

Social Innovation: A Window on Alternative Ways of Organizing and Innovating

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Abstract

The term social innovation is used to describe a broad range of organizational and inter-organizational activity that is ostensibly designed to address the most deep-rooted ‘problems’ of society such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation. Theoretically, however, this presents challenges because many of the ideas and practices grouped under the label of social innovation may have relatively little in common. In this article, we outline a simple framework for categorizing different types of social innovation – social entrepreneurship, social intrapreneurship, and social extrapreneurship – which we believe provides a useful basis for theory building in this area. We also offer suggestions for future research with the potential to deepen, extend, and refine our typology.

Key words: social innovation, social entrepreneurship, social intrapreneurship, social extrapreneurship

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Introduction

Innovation research is focused overwhelmingly on one organizational form: the for-profit firm. Without meaning to oversimplify, at the core of this work is a concern with the processes through which firms create and appropriate value in the context of unmet market needs (Jacobides, Knudsen & Augier, 2006). Value, in this context, is economic value. Given the apparently dominant role of firms in most societies and economies, it is perhaps unsurprising that this view of innovation should be the prevailing one. But for the growing number of researchers like us who are interested in a different type of innovation – often labelled social innovation – it is a very narrow view.

Social innovation is a contested term. It tends to be defined quite generically as the creation and implementation of new solutions to social problems, with the benefits of these solutions shared beyond the confines of the innovators. Given the constraints of space, we will not consider in detail the theoretical issues raised by this definition, but for those who are interested the chapter by Lawrence, Dover and Gallagher (2014) provides an excellent critique. These authors argue such a definition is open to challenge along several dimensions. For example, they point to the socially constructed nature of social problems, and explain how particular moral assumptions about who is and is not ‘worthy’ of support – which tend to reflect the values of elites – shape whether issues become categorized as ‘problems’; that ideas of novelty or newness are embedded in distinct social and historical contexts and therefore seldom clear cut; and that the distribution of ‘benefits’ is an inherently political process, which means that the “impacts of social innovation are never ‘ethically neutral’” (p. 325).

Leaving to one side the definitional issues, the study of social innovation is intriguing from an organizational standpoint because, in addition to firms, a range of organizational forms and processes seldom considered in work on ‘conventional’ innovation are implicated

in it. From our perspective, these forms – which can be termed broadly as social purpose organizations – are inherently interesting. They operate in the public, private and social sectors, as well as the intersections between them, although as Nicholls and Murdoch (2012: 8) point out, social innovators often position themselves against these labels – the intractable nature of social challenges such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation “are seen as highlighting the failure of conventional solutions and established paradigms... across all three sectors of society: private sector market failure; public sector, siloed thinking; a lack of scale in, and fragmentation across, civil society.”

Excellent descriptions of many of the key social purpose organizational forms are to be found in Pearce (2003), who distinguishes between social and community enterprises, social firms, fair trade businesses, social businesses, local exchange trading systems, and time banks. More recently Dubb (2016) outlined a series of “community wealth building forms”, including employee stock ownership plan companies, co-operatives, community development finance institutions, community development corporations, social enterprises, and municipal enterprises. In addition, social movements and movement organizations also play a key role in shaping how social ‘problems’ and their ‘solutions’ are constructed, and in promoting, resisting and reversing the ideas and practices that underpin social change (Givan, Roberts, & Soule, 2010). As digital technology has diffused, new kinds of grassroots innovation movements – “variously called hackerspaces, fablabs and makerspaces”, and which are based around “open access, community-based design and fabrication workshops” – have emerged throughout the world, some of which are directly concerned with social issues and challenges (Smith, Fressoli, Abrol, Around & Eli, 2017: 100). Of these many and varied forms, only social enterprise has received anything approaching a thorough treatment by innovation researchers, yet it is arguably one of the least interesting types of organizing within the social innovation landscape.

On the face of it, all of this implies a treasure chest of opportunities for researchers. From a conceptual standpoint, however, it raises a fundamental question: how do we approach such a broad range of organizational forms and activities, and create a set of theoretical ideas around them that builds on existing work in innovation and organization research, while at the same time accounts for the distinctive nature of the organizational processes grouped under the label of social innovation? Below we outline simple framework for categorizing social innovation that comprises three different processes – social entrepreneurship, social intrapreneurship, and social extrapreneurship – which we believe could provide a useful basis for theory building in this area (see Table 1).

