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Navigating the ‘meaningless’ of social innovation: perspectives of social care practitioners in Scotland

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ABSTRACT

Social innovation is an umbrella concept that allows space for a diverse range of perspectives to co-exist. In this paper, we explore how practitioners negotiate this complexity. Conducting 19 interviews with stakeholders involved in social enterprise and social care in Scotland, we show that almost anything can be conceived of as a social innovation as defined by the European Union. The EU definition can be a useful tool for organizations to demonstrate to funders how and why they are socially innovative. However, in failing to interrogate the power dimension of social innovation, the EU definition neglects any transformative potential.

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KEYWORDS Social innovation; social care; social enterprise; social innovation definitions; social entrepreneurship

Introduction

Social innovation, broadly understood as innovations that are social in their means and their ends (SIX and The Young Foundation 2010), has become prominent in policy, practitioner and academic discourses over the last 20 years (Calò et al. 2023). The growth in research in social innovation has resulted in a multitude of definitions and frameworks (Moulaert et al. 2017). Perspectives within this ‘contested conceptual space’ (Bragaglia 2021; Calò et al. 2023) range from enthusiastic acclaim (e.g. Hansen et al. 2022), to more qualified support (e.g. Krlev et al. 2020), scepticism (e.g. Teasdale et al. 2022), often combined with a normative desire for social innovation to be built on democratic engagement and the restructuring of power relationships (e.g. Moulaert et al. 2017). Meanwhile, critique from ‘outside of the social innovation tent tends to focus on neoliberal roots and influences of the concept (Alexander and Fernandez 2020; Sandberg, Eikenberry, and Mirabella 2019). To some extent, these differences can be attributed to different worldviews. How we appraise concepts is shaped by our assumptions and normative theories (Ayob, Teasdale, and Fagan 2016; Teasdale et al. 2023). However, this contestation

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does not rest solely on how we interpret the “objective reality” that is social innovation. Contestation also occurs as to what “ought to be” considered social innovation. For example, some commentators highlight social enterprises’¹ provision of healthcare as a social innovation. This, in turn, leads more critical observers to see the broader concept of social innovation as a political means to reduce the size (and budget) of the public sector (see Calò et al. 2023). However, other commentators highlight the (publicly funded) UK’s National Health Service as an example of social innovation (Mulgan et al. 2007). In essence, to be described as a social innovation usually signifies some kind of valued achievement (Teasdale et al. 2021). Therefore, what we perceive of and describe as a social innovation depends on what we value, or what we expect observers to value. The concept (or signifier) can be considered at least partially ‘floating’ in that it absorbs meaning and becomes subject to multiple, often contradictory interpretations, or signs (Laclau 2003).

Of course, social innovation being a contested concept is not new to an academic audience. Numerous academic reviews have sought to clarify the contested space of social innovation (e.g. Ayob, Teasdale, and Fagan 2016; Calò et al. 2023; Ziegler 2017). Making sense of social innovation is not simply an academic exercise, yet relatively little attention is given in the literature as to how practitioners negotiate this contestation. This is important since government and philanthropic funding for many third sector organizations are now structured around the concept of social innovation. In the United States in 2009, the then President, Obama, established the Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation (now defunct) to engage citizens and civil society to find new ways to solve social problems. In Europe, the Social Innovation Initiative sought to enhance the capacity for member countries to develop flourishing environments for new social innovation through the Horizon 2020 strategic framework for research and innovation (Massey and Johnston-Miller 2016). The Bureau of European Policy Advisers (BEPA) defined social innovation in 2011 on behalf of the European Commission as:

... new ideas (products, services, models) that simultaneously meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives) and create new social relationships or collaborations. They are innovations that are not only good for society but also enhance society’s capacity to act. (BEPA 2011, 9)

While these European and US policy streams did not precisely align (Ayob, Teasdale, and Fagan 2016), the overarching policy direction in much of the ‘western world’ appeared favourable to this ‘weak’ version of social innovation (Ayob, Teasdale, and Fagan 2016). How this was operationalized varied considerably among nation states (De Pieri and Teasdale 2021; Krlev et al. 2020). Nonetheless, considerable sums of money to support social innovation research and practice were made available, particularly within Europe (Hansen et al. 2022; Torfing 2019) with an emphasis on identifying and growing numerous small-scale projects (Notarnicola, Berloto, and Perobelli 2022). For example, the budget for ESF Social Innovation+ totals €197million for the 2021–2027 programming period.

