



On the evaluation of social innovations and social enterprises: Recognizing and integrating two solitudes in the empirical knowledge base[☆]



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Social innovation
Social enterprise
Evaluation
Social accounting
Performance measurement

ABSTRACT

Social innovation (SI) is billed as a new way to address complex social problems. Interest in SI has intensified rapidly in the last decade, making it an important area of practice for evaluators, but a difficult one to navigate. Learning from developments in SI and evaluation approaches applied in SI contexts is challenging because of ‘fuzzy’ concepts and silos of activity and knowledge within SI communities. This study presents findings from a systematic review and integration of 41 empirical studies on evaluation in SI contexts. We identify two isolated conversations: one about ‘social enterprises’ (SEs) and the other about non-SE ‘social innovations’. These conversations diverge in key areas, including engagement with evaluation scholarship, and in the reported purposes, approaches and use of evaluation. We identified striking differences with respect to degree of interest in collaborative approaches and facilitation of evaluation use. The findings speak to trends and debates in our field, for example how evaluation might reconcile divergent information needs in multilevel, cross-sectoral collaborations and respond to fluidity and change in innovative settings. Implications for practitioners and commissioners of evaluation include how evaluation is used in different contexts and the voice of evaluators (and the evaluation profession) in these conversations.

Social innovation (SI) is billed as a new way to address complex social needs. Interest in SI has intensified to the point that it has been described as a “global obsession” (Rogers, 2008, n.p). Organizations in public, private, non-governmental and philanthropic sectors are committing money and other resources to stimulate the growth of SI and related ventures such as social enterprises (SEs) (e.g., Corporation for National and Community Service, 2016; European Commission, 2016; Government of Canada, 2014; J.W. McConnell Family Foundation, 2017). Consequently, this is becoming an important area of practice for evaluators.

The research literature on SI and SE is growing, including with respect to evaluation. It describes practitioners applying a variety of innovative approaches in this new terrain (Antadze & Westley, 2012; TEPSIE, 2014; Patton, McKegg & Wehipeihana, 2015; Preskill & Beer, 2012). Divides appear to exist, however, between those writing about SI versus SE. In addition, “fuzzy” conceptualizations of SI and the relationships between it and SE add to the challenge of learning from the experiences of practitioners in this new field (Svensson, Szijarto, Milley, & Cousins, 2016; Cunha, Benneworth & Oliveira, 2015; Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2015).

We encountered these divides and conceptual challenges during a systematic review and integration of empirical studies on SI evaluation for two previous studies, where our purpose was to describe what evaluation practices look like in SI contexts, what drives those practices and how they affect SIs (Milley, Szijarto, Svensson, & Cousins, 2016), as well as the implications for evaluation design (Svensson et al., 2016). Here, we take up the questions: How do empirical reports of evaluation practices in SI and SE contexts compare? What are the implications for evaluators and those commissioning evaluation in this domain?

In this paper, we describe “two solitudes”¹ found in our sample between studies on evaluations in SI versus SE contexts. We outline where they diverge and converge. We address some key conceptual issues, and conclude by discussing how expectations about the role of evaluation in SI and SE affect the conduct and use of evaluation.

1. Defining social innovation and social enterprise

“Social innovation” and “social enterprise” have been defined in a variety of ways (e.g., Cunha et al., 2015; Pol & Ville, 2009; Westley, 2013). Some definitions are broad or vague and make it difficult to

[☆] Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Evaluation Society, Vancouver, May 2017.

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¹ ‘Two Solitudes’ is a term previously used to describe the historical co-existence of English- and French-speaking people in Canada (MacLennan, 1945).

distinguish SI and SE from conventional social interventions (Svensson et al., 2016). Contradictions among definitions and the interchangeable use of related terms, such as the conflation of social innovation and social entrepreneurship (Antadze & Westley, 2010), likely relate to the relative youth, rapid uptake, and appeal of SI and SE across a range of fields and sectors. As part of our research (Svensson et al., 2016), we compared definitions of SI found in the conceptual literature to those in our sample of empirical studies on evaluations in SI contexts. We were looking for features that distinguish SI from other types of social intervention in ways important to evaluation. We briefly note the findings from this study below, and follow with an outline of features of SE derived through a similar review of the literature on this concept.

1.1. Social innovation

Antadze and Westley (2010) define SI as “a complex process of introducing new products, processes or programs that profoundly change the basic routines, resources and authority flows, or beliefs of the social system in which the innovation occurs” (p. 2). The process focus has been called the “sine qua non” of SI (Hubert, 2010, p. 42). It is likely to include a heavy emphasis on collaboration and co-creation through experimentation, often explicitly drawing on “design thinking” (e.g., Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2015). Collaboration among diverse actors is promoted as a way to foster creativity (e.g., Hubert, 2010) and can involve tapping into multiple funding sources, including from the private sector. The commitment to participatory approaches in SI can extend to how intended outcomes are defined, including co-defining what change is desired as part of the process of SI and resisting specification of intended outcomes in advance (e.g., Cunha et al., 2015; Murray, Caulier-Grice & Mulgan, 2010). Language around social change, system change and transformation is common, especially with respect to vertical scaling (through levels in a system) as a complement to lateral scaling (expansion to other geographic areas or to more people) (see e.g., Westley, Antadze, Riddell, Robinson, & Geoby, 2014).

