



Social innovation: Moving the field forward. A conceptual framework

Giovany Cajasanta-Santana*

Kedge Business School, Domaine de Luminy BP 921, 13288 Marseille, France

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ABSTRACT

Research on social innovation has gained momentum over the last decade, spurred notably by the growing interest in social issues related to management, entrepreneurship, and public management. Nevertheless, the boundaries of social innovation processes have not yet been completely defined, leaving considerable space for contributions to both theory and practice. To date, research on social innovation has been polarized between agentic and structuralist approaches. Building on institutional and structuration theories, this article proposes bringing these two approaches together and presents a new conceptual framework to investigate social innovation as a driver of social change.

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1. Introduction

'Sir, let me beg of you, whether whatever is now the routine of trade was not, at its commencement, project?—whether whatever is now establishment was not, at one time, innovation?'

(Jeremy Bentham, 1843)

'We believe in fact that the need will quickly become evident for social innovation to match technical change.'

(The limits to growth, 1973)

Professor Muhammad Yunus founded The Grameen Bank in 1976 as a microfinance organization that gives micro credit loans to impoverished people without demanding collateral. The bank was founded with the belief that one could fight poverty by bringing financial services to poor people and helping them to establish profitable businesses. The project turned out to be a driver of social change and has established a new method of money lending and fighting against poverty. Eventually, Yunus won the Nobel Peace Prize for his '...efforts to create economic and social development from below'.¹

The phenomenon of micro finance is a new idea that has transformed the relationship between lenders and borrowers in the lending market and has also changed the social system in which these exchanges take place. It has been a driver of social change and has been presented as a successful example of social innovation [1–3].

Recently, Phillips [4] called for more research into social change and drew our attention to the fact that social change has overtaken the speed of technological innovation, which reverses Drucker's observation that, during the twentieth century, social change had been slower than technological change. It is interesting to note that later Drucker also claimed that we had overestimated the role of science and technology [5] as a vehicle of change to the detriment of a particular vector of social change: social innovations [6].

Although the concept of social innovation is as old as mankind [7], it has only recently entered the social sciences. While in discussion regarding technology we have seen considerable development of the concept of innovation, the idea of social innovation remains to date underdeveloped. Little attention has been devoted to understanding its emergence and diffusion as an outcome of purposeful and legitimated social actions. Research about social innovation is still largely based on anecdotal evidence and case studies [1,2] lacking unifying paradigms. The literature remains fragmented, disconnected, and scattered among different

* Tel.: +33 9 54832789; fax: +33 4 78337926.

E-mail address: cajasanta-santana@em-lyon.com.

¹ http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2006/yunus.html.

fields such as urban and regional development [8], public policy [9–12], management [6,13], social psychology [14] and social entrepreneurship [15–17].

To date, two theoretical perspectives have guided the incipient research endeavours on the subject. On one side, there is an 'agentic centred perspective', an individualistic and behaviourist approach in which social innovation is created through the actions undertaken by specific individuals. On the other side, there is a 'structuralist perspective' in which social innovation is perceived as determined by the external structural context.

This paper is a response to Phillips' call to action through a conceptual contribution to the discussion, conceptualization, and study of social innovation. It is also an answer to the call for new theoretical and conceptual alternatives in order to understand the process of social innovation [1,2,18,19]. It extends previous work by proposing a third and hitherto underrepresented perspective where collective (and not only individual) action and the structural context co-evolve interactively in the process of social innovation creation.

To have a comprehensive picture of the role that social innovation plays as a source of social change, a critical dialogue with existing theories is required. Firstly, I employ institutional theory to argue that social innovation is always related to collective social action aiming at social change. The institutional perspective sees social innovation as a result of the exchanges and application of knowledge and resources by agents mobilized through legitimization activities [20–22]. Secondly, I draw on structuration theory to describe how social innovation is created as a transformative force through the inter relationship between agents, institutional structures, and social systems [23].

The need for this paper is shown by the fact that no scientific field can advance if practitioners and scholars do not share a common understanding of the key concepts used in their analysis [21]. Therefore, the fundamental goal of this paper is to develop and extend our conceptual understanding of the phenomenon, and provide a contribution to the conceptualization and study of social innovation. The paper situates the field both historically and disciplinary in order to propose a definition based on social change, and outlines a conceptual framework built on institutional and structuration theory.

The paper is structured as follows: firstly, I present a review of the literature through the evolution of social innovation research, and secondly, I discuss the proposition of the conceptual framework.

