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Constructing 'Problems' and 'Solutions': Social Innovation as Social-Symbolic Work

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INTRODUCTION

There are nearly a billion people living in extreme poverty,[1] around 800 million people without access to electricity,[2] more than two billion people who do not have safe drinking water,[3] and 89 million people who have been forcibly displaced.[4] Persistent inequalities and the effects of a changing climate are compounding all the above (Kemp et al., 2022). Social innovation, commonly defined as 'a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions' (Phills et al., 2008, p. 36), has emerged as an influential approach for social scientists and policy makers, guiding thinking about how society can organize to address seemingly intractable issues such as these. In organization theory, a burgeoning set of ideas has coalesced around the concept of social innovation, which has become a key focus of the field (Beckman et al., 2023; Gegenhuber and Mair, 2024; Tracey and Stott, 2017; van Wijk et al., 2019).

Social-symbolic work – 'the purposeful, reflexive efforts of individuals, collective actors, and networks of actors to shape social-symbolic objects' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019a, p. 31) – offers a powerful lens to critique and extend current conceptions of social innovation. Viewed through a social-symbolic lens, the discourse of social innovation is dominated by a particular understanding of social change which emphasizes the need for organizations to embrace market-based activity and balance social and commercial goals. As a consequence, social innovation has come to be perceived narrowly and in ways that arguably distort both how it is theorized and how it is enacted in practice (Mair and Rathert, 2024; Stott and Tracey, 2018).

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The effects of this understanding have been felt most profoundly by social sector organizations, whose funding is increasingly dependent on their ability to convince governments, foundations, and social investors that they can address the most deep-rooted social issues through 'enterprise' (Dey and Teasdale, 2016) – and to do so at scale (Beckman et al., 2023). The social innovation discourse has also incorporated an expanded role for corporations, which some consider the only organizations with the necessary resources and innovative potential to make change at the level of 'systems' (Dionisio and de Vargas, 2020). Meanwhile, government is often seen as impeding progress, their new role in the social innovation landscape being to facilitate the efficient functioning of markets connected to social issues, often in partnership with for-profit firms (Rao-Nicholson et al., 2017). By contrast, we argue that social innovators who foster sustained social change enact a broader repertoire of social-symbolic practices – practices which the social-symbolic work perspective helps to reveal and illuminate. This does not imply that the creation of ventures that combine social and commercial goals is unimportant for social innovation. Rather, it shifts the focus to a wider set of practices designed to shape meaning and institutionalize social change.

We begin by outlining our understanding of social-symbolic work and its relationship to social innovation, arguing that social innovation is fundamentally concerned with the construction of social 'problems' and 'solutions' – the objects of social innovation (Lawrence et al., 2014). We then introduce Rothman's (1970, 2007) 'modes of community intervention' typology, which we combine with the social-symbolic perspective to propose a simple framework for 'social-symbolic organizing'. Our framework offers a novel way of thinking about the work of social innovators that draws attention to a repertoire of persuasive practices that we believe sit at the core of social innovation. We conclude with reflections on social-symbolic work as an approach with the potential to bridge social innovation research and practice. It is important to emphasize that while Rothman's work is focused on interventions in marginalized communities, his modes – and the types of social symbolic work that we derive from them – have relevance to social innovators working in any context.

SOCIAL-SYMBOLIC WORK, SOCIAL INNOVATION, AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Social-symbolic work is an important and increasingly influential perspective in organization theory. Rooted in the tradition of social construction (e.g., Bauman, 1992; Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Giddens, 1984), it provides a theoretical architecture and vocabulary to explain how people and organizations purposively shape the world around them while at the same time accounting for the constraints on action that emanate from the social context they inhabit.

A key idea within the social-symbolic work perspective is the concept of a social-symbolic object: 'a combination of discursive, relational, and material elements that constitute a meaningful pattern in a social system' (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019a, p. 24). Social-symbolic objects are the targets of social-symbolic work. They convey meaning, helping actors in a social setting to interpret the social world. At the same time, they are malleable; their meaning can be shaped and is open to multiple interpretations. Social-symbolic objects can take many forms, including ideas, beliefs, practices, signs, values,

emotions, language, artifacts, technologies, identities, bodies, and social spaces. We can think of work and objects as conceptual counterparts which, while theoretically distinct, are also mutually constitutive (in the sense that when actors engage in social-symbolic work, their work is necessarily directed at something).

