

Rethinking the redistributive-market economy divide in UCB biobanking.

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Umbilical Cord Blood (UCB) is a rich source of stem cells used in haematopoietic reconstitution – for treating oncological, immunological and haematological malignancies. For being used as a transplant, UCB should be collected and stored in bio-banks. Two main models of UCB banking are in place: a system of public banks based on free donation and working in the framework of public healthcare system; a circuit of private banks selling the opportunity to store UCB for future autologous or family use. Usually, these two models are described as separated and opposed, inspired by different ethics and logics and giving rise to different economies: a gift/redistributive economy versus a market economy. A standard narrative of opposition has been developed in biomedical and bioethical literature, which describes this opposition and locates it in diverging economic and ethical logics. In my work I call into question this narrative as both empirically and analytically unsatisfactory. Analyzing some cases of overlapping and hybridization between the two regimes, I argue that the boundary between redistributive and market economy is growingly blurred. Drawing on notions of entanglement (Callon), biomedical platforms (Keating and Cambrosio), and bio-networking (Patra and Sleeboom-Faulkner) I will show how the configurations of the network of actors, objects and institutions involved in biobanking create fields of practice where redistributive and market economies coexist and hybridize each other. Models of UCB banking – and their related economic and societal implications – are not the outcome of institutional arrangements embedded in ethical and economic logics, but they are instead the resulting configurations of the bio-networking of involved actors and of the interplay between technical, ethical, economic and logistical considerations.