In Scotland, the empirical focus of this paper, the Scottish Government established a Social Innovation Fund in 2017 with up to £250,000 offered to partnerships between social enterprises and research organizations to test and scale up social innovations (Scottish Government 2017). More recently, the First Port Social Innovation Challenge

intends to support innovators in social enterprises or collaborative ventures to address social challenges with awards of up to £50,000 (FirstPort 2022).

Elsewhere, the Scottish Government includes Social Innovation as part of the *National Innovation Strategy* (Scottish Government 2023), channelling funding through organizations such as Highland and Islands Enterprise (HEI), who invested £32.7 million in more than 900 client-led projects during 2021/22 (HEI 2023). Consequently, for an organization or entity appraised as a social innovation, financial, as well as reputational rewards could follow. However, on the ground, understanding of what is meant by social innovation, and the wider funding and policy environment appeared fragmented. The lead author of this paper had been working with social enterprises in the field of adult social care. Many practitioners were confused by the changing funding environment alluded to above, and keen to understand what was meant by social innovation, with the medium-term goal of being able to demonstrate eligibility for funding. Hence, the aim of this paper is *to understand how practitioners make sense of social innovation*.

In this article, we seek to provide an account of how an abductive approach to analysis eventually leads to clearer problem formulation (Chen, Sharma, and Muñoz 2022). We present the story of our misguided attempts to adapt the BEPA definition (above) as a tool to enable social enterprises to demonstrate whether something is (or isn't) a social innovation. Research funding was secured from The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland. Perhaps naively, our grant proposal set out to develop a framework that could help small organizations navigate this new policy and funding environments by definitively identifying whether something is/is not a social innovation. Our methods are described more fully in the next section of this paper. First, we developed a framework/tool outlining five dimensions of social innovation and building upon the widely used BEPA definition. Nineteen participants were sampled from organizations (mainly social enterprises) working in the social care sector in Scotland. Qualitative interviews explored their prior understandings of social innovation, and, subsequently, the practical applicability of the five dimensions in our tool. Next, we undertook more detailed interviews with four case study exemplars to 'test' the framework by mapping each organization against each of the five dimensions. At first, we were delighted to learn that each organization could be considered socially innovative against each of the dimensions. However, in an abductive approach to analysis, we returned to the wider interview data and academic literature to explore some of the more critical observations pertaining to the applicability of the dimensions. Our findings make three main contributions to the public management/social innovation literatures. First, we show that any organization or entity might reasonably be called socially innovative by some commentators, dependent on their perspective as to what has social value. While use of the term social innovation seeks to convey positive meaning, the contradictory meanings associated with the concept render it effectively 'meaningless'. Second, we demonstrate how the tool (or definition) becomes less useful as a means of saying whether something is (or isn't) a social innovation, yet offers practical potential for organizations to work through the dimensions and articulate to funders how and why they are socially innovative. Finally, we highlight that the 'meaningless' of the BEPA definition, while suggesting that everything is, or can be, social innovation, deliberately fails to interrogate the power dimension inherent in 'stronger' traditions of social innovation (see Ayob, Teasdale, and Fagan 2016). In our concluding discussion, we reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of both the BEPA

definition and the framework; and the wider implications for policy, research and practice.

Research setting – social enterprises working in the field of social care in Scotland

The data for this paper was collected from Scottish social enterprises working in the highly pressurized pre-Covid Scottish social care system. The definition of social enterprise used here is market-driven organizations that balance their commercial trade of goods and services with their underpinning social mission to address social challenges like care, ageing, unemployment, housing etc (Calò et al. 2018; Defourny and Nyssens 2017; Hall, Miller, and Millar 2016; Hazenberg et al. 2016; Henderson et al. 2020). Social care includes help with ‘day-to-day living’ for people in residential care or living in their own homes, who suffer from illness, physical and/or learning disabilities, addictions, mental health issues, homelessness and more (Scottish Government 2021a). Indeed, the NHS itself has supported UK social enterprise spin-outs as innovative and cost-effective solutions to decreasing pressure on care services (Hall, Miller, and Millar 2016). As well as providing social care, social enterprises also operate in the niche low-profit market for care-related advocacy and support services (see Henderson et al. 2019).