The social-symbolic work perspective distinguishes between three types of work, each of which is targeted at objects located at a corresponding level of analysis: self work – the purposive efforts of actors to shape aspects of the self; organization work – the purposive efforts of actors to shape aspects of organizations; and institutional work – the purposive efforts of actors to shape aspects of institutions and institutionalized understandings of the social world. While self work, organization work, and institutional work are all key elements of social innovation, here we focus on social innovation as institutional work.[5] In doing so, we conceptualize social innovation as a social-symbolic endeavour in which work is targeted at two types of social-symbolic object: institutionalized understandings of social problems and their solutions. From this perspective, social innovation entails social-symbolic work designed to legitimate (1) a particular understanding of an issue so that it is widely viewed as a problem in society that needs to be addressed, and (2) a particular approach to addressing that issue so that it is widely viewed as an effective solution to that problem.

For example, in Lawrence's (2017) study of the creation of the first safe drug injection site in Canada, the focal social innovators became embroiled in a discursive struggle to (1) convince local stakeholders that the deaths of people from the injection of impure drugs was a problem that even merited attention (some stakeholders viewed illegal drugs as so profoundly immoral that the idea that drug use should be made safer was an anathema), and (2) that safe drug injections sites were an appropriate solution to this problem (some stakeholders believed these sites would merely promote drug use and endanger community members, and that efforts should be focused on prohibiting illegal drugs). This example neatly illustrates how social innovation may require deliberate efforts (social-symbolic work) to frame a social problem in a particular way and to justify the solution to that problem – the 'problem' and its 'solution' being the objects of the work.

While Lawrence's (2017) study focuses on a contentious issue, even an organization that is tackling an issue that is widely accepted as a social problem worthy of attention needs to frame the issue in a particular way so that its specific solution makes sense vis-à-vis the alternatives. For example, homelessness in the UK is generally considered as a social problem that ought to be addressed. However, social innovators aiming to address homelessness in new ways must nonetheless reframe the causes of homelessness to align with their particular approach in order to justify why their solution is needed. In Tracey et al.'s (2011) study of a UK social enterprise that sought to legitimize a novel organizational form for tackling homelessness, the founders reframed homelessness as a problem of unemployment rather than of housing, and criticized existing approaches for fostering dependency and tackling symptoms rather than root causes. They were able to use this discourse to garner support from key audiences – policy makers, investors, other homeless support organizations – and create the space for their approach to grow and take root across the homeless support sector.

From this standpoint, social innovation is essentially a social-symbolic activity designed to construct legitimate 'solutions' to strategically positioned social 'problems'. Rooted in the social-symbolic work perspective, this conception of social innovation has the potential to challenge and extend prevailing understandings of the topic in powerful ways (see Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019; Dey and Steyaert, 2010; Lawrence and Phillips, 2019b).

EXPANDING THE STRATEGIC REPERTOIRES OF SOCIAL INNOVATORS: A FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL-SYMBOLIC ORGANIZING

We argued in the introduction that a particular conception of social innovation has shaped the theory and practice of social innovation. This conception supports a particular – and increasingly hegemonic – interpretation of why social problems exist and a corresponding interpretation of the appropriate solutions for addressing them. In other words, it profoundly influences how social innovators construct social problems and the available solutions. As a result of this dominant way of viewing social problems and their solutions, social innovators often default to market-based, entrepreneurial practices no matter the context or the issue. Such practices have come to be seen as more legitimate by impact investors, philanthropists, and governments than non-entrepreneurial approaches which rely on philanthropic or public funds. Social innovation practices have thus become increasingly marketized.

The valorization of market-based approaches to social innovation is rooted in a neoliberal ideology that assumes that organizations protected from market pressures are inherently 'inefficient' (Fougère et al., 2017). But by promoting the idea that market-based solutions are the only viable solutions, we are left with a narrow conception of social innovation and its constituent practices – social entrepreneurship alone cannot solve global problems, nor can current models of 'sustainable business' or the apparent shift towards corporate responsibility measures through ESG frameworks (Stott and Tracey, 2018). What, then, is our alternative? In short, we believe that social innovation that produces sustained social change frequently involves a broader repertoire of social-symbolic practices designed to shape processes of meaning construction: social innovation is about more than balancing competing demands in the face of social and commercial goals; it is also about producing a particular version of social reality that aligns with the goals of social innovators. Doing so requires, we argue, a distinct set of practices underpinned by forms of social-symbolic work that tend to be glossed over in the literature.