2. The 'social' into innovation

The capacity to innovate and create new things is one of the hallmarks of civilization. Innovation has been present in human history as a manifestation of its creative capacity and as the outcome of humanity's efforts to develop responses to its needs and to improve its quality of life, in Simms' words: 'Civilizations are the result of human innovations' [7].

The study of innovation began in economics, notably in the works of Schumpeter, although we can find the origins of the Schumpeterian approach to innovation in the writings of Max Weber and Werner Sombart [24].² Since Schumpeter

[26], the concept of innovation has evolved separately in different scientific traditions such as technological studies, social psychology, urban development and management.

However, attention to social dimensions appeared quite recently in the innovation discourse and research. In the *Green Paper on Innovation* [30], a document created by the European Commission to identify the factors on which innovation in Europe depends and to elaborate proposals to foster innovation capacity in Europe, innovation is described as:

'...being a synonym for the successful production, assimilation, and exploitation of novelty in the economic and social spheres' (p.1).

The social element of innovation is highlighted later in the document:

'Innovation is not just an economic mechanism or a technical process. It is above all a social phenomenon. (...) By its purpose, its effects, or its methods, innovation is thus intimately involved in the social conditions in which it is produced' (p.11).

The importance of the social dimension of innovation has become a widely accepted idea. Research on innovation has widened to accept the process of innovation itself as a social action [31]. Therefore, although we have a lot to gain by building on previous research on technical innovation, the particularities of social innovation call for new paradigms and new theoretical perspectives in order to move forward. This point is further developed in the next section.

2.1. Technical and social innovations

The first difference between technical and social innovations lies in the intended result. Based on Schumpeter's definitions, there is no gain in saying that the concept of innovation has entered the technology and management discussion as a driver of economic value creation. Dawson and Daniel [27] point out 'profitability and commercial success as a key driver for innovation' (p.11). It is also common in management literature, for instance, to focus on profitability and commercial success as a key driver for innovation [27]. Often a common definition of innovation in this field is 'the profitable exploitation of a new idea' [28]. This can be explained by the fact that management research has evolved with the concern of explaining performative behaviour in an economic value creation context [29].

On the other hand, social innovation brings up social change that cannot be built up on the basis of established practices. The intended purpose of both types of innovation is fundamentally different, albeit some outcomes might overlap (like the increase of a social group's wellbeing).

Another important distinction can be found in the immaterial structure of social innovation, which does not come to fore as a technical artefact, but as new social practices that will ultimately become institutionalized. Technical innovations are directed at technological advancements to create new products or artefacts [18].

Since social innovations are oriented toward social practices, we need to reflect on social structures, how they enable and constrain agents while acting upon those practices. In this

² Reinert and Reinert [25] trace back to Nietzsche the concept of creative destruction put forward by Schumpeter for explain innovation.

sense, as Howaldt & Schwarz [18] argue, what is meant by 'social' does not relate only to the behavioural practices or the human relationship involved in the process of innovation creation and diffusion, it has a larger meaning based on the creation of a greater common good. In order to understand clearly the need for new conceptual and theoretical approaches on social innovation, in the next section the paper explores a historical and disciplinary review of social innovation.

3. A historical and disciplinary situation

Abbott [32] suggests that to clearly understand an academic field we should situate it 'historically and disciplinarily'. Social innovation, as a field of study, does not benefit from a long tradition in the social sciences. It is nonetheless true that social innovation as a phenomenon has been constantly present in the evolution of human societies [33]. The social reality in which we live today was constructed in the past and is continuously in flux. Practices, habits, and institutions such as money, universal suffrage, laws, and the modern state were all social innovations at a certain time. However, the concept of social innovation appeared in social science discourses only during the last decades scattered throughout various disciplines as public administration [12,34], history [35], social movements [36], management [6,13], social psychology [14,37,38], economics [39], and social entrepreneurship [15–17]. Even if the social dimension of innovation has been acknowledged, the idea of social innovation in literature after Schumpeter is rarely found and often side-lined [18]. The sociologist William Ogburn [40] was arguably the first to propose a distinction between technical and 'social invention'. In his book 'On culture and social change', he claims that:

'The use of the term invention does not apply merely to technical inventions in our context, but instead comprises social inventions such as the League of Nations; it is also used to denote innovations in other cultural areas, such as the invention of a religious ritual or an alphabet'.³

His ideas regarding social inventions were barely developed in innovation thinking during the 1970's except rare mentions to the term [41,42]. During the 1980's, we can hardly find references to social innovation, a notable exception is Gershuny [43] who presents a study on how social innovations may influence the structure of developed economies. In management discourse, Drucker [6] was the single voice during the 1980's to sing the praises of social innovation. He points out that during the 20th century managers had overemphasized the role of science and technology as change agents to the detriment of social innovation. He identifies management as both an agent, and as an example, of social innovations.