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A Social Innovation Typology: Social Entrepreneurship, Social Intrapreneurship and Social Extrapreneurship

Social entrepreneurship is the most well-known of the categories in our typology. This is due, at least in part, to the media profile of people such as Blake Mycoskie (who founded controversial venture TOMS Shoes) and Muhammad Yunus (who popularized microfinance) who self-identify as social entrepreneurs. From an academic standpoint, there is already quite a significant body of work that has emerged to conceptualize social entrepreneurship (Dacin, Dacin & Tracey, 2011). While this is of course to be welcomed, it is worth noting that few debates in management research can be as fraught – and perhaps as circular – as the debate about the meaning of this term. We think of social entrepreneurship as the process of creating and growing a venture, either for-profit or non-profit, where the motivation of the entrepreneur is to address a particular social challenge or set of challenges. As with the broader concept of social innovation, this definition raises a number of issues (for example, how can the ‘true’ motivation of the entrepreneur be ascertained in any meaningful sense, and what makes a challenge ‘social’?) For those who are interested in the nuances of

the definitional debates surrounding social entrepreneurship, Dacin, Dacin and Matear (2010) provide a thorough synthesis and critique of the main issues.

Most of the work on social entrepreneurship is concerned with social enterprise (e.g., Smith, Gonin & Besharov, 2013; Tracey & Jarvis, 2007), and to a lesser extent community enterprise (e.g., Peredo & Chrisman, 2006; Haugh, 2007), as the focal organizational forms, but the concept applies equally to the broad range of social purpose organizations highlighted above. Theoretically, much of the research to date has treated social entrepreneurship as the process of creating and sustaining “hybrid organizations” that combine elements of different kinds of organization from the for-profit and non-profit worlds (see Battilana & Lee 2014 for a comprehensive review). For example, drawing on the context of institutional logics from institutional theory, Battilana and Dorado (2010: 1419) studied two microfinance organizations in Bolivia designed to address financial exclusion in poor communities, revealing how these ventures sustained their hybridity “in the absence of a ‘ready-to-wear’ model for handling the logics they combine.” And drawing on organizational identity theory, Besharov’s (2014) study of a socially focused retailer showed how the diverging values of organizational members underpinned multiple organizational identities, which posed both challenges and opportunities for the organization.

While social entrepreneurship research is certainly more developed than research on the other two processes in our framework, it remains in its infancy. Indeed, although researchers have made significant progress in understanding the tensions and contradictions that appear to characterize social entrepreneurial activity, many other issues and questions are only beginning to be considered. These issues include emerging research on, for example, the nature of social entrepreneurial opportunities (Mair & Noboa, 2006), resource acquisition (DiDomenico, Haugh & Tracey, 2010), social venture growth (Lyon & Fernandez, 2012), and

the identities, values and goals of individual social entrepreneurs (e.g., Wry & York, in press).

The second type of social innovation in our typology is *social intrapreneurship*. At the core of the concept of intrapreneurship is the idea that established organizations are most effective when they find ways of harnessing the creative talents of their members (Basso, 2010). More recently, the concept of social intrapreneurship has become increasingly prominent, attracting much interest. However, there is no agreed upon definition, and little research on the topic (see Kistruck & Beamish, 2010 for an important exception). We view social intrapreneurship as the process of addressing social challenges from inside established organizations. In the world of practice, social intrapreneurship has generally been associated with for-profit firms (Michelini & Fiorentino, 2012), where it has been linked with ideas such as shared value (Porter & Kramer, 2011) and corporate social innovation (Kanter, 1998). These concepts emphasize the notion that companies should treat social problems as commercial opportunities, thereby creating social and commercial value at the same time. From this perspective, social intrapreneurship is rooted in the apparent “comparative advantage of private firms” (Hess, Rogovsky & Dunfee, 2002: 116) over governments and social sector organizations in addressing social problems. Prominent examples include GE’s “Healthyimagination” initiative, which is focused on improving the affordability and quality of healthcare around the world, with a strong focus on the global south. The extent to which examples such as this one constitute a kind of impression management or a ‘real’ attempt to address intractable social problems is a matter of some debate (Crane, Palazzo, Spence & Matten, 2014).