To this end, we believe there are important lessons to be learned from the work of 19th century social reformers, whose experiments and collective action framed many of our most cherished social institutions, such as libraries, public health, and mutual insurance. This group of radicals was interested in and drew upon what we would now term social enterprise – especially the cooperative model – but they viewed it as but one element of social reform; activism through self-organized campaigns, political engagement, and protest were of equal importance. Many social reformers practiced all three

simultaneously (see Elwitt, 1980; Rodgers, 1998). They did so because they understood that political activism was essential to address social problems – especially contentious issues that threatened the moral order – to be noticed. From their perspective, building organizations from the grassroots was imperative for change to be inclusive. But for change to be *enduring*, it had to be enshrined in law and formal regulations, as well as guarded by social reformers within political systems.

Unfortunately, the repertoires of social organizing developed since the nineteenth century – which combined grassroots organizing, political and social action in collaboration with the state, and various forms of protest and social movement organizing – have been hollowed out in many places. Put simply, they have become too focused on 'enterprise' and not focused enough on the range of persuasive and political skills needed for social change. To think about how we can refocus attention on these repertoires, we draw on the work of American sociologist Rothman (1970, 2007). In doing so, we offer a simple framework comprising sets of practices that social innovators can deploy to address deep-rooted social issues in marginalized communities.

In addition to his academic work as a sociologist, Rothman was a social worker who combined his knowledge and experience from the two domains into a methodology he termed 'Social R&D'. His approach was designed 'not only to produce knowledge, but to actively transform this knowledge into 'social technologies,' such as treatments, practical methods, or devices that practitioners could directly use or apply' (Goulet-Langlois et al., 2021, p. 29). It has been highly influential as a form of action research across several disciplines and takes the idea of 'engaged scholarship' significantly beyond what we have seen in management and organization studies.

In developing our framework, we adapt Rothman's (1970, 2007) typology of community organization to theorize a repertoire of practices that we believe are necessary for social innovators if they are to make deep-rooted social change. The typology comprises three 'modes of community intervention' that can be deployed by community 'practitioners': Mode A, Locality Development; Mode B, Social Planning; and Mode C, Social Action. Each mode represents a particular approach to addressing community needs. Locality Development (Mode A) is focused on community empowerment and participation. It seeks to build a cohesion among community members, and to develop their problem-solving capabilities. The role of community practitioners is that of an enabler or catalyst, encouraging community members to work together to address the problems that they face. Social Planning (Mode B) is focused on expert-based analysis and intervention. It seeks to address community issues through evidence and formal political channels, and promotes the need for communities to engage constructively with elites in order to garner the resources and support needed to make change. The role of community practitioners is to contribute expertise and facilitate relationships with policy and other 'experts'. Social Action (Mode C) is focused on confronting entrenched structures of power and tackling social injustice. It seeks to challenge vested interests and advocate for marginalized groups, thereby forcing changes to power relations. The role of community practitioners is to facilitate protest and other forms of contention with a view to pressuring elites into taking local problems seriously and diverting resources accordingly. The modes are Weberian ideal types; actors can combine practices from across the modes and indeed other practices that sit outside the modes.

We reconceptualize these modes of community intervention as forms of social-symbolic work centred on the construction of social problems and solutions. Drawing on Rothman's typology, we argue that social innovators can leverage three distinct but mutually reinforcing modes of social-symbolic work – which we label social inclusion work, social activism work, and socio-political work (Table I) – to address deep-rooted social issues. Collectively, they constitute a framework for social-symbolic organizing in the context of social innovation. Each type of work maps onto one of Rothman's modes of community intervention. Specifically, social inclusion work links to Locality Development (Mode A) and is concerned with participatory and inclusive organizing in marginalized groups. Socio-political work links to Social Planning (Mode B) and is concerned with supporting marginalized groups to engage with formal political structures. Social activism work links to Social Action (Mode C) and is concerned with organizing marginalized groups through protest and other forms of direct action.

