

Social Innovation: A multi-lens approach to framing the discussion

Introduction

Social innovation (SI) is a highly contested field of research lacking a clear consensus on definition, framework, and scope (Benneworth et al., 2014; Bulut, et al., 2013; Hart et al., 2015). Mahdjoubi (1997) expressed social innovation as “comprising the learning structures of a society, let the technological innovation flourish. Social/human and technological innovations are two parts of a joint system” (p. 1). Most social innovation scholars, however, deemphasize the technological factors and focus on the process of improving society through social intervention that creates value (Khutrakun, 2013; Martinez, 2017; Moore et al., 2012; Phills et al., 2008). The social innovation literature does not, we contend, adequately consider the ‘social’ aspects of social innovation. To address this lacuna, we propose a theoretical model that leverages an (applied) anthropological framework to serve as a ‘social context’ and ‘innovation’ filter, resulting in a greater socio-cultural appreciation that not only respects the host culture, but potentially fosters a greater sustainable social impact by better understanding the socio-cultural context of the target market.

Social Innovation Background

Mulgan et al.’s (2007) seminal work simplifies what social innovation is meant to be, namely that they are simply “new ideas that work,” and more specifically,

Innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organisations whose primary purposes are social (p. 8).

They do not distinguish between cases where an organization’s aim is to generate profit and those operating as a nonprofit, but rather emphasize that the mission or objective

drives social innovation. Altuna et al. (2015) contend that most social innovation research considers the work of nonprofit organizations, but should include all actors (e.g. government agencies, for-profit firms, individuals/households). Pol and Ville (2009) describe numerous definitions and applications of social innovation as both a term and field of inquiry. They discuss variant discourses on its application at the macro-level (i.e., nation-states) micro-level (i.e., a single community), and whether the focus of a social innovation should focus on quality versus quantity. They express, like most in this field do, that a comprehensive definition should coalesce all the different disciplinary approaches of social innovation, to gain credibility and traction. Outside of their own SI definition they express, “[t]here must be an ‘environment’ conducive to the creation of new ideas and a ‘context’ in which a new idea is socially innovative” (p. 884).

The Role of Social Context within Social Innovation

In spite of disagreement on a single unifying definition or framework, most scholars in social innovation express SI as a well-intentioned new idea, intervention, product, or service that will improve society (see Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Gabriela, 2012; Lettice & Parekh, 2010; Radin & Lam, 2015). Social innovation does not exist in a vacuum, and perhaps its greatest strength is that it is inherently interdisciplinary, which could help to foster more creative innovations. When art critic Robert Hughes (2013) posited the *Shock of the New*, he was referring to very old new ideas, stretching back deep into the 19th century; when it comes to social innovation, perhaps the shock is that it is not really very new at all. Social innovation as it stands now arose out of energy devoted to *innovation* removed from the social sphere, a revival of interest, for example, in the works of Schumpeter (1950; Baumol, 1993), rather than an interest in social science that

Cajaiba-Santana identifies (2014). In his influential work Taylor (1970) proffers the key question that lies at the core of social innovation today—and he did so almost 50 years ago: how can change be introduced and maintained?

The Role of Innovation & Design Thinking within Social Innovation

Liedtka et al. (2017) contend that traditional methods to addressing issues in the social sector, (e.g., the donation and grant dependent nonprofit model), are often hindered by issues such as stakeholders not agreeing on what a problem is, or decision makers having ample amounts of data but not those that they need. Innovation, in a social innovation context, often leverages the methodology of design thinking, embraced by for-profit and nonprofit organizations alike, to address complex issues from a solutions-based perspective (Sipe, 2018). Design thinking is a human centered approach that aims to (ideally) create feasible, viable, and desirable innovations from a framework of inspiration, ideation, and implementation (Brown & Wyatt, 2010). However, although some such as Kolko (2015) argue that ‘design thinking has come of age’, it still possesses a predominantly market-based lens from a top-down approach. It does not, arguably, fully consider the ‘social context’ within social innovation, if it does not also consider the a more bottom-up, or hybrid approach that aligns with participative design at the community-level (Manzini, 2014). To address this conundrum, we propose the following model that leverages anthropology as a social ‘filtration’ theoretical lens.

