Social Innovation

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Definition

Few concepts in the civil society sector have caught on as quickly as has social innovation (Anheier et al., 2019; Mouleart, 2005; Nicholls & Murdock, 2010). Social innovation research has been characterized by a flurry of conceptual definitions and theoretical considerations (Oosterlynck, 2013). While the lack of consensus about the meaning of social innovation is considered by some as indicative of the field's lack of integration, construct clarity and programmatic unity (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016), others (ourselves included) see this situation as testifying to the vitality of a field under construction. Thus, while scholarship on social innovation is informed by vastly different intellectual traditions and definitional debates, it is commonly agreed that social innovation is crucially about using innovative approaches that introduce new combinations, practices, products, and services, etc. to create beneficial outcomes and impacts for society and the environment. Reflective of this perspective is the European Commission (2013, p. 6) guide to social innovation which states that "social innovation can be defined as the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) to meet social needs and create new social relationships or collaborations". By a similar token, Pol and Ville (2009) purport that social innovation includes any innovative idea that has the potential to improve the quality of life. These tentative definitions are indicative of much of the existing scholarship which conceives of social innovation as an innovative response to grand challenges which, due to their inherent complexity, defy easy solutions and quick fixes (Chalmers, 2021). Aspiring to tackle messy, longstanding problems, social innovation is commonly considered a key mechanism for contributing to the realization

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of the Sustainable Development Goals defined by the United Nations (Eichler & Schwarz, 2019). To innovate on these universal issues, scholars have noted that social innovative endeavors often require an orchestrated approach that cuts across public, private and not-for-profit sectors, and civil society (Christmann, 2019). While research has historically variously looked at social innovation from an individual or an organizational level (Terstriep & Rehfeld, 2020), more recent studies have heeded the dynamic, shifting, and interconnected and multilevel nature of innovation processes in which heterogeneous social agents are involved (Wijk et al., 2018).

Introduction and historical background

Social innovation as a new type of innovation

While social innovation has taken the social sciences by storm (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014), the literature remains fragmented and scattered among different scholarly fields and disciplinary silos such as urban and regional development, public policy, management, social psychology, or social entrepreneurship. Despite the internal diversity of social innovation research, a striking element of much social innovation research is that it is closely informed by and aligned with theories and empirical studies of technological or commercial innovation (Krlev, Mildenberger, & Anheier, 2020). While this connection has led to countless synergies and relevant knowledge, both practical and theoretical, scholars have recently advocated for truly new theories that challenge our classical thinking about the nature of social innovation (Lee, Spanjol, & Sun, 2019). A productive line of inquiry in this regard has pointed out that one of the main differences between innovation and social innovation pertains to their processes and outcomes or finalities. On the process side, social innovations are more comparable to far-reaching socio-technical transformations than to individual technological or commercial innovations promoted by organizations (Baregheh, Rowley, & Sambrook, 2009). Scholars have also attempted to distinguish the two concepts by mapping the multiple uses of the 'social' of social innovation (Nicholls and Murdock, 2010; Krlev et al., 2020), showing, among other things, how the prefix 'social' is used to emphasize and foreground new forms of social collaboration; collective

approaches to delivering these innovations; the constitutive role of the social sector (or civil society) at different stages of the social innovation process.

In terms of outcomes and finalities, absolute priority in social innovation research has been devoted to the provision of support that benefits marginalized or vulnerable target groups (Ziegler, Molnár, Chiappero-Martinetti, & Jacobi, 2017). Putting target groups (or beneficiaries) front and center in definition of social innovation, this introduces a sharp and unambiguous difference from commercially oriented innovation. While some social innovation scholars have advocated rather broad and axiologically neutral definitions that includes different types of innovation approaches so long as they change societal practices (Franz, Hochgerner, & Howaldt, 2015), other scholars have promoted more narrow and explicitly normative understandings conceives of the subject matter that primarily in relation to solving and mitigating social problems (Krlev, Anheier, & Mildenberger, 2019a). While prevailing definitions prefigure forms of innovation that are rooted in values (and not merely in instrumental, commercial considerations and interests), it is worth mentioning that researchers in the field of social innovation have come up with alternative concepts. Consider, as an example, the concept of 'responsible innovation' that grew out of the attempt to embed principles of responsibility in the research and development processes, initially of science and later of corporate actors. Responsible innovation thus aspires to imagine how corporate actors can "do good" in society by allowing for wider stakeholder influence and participation in their governance structures and processes (Scherer & Voegtlin, 2018). Another innovation type is inclusive innovation that denotes ways to enhance co-creation, co-determination, or other ways of including target groups in the innovation process (George, Baker, Tracey, & Joshi, 2019). These cousins or cognates of social innovation and social innovation in particular, can be seen as driving forces of positive social change at scale (Seelos & Mair, 2017) and the systemic transformation of dysfunctional social systems (Mair & Seelos, 2021). Such social transformations involve and require performance dimensions that we do not normally associate

with ‘traditional’ (i.e., commercial) innovation, such as actor diversity and collective engagement to achieve equity across society (Kania et al., 2021). While we can roughly describe these and other desired effects of social innovation, research shows that they often remain very elusive in practice as they defy established measurement categories in the realm of technological or commercial innovation (Cunha & Benneworth, 2020; Lee, Lee, Kee, Kwan, & Ng, 2019).