By reinterpreting Rothman's modes of community intervention through the lens of social-symbolic work, we create a bridge between his framework and contemporary organization theory. A key strength of the social-symbolic work perspective is its provision of a theoretical foundation for understanding how organizations purposefully seek to create, maintain, or transform social realities. From a social innovation standpoint, it allows us to see (1) social problems and solutions as social-symbolic objects that are negotiated between social actors and (2) how different types of organizational intervention influence these processes of social construction in marginalized communities. The forms of work that we theorize do not preclude market-based activity. Rather, they complement the social entrepreneurial skills that are presumed to lie at the core of contemporary social innovation practice. In the remainder of this section, we outline each type of work in turn. In doing so, we explain how they can be used to construct and legitimate social problems and their solutions – the focal social-symbolic objects in our conceptualization of social innovation.

Social Inclusion Work

Social inclusion work is the process of participatory organizing to support social, economic, and environmental justice. It seeks to strengthen the self-esteem of marginalized groups by encouraging these groups to see the varied challenges that they face, such as unemployment, or discrimination, or isolation, as social problems that result from the way that society is structured rather than individual failings. At the same time, social inclusion work reframes the solutions to these problems as dependent on the efforts of marginalized groups. By shifting the 'blame' for the problems experienced by marginalized groups from individuals and society, and positioning marginalized groups as possessing the potential to solve these problems themselves, social inclusion work builds agency and over time creates solidarity between community members. It often involves disrupting and changing the institutionalized norms and practices that work against marginalized groups, which in turn may require the creation and legitimation of alternative forms of grassroots organizing.

This form of work can therefore be seen as an essential building block of 'bottom up' participatory approaches to social issues. It both creates awareness within marginalized groups about the nature of the issues that they face and amplifies their voices.

Table I. Social-symbolic organizing for social innovation

Type of social- symbolic work	*Link to Rothman's framework*	*Definition*	*Overarching framing of 'problems'*	*Overarching framing of 'solutions'*	*Underlying organizing practices*	*Example*
Social inclusion work	Mode A: locality development	The process of participatory and inclusive organizing within marginalized groups	Social problems are caused by the way that society is structured rather than by the failings of individuals	Marginalized groups must take responsibility for their own well-being	• Participatory action research • Community organizing • Community enterprise	The Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative to hold public assets in trust for the local community
Socio-political work	Mode B: social planning	The process of organizing marginalized groups to engage with formal political structures	Social problems are caused by the failure of formal legal and political systems	Marginalized groups must engage with mainstream political structures so that they serve their interests	• Evidence-based research • Lobbying • Formulation of policy, regulation, and legal frameworks	The movement against child marriage in Indonesia
Social activism work	Mode C: social action	The process of organizing marginalized groups through protest and other forms of resistance	Social problems are caused by elites (leaders of corporations, financial institutions, political parties) seeking to maintain their dominant positions	Marginalized groups must engage in direct action to confront the vested interests that oppress them	• Awareness campaigns • Protest and demonstration • Civil disobedience	The 'Capitol crawl' to highlight the inaccessibility of public buildings in the USA

Note: Inspired by Rothman (1970, 2007).

In other words, it encourages action on the part of those who are typically excluded from mainstream discourses. As a consequence, social inclusion work can promote contextually nuanced solutions; that is, solutions which are co-produced by marginalized groups to meet their own needs. Social inclusion work thus focuses on making change within political systems and supports the creation of an institutional context that meets the needs of all members of a community and not only its most privileged members.

Social inclusion work is underpinned by a range of community-based organizational practices linked to what Rothman terms locality development, including participatory

action research, community organizing, and community enterprise. *Participatory action research* helps marginalized groups to identify, analyse, and build contextualized insights about the social problems that they face (Cornish et al., 2023). In enacting this practice, organizations support community members to engage in research that prioritizes local knowledge and to critique community problems in ways that are rooted in their own experiences. *Community organizing* – a 'practice in which residents collaboratively investigate and undertake sustained collective action regarding social issues of mutual concern' (Christens and Speer, 2015, p. 193) – builds on the research by providing a structured way to enable marginalized groups to come together to develop possible solutions to the problems they have identified. This facilitates solidarity among community members, reinforcing social connections and building a sense of empowerment (Aiyer et al., 2015). *Community enterprise* goes one stage further through the creation of grassroots initiatives that provide economic opportunities for members of marginalized groups (Haugh, 2007; Stott et al., 2019). Crucially, this practice allows community assets to be held in shared ownership, positioning community members as having a stake in the future and helping to build a shared understanding of their roles and responsibilities in ensuring the welfare of the community. Taken together, these practices encourage marginalized groups to view themselves as architects of their community's wellbeing.

