Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Technological Forecasting & Social Change

'Shaken, but not stirred': Sixty years of defining social innovation

Mónica Edwards-Schachter [a,*], Matthew L. Wallace [b]

[a] INGENIO (CSIC-UPV), - Institute of Innovation and Knowledge Management, Spanish Research Council & Universitat Politècnica de València
[b] Ciudad Politécnica de la Innovación, - Camino de Vera s/n Edif. 8E AJ- 5ª, P. 46022, Valencia, Spain

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution in the conceptualization of Social Innovation (SI) with a view to elucidating the multiplication of uses of the term over the last half century. We performed a comprehensive and systematic literature review extracting 252 definitions of SI through a search of 2,339 documents comprising academic papers, books and book chapters, together research and policy reports. To guide the inductive analysis of pluri-vocal discourses we assume innovation to be a learning-based process involving actors' interactions and social practices. We apply mixed qualitative methodologies, combining content analysis based on an interpretivist ontology with cognitive mapping techniques. Our findings show that SI was introduced as an analytical concept by incipient academic communities and has spread in the last decades as a normative concept fuelled by development and innovation policies. SI is defined by a set of common core elements underpinning three different and interrelated discursive 'areas': processes of social change, sustainable development and the services sector. We point to some policy implications and a number of promising avenues for research towards the advancement of a broader socio-technical theory of innovation.

© 2017 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

We are living under the Social Innovation (SI) imperative (Harris and Albury, 2009). As a kind of 'global discursive obsession'[1] SI has become a ubiquitous term in a variety of policy reports and practice-oriented as well as academic contributions (European Commission, EC, 2013; Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010; Mulgan et al., 2007; Mumford, 2002; Taylor, 1970). The impressive growth of SI as a concept is found in a number of institutions, networks and agencies created after pioneer initiatives in the US, Canada and Europe[2]. Simultaneously SI labels an increasing diversity of maker movements and societal organizational experiments across the world involving actors from government, business and civil society (Battisti, 2014; Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012; Hassan, 2013). In the last decade, SI has been fueled by a plethora of non-profit incubators, social accelerators and hybrid platforms (BENISI, 2013; Mulgan et al., 2007; Peters et al., 2004). One recent example is the hub/platform *Social Innovation Europe* created in 2011 to scale-up SI around European countries followed by a recent project to establish a wider *Social Innovation Community* of researchers, social innovators, end users (citizens) and policy-makers[3].

Despite the pervasive narratives developed, it is not easy to answer the question of what SI is. Described as a 'buzzword' or 'quasi-concept' (Godin, 2012a; Jenson and Harrisson, 2013; Pol and Ville, 2009), the term has become 'overdetermined' or, in most cases, its definition is avoided or ignored. Even the numerous interpretations of SI have 'caused some scholars to drop it as a scientific concept' (Moulaert et al., 2013, p.13) or questioning its usefulness (Pel and Bauler, 2015).

Obstacles are usually justified by a widespread assumption about its origin being rooted in practice instead of scholarship and dominance of grey and policy-oriented literature, being for long time a marginalized topic in both economic and sociological theories of innovation (Benneworth et al., 2015; Hillier et al., 2004). Moreover, SI is associated with a 'babelizing' phenomenon where the meaning of innovation moves between restrictive definitions based on technology to a vast

---

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail addresses: monicaelizabethedwards@gmail.com (M. Edwards-Schachter),
  matt.l.wallace@gmail.com (M.L. Wallace).
  [1] Roberts, Y. (2008). New ways of doing. Social innovation is a new global obsession. It might be a nebulous idea but it has huge potential. *The Guardian*, 11/08/2008.
  [2] Ashoka (1980), Skoll Foundation (1999) and the Center for Social Innovation at Stanford University (2000) in US, the Centre Canadien de Recherche sur les Innovations Sociales (1986) in Canada, the Institute for Social Inventions (1985) and The Young Foundation (2005) in UK, the Vienna Zentrum für Soziale Innovation (1990), the Foundation of Soziale Innovation GmbH in Dortmund in Germany (1994), the Centre for Social Innovation, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University (2000), the McGill-DuPont Social Innovation Think Tank, McGill University (2002), the New Zealand Centre for Social Innovation in 2006, the East Asia Social Innovation Initiative (EASII) in 2015 among others.

[3] ec.europa.eu/bepa/pdf/publications_pdf/social_innovation.pdf.

range of 'adjectives' identifying other innovation types (Edwards-Schachter, 2016). A discursive fluidity in the meaning of 'social' and 'societal' is present not only in SI but also in the notions of grassroots innovations (Gupta et al., 2003; Seyfang and Smith, 2007), frugal innovation (Prahalad, 2005), Base of Pyramid innovations (Prahalad, 2005, 2012); Jugaad innovation (Radjou et al., 2012), among others. The addition of the adjective 'social' to innovation also brings to the fore the discussion drawing on concepts like 'social' learning, 'social' capital, 'social' 'sector' and 'social' interactions in knowledge exchange (Kanter, 1999; Nicholls and Murdock, 2012).