Like most nations in the world, the Scottish population is ageing, increasing the pressure on social care. By mid-2043, it is estimated that almost a quarter of the Scottish population will be of pensionable age (Scottish Government 2021b) increasing demand for all state-delivered health and social care services. Even before challenges brought about by Brexit in 2016, and the Covid pandemic in 2020, Scottish local authorities were facing significant financial pressures, in part due to the UK Government’s austerity agenda (Audit Scotland 2018). These fiscal constraints cut social work budgets across the country, reducing them by 2% between 2013 and 2017 alone, despite increasing care demands from the ageing population. The financial cuts to these regional local authorities have continued and, when excluding COVID-19 funding, local authority funding has been cut in real terms by 4.2% since 2013/2014, despite a real-term increase in the Scottish Government’s overall budget during this period (Audit Scotland 2022). Therefore, at the time of data collection (pre-pandemic), Scottish social care was already experiencing significant pressures from austerity-driven funding cuts, reducing resources despite an increasingly-ageing population (Audit Scotland 2016, 2018; Hazenberg and Hall 2016; Henderson et al. 2018, 2019). Covid-driven stress on the Scottish social care system exacerbated this crisis, prompting the Scottish Government-led proposal for a National Care Service (Scottish Parliament 2022).

In Scotland, most social care spending derives from the 32 regional local authorities. SE and third sector organizations traditionally receive only a very small proportion of contracted social care spending (Audit Scotland 2016). Audit Scotland, the independent agency that audits 227 Scottish public bodies in Scotland, proposed ‘achieving transformational change is increasingly vital to councils as they respond to reductions in funding’ (Audit Scotland 2018, 21). Hence, Scottish Government, local authorities and funders of social care services were eager to learn about (socially) innovative solutions to tackling the crisis in social care. The Scottish Government established a Social Innovation Fund in 2017 to support partnerships between universities and

social enterprises that would test, evidence and scale innovative solutions to social problems (Scottish Government 2017). This created a legacy of funding opportunities for third sector organizations and social enterprises operating in the social innovation space, including FirstPort's Social Innovation Challenge, a third sector innovation fund (FirstPort 2022), the Converge's Create Change Challenge (Converge 2022), and the Innovation Fund by the Hunter Foundation (supported by the Scottish Government) (The Hunter Foundation 2022). Social enterprises working in the field of social care were keen to understand how to negotiate this new funding landscape, and relatedly, to understand how to position their own work as socially innovative.

This led us to secure funding from the Carnegie Trust to explore the ways in which social enterprises might position themselves as socially innovative. As part of this, we aimed to work with social enterprises in the field of social care to develop a framework to assess and/or demonstrate whether and how a project is socially innovative. Most of the funding schemes outlined above referred to the BEPA definition of social innovation quoted earlier (BEPA 2011) and many of our sample (described in the next section) were familiar with it, so we adopted that BEPA definition as our starting point. We broke the definition down into its five elements, namely: 1) a new idea; 2) meets social needs; 3) creates new relationships/collaborations; 4) is good for society; and 5) enhances society's capacity to act. This formed the basis of our Social Innovation Definition Matrix (SIDM). To test the practical utility of the SIDM (and its five dimensions) we explored the understandings of social innovation amongst 19 participants sampled from the Scottish social care sector. Then, to test the framework by mapping their activities against each of the five dimensions, we undertook more detailed qualitative interviewing with four 'exemplars' of SE-led social innovation in Scottish social care.

Method

Sample

Our sample consisted of 19 stakeholders from 15 social enterprises or public sector organizations supporting social enterprise in the field of social care in Scotland. Participants were purposively selected on the basis of their theoretical understanding of the phenomena (social enterprise, social care, social innovation) with the aim of gathering a wide range of perspectives (Mason 2017). We began by utilizing the lead author's existing contacts and subsequently we used snowball techniques by asking participants for further contacts (Noy 2008) until a degree of theoretical saturation (i.e. no new themes emerging) was reached (Low 2019).

Participants were given numbered pseudonyms using the following groupings to categorize them in order to preserve anonymity:

- Social Entrepreneurs 1-4 – Social entrepreneurs who started-up new social care SEs widely recognized as socially innovative;
- NHS Workers 1-4 - NHS staff who refer patients to SEs;
- Advocacy Workers 1-3 - Representatives from advocacy organizations;
- SE Representative 1-3 - SE staff representing their enterprise's views;
- Social Worker – Held national representative and HE training roles;
- Community Development worker;

- Community Partnership Officer – working across local authority and NHS;
- Government Procurement Manager – Government social care procurement manager;
- SE Funder – representing a national Scottish SE funding body.

The four participating social entrepreneurs (1–4) lead social enterprises that are widely recognized (in the policy and practice literature, by academic experts (the lead author) and by others in the sample) as exemplars of social innovation in the field. In addition to the sample-wide interview for the purposes of developing the SIDM, we undertook in-depth interviews with these participants to enable us to ‘map’ their organizations against the framework in order to validate it. Each of these social enterprises had been trading for at least one year, and all had started within the previous four years.

