

Researching Social Innovation: How the Unit of Analysis Informs the Questions We Ask

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Abstract

Research on social innovation investigates the process by which social problems are tackled. Such ambitious efforts at change require scholars to develop ambitious research designs. We argue for research designs that center organizations as the unit of analysis and those that center ecosystems as the most useful level of analysis. After highlighting the important benefits and trade-offs associated with these design choices, we end with a few provocative questions and their appropriate research designs to motivate future research.

The world changes according to the way people see it, and if you can alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change the world.

- James Baldwin

Introduction

Social innovation as a concept has attracted great interest because of its focus on how we might tackle the complex social problems of our time. Given the realities of an environmental crisis, a global pandemic, and increasing inequality across the globe, management scholars are increasingly attentive

to how to apply their toolkit to these pressing problems. To inform this growing interest, we reflect on social innovation as a concept and the appropriate unit of analysis for investigations of social innovation. We argue for researchers to adopt appropriate research designs to study these important issues.

Social innovation is a relatively young area of research – or at least a fairly new term. As Logue details, the term emerged in academic publications around 2003 and has exploded over the last decade.¹ There are many definitions on offer.^{2,3,4,5} In the first issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review* in 2003, social innovation was described as “the process of inventing, securing support for, and implementing novel solutions to social needs and problems.” The focus on process allows for any number of units of analysis; yet, for any given social innovation process, an entrepreneur might invent, an organization might secure support and develop, and a government might implement or diffuse.

If we are interested in social innovation, should we study the individual actors or the system in which this process takes place? A contrasting definition comes from a 2008 *SSIR* article where social innovation is defined as “a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals.”⁶ Here the focus is on social innovation as an outcome and a successful outcome at that (either more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just). Although this definition is problematic, because social innovation can then only be defined *ex post*, it does raise the question of impact – and suggests we should examine the outcomes associated with social innovations (not just their intent).

Depending on the social problem, outcomes might be measured at the individual, organizational, or societal level. Mulgan offers a definition that highlights both process and outcome: social innovations are “innovations that are social both in their ends and their means.”⁷ Notwithstanding the problem of having *social* and *innovation* in the definition of the term itself, this definition points to the importance of goals and outcomes as well as to processes and developed capacities for action.

From this broad understanding, we ask how researchers might go about studying social innovation. This decision is partly shaped by the researcher’s theory of change, which is itself shaped by a researcher’s ontological and epistemological beliefs. A starting point is with the organization as the appropriate level of analysis for studying social innovation. Note that we do not ask whether the *firm* is the appropriate level of analysis; we instead focus on the *organization*. Firms are only one important actor to consider. Other organizations, such as NGOs, non-profits, investors, and foundations, are all

critical in this space, and new organizational forms are emerging to instigate social change processes (e.g., cooperatives, hybrid organizations, charter schools, platform-based organizations). Asking whether the organization (rather than the firm) is the most useful unit of analysis for social innovation provides a larger set of relevant actors to study. Rather than the organization, however, we also might focus on individuals and their own actions as social entrepreneurs or grass-roots organizers in enacting change. Or we might argue for a level of analysis that extends beyond organizations – to governments, fields of practice, communities, or ecosystems. If our goal is to enhance our understanding of social innovation as mechanism of social change in society, the question is what level of analysis to take in such investigation, and what are the benefits and challenges of those choices?

What we gain by using organizations as the unit of analysis to study social innovation

Why are organizations useful sites to study social innovation? We offer two main reasons. First, organizations are primary sites to understand innovation and scaling. In their book, Seelos and Mair argue that contrary to popular beliefs, innovation per se does not create impact.⁸ Impact is understood as progress on a social problem or societal challenge. Innovation is an investment. What creates impact is sweat, blood, and tears - work we call scaling. Scaling not only refers to an improvement in terms of quantity but also quality. From the perspective of an organizational scholar, innovation and scaling are different processes. Although these processes require different competencies, they need to be analyzed together to understand the organizational pathways to impact. For example, Gram Vikas, an organization that constructs water infrastructure and toilets for households in poor villages in India, piloted many innovations in their efforts to reduce inequality in India. Scaling these efforts, however, required extensive efforts to educate and ensure broad and universal participation and adoption of villagers for these innovations to have impact. The competencies needed to effectively scale innovations differ from those needed to develop the innovations themselves. Focusing on organizations as the unit of analysis allows us to understand how innovation and scaling complement each other while opening the door to the following questions.⁹

1. What pathologies derail organizations from a productive path to impact?
2. How do organizations suppress or remove such pathologies?
3. What are the different archetypes of successful innovation and scaling?

