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Social innovation research: An emerging area of innovation studies?

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ABSTRACT

While the adoption of Social Innovation (SI) in the governance and policy domain has fueled a rapidly expanding scholarly literature, this field has become characterized by conceptual ambiguity and a diversity of definitions and research settings. This present situation inhibits the integration of findings. This paper traces the content, scope and relatively short history of modern social innovation research across disciplines by applying network and bibliometric analyses, and explores their relevance to innovation studies. Based on data from 172 publications, we analyze scholarly works that directly address the social innovation topic, allowing us to identify the precedence, dynamics and the current map of social innovation research as an emerging field of study. Our analysis suggests that the SI field is grounded in four distinct intellectual communities arising through a somewhat organized diffusion process: 1) Community Psychology; 2) Creativity research; 3) Social and societal challenges; 4) Local development. The interest of SI in the areas of management and entrepreneurship is only very recent and is currently reflected within existing communities. We forge conceptual bridges between the two (currently very separate) domains of social innovation and innovation studies, and the implications of our finding for further research and policy are also discussed.

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1. Introduction

The field of social innovation (SI) has received rapidly growing scholarly and policy interest[1] during the last decade (Adams and Hess, 2010), driven by such trends as the engagement of citizens and organizations in innovation, criticism of dominant business models and narrow economic outlooks on development, extensive declines in public spending, and the needs of developing economies, where innovation is not about cutting-edge technology but about solving social problems. An increase in social innovation has the potential to alter the structure of innovation systems, corporate identities and strategies, employee motivation, as well as public and private governance, thus presenting new challenges for policy and management practice. The field's rapid development during the last decade has primarily included practical issues from descriptive case studies, along with the creation of a plethora of concepts, definitions, research settings and theoretical boundary conditions. This has led to a present lack of clarity or overview of what constitutes the field's own history and current 'jurisdiction'. Despite recent efforts to define and clarify its meaning, the concept of social innovation (SI) is therefore still considered rather ambiguous, and the state of knowledge continues to be fragmented (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Dawson and Daniel, 2010; Pol and Ville, 2009). Significant work is still required to position the more discipline-bound analytical, conceptual and theoretical contributions made since the late 1980s (Jessop et al., 2013). Complementing prior conceptual discussions, this paper adopts an integrative review approach to address the fragmentation problem of the SI field by systematically charting its intellectual structure and development, contributing to a more complete, integrated understanding.

While earlier reviews concerning definitions (Dawson and Daniel, 2010; The Young Foundation, 2012; Pol and Ville, 2009) have been crucial in bringing some important characteristics of SI into focus, the SI area is not yet well integrated and consolidated as a research field. This present disintegrated state of the SI field complicates the systematic accumulation of knowledge

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[1] Examples are the European Commission's Social Innovation Initiative, the United States Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation, the OECD Local Economic and Employment Development (LEED) forum on Social Innovations, and the Inter-American Development Bank's operations promoting social innovation activities in Latin America. Many of these actions are extremely heterogeneous, reflecting the lack of a common understanding on the topic.

and growth of the emerging SI research field. In particular, this poses a challenge for scholars to develop generalizable knowledge and formulate articulate theories and hypotheses about the antecedents and consequences of SI, and under which circumstances these operate. According to Mohr (1982), the absence of cumulativeness obstructs theoretical development "so that theory within each separate stream of research has been inhibited by the absence of sets of related ideas. . .that might be fitted together to form the springboard for important, innovative departures." Raasch et al. (2013) highlight that the absence of a shared set of concepts, aims and research questions creates a challenge that phenomenon-based research fields often have to come to grips with. Practitioners, investors, policy makers and other stakeholders are in serious need of such knowledge in order to be able to formulate effective policies and strategies, underscoring the importance of a unified understanding for innovation policy and research. In addition, SI has been largely overlooked by the majority of innovation literature (Adams and Hess, 2010; Edwards-Schachter et al., 2012), with the mainstream of research in innovation studies traditionally focusing on technological innovation in manufacturing, though continuing to expand the range of questions and topics (e.g. Windrum et al., 2016; Drejer, 2004; Gallouj and Weinstein, 1997).