- Case study 1 (Social Entrepreneur 1) subsidized their urban befriending activities using income accrued by providing private social care in remote rural areas;
- Case study 2 (Social Entrepreneur 2) delivered language-learning classes to improve memory for older people across Scotland;
- Case study 3 (Social Entrepreneur 3) focused on increasing physical activity and reducing social isolation amongst older people through the provision of a weekly disco and extreme sports like climbing and surfing;
- Case study 4 (Social Entrepreneur 4) was a co-operative of sole traders, social enterprises and small businesses delivering care and activities to older people in rural areas.

Table 1 presents the four Social Entrepreneurs’ own descriptions of their organizations’ social innovations in the SIDM framework, including why their activities 1) are new ideas; 2) meet social needs; 3) create new relationships; 4) are good for society; and 5) enhance society’s capacity to act. In addition to mapping each dimension, we asked the remaining interviewees to give us examples of social enterprises they considered to be socially innovative. This met with mixed results as some participants found it difficult to spontaneously think of socially innovative enterprises during the confines of the interview. However, a number of participants were able to do so. Advocacy Worker 1 mentioned all four selected case studies as examples of social enterprise-led social innovations, focusing on her detailed knowledge of each through her national remit supporting hundreds of Scottish social enterprises. SE Funder also identified Case Studies 1, 2 and 3 as social innovations, focusing particularly on their beneficial impact on the health and wellbeing of older people using new approaches and activities. Advocacy Worker 2 highlighted Case Studies 1, 2 and 4 as innovative, but had not heard of Case Study 3. Similarly, the Government Procurement Manager and the Community Development Worker highlighted Case Study 4 as socially innovative as they worked in that area, but neither were unaware of the work of Case Studies 1–3.

Data collection

The interviews were undertaken in two phases. Phase 1 used a ‘guided conversation’ approach to support the participants as they attempted the potentially intimidating task of defining social innovation, a complex ‘fuzzy’ concept which has different and even conflicting meanings (Domanski, Howaldt, and Kaletka 2020). The guided

Table 1. Dimensions of social innovation: four Case study exemplars.

	Case Study 1 Social care in remote rural areas	Case study 2 Language classes to delay dementia	Case Study 3 Physical activities for older people	Case study 4 Collective of older people services
New idea	Subsidies traditional care model in rural area with a befriending business in a large urban centre.	Provides language classes to delay dementia and improve cognitive abilities in older people.	Provides activities which usually exclude older people, including discos, climbing, surfing etc.	Co-operative of small organizations deliver activities for older people in an under-served rural area.
Meets social needs	Clients approached the business due to lack of care provision in area.	Provides an alternative activity for people with dementia.	Brings together older people to reduce social isolation, improve health and wellbeing, and offer signposting and support.	Provides a range of alternative and conventional activities suitable for purchase through personal social care budgets.
Creates new relationships/collaborations	Generated new community collaborations amongst clients, carers, community volunteers and NHS services in islands and remote rural areas.	Formed links across other social enterprises to combine services for delivery, created relationships between organization and multiple agencies/ organizations.	Formed links across other social enterprises to combine services for delivery, created relationships between organization and multiple agencies/ organizations.	Generated new community collaborations amongst clients, carers, community volunteers and NHS services in rural areas.
Good for society	Provides sustainable rural social care for older people, reduces social isolation.	Provides activities for individuals with dementia and their carers, reduces social isolation.	Provides activities and social contact for individuals and their carers, keeps older people active for longer.	Provides sustainable rural social care and activities for older people, reduces social isolation.
Enhances society's capacity to act	Generated a sustainable new support network for vulnerable isolated people, NHS is keen to replicate on other islands in partnership with organization.	Trains language tutors to teach people using verbal, sensory and non-verbal means.	Empowers socially excluded individuals enabling them to become more active and visible in society, challenging stigma and ageism.	Generated a sustainable new support network for vulnerable isolated people, promoting employment, new start-ups and high standards in care and activity provision.

conversations used predetermined broad thematic prompts to ensure coverage of necessary themes, and to bring participants back on-topic if required (Rubin and Rubin 2005). The interviewer purposefully maintained an active listening approach, thereby 'hearing' the participant's reflections on the definitions and examples without imposing their own views (Louw, Todd, and Jimarkon 2011; Talmage 2012). Guiding the conversation using active listening elicits data within specific parameters whilst enabling the participant to create meaning, and facilitates more reflection on the concepts discussed (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree 2006). The two aims of the Phase 1 guided conversations were to 1) collect self-definitions of social innovation in the participant's own words; and 2) capture perceptions and reflections about social

innovation in the 'real world' from their own shared experience. Each guided conversation began by inviting the participant to describe their professional role and share their experience of and opinions about social innovation, including using the thematic prompts at opportune moments to elicit their self-definition of social innovation, and the identification of SE-led social innovation examples (see discussion earlier).