Complexity thinking is evident in the conceptual and empirical literature on SI, emphasizing, for example, nonlinear relationships between inputs and effects, the importance of context and agency, and the emergent character of outcomes. Complexity is seen to feature in the processes inside SI initiatives (for example, social dynamics of collaboration), the problems SI targets (for example, poverty as a complex issue), and the surrounding environment (for example, rapid demographic change) (see also Preskill et al., 2014, on sources of complexity). Of note, definitions of SI sometimes assume uncritically that system changes or transformations will be beneficial (Pol & Ville, 2009), squaring with Dahler-Larsen’s (2016) observation that the term “innovation” tends to have positive connotations, even though something new is not always better.

Given the diversity among SIs and conventional social interventions, we see differences between them to be a matter of degree. The features discussed above are meant to be used heuristically as sensitizing categories to guide understanding of SI and inform evaluation design (Svensson et al., 2016), rather than as definitions in an operational sense (Patton, 2007).

1.2. Social enterprise

Social enterprise is a term frequently associated with SI but, unlike SI, it refers primarily to characteristics of an organization rather than a process or intervention (see e.g., Antadze & Westley, 2010; Cunha et al., 2015). Although descriptions of SE vary in the literature we reviewed (see below), five recurring themes stand out.

1.2.1. Hybrid aims

Hybrid mixes of economic and social aims distinguish SEs from conventional not-for-profit and social sector organizations as well as

from purely for-profit businesses. Although SEs are typically active in markets and aim to generate economic profits, some or all of these profits are reinvested in pursuit of their social missions. What is seen to distinguish SEs from conventional private sector organizations is their emphasis on profits as the means to achieve social ends (e.g., Arena, Azzone & Bengo, 2015).

1.2.2. Hybrid financing

SEs are not averse to accessing multiple sources of funding, including governments, philanthropic foundations and private investors, however self-sufficiency and non-reliance on public funds are frequently noted as goals of SE actors (e.g., Luke, Barraket & Eversole, 2013; Nicholls, 2008).

1.2.3. Use of business methods

SEs are seen to be more likely than conventional social service organizations to apply methods adopted from the private sector, for instance by using marketing strategies to raise demand for their goods or services.

1.2.4. Innovation identity

SE actors and advocates describe SEs as seeking to provide innovative responses to complex social needs left unaddressed by conventional private and public sector organizations (i.e., “filling institutional voids” in Nicholls, 2009, p. 759; see also Luke et al., 2013; Sadownik, 2012), often at a local level and/or with an interest in scaling out laterally. They also claim SEs are more nimble, flexible, efficient, transparent and accountable (e.g., Nicholls, 2009) than conventional social sector organizations. Methods akin to design thinking that are “characterized by trial and error, continuous iteration, and a focus on results” are also claimed to set SEs apart from other entities (Galvin & Iannotti, 2015, pp. 424–5). The level of importance attributed to individual “change agents” or “social entrepreneurs” in some of the discourse (Galvin & Iannotti, 2015; Vo, Christie & Rohanna, 2016) also sets it apart.

2. Implications for evaluation

The foregoing distinguishing features have implications for evaluators working in SI and SE contexts. For example, the purposeful engagement of a diversity of stakeholders across sectors and social boundaries, as well as the intensity of collaboration, are likely to be greater than in more established, conventional social programs, generating tensions and conflicts of a different degree and kind. These dynamics complicate the evaluation process (Milley et al., 2016). SE actors, for example, are described in empirical studies as being caught between the public and private spheres, “negotiating competing legitimacies” represented by diverse stakeholder demands in evaluation practice (Barraket & Yousefpour, 2013, p. 455; see also Ebrahim & Rangan, 2014; Galvin & Iannotti, 2015). Establishing a coherent conceptualization of the intervention among diverse actors is also described as a key activity in some SI evaluations (e.g., Moore & Cady, 2015). While this is generally thought to be good evaluation practice, it may be particularly poignant in the context of SE’s and SI’s given their unique character. We expand on this and other implications for evaluation in the discussion section of this paper.

3. Methods

As signaled in the introduction, our original research project from which this paper emanates aimed to map the empirical landscape of evaluation in SI contexts. The SI and evaluation fields both draw on a broad range of ideas and traditions within and across disciplinary and geographic boundaries (Milley et al., 2016; Westley, 2013). As such, we faced a choice of selecting from among available non-overlapping

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