During the last two decades, the concept of social innovation appeared in management studies under the umbrella of different fields as social entrepreneurship, social movements, and social economy [36,44,45].

3.1. Clarifying the concept

Social innovation has been frequently presented as a normative instrument used to resolve social problems through the creation of new services or new products [9,46–48]. This view is in part explained by the fact that the contexts in which social innovation has been evolving (social entrepreneurship [49,50] and public policy [51,52]) are based on actions aimed at solving social problems. However, presenting social innovation based on such instrumental view is a teleological mistake: the assumption that because we see a particular outcome to a process we conclude that the process must always have that specific result. This paper argues that this kind of instrumental definition leads to a too narrow view of social innovation. First, because an answer to a social problem is not necessarily a social innovation, even technical innovations might be aimed at solving social problems. Second, because it proposes a material dimension of social innovation (product), what is incoherent with the ontological immateriality of the phenomenon as highlighted by Neumeier [10]: 'Social innovations are non-material: their material outcomes are solely a supplementary result and they focus not on needs but on asset building' (p. 55). Hence, social innovations are manifested in changes of attitudes, behaviour, or perceptions, resulting in new social practices. Third, and this is a central aspect stressed in this article, social innovation is about social change and this should be the main characteristic to be put in evidence [10,18]. We are not only talking about changes in the way social agents act and interact with each other, but also changes in the social context in which these actions take place through the creation of new institutions and new social systems (this is further developed on Section 3.2).

Hence, what underlies the path of social innovation is not a social problem to be solved, but the social change it brings about. From this standing point, one can better perceive the specificity of the process of social innovation creation as new ideas manifested in social actions leading to social change and proposing new alternatives and new social practices for social groups. Dawson and Daniel [27], for example, posit that the objective of social innovations is the improvement of collective well-being.

Social innovation takes form when a new idea establishes a different way of thinking and acting that changes existing paradigms. The thesis developed in this paper argues that 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.

However, not every process of social change is necessarily a social innovation; the distinguishing feature of social innovation lies firstly in newness and secondly in the inherent purposeful actions oriented towards a desired result. Social innovations are associated with intended, planned, coordinated, goal oriented, and legitimated actions undertaken by social agents aiming at social change that will emerge in the establishment of new social practices [18,31,53,54]. Of course that does not mean that social innovations have a positive image for everyone. They might be perceived as an improvement by a group and as regression by others. Howaldt and Schwarz explains that '(A)s with every other innovation, 'new'

³ Ogburn (1969) "On culture and social change", p. 56 cited in Howaldt and Schwarz [18, p.18]

does not necessarily mean 'good' but in this case is 'socially desirable' in an extensive and normative sense. According to the actors' practical rationale, social attributions for social innovations are generally uncertain' [18]. McLoughlin and Preece [55], for instance, provide a detailed case study about a failed attempt of implementing a social innovation. They demonstrate the importance of social engagement and cooperation among different social groups in order to define clearly what is 'socially desirable'.

To conclude, it is also important to highlight possible sources and outcomes of social innovation. The majority of the research on the subject is linked to social entrepreneurship or public policy initiatives, which miss other drivers of social innovation. Howaldt and Schwarz [18] present a broader spectrum of sources of social innovation, acknowledging that social innovations can assume their form and be disseminated via:

'...the market (such as new services, business models, logistics and application concepts) as well as technological infrastructure ('web-based social networking'), social networking and social movements (gender mainstreaming), via governmental guidelines and support, via intermediary and self-organized institutions such as foundations, in inter and intra organizational processes, via the effect of charismatic individuals or social entrepreneurs, through 'living experiences' and a diverse array of forms of communication and cooperation as well as change-oriented 'capacity-building'(p. 31–32).

The outcomes of social innovation might be manifold, taking the form of new institutions, new social movements, new social practices, or different structures of collaborative work [14]. Regardless of the source of social innovation, the concepts of social action and social change are core to the process. Social innovations are a kind of social change; they have an impact on future social development and present stability beyond temporary fads.