Different types of social innovation

What further complicates the issue of understanding and conceptually controlling the phenomenon of social innovation is that social innovation has different driving forces that may be situated in all sectors and can be more or less formally organized, which in turn may drive transformations in very different ways. For instance, one of the most widely discussed drivers of social innovation are social entrepreneurial endeavors (Zahra, Gedajlovic, Neubaum, & Shulman, 2009). Inspired by the work of pioneering entrepreneurship scholars such as Hayek, Kirzner or Schumpeter, Zahra and colleagues (2009) have distinguished social innovation as social bricolage (social entrepreneurs enacting situational combinations of existing structures or practices), construction (social entrepreneurs instigating wider social visions and masterplans about new structures and practices) or engineering (social entrepreneur replacing or destroying existing structures and practices). More recently, scholars have stressed that social innovation can be embedded into established organizations (via social intrapreneurship) or used to create wider ripple-effects in society (via social extra-preneurship, that is the dedicated practice of involving a wide range of stakeholders and promoting multiple transformations at the same time) (Tracey & Stott, 2017). Both of these approaches suggest different forms and areas of social innovation, and different levels of depth and breadth of change that these social innovations can trigger.

The point here is that social innovation is not only of interest for the innovation process itself, but also and especially for the way things change as social innovations evolve. The literature

addressing these developments identifies varying degrees and intensities of social innovation. For some, the term social is used to refer to a broad range of social transformations based on 'socially oriented' innovations (Marques, Morgan & Richardson, 2017), which we would consider a wide and yet weak version of social innovation. For others, social innovation is defined more narrowly to refer to radical practices that transform existing power relations in the way social innovation is conceived, designed, promoted, or disseminated (Pel et al. 2020; Avelino), which we would consider a strong version of social innovation. This latter view is visibly more radical than the previous, more pragmatic one (see also Vercher et al., 2022), which for some scholars might not even qualify as social innovations under a normative lens that is value-laden and orients at social problems as well as benefits to target groups. The radical version fundamentally differs from other more technocratic or reformist approaches to social innovation, which may include the relabeling of long-standing and well-established problem-solving practices as social innovation because it is fashionable or because of a general fascination of decision makers and policy with embracing innovation, whereas improving or maintaining continuity would even be more effective (see Ayob et al. 2016 on the social innovation discourse in the UK for instance).

Current Key Issues

There are a variety of key issues that are currently emerging in the context of social innovation research, such as measuring social innovation (Krasnopolskaya & Korneeva, 2020; Terstriep et al., 2021), financing social innovation (Mollinger-Sahba, Flatau, Schepis, & Purchase, 2020; Vanderhoven, Steiner, Teasdale, & Calò, 2020), or social innovation and sustainability (Ziegler et al. 2022; Wittmayer, Hielscher, Fraaije, Avelino, & Rogge, 2022). Rather than following these already well-established lines of research, we have chosen to highlight two other issues that have the potential to be linked to broader research themes in the social sciences.

Social innovation ecosystems

Scholars have argued for some time that research on social innovation has been polarized between agentic approaches that focus on individual organizations and structuralist approaches that focus on institutional or macro-level change (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Scholars have recently emphasized that this division is problematic because it does not allow us to grasp the middle ground between these two levels and to draw out the connections between the two (Pel et al., 2020). The ecosystem concept offers a response to this challenge by allowing us to bridge the two approaches to social innovation through a multi-level perspective. In the field of social innovation, the ecosystem perspective is not yet very common. This is so even though the ecosystem perspective has proven useful in neighboring disciplines where is was used to analyze phenomena such as the sharing economy (Laamanen, Pfeffer, Rong, & van de Ven, 2018), entrepreneurship (Muñoz, Kibler, Mandakovic, & Amorós, 2020) or traditional innovation (Autio & Llewellyn, 2013),