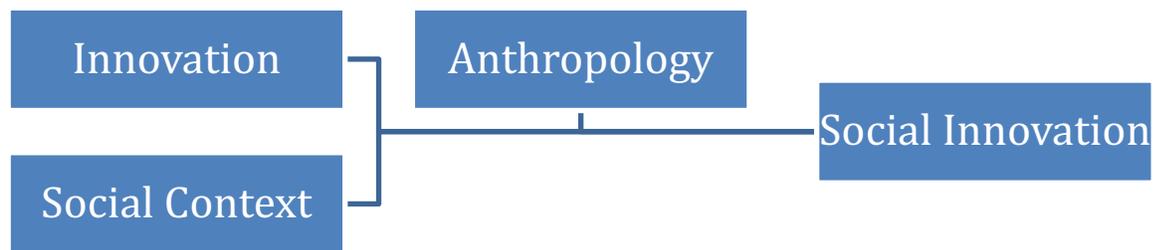


Figure 1: The roles of innovation, social context, and anthropology in framing social innovation.

The Value of Including Anthropology within Social Innovation

Taylor (1970) proposed the task of social innovation as both inquiry (research) and solution, but expressed concerns for introducing and maintaining social innovation. By casting SI as applied research, the task of *doing* social innovation then becomes a discipline of practice *and* research. To redress Taylor’s concerns, cultural factors should warrant greater consideration in terms of impact and sustainability. Therefore, it is imperative to engage the ‘specialists’ in socio-cultural studies, anthropologists, and more relevant to social innovation, applied anthropologists. Foster (1969) defined applied anthropology as “the phrase commonly used by anthropologists to describe their professional activities in programs that have as primary goals changes in human behavior believed to ameliorate contemporary social, economic, and technological problems, rather than the development of social and cultural theory” (p. 54). Van Willigen (2002) contends that Foster’s definition focused too closely on programs, and that applied anthropologists do work directly for communities as a whole. He defined applied anthropology as

A complex of related, research-based, instrumental methods which produce change or stability in specific cultural systems through provision of data, initiation of direct action, and/or the formation of policy. This process can take many forms, varying in terms of problem, role of the anthropologist, motivating values, and extent of action involvement (Van Willigen, 2002, p. 10).

An applied anthropology lens may empower social innovators to mitigate unintended consequences of their interventions, such as acculturation or the demise of one's culture (or an aspect of it) by another's, through soft interactions such as technological innovations, rather than hard interactions such as warfare (Rouse, 1986). Transculturation, conversely, occurs when cultures 'develop' over time through the collaborative exchange of ideas and innovations without one culture losing its identity (Ortiz, 1947; Rouse, 1986; Thomsen et al., 2018). To implement and maintain social innovation then, the transcultural exchange of ideas may influence social innovators by providing a change in perspective that is acutely aware of cultural differences.

Discussion and Conclusion

The SI literature is populated with well-intentioned actors eager to present 'solutions', and even leverage a design thinking approach, but their solutions are not necessarily sensitive to the socio-cultural ecosystem in which the social problems that they target exist (Tan et al., 2005). Social innovation, we argue, does not currently award due merit to the 'social' aspects of their respective fields, because they do not adequately emphasize the cultural impact that entrepreneurship and innovative interventions may have on host communities and their cultures (Bae et al., 2014; De Frece & Poole, 2008; Isakson, 2009; Jones & English, 2004). The field appears well equipped to provide solutions, but currently lacks sufficient evidence on whether or not interventions should even occur, rarely consider host communities' perspectives in the interventions, and do not sufficiently address how to overcome criticisms of implementing SI projects (De Frece & Poole, 2008). Therefore, we posit that our model (see Figure 1 above), may mitigate these socio-cultural criticisms. To

test our theoretical model, we propose the following research questions, 'how can social innovation scholars and practitioners alike develop their cultural knowledge, in order to better consider the 'social' aspects of social innovation, and maximize the innovation's potential impact?', 'will an anthropological theoretical lens balance a design thinking approach to social innovation?', and 'can an anthropological lens serve as a filter a social innovation context to make sure it is appropriate culturally, and if so, will possessing a better understanding of the socio-cultural dynamics within a target market increase the social innovation's impact?'. To answer these research questions, we will proceed to engage in a mixed-methods study that triangulates country-level data and surveys collected from applied anthropologists and social innovators, and compare them with ethnographic case studies. We hypothesize that when the anthropological filtration method is applied to social innovation, innovations will not only gain better acceptance within host communities, but have a greater sustainable impact due to a better socio-cultural understanding that engages a transcultural lens.

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