For example, Community Development Corporations (USA) and Development Trusts (UK) aim to design and deliver lasting solutions to social and economic harms in the most economically impoverished places by deeply implicating marginalized groups in all aspects of their governance. The Dudley Street Neighbourhood Initiative, a CDC based in Boston, Massachusetts offers a compelling example of an organization with a clear commitment to community engagement and empowerment. It created one of the first community land trusts in the USA that places local assets – land and buildings – in the hands of community members. Through this governance mechanism, local people become the guardians of community resources. They do so by taking responsibility for ensuring that these resources are 'remove[d] from the speculative market' and protected 'permanently … for community use'.[6] From this perspective, the problems faced by community members are rooted in the structures of ownership and control promoted by capitalism, and the solutions are for community members to take ownership of local assets and use them for community benefit.

Socio-Political Work

Socio-political work is the process of political organizing to overcome harms and achieve social, economic, and environmental justice. This form of work seeks to frame social problems in marginalized communities as rooted in the failure of formal legal and political systems. It is premised on the idea that significant discursive, relational, and material power is embodied in political and legal structures – from the local to the global. Unlike social inclusion work, which is focused on empowering community members to address their own challenges, socio-political work frames solutions to deep-rooted community problems as necessitating engagement with mainstream

political structures. This involves capturing political and legal power; in other words, the ability to shape or enact laws. Socio-political work requires an understanding of how legal actors, institutions, and processes frame the creation, interpretation, and enforcement of legal frameworks in different contexts (Creutzfeldt, 2020) as well as the tools to shape discourses and relationships within political infrastructures to influence decision making. This includes working within political parties and taking office – publicly defined roles regulated by legal and ethical constraints (Alexander, 2006) – such as a local councillor, elected mayor, or member of a public body. It also involves efforts to influence political parties and office holders, including journalism and policy work in think tanks.

The concept of socio-political work helps bring to the fore the idea that framing, prioritizing, and resourcing action on social issues is 'an inherently political endeavor that has broad social implications' (Beckman et al., 2023, p. 700) – and therefore requires social innovators to engage directly with or within political organizations. More broadly, our framework suggests that engaging with formal political structures represents an important mechanism through which social innovators can make deep-rooted and lasting social change (see also Mair and Rathert, 2024; Neuberger et al., 2023). Yet social innovators, particularly those operating in market-based models such as social enterprise, often neglect socio-political work.

This form of work is underpinned by a range of community-based organizational practices linked to what Rothman terms social planning, including evidence-based research, lobbying, and the formulation of policy, regulations and legal frameworks. *Evidence-based research* plays a key role in socio-political work by generating the data and formal analysis needed to frame social problems and their solutions in ways that resonate with policy makers (Cairney, 2016).[7] This practice generates legitimacy for community-based organizations in the eyes of the political establishment, allowing them to present 'scientific' evidence that challenges current policies and fundings models. Through *lobbying*, community organizations can use this evidence connect with formal political structures (Avner, 2010). To do so they must forge relationships with the political class in order to shape legislative agendas and resource allocation decisions. This necessitates a sophisticated understanding of political systems and a willingness to engage with the elites that are often seen by community organizations as part of the problem rather than the solution to issues of marginalization. Socio-political work's third main practice of *formulating policy, regulation, and legal frameworks* goes a step further – it involves community organizations not just influencing political agendas but becoming political actors who are implicated in political decision making. This requires moving 'beyond engagement and participation' (Bovaird, 2007, p. 846) to active involvement in public governance. Many community activists are reluctant to take such a step, but it is core to Rothman's framework. Combined, these practices are designed allow community organizations to alter political systems and make fundamental change.

There are many compelling cases of social innovators that have successfully engaged in socio-political work to drive social impact. For example, in seeking to prevent child marriage in Indonesia, a group of lawyers worked with children's rights organizations to instigate two judicial reviews (2015 and 2019) of the 1974 marriage law that allowed children to be legally married in particular circumstances. The first judicial review was rejected by the constitutional court in Indonesia. However, activists were able to use this

defeat to raise the profile of their cause and put political pressure on the legal establishment. The second judicial review was successful, which made child marriage illegal in the country (Claus and Tracey, 2020). This change could not have been achieved without the social innovators concerned engaging in formal political processes, and ultimately working with elements of the political establishment. From the perspective of the children's rights organizations at the heart of this case, the problem of child marriage was rooted in its legal status, and the solution to eradicating it lay in engaging with political structures in order to create a new legal framework that governed the institution of marriage.