Phase 2 of the interview asked semi-structured questions and aimed to a) get a list of socially innovative social enterprises and b) gather each participant's perceptions, reflections and critiques of the five dimensions on the SIDM. Firstly, participants were asked to give examples of social innovations in social enterprise they had encountered in their work, and why they defined those social enterprises as social innovations (see earlier for results). Secondly, they were asked whether they agreed/disagreed that social innovations had to 1) be a new idea; 2) meet social needs; 3) create new relationships; 4) be good for society; and 5) enhance society's capacity to act. They were also asked to explain their response to each of the five dimensions.

Alongside the discussion around the agreement/disagreement with the five criteria, the social entrepreneurs were also asked to describe if and how each individual SIDM criteria was relevant to their organization. Their responses to this section of the interview are mapped on [Table 1](#).

The interviews ranged from 45 to 120 minutes. Ethical approval was granted by the University's Ethics Committee and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis with the participants' explicit consent.

Data analysis

The data was organized in QSR Nvivo. A thematic analysis was conducted which categorized the data using deductive manifest themes initially, before a second analysis explored latent emerging themes from Phase 1 (Braun and Clarke 2006; Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013). The four deductive themes were 1) self-definition of social innovation; 2) identification of SEs that are social innovations; 3) case study organizations' self-definition of themselves as social innovations; and 4) participants' critique of the BEPA (2011) definition. Latent inductive themes that emerged during the analysis were embedded within both the definition narratives and the real-world experiences of social innovation elicited during the guided conversations. Four of these were found in over half of the participant interviews, namely a) funding as driving presentation of 'newness'; b) process versus outcome as 'types' of social innovation; c) temporal dimensions of 'impact'; d) burdens of immediate 'proof' of effectiveness. The findings are presented below.

Results

The findings from the thematic analysis are described in the following two sections, 1) self-perceptions of social innovation and 2) the participants' critique of the social innovation definition.

Self-perceptions of social innovation

Most participants talked about social innovation in relation to the funding environment for social care, reflecting their lived experiences rather than a deep engagement with the concept. The participants presented different ‘flavours’ of social innovation in their definitions. For one group, particularly funders, social innovation was defined specifically by its outcomes and was inherently different or distinct from previous approaches, as a ‘new way of providing’ (NHS Worker 1):

To me, it’s doing anything differently, as long as it has a purpose. A clear social purpose. (Government Procurement Manager)

Other participants defined social innovation more procedurally, in ‘*how* things are organized . . . as well as in the *what*’ (Social Entrepreneur 4), including collaboration:

Social innovation is when people come together with a mutual interest in developing or improving a support or a service or a facility to benefit themselves and others. (Community Partnership Officer)

Social innovation can be ‘hidden’ within the business *process* according to one participant, who noted that socially innovative processes could be found within organizations who ‘organise things in a different way’ (SE Representative 1), though this was rarely recognized as social innovation. She defined social innovation as including those internal process innovations:

I think those are the ones people don’t get excited about and tell folk about but actually, potentially, that’s going to make the biggest difference because if one organisation does it, others think ‘Aha, that’s how you do it! Now I know how we could do it’. (SE Representative 1)

The SE Funder focused on *outcome* social innovation that delivered tangible observable results, rather than *process* social innovation within the business itself. She noted that she was flexible and inclusive in her self-definition and that, for her, social innovation did not have to be a completely new idea but instead could be:

. . . an existing approach but that hasn’t been trialled with a particular target group or it hasn’t been trialled in a particular geographical area . . . we’ve got quite a broad definition, I think, of social innovation . . . (SE Funder)

Amongst those participants who been working in the third sector for decades, social innovation did not always deliver ‘real’ social impact. They tended to see the language of social innovation as detached from their day-to-day realities, as one explained:

. . . Social innovation can be far less socially productive . . . Some of the great social innovations can be technological like Facebook or Snapchat or Instagram . . . (But) in my world . . . (*it must be*) something that was having a direct impact on the health and wellbeing of an individual, which many of those in these social media social innovations don’t, frankly. (Advocacy Worker 2)

Another felt the lack of clarity around what was (or was not) social innovation led to inconsistency in funding. She spoke of coming across ‘brilliant’ ideas she felt were clearly social innovations, but felt these occasionally lost out as funders were inconsistent in what they defined as social innovations. She gave the example of the Scottish Government-administered Social Innovation Fund:

. . . you thought, ‘What on earth are they funding?’ Like some of it you’re like, ‘Oh aye, great!’ You can see what it is. Other things you’re like, ‘What do you think is innovative? What are

they seeing as being innovative?' ... We need social innovation and I'm not saying we don't but ... there's loads of things that are going on that if you just did a bit more of that or tweaked that a wee bit, then that would really work... (Advocacy Worker 1)

The temporal dimension of social innovation was also mentioned, with one participant noting that disruptive innovations took time to emerge and change systems:

One of the mechanisms for ... social change has been the onset of dementia-friendly community organisations ... (*where local people*) come together collectively to set out to educate and inform the wider community about the impacts of dementia, to build local activity and ... different networks of support (*other*) than traditional care ... I think that is hugely different from what it was 25 years ago ... It is that collaboration and networking and that innovative way of practical solution-focused, local way of looking at things would be something that I would see as a marker of a change. (Advocacy Worker 2)

However, some participants stated that the immediacy of the funding landscape meant that funders were reluctant to invest in organizations and initiatives that could only be evidenced in the longer-term. This was seen as both expensive and 'risky' – at least when compared to the one-off grants to develop innovative ideas that were favoured by funders such as Scottish Government:

... funders are really risk-averse and they want a lot of the risk to sit with you until they have something tangible ... you have to take the risk in that fluid process where there's nothing tangible and then, as soon as you have a tangible statistic that actually it is effective, then that means that it's less risky for them ... As a society, we put a lot of importance on statistics and figures to prove things, and that's what we value and see as a good measure. (Community Partnership Officer)

The SE Funder partly agreed with this assessment. She noted that social entrepreneurs were often asked to provide more evidence than those with more mainstream ideas:

... for us as funders ... you can get projects that sound very innovative and are taking like a really unusual approach to solve a problem and you might think, 'Yeah, I could see how that could maybe work'. But there's no real evidence base behind it ... some projects ... were not getting funded because there wasn't the background research to show that that they would have a social impact ... I think as long as there's a way to prove that although the technique is new and it hasn't been tried before, that it can have those results, I think that's quite important. (SE Funder)

Funding bodies are understandably reluctant to invest in ideas without 'proof' that they will work. However, social enterprises tend to develop context-dependent solutions to problems that are not always amenable to the kinds of evidence demanded by policy makers or funders (Arvidson et al. 2013; Millar and Hall 2013; Roy et al. 2014). While not directly addressing this problem, the development of a simple tool that can help funders and practitioners assess/demonstrate how and why an idea or project is socially innovative, would at least permit better targeting of one-off grants towards socially innovative start up projects, and help move the sector towards new ways of thinking and doing:

... I'd like to see more people coming through with those types of ideas ... I'm trying to also work on how we support them and trying to understand them a bit better. (SE Funder)

More importantly, it could begin a conversation about what was funded in social care, and how the system could be more effective and more efficient in future.

Participants' critique of the SIDM

Following the initial reaction to SIDM's dimensions, we asked our participants to reflect upon the BEPA definition more carefully. At this stage, the sample's opinions differed and some amended their initial reflection. Some participants suggested that the BEPA definition did not capture the temporal processes and power dimensions of social change from the bottom-up:

The bit that's missing there for me is social innovation from the ground up ... it doesn't mention people once in that ... (*for example*) with the Men's Shed movement, they're so committed and it takes them years to get off the ground. The battles they have (*accessing buildings and funding*) ... they persevere with it and they usually get there in the end, and something really good comes out of it. (Community Partnership Officer)

The size and scale of what counted as a social innovation was raised by several participants, noting the definition did not give boundaries nor offer any clarity on that. As a result, one participant felt that the social innovation definition was simultaneously too-narrow and too-broad a term:

... how much of that social innovation actually just happens day-to-day in everyday life that folk don't think of as social innovation? ... (*when*) it's some transformational change in some way, it needs to be shown to be so much bigger ... Whereas, I think so much (*is*) an incremental, gradual thing rather than a whole sea-change of something all at the one time. (SE Representative 1)

The lack of clarity around boundaries was a common theme. One participant stated that the BEPA (2011) definition was simply 'a cover-all definition for all social innovation' (Advocacy Worker 2). Perhaps more tellingly, another participant stated she liked the BEPA definition because what she had previously considered routine problem-solving in her job was reflected in the BEPA elements, yet she had not considered her work to be socially innovative until she saw that definition:

... part of our role is we have to be innovative and find services that are going to meet individual's needs. We do that every day. (NHS Worker 2)

Our interviews then moved towards critiquing each of the five elements within the BEPA definition individually.