In addition to firms, social intrapreneurship can also take place in larger public sector and social sector organizations. With regard to the public sector, there has been a rapid growth in Public Social Innovation Labs, such as MindLab in Copenhagen and the

MaRS Solutions Lab in Toronto, which claim to draw on design thinking principles to develop solutions to social challenges in a way that “involves citizens” (Bason, 2016). Increasingly, large social sector organizations have also become involved in similar approaches. For example, Brac, which is based in Bangladesh and by some accounts the largest NGO in the world, created a social innovation lab which it is claimed forms “a cross-disciplinary platform for BRAC staff to learn about best practices in development, generate ideas, experiment, and share knowledge about scalable innovations with the global development community”¹ .

The third and final type of social innovation in our framework is *social extrapreneurship*. Unlike entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship, the concept of extrapreneurship is not common in the literature. In the world of practice, it was originally used as a term for corporate ‘spin-outs’ – i.e., when a company splits off part of itself to create a new, independent company – as distinct from intrapreneurship (the creation of new opportunities within an organization), and entrepreneurship (the creation of a new venture outside an extant organization) (Enbar, 1999). More recently, Algosó (2015) highlighted the rise of a different sort of extrapreneur in the international development sector – one who works beyond organizational boundaries. He argues that “extrapreneurs create things in a space that transcends any one agency. Extrapreneurship is a partnership approach that goes beyond co-ordination or co-branding. It starts with the network and leverages [resources]... to create a disproportionately greater development impact.”

Reframed in the context of social innovation, social extrapreneurship captures the process of inter-organizational action that facilitates alternative combinations of ideas, people, places and resources to address social challenges and make social change.

¹ <http://innovation.brac.net/>

Theoretically, it could be conceptualized as a form of institutional entrepreneurship (Tracey, Phillips & Jarvis, 2011), extra-institutional entrepreneurship (King & Soule, 2007), or institutional work (Lawrence & Dover, 2015). It is a concept that we believe usefully compliments both social entrepreneurship and social intrapreneurship. Social extrapreneurs can be characterized as working in and between organizations and networks, not only to create apparently novel solutions, but to develop a range of support mechanisms for the “ecosystems” and “platforms” that shape social change (Nambisan, 2009; Moore & Westley, 2011; Wallin, 2011).

Like social entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs, social extrapreneurs can be found in the public, private and social sectors, but may also work in academia and in network and social movement organizations. For instance, Engineers Without Borders partners with companies, government organizations and NGOs to create engineering solutions to the infrastructure challenges facing the poorest countries. They are also seeking to build a movement – a new generation of engineers around the world whose work is underpinned by the social, ethical and environmental dimensions of engineering design. Examples from the academic literature include Maguire, Hardy and Lawrence’s (2004) study of HIV/AIDS treatment advocacy in Canada, Mair and Marti’s (2009) study of a poverty reduction program in Bangladesh aimed at the “ultra-poor”, and Zietsma and Lawrence’s (2010) study of logging practices in British Columbia.

A Research Agenda for Social Innovation

We began by arguing that social innovation is an overarching concept incorporating a range of organizational and inter-organizational activity ostensibly designed to address the most deep-rooted ‘problems’ of society. We further suggested that from an organizational standpoint we can conceptualize social innovation as comprising three core organizational processes, namely social entrepreneurship, social intrapreneurship, and

social extrapreneurship. In this final main section, we briefly consider three areas where our typology could help structure an emergent social innovation research agenda.