Second, an organization centric analysis helps us understand transformation processes. As a community of scholars, we have made great progress in understanding organizing around social problems. The excitement around social enterprises (SEs) as hybrid organizations has certainly helped legitimize the study of organizations as sites where social innovation occurs.^{10,11} A focus on designing and managing hybrid organizations is premised on the assumption that organizations provide the most impactful locus for accomplishing social change. Appropriately designed hybrid organizations are able to be flexible and adaptive while also coordinating action.¹² However, these organizational features and processes need to be complemented by a mechanism-based inquiry of the social problem being tackled so as to develop a repertoire of transformation processes.¹³ Organizational programs, such as the one by Gram Vikas to improve sanitation in India, or the range of programs offered by BRAC to make progress on a variety of social problems related to health, education, and sustainable livelihoods in Bangladesh, offer empirical windows through which to understand processes of transformation.^{14,15} Studying how organizations intervene in social systems, by focusing on the programs and interventions, requires deep engagement with the organizations, the problem, the people and communities affected. It also requires there be a clear definition of what is meant by a social system and how organizational efforts to change systems are analyzed.¹⁶

The debate over the unit of analysis is in fact a research design debate. This debate is linked to how we study, what we study, what we know, and what we see. We spend too much time looking at the cross section. We need to understand the complex process over time and in time. With the organization as the unit of analysis, we have an anchor to trace the process of a particular organizational program and its implementation – the innovation and scaling process – and to understand these mechanisms of social innovation over time and in a specific context.

The meaning of social innovation, as is the case of many related concepts such as social entrepreneurship or systems change, remains contested and changes over time. Organizations are central actors in fueling contestation over meanings and in reproducing ambiguity with consequences for and beyond organizations. Chiova, Mair, and Vernis show how multiple frames of social entrepreneurship enacted by a range of diverse organizational actors over decades explains persistent conceptual ambiguity.¹⁷ Ventresca and Savaget, in a survey of funding organizations, found that systems change disrupts the status quo, influences chains of cause and effect, empowers agents, coordinates agents better, scales up, scales deep, and has impacts beyond the organizational level.¹⁸ How these different organizational actors

understand social innovation further highlights the importance of organizations as the appropriate locus for inquiry – organizations are where contrasting definitions are promoted, funding is obtained, and change objectives are formulated.

Why ecosystems are a useful level of analysis for studying innovation

More and more organizations and organizational scholars are seeking to explore and understand the relationship between organizations and social systems. Here we offer an alternative to the organization as a unit of analysis to understand social innovation and especially the impact of social change. To determine the best unit of analysis, two questions need to be addressed:

1. Does context and sense of place matter?
2. What effects do they have?

The answers to these questions are complicated by the fact that an organization is embedded in an ecosystem in which a wide variety of actors allow it to exist.¹⁹ Hence, when organizations are called to fulfill their obligations as social actors, restricting actions and accountability to being inside or outside its organizational boundary makes no sense as it is operating in an interdependent ecosystem. The logical conclusion, therefore, is that the study of social innovation requires an ecosystem approach whereby firms move away from organization-centric target setting approaches to one that is connected to systems level targets. If outcomes are measured at the systems level, our research design should consider the multiple actors who shape those broad targets.

Does context and sense of place matter?

Albert Einstein once stated: “We can’t solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.” To design broader and more impactful social innovations, organizations need to develop a more holistic understanding of the impact of production, distribution, and consumption of their products or services on ecosystems.²⁰ This requires the “redesign of products and processes to reduce environmental and social impacts, product stewardship, protection of habitats, operation within a region’s environmental carrying capacity, protection of the interests of future generations, as well as the equitable balancing of the interests of all segments of society.”²¹ This cannot be undertaken by an organization alone, nor can the organization ignore the context, time, and place in which this change takes place.