A new idea (products, services, models)

When breaking the definition down, the participants questioned what the term 'new' actually meant. For example, Advocacy Worker 1 felt that there was nothing new, just ideas recycled in different ways, for different groups, and in different places. Similarly, another questioned:

... is it original? ... It's probably a variation of something that's out there already somewhere else. (Government Procurement Manager)

Amongst some participants, both social innovation and ‘new’ were socially constructed, and defining any activity, service, product, process etc. as social innovation can be achieved simply through ‘how you make people think about it’ (SE Representative 1). One participant turned to the seven basic plots in literature as an analogy for ‘new’ in social innovation:

I am not sure that there is anything blusteringly new around. For example, I hear often about innovations, service innovations that in actual fact have a long gestational period over time and over place and are ‘discovered’ . . . it is the same in writing, there are probably only seven great plots which are recycled. I am a bit sceptical about ‘new’ in that context, as in blusteringly new, newly applied, newly discovered, newly redesigned. I am not sure there is anything desperately new. The novelty is a function of time and circumstance, I believe. (Advocacy Worker 2)

For others, ‘new’ within social innovation was a distraction, with one participant suggesting ‘we’re too caught up in the new’ (Community Development Worker). *Creativity* was suggested by another as a more appropriate word for what was being termed social innovation:

. . . people associate innovation with having to be something which is completely new . . . I think innovation is a bit of a buzzword, to be honest with you, and I think creativity would suit a lot better. More kind of organic . . . like organic growth and organic change, more creative rather than innovative. (Social Entrepreneur 2)

The word *creative* emerged in the data on multiple occasions, particularly when discussing new ideas and the application of existing ones in new ways or with other communities. For most of our participants, then, most ideas are not new but instead are existing ideas that evolve as they move across time and context. Hence, social innovation involves the creative application of existing ideas into new contexts (see Ayob, Teasdale, and Fagan 2016; Osborne and Brown 2011).

Meet social needs (more effectively than alternatives)

The sample unanimously agreed that meeting social need was essential for any social innovation. On this criterion, the additional phrase garnered most comment, reflecting concern about the inclusion of the phrase ‘*more effectively than alternatives*’:

It would be arrogant to say that we are better than anybody else, and I really don’t think that that’s the approach that we want to foster as a co-operative. We’ve always said that we’re part of the solution, okay? So, I don’t think that we are more effective. (Social Entrepreneur 4)

Here the speaker alludes to the importance of the wider ecosystem, in which they are just one component. While formally there is a ‘market’ for the provision of social care services in Scotland, third sector participants in this market do not see themselves as competitors since, for many, the overriding goal is the provision of high-quality social care rather than profit (see Buckingham 2009; Calò et al. 2018).

Other participants raised questions as to who should decide whether something is more effective than alternatives:

. . . (*reading*) ‘meeting social needs more effectively than alternatives’. In what way more effectively? Like cheaper? Faster? Better? . . . Who is then deciding what is more effective?. (Advocacy Worker 1)

Another who disagreed with the inclusion of ‘*more effectively than alternatives*’ noted ‘... it could be better for some people, but not for everybody’. (Government Procurement Manager).

The Funder was the only participant to be positive about *more effectively than alternatives*, noting that there was always scope for improvement:

... there has to be an element of that in any sort of social innovation... it said in that definition that it’s like sort of improving on alternatives, but I think it’s sort of challenging those alternatives, challenging what’s in place and just saying, ‘This isn’t really good enough, how do we make it better? How do we do something new?’ (SE Funder)

Creates new collaborations/relationships

Many participants felt that the creation and maintenance of collaborations and relationships were an essential part of almost all organizations’ work, regardless of whether they were socially innovative:

I think in terms of the social innovation context, I wouldn’t see it as being any different to mainstream social enterprise, social business, in that it would need to be creating those collaborations and relationships to succeed long term. (SE Funder)

A Policy Officer from a national care charity highlighted the need for these collaborations to be dynamic, flexible and, where necessary, a challenge to the previous status quo of bounded and/or regulated relationships:

... it is about creating those social relationships. Whereas before, often (care) providers were very onerous over what they did and what they don’t do. But we’re about ‘Yes! Let’s get together! How can we do this? Can we work together?’ (SE Representative 3)

One participant highlighted that new collaborations can come with inequality in the power dynamics, and that the rebalancing of inequitable power relationships is an essential component of social innovation not captured within the BEPA definition. They argued that the emphasis on collaboration should include an emphasis on equality:

Social innovation can happen as long as everybody recognises that everybody is coming in as an equal and working together. (SE Representative 2)

Therefore, the emphasis on new collaborations and relationships is largely meaningless, since almost all business activity involves new collaborations. Furthermore, the BEPA definition lacks any emphasis or consideration of changing power dynamics within these collaborations (see Ayob, Teasdale, and Fagan 2016; Moulaert 2009).