Social Activism Work

Social activism work is the process of organizing individuals, groups, or communities to achieve social justice through protest. Like social inclusion work, social activism work seeks to shift the blame for social problems away from individuals, but rather than blaming social and economic structures in general, it frames responsibility as residing specifically with elites – often leaders of corporations, financial institutions, and political parties. It is premised on the idea that certain voices are ignored by these elites and deliberately denied access to legitimate political channels. Solutions to the social problems faced by marginalized groups are framed as necessitating protest and direct action on the part of the disenfranchised, often via social movements and other activist organizations (Rao et al., 2000). Unlike sociopolitical work which involves working collaboratively with actors in positions of power, social activism work challenges dominant discourses through direct provocation and is designed to subvert or break legitimate institutional norms that maintain the position of elites.

Social activism work represents a key mechanism through which social change takes place (Tilly, 1978). For example, movements advocating for indigenous groups, climate justice, and gender equality have exerted significant pressure on corporations, national governments, and intergovernmental organizations such as the UN to challenge and shape the way that their issues of concern are framed (Steger and Wilson, 2012). This form of work plays a crucial role in amplifying the voices of those experiencing harm as well as surfacing new or neglected issues that require attention. It also emphasizes the urgency of achieving social change by spotlighting issues that are pushed to the shadows and drawing attention to the accumulation of harms that will impact current and future generations.

Social activism work is underpinned by a range of community-based organizational practices linked to what Rothman terms social action, including awareness campaigns, protests and demonstration, and civil disobedience. *Awareness campaigns* are designed to draw attention to and frame social problems in ways that resonate with the broader public (Lang, 2012). They often draw on mainstream media and digital platforms to offer alternative perspectives on key issues of concern to marginalized communities (Wouters, 2019). *Protests and demonstrations* are also designed to raise awareness but are more provocative and contentious than campaigns: they represent visible expressions of collective dissent that are intended to place pressure – both social and political – on policymakers and other elites to consider radical solutions to issues of marginalization. Finally, *civil disobedience* takes direct action a step further by deliberately defying the state's authority, challenging what Smith (2011, p. 145) describes as 'the moral requirement that citizens comply' with government rules and prescriptions. This type of direct action

intentionally breaks the law, but is non-violent. The most common types of civil disobedience are sit-ins, boycotts, blockades, and information leaks. They are designed to test institutional authority and expose the apparent hypocrisy inherent in many aspects of political and legal systems. In authoritarian regimes, civil disobedience carries significant risk of arrest, imprisonment, and state violence (Ruijgrok, 2017). Taken together, these practices are designed to allow members of marginalized groups to demand accountability and push for radical change that challenges deeply rooted vested interests and power structures.

At the core of social activism work is the creation of social-symbolic spectacles to garner attention and signify urgency, such as huge crowds waving banners, or protestors glued to a motorway causing gridlock. Central to the spectacle is the symbolic embodiment of harm. This is illustrated, for instance, by the families of COVID victims marching on government buildings or protecting a tree by living in it. One of the most dramatic illustrations of social activism work is the 'Capitol Crawl', a 1990 protest event that saw more that 1000 people gather at the US Capitol in Washington to campaign for disabled rights, including the rights of disabled people to access public buildings. In a dramatic move, around 60 protesters discarded their wheelchairs and crawled up the 365 steps of the Capitol building. The youngest protester – Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins – was just 8 years old. News and images of the event quickly spread around the world, with the protesters providing 'a physical demonstration of how inaccessible architecture impacts people with disabilities'.[8] From the perspective of the disabled rights movement, it was the political elite in Washington that was responsible for the problem of accessibility and the denial of disabled rights, and the solution was to shame senators into action through forms of highly visible protest that were intended to shock.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

We believe that social-symbolic work is a particularly valuable lens for examining social innovation because of its ability to span theory and practice; it functions as a boundary object that bridges these domains, which – despite all the talk of 'engaged scholarship' – too often operate in silos (Beckman et al., 2023). The perspective is anchored around two core concepts – work and the objects of the work – that are quite intuitive for both scholars and social innovators, but which at the same time enable the complexity of the social world to be interrogated and incorporated.