So, in order to move forward investigating the way social innovation emerges and spreads, we need a theoretical perspective and a conceptual framework able to encompass the specificities of the phenomenon and powerful enough to model and explain its occurrence.

3.2. The need of an integrated perspective

Although previous works provide useful insights about the conception and the analysis of social innovation processes, they fail to propose a theoretical perspective to guide inquiry and move research in this field forward. As it is demonstrated below, the literature has oscillated between approaches centred either in agentic actions or in socio-structural contexts as determinants of social innovation. This paper proposes a third perspective, which brings these two perspectives together. Similar perspectives in innovation research were proposed by Pierce and Delbecq [56] and Slappendel [54]. They share the same concern that: 'The action–structure dichotomy has provided important insights, but it does not tell the whole story. Because innovation exists in both voluntaristic (action) and deterministic (structure)

realities, any adequate theoretical understanding of it must embrace both of these aspects' [57, p. 1480].

These perspectives are presented here as a framework for organizing the literature on social innovation so the need of an integrated perspective can become salient.

3.2.1. Individualistic perspective

In the individualistic perspective, individual agent's values and attributes are the primary causal force in determining social innovation [7,14,37]. Mulgan [16], for instance, highlights the role of '...a very small number of heroic, energetic, and impatient individuals' (p.13) and social 'movements of change' (p.15) in developing social innovations. He acknowledges the importance of recognizing opportunities to innovate, but gives little attention to the role of social structures and institutions in this process. This kind of approach is typically present in the social innovation school of social entrepreneurship [1,49,50]. This school distinguishes itself by the importance given to the individual level antecedents in the conception of social innovation. Bacq and Janssen [49] compare this school to the 'school of traits' in the entrepreneurship field, which is in line with the Schumpeterian tradition of heroic entrepreneurs. Social innovation is, according to this perspective, the result of the action of visionary individuals able to 'find innovative solutions to social problems of his/her community that are not adequately met by the local system' (p.382).

3.2.2. Structural perspective

The second perspective is the structural perspective. This has captured the most attention in the field of social innovation research and implies that structure and context will be the causation factor for innovation. Hämäläinen [20], for instance, proposes to frame social innovation processes by analysing society's structural adjustment abilities to accommodate new ideas and practices. Lettice and Parekh [15] undertook interesting qualitative research on social innovation processes among social entrepreneurs by analysing '...how the social innovators had originated their ideas and what barriers and enablers they had encountered along the way' (p.155). Their analysis concentrated on social structures and their influence on the process; the same applies to Klein et al. [9] who drew on socio-economic geography to understand the structural determinants of the garment industry in Canada. Novy and Leubolt, [58] in their study about the participatory budgeting in Brazil, acknowledge that social innovations are both historical and contextual dependant and highlight the need of 'multiscalar analysis of [their] historical and geographical roots' (p.2023). The presence of this perspective in the research of social innovation can be explained by the pervasive influence of structural functionalism in organizational analysis [54,59]. Scholars in this field are interested in how the social context and organizations are defined by structures that can be categorized and analysed. However, this approach has been criticized as being a 'sterile conception of environment' as an abstract, exogenous force that constrain agents' behaviour [59].

3.2.3. A unifying view

These two research perspectives have dominated the study of social innovation in recent years. Without taking

explicit ontological positions, scholars have been analysing social innovation using one of those two perspectives. With only few attempts to bring the two together [18,60] research on the subject remains divided. Wangel [61] for instance draws attention to the fact that social structures and agency have been rarely combined in backcasting studies for sustainable development. She claims that '(...) *explicit inclusion of social structures and agency facilitates a more structured reflection on the socio-political-cultural context*' (p.874) in which technological innovation and social change take place. This corroborates what Drazin, Glyn, and Kazanjian [62] point out: 'Agency and structure are divorced when they should be co-equals' (p.171).

Therefore, we need a more holistic view of the phenomenon of social innovation in which agentic actions and social structures can be conceived as both dualistic and interdependent. The absence of such a relationship between agency and structure deprives us of empirical analysis of the complexity of the phenomenon. This brings us to the third perspective, which is called here the 'structuration perspective'. According to this view, social innovation is conceived as interactively influenced by both agents and social structures. The adequacy of such a perspective is based on two pivotal characteristics of social innovation processes:

First, social innovation is based on collective actions that take place inside a given social system, which are determined by underlying institutions. Second, the historical and cultural context in which social innovation occurs is an important consideration for understanding its processes since it is historically and culturally situated [58,63].

