Reflections on ISTR PhD Seminar July 2020

Aleksandar Bozic, PhD Student, Department of Social Work and Sociology, University of Agder, Norway

Since beginning my doctoral studies at the in 2018, I have hoped to participate in the International Society for Third-Sector Research (ISTR) conference and the accompanying doctoral seminar. I observed that ISTR is a unique global community of passionate scientists, researchers, and practitioners with an interdisciplinary approach to third-sector research. Because I wanted to further my theoretical knowledge in the third sector and present the preliminary findings of my doctoral study on non-profits and social innovation in a fragile context, I decided to apply for the ISTR International Conference and PhD Seminar for 2020 in Montreal, Canada. My supervisors and the faculty eagerly supported this decision. I was delighted when the organizers accepted my abstracts for both the seminar and the conference.

As a result of the challenging circumstances surrounding COVID-19, the conference was postponed until 2021; however, the organizers decided to organize this year’s PhD seminar fully online. Though many of us have in some way accustomed to the new circumstances with online meetings and webinars, it was undoubtedly a unique experience for participants to take part in an online doctoral seminar, as well as for organizers to deliver such an event entirely virtually for the first time, which certainly exceeded our expectations. The PhD seminar was held from July 5th to 10th, and it opened with an informative presentation by guest speaker Prof. Deena White from the Department of Sociology at the Université de Montréal. Following the opening plenary, 37 students from universities in 21 countries, representing approximately 23 nationalities had the opportunity to briefly introduce themselves and present their projects; the diversity of research topics and participants’ backgrounds was impressive.

Central to the seminar were the parallel small group sessions for which each participant was assigned to one of six thematic groups. Before the seminar, we received a brief overview of all participants’ project abstracts and information about the timeslots allocated for each of our presentations in small group sessions. In my group, eight students and three faculty members from different universities, countries, and time zones met on Zoom for two-hour virtual sessions throughout the four days. The faculty members facilitated the sessions, in which two students each had 15 minutes to present their project and 30 minutes to receive feedback from peers and senior faculty members. Although each of our projects was different, we all had significant comments, advice, and feedback to offer. The quality of discussion was high, and the group members were very open to exchanging ideas, concepts, resources, and challenges that we have faced in the past. These sessions were well-organized, engaging, and hands-on.
Apart from the academic discussions, PhD seminars are also important for socializing and networking, which usually occurs in a more informal context outside of the group sessions. Given that we were not able to socially connect with each other in person by mingling during breaks or having lunch as a group, the organizers arranged the PhD Seminar Cafe, which provided the opportunity for participants from different groups to sign in and socialize with each other during a one-hour window. The organizers truly tried to build a sense of community online as much as possible.

The seminar was closed with a wonderful professional development workshop entitled “Getting Published for PhD Students” by Prof. Susan Appe, ISTR Board Secretary and co-editor of “Voluntas,” and with the participants’ reflections on what we gained from the seminar and how we could continue collaborating in the future. Although we would all experience a kind of “Zoom fatigue” at the end of our virtual sessions, it was a valuable experience to participate in such a well-organized online seminar. It helped me to focus and reflect on some theoretical aspects of my project, especially because research on social innovation and non-profits has been steadily increasing in recent years, but there is still a dearth of theoretical and empirical evidence regarding this topic. At the same time, I was able to provide some reflections on my peers’ concerns that could be helpful for their PhD journeys since my research and professional background is in social work, civil society, sociology, and international development. It was vital for me to be surrounded by a group of people who have similar research interests because we as PhD students can often feel quite isolated with our challenging work topics. After an active and inspirational week, I felt that I had finally found my “tribe” of peers and established scholars with similar research interests that I have been seeking for so long. I am thrilled to be a part of the vibrant and diverse ISTR community and am looking forward to having the chance to meet my fellow PhD colleagues in person next year at the conference in Montreal and hearing more about the progress of their amazing projects.