An organization is not only embedded in a community that is shaped by specific rules, norms, and institutions (both formal and informal), but also

by power relations.²² For example, Aguiñaga, Henriques, Scheel, and Scheel in seeking to address a small community's environmental problems developed and piloted a bottom-up circular value ecosystem governance system to enable a small poor rural Mexican community to close production process loops with the aim of creating new economic opportunities.²³ Here social, economic, and environmental concerns were and continue to be intertwined. Social change in this participatory action research pilot required researchers to: 1) build stronger community trust by seeking the participation of trust-laden stakeholders to establish a shared vision of the social innovation being proposed; 2) encourage greater collective action via partnerships with civil society and business to compensate for the lack of government leadership; 3) provide entrepreneurs more information and technological services regarding the transformation of residues into valuable outputs; and 4) help acquire seed funding to support and encourage community and entrepreneurial activity in an impoverished region. The research team also observed powerful economic and political actors who, in lobbying to build an open pit limestone quarry at the edge of a protected natural area in which the village was located, used their power to usurp community decision-makers. In other words, for social change to occur, an understanding of the political and economic contexts of the place in which the activity is occurring is needed. A focus on the organization as the unit of analysis backgrounds these important drivers of social change. An ecosystem approach sheds light on these drivers, which more often than not are time-, context-, and place-specific.

What effects do they have?

Barnett, Henriques, and Husted examined over 6,000 articles addressing corporate social responsibility (CSR) performance published in the past 50 years and found that studies overwhelmingly focused on economic performance as opposed to social performance.²⁴ If social impact is not being assessed – either qualitatively or quantitatively – how do we know whether a social initiative has the promised positive impact? Moreover, centering on the organization as the unit of analysis makes it much too easy for goal displacement and mission drift to occur within organizations,²⁵ and for economic impact to supplant social impact as a researcher's focus of attention. After all, social performance is much more difficult to measure than traditional financial metrics, and the ability to measure drives many research designs.

So how do we design our research so that we do not supplant social impact? The answer is not to use a single organization as the unit of analysis. According to Herbert Simon, "Everyone designs who devises courses of

action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.”²⁶ A design approach requires the researcher to “understand user experience, explore alternative problem frames, and work toward solutions.”²⁷ Just as development economics has used impact valuation to help policy makers design better contextualized policies using field-tested technological and social rules, so too can management scholars “design models that seek to draw out the causal link between CSR initiatives and some dimension of societal well-being.”²⁸ Scholars taking such an approach transform from passive observers and assessors of organizations into active agents in designing and redesigning organizations to create a better world where impact can be assessed beyond an organization’s boundaries and across time. The focus should be on the initiative and its impacts rather than the organization per se.

Interestingly in a recent publication, Mair and Seelos propose an analytical scaffold consisting of three system realms: the problem realm, the situational realm, and the causality realm which guides empirical work by focusing our attention on the organized system change. Matching such a parsimonious analytical approach with evidenced-based policy making approaches used by development economics, such as randomized control trials, would allow practitioners and scholars to “develop a repertoire of transformative mechanisms that elucidate the causal apparatus of organized system change.”²⁹

Clarifying points of agreement & disagreement

Before highlighting the trade-offs associated with these distinct analytic choices, it is important to highlight the points of commonality. Regardless of the level of analysis, we need to think about impact broadly. It is more than financial performance, and it is more than what social outcomes the organization can produce. We would like to see scholars focus on systemic change to not only reduce social problems but change the conditions that created them in the first place. Relatedly, both analytic choices to examine social innovation focus on transformation rather than stabilization. Our goals and aspirations for social innovation research are very much aligned. To do that, we need to understand the larger context or ecosystem in which organizations are embedded. Organizations are not the only relevant entities in a social innovation process and we must think about the social and political context in which organizations are embedded. This requires deep engagement with the research context and longitudinal analysis.

So what are the implications of these analytic choices? Where do we disagree? A key point of difference is our underlying theory of change. Are organizations where collective action can meaningfully happen, or is it

through communities where cross-organizational relationships are the basis of change? The case *for* the organization as the unit of analysis focuses attention on understanding and averting organizational pathologies that reduce impact, and to understand the organizational practices and processes that support innovation and scaling together. This combination is what allows organizations to have impact. This perspective highlights the importance of researchers understanding processes of social innovation. The case *against* the organization argues that it is the interactions, practices, and processes that exist outside the organization, in the community and ecosystem itself, that enable social change. Government, for example, is not a mere stakeholder but a change agent that can set the stage for meaningful action and ensure follow-through across a host of organizations.³⁰ In addition, this perspective lends itself to measuring system level rather than organizational outcomes. Neither perspective stands alone, and in any given research study the theory of change should inform the unit of analysis and subsequent research design.

