrated in Spanish research system although there is growing pressure to introduce the topic in the debate. The proliferation of research assessment institutions at national and local levels have contributed to the low conceptualization of a common idea of social impact.
- The results show that the political and administrative system can influence the concept of the social impact of research and the implementation of policies to measure and enhance it

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING!

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