Given the inherent complexities of SI as an emerging subject, the goal of this article is to create an improved foundation for the process of theory-building by connecting the gaps between various strands of SI scholarship and creating a common organizing framework to identify central aspects and issues of the field. This is especially important for new research fields that emerge from different arenas (Torraco, 2005). Furthermore, we hope to enable the initial preconditions for integration of the SI field in the arena of innovation studies, defined by Fagerberg et al. (2012) as: ". . .the scholarly study of how innovation takes place and what the important explanatory factors and economic and social consequences are." SI research can contribute to the ongoing development of more holistic and non-technological approaches within innovation studies that are needed in the light of pressing 'grand challenges' that require more than technological solutions alone (Foray et al., 2012).

By systematically reviewing 172 publications from the period 1986–2013 in the field of SI with the help of bibliometric analysis, we uncover the formation of four distinct scholarly communities of SI, their connectedness, and the common distinctive elements that constitute them. Thus, our analysis is complementary to prior narrative reviews of SI. While a previous focus on the plurality of definitions appears not to have solved the perceived ambiguity surrounding SI research, our systematic and integrative review approach reveals that despite the existence of distinct intellectual communities and heterogeneity, significant shared 'core elements' do exist.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows: in the next section, we introduce the SI field with a brief discussion of key issues in recent work as well as its position in social entrepreneurship research. The third section then explains our method of review and the bibliometric approach. Section four presents and discusses the results of our analysis, and proposes new conceptual bridges between the currently very separate communities of innovation studies and social innovation research. In the final section we present our conclusions and suggestions for future research as well as implications for policy.

2. Variations in research on social innovation – a brief overview

We hope this paper can also inform readers who are not yet familiar with social innovation, and therefore provide as background information a short, but not complete, overview in which we describe various conceptions of social innovation found in the recent literature. It should be noted that this short sketch of literature does not do justice to the many nuances of the SI literature and does not serve to guide our analysis. The well-initiated reader may elect to skip over this section.

The scientific discourse on SI has lately had an emphasis on conceptual definitions, reflecting the lack of integration of the literature and ambiguity surrounding the scope and meaning of SI. While the diverse background of the field's progenitors (ranging from economist Joseph Schumpeter to sociologist William Ogburn) is related to this, space limitations do not permit us to discuss the field's key intellectual roots. Instead, we provide a brief overview of the recent conceptual discussion and definitions, and point to Neumeier (2012), Moulaert et al. (2013) and Cajaiba-Santana (2014) for added historical insight.

One of the first attempts to expand the debate on the meaning of social innovation by describing the SI literature was an introductory piece for a Special Topic issue in *Urban Studies* by Moulaert et al. (2005). Their survey focused mainly on works from disciplines that are relevant for spatial development. Moulaert et al. propose three dimensions of SI, which they suggest frequently interact: 1) satisfaction of human needs that are presently unmet; 2) changes in social relations; and 3) an empowerment dimension in the form of increasing socio-political capability and access to resources (Moulaert et al., 2005). This characterization has a recognizable sociological component.

Contemporary sociologists have conceptualized social innovation as new ways of creating and implementing social change. For example, Hochgerner (2011) defines social innovation as the new combination of social practices. Howaldt and Schwarz (2010) define it as "a new combination and/or new configuration of social practices in certain areas of action of social contexts prompted by certain actors or constellations of actors in an intentionally targeted manner with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices". Thus the conceptual focus is on 'practices' and on the way they are combined. This approach considers social innovation more as a new innovation paradigm, rather than a separate category of innovation (e.g., as opposed to Taylor's (1970) distinction between social innovation and technological innovation or Ogburn and Duncan's (1964) complementarity between technical inventions and social inventions). Rather, social innovation refers to a large revitalization of the social aspects involved in any kind of innovation, technological innovation included.

Recently, Cajaiba-Santana (2014) developed a sociologically oriented framework to approach SI, departing from the same previous approaches: "social innovations are new social practices created from collective, intentional, and goal-oriented actions aimed at prompting social change through the reconfiguration of how social goals are accomplished." This framework combines the structural perspective of SI, focused on social structures and organization, with the (early Schumpeterian) individualistic agency perspective, focusing on individual agents and their characteristics as determinants for social innovation.

The sociologically oriented conceptualization of SI contrasts to the more economic conceptualization adopted by Pol and Ville (2009), who reviewed several used definitions of SI, and explored the differences between 'business innovation' and 'social innovation'. Their work discusses a limited sample of four different conceptions of SI in the literature, and concludes that their commonality is the improvement in the quality of life or the quantity of life. On the basis of this discussion, they re-define SI as any innovation of which the "implied new idea has the potential to improve either the quality or the quantity of life." (Pol and Ville, 2009).