A first interesting research direction concerns the rise of digital social innovation. The idea that technology is profoundly reshaping social innovation is gaining much traction. But is digital technology really an alternative to the face-to-face relationships that have traditionally been assumed to underpin the activities of social purpose organizations, or merely a compliment to it? Research which explores the limits and potential of digital technology in social innovation represents an important line of inquiry. For example, one of the biggest shifts in the social entrepreneurship landscape over the past two decades has been a move from thinking about social enterprise as rooted in communities of place, exemplified by the mantra “local solutions to local problems”, to social entrepreneurship as a form of technology entrepreneurship concerned with “developing inspiring digital solutions to social challenges” around the world (Bria, 2015: 4). A similar shift has arguably taken place in the context of social intrapreneurship. For example, we see major global financial institutions such as Barclays creating social innovation labs, apparently with a view to using their FinTech capabilities to tackle social exclusion; and governments around the world are increasingly focused on “public sector digital innovation”, which is often framed as a way of responding to fiscal constraints while at the same time increasing and personalizing service quality. With regard to social extrapreneurship, NGOs and social movement organizations have made significant investments in their digital capabilities, which are seemingly designed to harness stakeholder support and facilitate social objectives. This applies not only to new ventures – NGOs such as Oxfam that are often considered, perhaps unfairly, as conservative and reluctant to change are also making significant investments in digital technology. The landscape is moving very quickly, but social innovation researchers have been slow to explore the implications of this digital

‘revolution’. We think it will be important to consider the role played by ‘real’ face-to-face relationships at the grass roots of communities, versus relationships and ‘solutions’ that are developed and deployed virtually. The technology innovation literature (e.g., Asheim, Coenen & Vang, 2007) suggests that the dynamics are likely to be nuanced – the idea that virtual relationships can replace face-to-face ones in addressing problems in the poorest communities may well be misplaced.

Second, we think that there is a significant opportunity to build on emerging research on social innovation from a critical perspective (Steyaert & Dey, 2010). This work explores, *inter alia*, the role of elites in shaping the social innovation landscape and the potential “dark side” of social innovation activity. For example, with respect to social entrepreneurship, many non-profit organizations feel under pressure to adopt the language and practices associated with social enterprise even when they are ideologically opposed to doing so. This dynamic is illustrated in a revealing study by Dey and Teasdale (2015), who show how social sector actors may engage in “tactical mimicry” – publically identifying with the discourse of social enterprise in order to acquire resources, while at the same time privately expressing disdain for it and characterizing its core ideas as neoliberal “bullshit”. With regard to social intrapreneurship, particularly in the corporate sector, there has been much debate about whether ideas such as shared value are simply forms of impression management designed to maximize revenues. Indeed, some of the companies extolled as developing ‘best practice’ shared value initiatives have, at the very least, serious questions to ask about their commitment to responsible business practices. For example, Walmart is often put forward as a shared value exemplar for its “greening” of its supply chain. At the same time, the company has been much criticized for its allegedly exploitative supply chain practices (Allen, 2016). In addition, there is significant opportunity to consider social extrapreneurship from a critical perspective. For instance, major foundations have invested

huge resources to address the effects of poverty and inequality around the world, and are amongst the highest profile social entrepreneurial actors. But they have done so in ways that emphasize a particular set of assumptions about social change. For example, the Gates Foundation has advocated a key role for the private sector in global health reform, which raises a “fundamental question about the mandate and role of a foundation in promoting and shaping policies on core health systems issues... to whom is the Gates Foundation accountable for the promotion of such policies?” (McCoy, Kembhavi, Patel & Luintel, 2009: 1651). This insight resonates with important work in post-colonial theory (e.g., Kohn & McBride, 2011) that conceptualizes Western intervention in poor countries as far from benevolent, because it reinforces rather than ameliorates poverty and inequality by creating dependency relationships. We believe these issues represent vitally important ones for social innovation researchers, particularly in the context of a social innovation movement that is sometimes reluctant to discuss, or even acknowledge, a possible dark side.