From a theoretical standpoint, the social-symbolic work perspective allows for the theorization of a core dynamic that sits at the heart of social innovation: the social construction of social problems and their solutions. This is important, because the idea that social innovators are striving for a 'best response' (Young, 2011, p. 21285) to a clearly delineated social issue continues to permeate much of the literature. There is of course a long tradition of research in sociology – most notably social problems theory – that has considered how social problems are socially constructed in a range of institutional settings (Loseke, 2003; Spector and Kitsue, 2011). This scholarship has highlighted, for

example, how multiple 'social problem claims' vie for dominance in 'arenas… where social problems compete for attention' (Hilgartner and Bosk, 1988, p. 56). However, the idea that the solutions to these problems also need to be purposefully shaped and legitimated is not a prominent feature of this research. By contrast, we conceptualize social innovation as fundamentally rooted in social-symbolic processes where social problems and solutions serve as foundational, and mutually constituted, social-symbolic objects that guide the actions of social innovators. This perspective offers an alternative to much existing social innovation research, which emphasizes, for example, the mobilization of resources, the fostering of partnerships and alliances, and the creation of models that balance social and commercial goals (Phillips et al., 2015). Thus, by shifting the focus to social-symbolic practices, we provide a different way of understanding how social innovation is structured and enacted.

From the standpoint of practice, we can think of the forms of work that we identify – social inclusion work, socio-political work, and social activism work – as three different approaches to the social-symbolic world that in combination represent a toolkit for social-symbolic organizing. Social innovators can draw on these perspectives to make sense of social issues and to tailor their social change efforts – regardless of the organizational form or sector that they are working in. In other words, social-symbolic organizing is a cognitive skill that can be learned. Social innovators need to be able to move between the three forms of work and to combine the practices associated with them. In our experience, this resonates strongly with social innovators: we have found it to be one of the few perspectives from organization theory with which they connect. Specifically, the idea that social innovation is underpinned by a need to persuade others that a particular understanding of a social problem is the 'right' one, and that a particular way of addressing that problem represents the most appropriate solution among a range of possible alternatives, strikes a chord with them and has clear implications to help guide their efforts.

More broadly, we have argued that a key strength of our framework is that it highlights a more expansive repertoire of practices that social innovators need to enact when seeking to make change. It is important to emphasize, however, that the social-symbolic perspective can also be applied to social innovation practices that are market-based. This includes social entrepreneurship (addressing social problems by creating new organizations), social intrapreneurship (addressing social problems through initiatives in established organizations), and social extrapreneurship (addressing social problems through initiatives that cut across organizations) (Tracey and Stott, 2017). Indeed, social purpose organizations may have little option in the current funding environment but to engage in 'enterprise' if they are to generate the resources needed for their social change efforts (Dey and Teasdale, 2016). A number of studies have explicitly considered the organizational challenges of building commercial operations while simultaneously engaging in the types of social-symbolic work in our framework.

For example, Tracey and Phillips (2016) studied a social enterprise in the East of England – Keystone Development Trust – that supported migrant workers who faced poor working conditions, a lack of affordable housing, and community marginalization. A core part of Keystone's philosophy was that the groups it supported should lead efforts to improve their situation. This involved what we have conceptualized in our framework as social inclusion work. Specifically, Keystone helped to create an initiative known as

META – Mobile Europeans Taking Action – in which migrants were encouraged to diagnose the problems that they faced in their new environment and to construct solutions that helped to address them. To help fund META, Keystone engaged in a range commercial activities, including a bike repair business, a recycling business, and a community café. Interestingly, many of the community's British residents reacted very negatively to META, which undermined the organization's standing in the community and its ability to generate revenues. Nonetheless, META was widely praised as an innovative approach to addressing migrant marginalization that could not have been achieved without the income provided by the Keystone businesses.

Mair and Rathert (2024) similarly show how social enterprises often engage in a range of efforts to make social change in addition to their commercial operations. Through a study of 718 social enterprises spanning seven countries, the authors identified two key types of advocacy: sociocultural advocacy aimed at society at large that is designed to change beliefs, attitudes and norms; and policy advocacy aimed at formal institutions that involves 'efforts targeting legislation or the process of policymaking, including how policies are enacted by state bureaucracies' (p. 3). Policy advocacy aligns closely with the concept of socio-political work in our framework. The study introduces the interesting idea of a 'market for public purpose' that 'puts the social problem addressed at the center of market dynamics and interactions' (p. 4). In other words, social enterprises compete not just in a commercial market but also for a mandate to address a particular social problem through a particular solution, which is a social-symbolic process. This suggests that, rather than sitting at the margins of social enterprise, socio-political work is fundamental to it – social enterprises may otherwise lack the legitimacy needed to pursue their goals.