The analyses of such features call for a theoretical perspective that conceives agents as embedded in complex institutional environments that not only constrain but also enable actions. Efforts so far to portray social innovation based on behavioural analysis or efficiency as a driving force underlying its process have proved to be reductionist [61,64]. The same efficiency based view of organizations has led scholars to migrate to institutional analysis where culture, values, beliefs, and social norms are the elements that define actions and the social structure where actions take place [65].

Social innovations, examined in terms of their substantive aspect, occur and are oriented towards the level of social practices. In order to understand the process by which social innovations emerge and develop, we need a conceptual framework that enables us to understand how the path for social innovation is created and reproduced by action and institutions, and to articulate a model in which the process of social innovation occurs in a reciprocal action/structure scheme. Social innovations are also contextual [52,57], their study also calls for research '...to include historical and contextual analyses, and increased debate about the reconciliation of action and structure' [54].

Therefore, in order to study social innovation we need to define the concepts of 'innovation', 'agent', 'institution/structure', and 'social system' interrelated in the same conceptual framework in order to encompass the phenomenon on its totality. Two complementary theories can answer this need and can be used as an effective lens through which to understand social innovation: neo-institutional theory and structuration theory.

4. A theoretical framework

Institutional theory [66–68] represents '(T)he most complete conceptual transition away from models based on technical environments and strategic choice, focusing heavily on the socially constructed world' [62]. This theory explains how institutions (norms, rules, conventions, and values) influence our understanding of how societies are structured and how they change [21,69].

Institutionalists have explicitly rejected rational models of action, instead arguing for cultural and cognition-based frameworks (institutions) that guide (without determining) individual and collective action. The theory evidences the role that institutions play in producing new ideas and new kinds of social systems, and proposes a rich array of theoretical insights about how new practices become established via legitimacy and diffusion [70]. It moves the discussion beyond competitiveness and rational thinking, because it acknowledges that the structures that influence agents are 'institutionally patterned in ways which cannot be explained by competitive interaction between organizations, technology, or organization-specific environmental conditions' [71].

However, institutional theory lacks a pervasive explanation of agency. In their seminal book 'The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis', DiMaggio and Powell highlighted the need for a coherent theory of action, the lack of which was institutional theory's main weakness when it is set out to explain change and the role of actors in the creation of institutions and social practices. Later works examine the processes through which actors create new institutions or change existing ones.⁴ Within the field of 'institutional entrepreneurship', scholars have analysed the conditions that make it favourable for agents to bring about institutional change based on the agent's motivations [72], social position [73], ideas for change, [74] or the structures and uncertainties in a field [75]. Nevertheless, what is of interest here is not only the role of agency in institutional change, but the interrelatedness of social/institutional structure and agency as well as their role in the social change process through the diffusion of social innovations. An alternative issue upon which the paper's argument is constructed is what was proposed by Barley and Tolbert [65], who argue that structuration theory and institutional theory both conceive institutions and actions as inextricably linked and understand institutionalization as an on-going dynamic process. They suggest that a fusion of both theories would enable a considerable advance in institutional theory and its explanatory power. In what follows, this article draws both upon institutional and structural theories to develop a conceptual model of social innovation.

Structuration theory has been used in different fields of the social sciences such as entrepreneurship [76–78], technology implementation [79–82], organizational culture [83], organizational theory [65,84], strategy and management [85,86], and business ethics [87]. It has proved its capacity as a general theory for explaining social action and social evolution [76,88]. The theory provides a theoretical framework that highlights how social systems and social structures

⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this point.

are iteratively and reciprocally created by agents who are both constrained and empowered by institutions.

Structures can be viewed as a set of institutionalized traditions or forms that enable and constrain action [80,89], for the purposes of this paper structures are similar to the concept of 'institutions' as suggested by Barley and Tolbert [65]. Through the interplay between institutions and actions, called the process of structuration, institutional practices shape human actions that, in turn, confirm or modify the institutional structure. Thus, the study of structuration involves investigating how institutions and actions configure each other in the process of creation of social systems. Social systems are conceived in the structuration theory as regulated models of social practices and relations between actors. Hence, the theory suggests that institutions set limits on human rationality but are also the subject of the action of human agency modifying, eliminating, or creating new institutions and eventually new social systems [89,90].