A third and final area of inquiry concerns geography and the role of place in social innovation. The challenges facing social innovators vary significantly depending on the nature of the institutional context in which they are operating, but this issue tends to be glossed over in the literature, with researchers seemingly reluctant to build theory about how the practice of social innovation differs, for instance, between countries in the global north versus the global south. Yet clearly there are significant differences. For example, social entrepreneurs in countries such as Vietnam, where social enterprise as an organizational form is only just emerging, face a particular set of categorical challenges. This means that building legitimacy and a coherent organizational identity is much harder than in countries such as the UK and the US where social enterprise as a category is very well established (Vergne and Wry, 2014). With respect to social intrapreneurship,

established organizations also face different opportunities and constraints in different parts of the world. For example, large NGOs are often viewed with deep suspicion by state actors in countries such as Russia and Indonesia. This renders their activities precarious, particularly when dealing with culturally sensitive issues, as the threat of expulsion or even arrest hangs over them (Jenkins, 2012). Similarly, social entrepreneurs face barriers to achieving collective impact in some geographies that do not exist in others because “rapid and often hostile... political, economic and social changes” place significant pressures on organizational and inter-organizational activity (Luthans & Ibrayeca, 2006: 93). We find it curious that the literature to date – even the institutional theory literature – has tended to play down the role of context in social innovation. In this respect, work by researchers such as Johanna Mair has played a key role in highlighting the distinctive nature of social innovation in the countries of the global south, and introduced a set of empirical contexts that are sorely under-represented in the mainstream literature (see, for example, Mair, Wolf & Seelos, in press).

Conclusion

On reading the burgeoning social innovation literature, one might be forgiven for thinking that it is a new phenomenon. It is not: social innovation as we currently understand it has a rich and fascinating history stretching at least as far back as the cooperative and social business movements of the Victorian era (McGowan & Westley, 2015) and probably much farther, but of course in a general sense social innovation is as old as civilization itself.

There is much to be learned from the successes and failures of the social innovators of the last 200 years; i.e., by taking a ‘long view’ of social innovation. At the same time, the organizational architecture of societies and economies around the world continues to evolve, with profound consequences for social innovation moving forward. For example, it is unclear if “we will soon find ourselves in a world in which for-profit organizations and

their alliances rule the world” as Barley (2016: 7) has argued, or a world that is shifting markedly to alternative organizational forms that represent “more democratic and locally owned enterprise” as Davis has (2016: 129) argued. Regardless of whether Barley or Davis is shown to be ‘right’, the decades ahead will surely continue to be defined to a significant extent by a set of critical organizational challenges with respect to poverty, inequality and environmental degradation.

Whether one takes the view that social innovation in its various guises represents a sophisticated form of impression management designed to frame organizations in a positive light, maximize resource acquisition, and reinforce global inequalities, or an altruistic endeavor designed to solve the world’s most intractable social challenges and reconfigure global governance to place power in the hands of disenfranchised communities, it is focused on a set of issues that matter to a shared future. Studying the organizational activities and processes subsumed under the umbrella of social innovation provides researchers with an opportunity to move away from “advancing an arguably narrow intellectual agenda in the service of academic and commercial elites” (Tracey & Creed, in press) and instead to “begin to look outwards and ask how organizations are altering our society” (Barley, 2016: 7). Such a shift is surely much needed.

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Table 1: A Typology of Social Innovation

| | Social Entrepreneurship | Social Intrapreneurship | Social Extrapreneurship |
|-----------------------------------|---|--|--|
| <i>Definition:</i> | The process of creating and growing a venture, either for-profit or non-profit, where the motivation of the entrepreneur is to address social challenges | The process of addressing social challenges from inside established organizations | The process of inter-organizational action that facilitates alternative combinations of ideas, people, places and resources to address social challenges |
| <i>Approach to social change:</i> | Creates change through the founding of new organizations | Creates change by leveraging the resources and capabilities of established organizations | Creates change through platforms that support collective effort within and between new and established organizations |
| <i>Example:</i> | Ayzh, an Indian social enterprise founded by Zubaida Bai to provide rural women in India with affordable health technologies – produced by women for women. www.ayzh.com/ | Arup, the multinational engineering firm, set up Arup International Development, a specialist non-for-profit venture. The venture provides a range of services to vulnerable communities, including support with disaster response and the construction of sustainable buildings and infrastructure. www.arup.com/services/international_development | Environmental organizations including WRAP and the Ellen MacArthur Foundation are working with governments, companies and social sector organizations to promote the concept of a “circular economy”; i.e., to reconfigure deeply held attitudes towards the use and reuse of resources and ‘normalize’ environmentally sustainable practices. www.ellenmacarthurfoundation.org/programmes |