Still at a very early stage, scholars have begun to explore the links between entrepreneurial ecosystems and the needs of social innovators (Audretsch, Eichler, & Schwarz, 2022), which should prove particularly helpful given the wide variety of actors involved and the changes triggered by social innovation. Ecosystem approaches are particularly appropriate as social innovations both drive and are part of larger changes in the field, such as the evolution of social investment intermediaries or the invention of new technologies like artificial intelligence and automation for green and social purposes (see contributions to Krlev, Wruk, Pasi, & Bernhard, 2023). Ecosystem analysis makes it possible to decipher organizational interdependencies, aspects of integration and disintegration, and processes of exchange between actors (Ganco, Kapoor, & Lee, 2020). The dimensions of space and actor networks, especially when combined with relational analysis, further enable targeted policy recommendations (Rocha, Brown, & Mawson, 2021). Importantly though, although the rise of social innovation has been strongly driven by policies, policy makers indeed lack guidance as to the sources and governance of social innovation (Krlev & Lund, 2020). They could thus benefit from concrete evidence on the

drivers of social innovation and the processual dynamics in its engagement with social innovation over time (Krlev, Anheier, & Mildenberger, 2019b), to which ecosystem approaches would contribute.

Digitization and social innovation

Social innovation scholars led the way in exploring how technological innovations – including open innovation platforms, blockchain technology or social crowdfunding – can be used to solve grand social challenges (Cangiano et al., 2017). Poonamallee and Joy (2018) point out that digital social innovation is characterized by the provision of novel solutions that involve development or adoption of technological innovations to address social and environmental problems. Such new approaches can help bridge the prevailing gap between technology and social innovation (Krlev et al., 2020), not least by seeing social and technological innovation as mutual enablers. We can clearly observe this in the context of the COVID -19 pandemic, where digital technology not only provided a new means for co-creation by virtual strangers, but also drove the realization of digitally based social innovation (Scheidgen, Gümüsay, Günzel-Jensen, Krlev, & Wolf, 2021). These included, for example, platforms for representing workers during closures and travel restrictions, new forms of (remote) digital education, or electronic means to increase efficiency and safety in coordinating medical treatments. Digitization also came into play by enabling open social innovation, which includes the application of digital platform technology to mobilize stakeholders across sectors toward solving collective social needs (Chesbrough & Di Minin, 2014). But while we have preliminary insights into why and how digital social innovation approaches came into existence and what outcomes they helped produce (Bertello, Bogers, & Bernardi, 2021; Gegenhuber, 2020), we are just beginning to understand how social problem solving can be accelerated (or hindered) when social innovation meets digitization.

Future Directions

Although a detailed, extremely rigorous, and rapidly growing literature on social innovation does exist (Nicholls & Murdock, 2011; Nicholls et al., 2015; Anheier et al., 2019), there is ample space for theoretical development. Among the available options, we consider the following to be particularly promising and timely. We believe they will help us either address some of the challenges discussed earlier or explore previously unexplored areas of social innovation research.

Capturing the dynamics of social innovation processes through (actor-)network approaches

First, we see value in theoretical approaches that help us foreground the dynamically unfolding and multifaceted nature of social innovation processes. Promising candidates in this regard are socio-material network approaches such as actor-network theory (Law & Hassard, 1999) and, in particular, the stream of research concerned with translation processes (e.g., Callon, 1980, 1986; Callon & Latour, 1981; Latour, 1986). While actor-network theory, or ANT for short, in its formative years focused primarily on innovation in science (Latour, 1999), translation theory is also theoretically useful for social innovation research because it can offer detailed insights into the development, growth, and scaling of social innovative solutions based on the ability of focal actors (such as social enterprises, advocacy groups, or public sector change agents) to engage other actors with different interests and beliefs in a broader network united by a concern in mitigating and solving specific social and ecological ills. So conceived, ANT provides a promising analytical tool for discovering how particular actors associated with a social innovative endeavor gain control over the interpretations of a given 'grand challenge' (such as abject poverty; Gauthier et al., 2020) and its solution, and thus use their interpretative authority and network-building ability to mobilize supporters around specific causes and actions.

In contrast to social network analyzes that focus primarily or exclusively on human actors (Young et al., 2010), ANT takes a broader perspective by examining how networks of human actors (people) and nonhuman actors (scientific data, technology, policies, and regulations, etc.) are composed and connected to enable particular social innovative solutions. The explanatory

power of a translation perspective is aptly illustrated by Horowitz's (2011) study of the formation of a protest alliance against a mining project in New Caledonia. The alliance against the mining company succeeded in mobilizing a diverse group of actors – an indigenous protest group, environmental organizations, and a human rights lawyer – by defining a common goal (as well as specific roles for the involved actors) that was compatible with the diverse interests of the group. Horowitz's example shows that ANT holds the key to deciphering the inherently political nature of ongoing translation processes by attending to how networks of diverse actors can achieve certain goals (against competing demands and interest), often in the absence of other sources of power (such as financial resources or structural power). The political dimension of network processes is evidenced by how certain issues and concerns gain visibility and legitimacy within the network while alternative perspectives and possibilities are silenced. ANT thus helps us develop a clearer understanding of how social innovation is always contested as network actors compete for allies, public support, and material and immaterial resources (Müller, 2015), and that there is a constant threat from counter-agents and counter-networks that seek to popularize other goals or block the intended goal (Young et al, 2010).