Arguably, the most important contribution of structuration theory to the social sciences is this connection between structure and action. The theory focuses on the reciprocal interaction of human actors and social structures across time and space. Giddens proposes the concept of 'duality of structure', which refers to the fact that social structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet, at the same time, are the medium of this constitution [89]. Therefore, the structure, by using institutions, acts over agents constraining and enabling their actions; through this process, social systems and social practices are recursively created. There is a reciprocal iterative process between agent and institutions as each one shapes and creates the other.

Ontologically, Giddens argues that agents and social systems are mutually constitutive in a dialectic relationship wherein they do not share the same ontological status. Bringing this assumption to the social innovation context, the interactive coming together of agents and their social context (social systems according to Giddens) may be conceptualized as a dialectic relationship whereby agents and the social context cannot exist independently and therefore cannot be understood as separate or distinct from one another.

Therefore, the combination of structuration theory and institutional theory provides complementary insights and allows us to put forward a theoretical framework capable of explaining how actions of agents are related to the structural features of society and how institutions may both constrain and enable the appearance of social innovations. In other words, it helps to delineate the fundamental interactions between actions and the elements that will enable and constrain all the activities undertaken to create a social innovation.

The study of social innovation processes has the potential to provide a comprehensive framework of how practices are created and institutionalized. New practices that emerge from social innovation processes are fundamentally constituted around institutional frameworks and actors that articulate within those frameworks embedded in broader social contexts [91]. The use of institutional and structuration theories enable us to analyse it on different levels, which provides a more nuanced and situated approach to social innovation processes.

These relationships are depicted in Fig. 1 below.

According to this model, an agent is at the same time constrained and enabled by structures (or institutions) in order to (re)create social systems. Given the central role of action, it is nevertheless important to discuss the way in

which action is conceived in structuration theory and in our model. Agency is a crucial tenet of structuration theory; actors are conceived as purposeful, knowledgeable, and reflexive. For Giddens, the idea of 'reflexivity' implies that actors have the capacity to monitor routinely their actions by reflecting upon them and acting according to their intentions. Reflexivity stands for the continuous monitoring of the social context and the activities taking place within this context. Agents' actions have the power of changing institutions, but are at the same time constrained by institutional practices. This feature of agency is an essential and potentially transformative element of social systems.

The notion of reflexivity allows structuration theory to extend beyond the boundaries of behavioural theories [76]. Behavioural approaches are commonly used in the individualistic perspective of social innovation, focusing on how the agent's cognitive structure interprets social systems, while a structuration view includes the ability to reflect upon and modify interpretations and social systems. Behavioural approaches also give too much importance to the agent's position in the social system. Although the agent's position may determine the access to certain resources and limit some options, from a structuration point of view, action is also determined by agent's reflexivity capacity, and by the institutional structures enabling and constraining actions.

In the effort to present social innovation as efficiency based, social action is commonly presented and analysed in a Weberian tradition of instrumental action, in which action is intentionally conducted towards the fulfilment of goals [92]. Nevertheless, the concept of action undertaken in social innovation processes is better represented by what Habermas called 'communicative actions'. These actions are directed towards the achievement of mutual understanding among individuals interacting in order to coordinate their actions based on a collective interpretation of the social context [93]. From an institutional point of view, what allows us to conceive actions in social innovation processes as 'communicative actions' is their legitimacy. It is legitimacy that will give validity to actions that change social systems and create new and legitimised social practices; without legitimacy, 'it is difficult to attract others to participate' [94, p.358]. Legitimacy gives actors the idea that new practices are worth being imitated and institutionalized [10], hence social innovation proposes new social practices through legitimised and purposeful actions.

Therefore, it is important to state clearly what we understand by 'practice'. During the last decade, a growing effort has been made towards the elaboration of theories of practice (e.g. [95,81]). Lounsbury and Crumley [69] define practices as activity patterns infused with meaning that order social life. In Fig. 1, the formation of new social practices is portrayed as the result of the creation (or changing) of social systems. Therefore, social change is the result of new social systems being created.

The model as presented here provides a collection of interrelated concepts and their relationships; it also sets the boundaries of the phenomenon of social innovation and promotes a scheme for interpreting it.