Why and to what extent is SI 'new' and 'different'? This paper attempts to answer to this 'desperate quest for a definition' (Djellal and Gallouj, 2012: p. 121) identifying definitions distributed among a diversity of 'tribes and territories' (Becher and Trowler, 2001). Recognizing the existence of multiple discourses, we analyzed the 'woven fabric of texts' across time spanning a variety of areas involving disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches (Thompson Klein, 2004). Texts act as intermediaries in the process of meaning construction connecting 'discourse communities' (Callon, 1990; Keller, 2005) where definitions essentially arrive at by social disputes and consensus, even some voices gain legitimacy while others could be silenced or marginalized across time (Becher and Trowler, 2001; Segercrantz and Seeck, 2013). Under this scope, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

- How has the conceptualization of SI evolved over time?
- Is it possible to identify some common 'core' meaning/s in the plurivocal discourses and definitions of SI constructed by scholars, practitioners and policy-makers?
- Which are the 'conceptual specificities' (if any) of the SI concept?

In what follows, Section 2 summarizes the state-of-the art on the topic. Section 3 introduces our analytical approach, Section 4 lays out our methodology, Section 5 presents the principal findings and, finally, Section 6 concludes and argues for a new self-consistent interpretation of SI that reflects its conceptual roots, its practical uses and its most promising avenues of scholarship.

2. Defining Social Innovation: state-of-the-art

The fast development experienced during the last decade in the academic field might erroneously lead one to consider SI as a recent phenomenon. However, various researchers agree that SI predates technological innovation. Moulaert et al. (2013) highlights the existence of a 'proto-disciplinary age' devoted to the analysis of SI considering the structural transformations of society and its social relations. Drucker (1957, p. 23) affirms that *'social innovation goes back almost two hundred years'* and Godin (2012a) maintains that SI reappears in the twenty-first century acquiring *'an autonomous (conceptual) status'* (p. 35). Other authors ascribes the SI 're-emergence' to the Francophone intellectual community in both Europe and Canada from the 1970s onwards, being one reference the French journal *Revue Autrement* (Chambon et al., 1982; Moulaert, 2000; Jessop et al., 2013; Rana et al., 2014).

Efforts to characterize SI as a disciplinary field were realized by Moulaert et al. (2005a,b), who identified guiding narratives on SI in management science, arts and creativity, territorial development and political science and public administration. More recently Van der Have and Rubalcaba (2016) associated the concept with four research communities (psychology, creativity, social and societal challenges and local development) through a bibliometric analysis of 172 academic papers from 1986 to 2013.

In our systematic review we identified sporadic mentions in academic publications dating back to the 1920s and following years from various disciplinary fields. Thus, Wolfe (1921, p. 281) refers to radicalism as *'the desire for and advocacy of thorough-going social innovation'*

arising from the individuals' motivation to change the environment. Swift (1930) associates SI to changes in social religious practices and McVoy (1940) discusses patterns of diffusion in SI as a measure of 'progressivism' in the US produced by the introduction of laws and regulations. Redlich (1949), in a paper published by the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology,* mentions the term referring to the role of business leaders *'who created a new social type'* and *'like every other social innovation resulted in all sorts of difficulties'.* Despite these older traces from the scholarly world, efforts to formally review the concept have primarily arisen since the year 2000, usually in form of reports and working papers (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012; Cloutier, 2003; Howaldt et al., 2014; Loogma et al., 2012; Nilsson, 2003; Sharra and Nyssens, 2010).

Godin (2012a, 2015) documents the origins and development of SI covering 'hundreds of titles on innovation' (2012, p. 7) from England, France and the United States. Phillips et al. (2015) perform a systematic review of 122 papers to explore links between SI and social entrepreneurship and Rana et al. (2014) analyze 105 papers restricted to SI in the public sector. However, most contributions lack a systematic methodology or contain one which is either not properly explained or presents serious weaknesses (selection bias, inclusion criteria not reported, small sample size, etc.). Furthermore, the analyses are confined to critically discussing some characteristics of SI and the prevailing confusion around it. Some authors proposed analytical approaches to overcome the fuzziness in analyzing 'innovation' in SI and group a common set of elements or dimensions based on the purposes and outcomes of SI, who can 'do' it (actors and society sectors) and how and where it is 'done' (Cloutier, 2003; Dedijer, 1984; Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012; Godin, 2012a). This is precisely the principal argument that guided our work: the study of SI as an innovation *process.*

3. Analytical approach: A learning-based process perspective of innovation

Given that knowledge—both codified and tacit—is *'the outcome of a social process'* (Borrás and Edler, 2015, p. 26), innovation is increasingly understood as a complex socio-cultural process of learning involving a diversity of actors and knowledge sources (Garud et al., 2013). Our study foregrounds the exploration of this *multiplicity* of innovation actors and processes that feed a knowledge-based learning society. As we sketch out in Fig. 1, our analytical approach considers innovation as a learning-based process highlighting the following aspects:

a) an emphasis on social interactions as forms of relationality between a variety of actors and *social practices* involving perceptions, meanings, experience and bodily competences, purposes and values, 'materialities' and 'acts' (Reckwitz, 2002; Shove et al., 2012). Innovation process is determined by purposive and deliberative social action (Hellström, 2004) involving interactive learning and a permanent capacity change.

b) innovation process involves potential institutionalization of social practices situating actors' ability to change rules, relational ties, or distribution of resources (Scott, 2008), being communication between agents and cultural identity inherent to institutionalization dynamics (Moulaert and Hamdouch, 2006).

c) social practices span the different stages of any innovation, from the origins or sources of invention to its diffusion, their effects or impacts, intended and unintended consequences in the market, society and culture.

We use this broad perspective as a heuristic to explore constituent elements in attempt to better draw the frontier lines between SI and 'classical' technological innovation and other innovation types.