Assessing non-linguistic meaning-making in social innovations: Images, artifacts, symbols

From the above, any understanding of processes of association and network building would be well advised to examine how the key actors in a social innovation endeavor use language to offer interpretations of problems that seem reasonable and feasible, and therefore able to convince others that they have the right solutions (Callon, 1980). However, 'meaning resources' such as written and spoken language are not the only means of creating and guiding networks and alliances (Waeraas & Nielsen, 2016). Other sources – including images, artifacts, colors, bodily gestures, or symbols – are crucial in making a particular social innovation initiative seem meaningful and attractive to others. Although these elements are undoubtedly found in most social innovations (Barberá-Tomás et al. 2019), as scholars we have yet to fully understand how such non-linguistic forms of translation (i.e., forms other than spoken or written language)

trigger emotional contagion and identification while influencing people's willingness to support a particular cause (Davis et al., 2017).

Following this line of reasoning, we believe that theories of multimodality (Jancsary et al., 2016; Höllerer et al., 2019) are well suited to shed a fresh light on how social innovations can create affective resonance among and cohesion between the actors involved. Insightful evidence in this regard can be found in recent work on how social entrepreneurs, who are considered key drivers of social innovative solutions (van Wijk et al., 2018), make strategic efforts to influence the emotions of their target audience (Barberá-Tomás et al. 2019). To this end, they use not only words (verbal text) but also images to evoke the implementation of their social mission. In this way, theories of multimodality can help us better understand that the success of social innovation depends not only on the strategic use of verbal information or the deployment of resources, but also on the skillful use of communicative means that can shape a shared idea and help mobilize actors in an embodied and affective way.

Advancing a critical angle on social innovations

The question of how specific representations of problems and their associated solutions are enabled, accepted, and disseminated in networks is integral to understanding how social innovations emerge, grow, mutate, and change. At the same time, these power struggles underlying social innovation efforts are indicative of the contested nature of knowledge creation (Alcadipani & Hassard, 2010). This brings us directly to the third and final point: the need to put social innovation research on a critical footing. In our view, sharpening this critical sensibility is important precisely because critical perspectives have remained comparatively marginal in social innovation research. Although there are the usual exceptions (e.g., Brandsen et al., 2016; Fougère & Meriläinen, 2021), few scholars have questioned and challenged the fundamental premises, research foci, and paradigmatic orientations of social innovation. Consequently, although research on social innovation is multifaceted and spans scientific

disciplines and fields of knowledge (Mulgan, 2012), we are confronted with a situation that we already know from other research traditions: that mainly the positive aspects of the phenomenon are considered, while the negative ones are – consciously or unconsciously – overlooked (Dey & Steyaert, 2018; Shepherd, 2019). To overcome what has been called elsewhere the "hegemony of positivity" (Sørensen, 2008), we suggest that a central concern of future research should be to uproot the unbridled positivity associated with social innovation by having empirical studies illuminate its various downsides. Following examples from related fields such as entrepreneurship (Shepherd, 2019), a dark side-perspective allows us to address the multiple 'negatives' of social innovation. This could include, among other things, negative spillover effects that social innovation can have on the various government, business, and civil society actors involved in it, as well as on the target groups of social innovation or society at large (e.g., undermining valued and effective institutions). Placing the question of "qui bono" (who benefits) at the center of this effort would allow us to give due attention to the (largely unacknowledged) fact that social innovations can produce losers as well as winners (Gabriel, 2016). We further see value in future critical research that addresses the extent to which the stated aims and results of social innovations hold up to higher moral standards such as, for instance, solidarity, democracy, or inclusion (note the strong link to the normative version of social innovation we initially introduced). As social innovation aims to solve social and ecological problems, it is appropriate to summon higher moral standards and principles to assess whether social innovations meet not only the social expectations associated with it, but also hold up to universal and inalienable standards of human welfare and the promotion of the common good.

Although many more possibilities for future research could be discussed here, we would like to conclude this article by emphasizing that social innovation research could greatly benefit from exploring connections to other social theories. Strengthening our efforts to cross-fertilize discipline-specific discussions that have not previously communicated with each other is key

to stepping out of our scholarly silos and allowing for a greater plurality of perspectives on what social innovation can be and what it can do.

Cross References (to other entries in the encyclopedia)

Social Enterprise, Public-Private Partnerships, Bottom-of-the-Pyramid Ventures

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