4.1. Specifying the level of analysis

The next step is to identify the different levels at which social innovations act. Previous works have failed to state

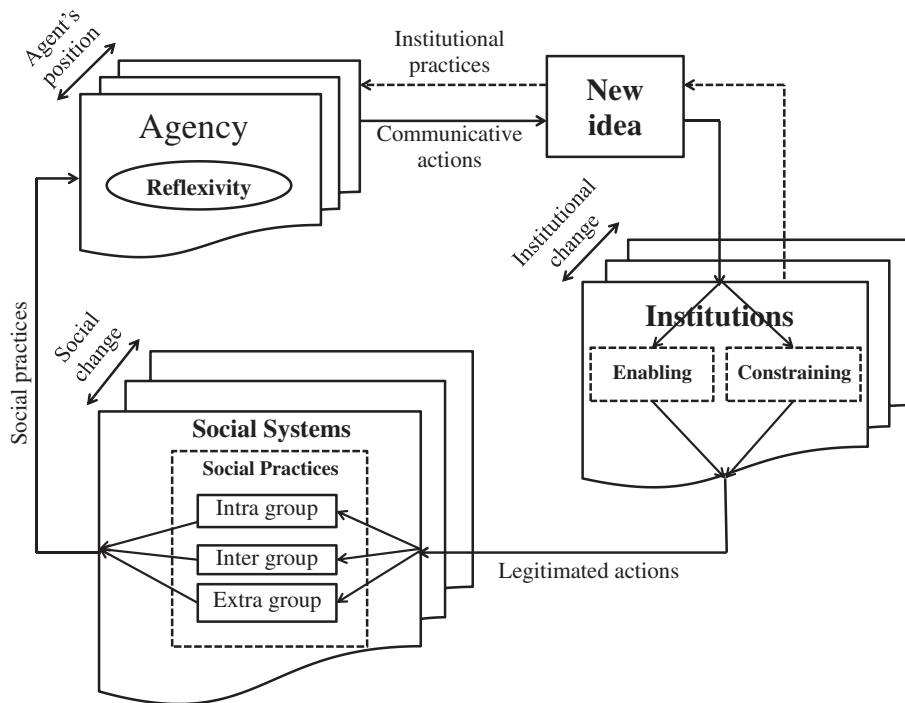


Fig. 1. A schematic conceptual model of the social innovation process.

clearly their level of analysis and where the social innovation analysed occurs. Based on the proposed model in Fig. 1, we can identify three different levels.

At the first level, there are the intra social group innovations; they are related to the basic norms, values, rules, habits, and conventions of a given social group. The institutions that frame actions at this level are group related and demand a micro level analysis. Lettice and Parekh [15] is an example of this level of analysis. Their inquiry is based on actions taken by small organizations inside specific social groups geographically located. At this level, it is important to understand the socio and cognitive related conditions that lead to the acceptance or refusal of new practices. The role played by individuals here is very important because social innovations at this level are directly related to the way in which individuals are socialized.

The second level is the level of inter group social innovations. At this level, we find different social groups linked in collaborative and/or competitive relationships. The study of the adoption of technologically supported independent living for elderly in Scotland conducted by Kinder [46] shows the interrelated actions of different social groups with different interests and power during the implementation and adoption of such social innovation. His study concluded that the capacity to change and implement new practices increases with the distribution of power among the different social groups implicated in the social innovation process. This is in line with Heiskala's definition of social innovation as '... changes in the cultural, normative or regulative structures of the society which enhance its collective power resources and improves its social performance' [96].

The third level consists of a macro level of social systems or, extra group social innovations. This level of analysis has received little attention in previous studies of social innovation, being more richly presented in the analysis of social movements and in public policy studies.

Klein et al. [9] case study is an example of a social group's actions and their relationship with government policies in order to resolve structural problems in the economic sector of the garment industry. Gershuny [43] is another example on how social innovations diffused amongst households can change the social structure of developed economies.

The three levels are identified in Fig. 1 as well as the effect of legitimised actions and on practices at each level.

5. Research implications

The social innovation process requires attention to the individual persons; more specifically, to what they think, to what they value, to how they behave, and to how inter-relations between actors and social systems take place [97,98]. In order to take into account the complexity and contextual dimensions of social innovation, we need methodological frameworks able to encompass the processual evolution of the different elements that iterate in the social construction of social innovations. As postulated by Van de Ven and Hargrave [99] and Slappendel [54], such processes call for a 'process methodology' where the discrete change of events are analysed based on historical narratives where the narration of temporal sequence of events show how change unfolds over time. This does not mean that social innovation progresses in distinct stages, the process is rather complex and iterative.

Similar to the social constructivist and related interpretive approaches to social analysis (e.g. [100,101]), the processual approach focuses attention on ontological problems, concerned with how conceptions of reality are rooted in broader social and historical processes that operate beyond the direct consciousness of actors, but are visibly instantiated in daily activities. In these approaches, action is a reflection of the perspectives defined by social groups out of which meaning emerges. The researcher looks for temporal and spatial variations in meaning, which allows for the analysis of change as people understand it.