In another important study, Lee et al. (2018) examined the efforts of a Sicilian responsible travel social enterprise – AT – which was part of the broader anti-mafia movement that aimed to eliminate the practice of 'pizzo' (the extortion of protection money). The movement's 'combative approach' (p. 2130), which included practices such as whistleblowing, reporting and protest marching, did not sit easily with how the venture positioned its commercial operations. Indeed, customers sometimes felt 'confused or threatened' (p. 2130) by the frames that AT deployed in its communication about the problem of pizzo and the solutions to it. To address this issue, the venture developed a sophisticated framing strategy whereby AT sought to position its activities so that they appealed both to movement activists and industry stakeholders. In the terms of our framework, the social activism work of the movement needed to be consistent with the needs and expectations of AT's customers and partners. This is an interesting insight which suggests that 'commercial social movement organizations' (p. 2131) such as AT face an intriguing tension that is seldom explicitly considered in the literature, but one that can ultimately be surmounted.

These studies reveal two key insights. First, social-symbolic organizing applies not only to traditional civil society organizations, but to commercially-focused social purpose organizations. Second, social-symbolic organizing is not an alternative to market-based solutions to social issues. Rather they often complement one another with both needed if organizations are to achieve meaningful social change. It is important to emphasize, however, that the skills required for social-symbolic organizing and the

skills required to run a commercial venture are very different – competence in one set may not be matched by competence in the other. Indeed, research has shown that 'the commercial skills needed to create a business venture are quite different from the kinds of institutional work required to influence the institutional environment' (Tracey et al., 2011, p. 76). Future research could usefully consider the relationship between these two skillsets in more detail in order to identify the different ways in which they can be integrated in social purpose organizations. For example, it would be interesting to know how organizations can cultivate both types of expertise. It would also be interesting to consider whether their relative importance evolves over time, perhaps as organizations scale, enter new markets, or as societal expectations shift.

Finally, we recognize a key limitation of our analysis: we have focused only on institutional work, yet self work and organization work represent equally important elements of the social-symbolic perspective (Lawrence and Phillips, 2019a). As such, a more comprehensive analysis of the interconnections between social innovation and social-symbolic work will inevitably involve going beyond institutional work to include self work and organization work. Indeed, building new understanding about the relationships between forms of social innovation and forms of social-symbolic work represents a critically important area of future study with the potential to significantly enrich our understanding of social innovation.

CONCLUSION

The concept of social innovation captures an important set of ideas about how social change is organized that has enriched organization theory. For practitioners on the front line, it provides a vocabulary and frame that help them to legitimate their activities, galvanizing a new generation of innovators and nurturing their creativity in tackling global issues. However, many social innovators and those who study them arguably place too much faith in market-based approaches. We have argued for a broader conception of the repertoire of practices that underpin social innovation. By adapting the work of Rothman (1970, 2007) and reconceptualizing some of his most influential ideas as social-symbolic work designed to shape social problems and solutions as social-symbolic objects, we have sought to offer a way of thinking about this expanded repertoire. We hope that social innovation researchers and practitioners will challenge, test, and extend our framework, and in so doing help to promote a set of ideas that social innovators can use in their social-symbolic efforts to make lasting social change.

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NOTES

[1] www.un.org/en/exhibits/page/sdgs-17-goals-transform-world.
[2] www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/energy/.

[3] www.unicef.org.uk/press-releases/1-in-3-people-globally-do-not-have-access-to-safe-drinking-water-unicef-who/.
[4] www.unhcr.org/uk/figures-at-a-glance.html.
[5] While the specific type of social-symbolic work that we are concerned with can be classified as institutional work, for simplicity we use the umbrella term social-symbolic work as we develop our arguments.
[6] https://www.dsni.org/what-is-a-clt.
[7] The audience for evidence-based research is therefore different than the audience for participatory action research. Specifically, evidence-based research is designed to persuade policy makers to view social problems in new ways, while participatory action research is designed to allow community members to critique and build understanding about the social problems that they themselves face.
[8] https://www.history.com/news/americans-with-disabilities-act-1990-capitol-crawl.

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