These theories of change also highlight potential disagreements of paradigm. Another reason that we focused beyond the firm per se (whether that be on organizations or communities) is that it allowed us to consider multiple social innovation perspectives. Despite commonalities across definitions of social innovation, Montgomery highlights what he sees as two social innovation paradigms: the technocratic and the democratic.³¹ These paradigms reflect the social and political bases of distinct epistemologies. The technocratic view sees promise in utilizing market forces to tackle social problems and places social entrepreneurs and firms at the center of the social innovation project. This has implications for preferred sources of funding and attention to particular organizing challenges such as scaling-up capacity. This paradigm is well-suited to the organization or, even more clearly, the firm as the level of analysis. Much social innovation research implicitly relies on this technocratic paradigm. Here, expert knowledge lies with entrepreneurs, citizens are consumers, and social innovation can improve the efficiency of public services. The case for the organization as the unit of analysis is well-aligned with the technocratic view, although our attention to organizations rather than firms suggests that markets are not the only important mechanisms of change at play. Indeed, technocratic approaches can also be seen at the community or ecosystem level (e.g. the Millennium Development project³²).

The democratic paradigm, in contrast, places its focus on social justice and deep community engagement. Rather than individuals as the source of expert knowledge, this perspective argues for bottom-up processes of change and the re-distribution of power and decision-making.³³ The democratic

paradigm embraces cooperation over competition, networks over markets, and sees the impact of social innovation through a political lens. Such a perspective is well-aligned with an ecosystem as the unit of analysis – but it is also well aligned with the goals of system change. In principle, the case for and the case against the organization as the unit of analysis can embrace both the technocratic and democratic paradigm. The disagreement is whether holding these two paradigms simultaneously is actually possible; indeed, the question is whether centering an analysis around organizations can ever lead to systems change or the type of transformation and re-distribution of power that such change requires.^{34,35} Taking Einstein's quote one step further, the case against organizations can be summarized by the title of Audre Lorde's famous essay: *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.*³⁶

Another contentious issue is the fact that social innovations do not automatically elicit a positive outcome, even when that is the intent. There are unintended consequences associated with all kinds of initiatives. Just as terms like systems change, social justice, social entrepreneurship, and social innovation are interpreted differently by organizations and organizational scholars, and those definitions should be articulated, so too must research design be explicit about the objective. Is the goal of the study to enhance knowledge on *positive* social change,³⁷ to evaluate the intended and *unintended* outcomes of a social innovation, to understand the elements in a *process* by which a social innovation is developed and scaled, or to enhance knowledge on broader *systems* change?

Despite the magnitude of these differences in paradigm, our points of agreement provide clear directions forward for research. For management scholars, the market is a useful tool and focus of study. The point here is to allow for other sources of change and inquiry. There is much work to be done in the social innovation space, and we leave with a few selected questions for future research.

Selected Questions

1. *Does social innovation re-distribute power and achieve more equitable solutions?*

Power is one of the issues that is often backgrounded when we focus our attention on the organization. Power creates enormous imbalances as to whose voices are heard and who wields control over critical resources that affect social problems. Bringing power to light allows researchers and practitioners to better understand the system in which social change is occurring.

2. *What is the impact beyond the firm? What other outcomes should we consider (e.g., well-being; systems-level outcomes)?*

Understanding the impact beyond an organization's boundaries is critical as it sheds light on the type of problems and which constituencies are within or outside the scope of an organized system change effort.

3. *How do we design social innovation research so as to account for complex processes in time and over time?*

It is imperative that we go beyond the surface of social systems to explore how these systems work across time. Such a research design requires deep engagement with the phenomena and sustained efforts to build trusting relationships with those involved. This is especially relevant when dealing with marginalized or excluded constituents.

4. *How can organizations make progress on social problems and societal challenges and what is their mandate to do so?*

Though societal challenges such as the climate crisis, income inequality, poverty, and racism are important challenges facing the world, overcoming these challenges are not necessarily the core focus of most organizations. Yet many organizations, including corporations, NGOs, religious institutions, and governments have contributed to these challenges via their activities. Determining what motivates such organizations to make progress on social problems therefore is essential to improve our collective welfare and sustainability as a planet.

Conclusion

The pathologies that derail organizations from a productive path to impact can only be discovered if we undertake research that allows us to 1) gain a rich understanding of the interaction of organizations and their environments and that 2) provide us the opportunity to compare sets of organizations across different contexts. The results of such research will allow us to suggest organizational designs that can better suppress or remove such pathologies.

Alfred Russel Wallace, a naturalist and explorer, in his book entitled *Man's Place in the Universe* wrote:³⁸

It is among those nations that claim to be the most civilized, those that profess to be guided by a knowledge of laws of nature, those that most glory in the advance of science, that we find the greatest apathy, the

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greatest recklessness, in continually rendering impure this all-important necessity of life...

Social innovation research is critical – let's make an impact on the organization and beyond.

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