The social innovation process can be seen as an organic process that unfolds from the dyadic relationship between actor and structure. This path is idiosyncratic and complex since we are dealing with the real experience of people acting in their environment and participating in the development of social systems and institutions, which are central elements of social innovation. It would be reductionist to model this process within a rational means-end framework of traditional positivist variance analysis because the intertwined nature of social innovation and its social context highlights the process of creation and not only the outcome. We need then to understand not only how people act but also how they give meaning to their actions. A perspective on the different processes allows the researcher to link the past to the present and indeed to future events, clarifying why things happened in a determined way. This process is sensitive to the institutional circumstances in which they occur and is rarely linear [102].

There are different ways of studying and conceptualizing the processes and social innovations described here. The perspectives of social constructionism, sensemaking, and history telling might be of particular relevance to the study of social innovation since they stand for points of view more concerned with process than causality.

From a social constructionist perspective, social innovation may be seen as emerging, and constructed from, social interaction between people and their socio-institutional context. During this process, the social interaction implies the co-construction of self and process [78,103,104].

In terms of sensemaking, the process of social innovation construction might be perceived as arising from the way in which individuals see the world around them [105]. It entails the identification of meaning against a situational institutional setting.

From a story-telling point of view, the social innovation processes may be seen as part of a story. Stories are seen as theoretical constructs that reflect narrative structures in which a sequence of events is explained based on their relationships [106]. Every social innovation represents a story, a rich account of the actions, events, and circumstances in which social context and actions are interwoven. From a positivist viewpoint, such accounts might be seen as mere description with little generalizable and theoretical relevance, but such narrations help theoretical development by highlighting patterns of behaviour and providing more complex explanations.

These perspectives are complementary and can contribute to the development a theoretical vocabulary expected to provide a fine understanding of social innovation.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to shed some light on the study of social innovation by taking a first step towards a better theoretical and conceptual understanding of the phenomenon in order to support future research. It answers the call for more theoretical development in the field [1,18,60] since the 'quality of theoretical work in this field has been low' [1, p. 158]. The paper proposes a conceptual framework that allows us to conceptualize social innovation as a collective creation of new legitimated social practices aiming at social change.

I have used institutional and structuration theory as an effective lens through which we can understand social innovation, enabling both theoretical development and empirical investigation. The essence of my argument is that, since both structuration and institutional theory and the domain of social innovation focus on the inter relationship between agents and social systems, these theories are particularly applicable to the nature of social innovation process.

From an institutional perspective, social innovation is portrayed as a result of the exchanges of knowledge and resources by actors mobilized through legitimization activities. From a structuration perspective, social innovation is socially constructed as individuals collectively engage in purposeful actions and reflexively monitor the outcome of their actions. The insights of both theories, as summarized above, can be leveraged to enhance our understanding of social innovation. Both theories attempt to fill the gap between a deterministic and static notion of structure, on one hand, and a cognitive interpretation of social systems on the other, by shifting attention to the integrative processes that bind the two together.

This brings us to the implications for further research and practice. The understanding of how social systems influence behaviour, and how agency can affect social systems, is crucial at a time we are trying to understand the difficulties of promoting social change by governments, the market, and private initiatives. The discussion carried out here suggests that, from a policy maker's perspective, we need structures able to foster social innovation by empowering the agent to act and think reflexively in the development and implementation of new ideas to promote social change (the 'Social Innovation Fund' in the US and the 'Social Innovation Europe' are good examples of this). The model implies that agents actively and reflexively interact with their social context, transforming and being transformed by it, as they promote social change through social innovation. This suggests, for practice, a focus on different skills and ways of thinking. Instead of analytical skills, agents should develop mind-sets aiming at developing creativity [107], bricolage [108], and collaboration as a matter of mobilising resources and other agents.

This essay contributes to the opening up of new paths of exploration of a concept not yet deliberated in innovation literature. The processual perspective on social innovation creation put forward in this paper is a step in this direction. This perspective, however, does not have the pretention of unifying the field of social innovation around one single paradigm. It suggests that with this approach, we can

generate complex descriptions of social innovation processes that we can learn from and expand our mind-set by applying other approaches.

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Giovany Cajas-Santana is an Assistant Professor at Kedge Business School, France. His research interests include social dimensions of business, social entrepreneurship and social innovation.