Good for society

Participants agreed with the notion that social innovation had to be *good for society*. Interestingly, participants did not reflect on defining society, but instead focused their discussion on individuals and beneficiary groups they worked with. Inherent in these discussions was a perception that, for the socially innovative activities they were involved with, the results of these activities tended to be ‘very micro-impact’ (Social Entrepreneur 2). This form of micro-social innovation contrasts with larger recognized social innovations, such as the suffragette or other civil rights movements that transformed society. Those closer to providing individual care seemed more drawn to this

conceptualization of social-as-individual. For example, the Social Worker noted that the definition failed to include the voice of the individual beneficiary, yet the social innovations he was involved with:

... listened to the voice of the actual service user ... because ultimately, what you're trying to do is make a difference for the person receiving it ... There needs to be the voice of a service user in there just to say ... 'How's it going to benefit the person receiving the service?' (Social Worker)

One participant presented a more critical reflection, referencing subjectivity in determining what is good for society, and highlighting the need to consider the counterfactual i.e. what would have happened if the social innovation had not occurred:

Is it better than what's out there? For some people, yes, of course it is. But for little old Mrs McGlump who says, 'I've worked all my life and I paid my stamps (*health and care insurance*) and I need a care worker in my house', telling her, 'Well, actually, no, you're going to have to go out and join a walking group', that's not better. (Government Procurement Manager)

This alludes to a perception in Scotland that, while small scale social innovations delivered by social enterprises are beneficial to their users, when viewed from a macro-perspective the gradual erosion of welfare rights and public services over the last thirty years has left a social care system that is considerably worse for society. This was echoed by NHS Worker 3, a community links practitioner in a deprived area of Glasgow, who noted that while social innovation can benefit the social care sector if/when it works for everyone, systems and communication processes have not necessarily kept pace with choice and opportunities. In other words, while there were more care options available to clients in some areas, a lack of awareness of those options remained as 'it's not explained to them that you can get different types of care that's more personal to you' (NHS Worker 3). There is currently a gap in our understanding of who in society can access and benefit from effective and well-evidenced social innovations and who cannot, whether because of organizational capacity, individual capabilities, or simply awareness of these opportunities. Therefore, what might be good for society might also exclude some individuals, such as Mrs McGlump, and might even be detrimental for those individuals.

Enhance society's capacity to act

The BEPA (2011) included a fifth component, that social innovations must also *enhance society's capacity to act*. This phrase generated some confusion and a variety of interpretations. For example, one social entrepreneur defined '*capacity to act*' as attending and participating in the socially innovative activity:

Capacity to act? Yes ... absolutely, especially with the participants. They are acting. Yes, I have created this, and yes, the same space could be empty every week, but the leaders in this are the communities, and they are acting. (Social Entrepreneur 3)

Others defined the phrase as empowering the community and social enterprise participants to act on local issues. The Funder noted that this is part of what is expected of social enterprises anyway, though she questioned the fairness of that expectation:

... you would hope that that is what (*social enterprises*) would be seeking to achieve, to enhance society's capacity to act to make things run a bit better by tackling a specific social issue or challenge. So, I would agree with that but I think it's quite ... a lot to ask of an individual social innovator ... (SE Funder)

Evaluating whether a social innovation enhances society's capacity to act, like determining whether it is good for society, may take time to evaluate, however, as the innovation's impacts might not be immediate or as anticipated. Social Entrepreneur 2 noted:

... the social innovation might be used to address a certain social issue but what you might find over time is it actually might address something else ... we looked at brain aging and the cognitive needs, but then we saw the effects in terms of wellbeing and confidence ... and we realised that what we were doing was innovative but for a different reason than we initially anticipated. (Social Entrepreneur 2)

It is notable that almost all participants focused on the enhancement of social entrepreneurs' capacity to act as opposed to the capacity of those receiving social care. To some extent the changes in social care in Scotland reflect a gradual transfer of power/capacity to act from the state to social entrepreneurs, but whether this reflects a relinquishing of responsibility or transfer of power (or both) lies outside the scope of this paper.

Concluding discussion

Our paper began from the premise that social innovation is subject to multiple interpretations. While this offers opportunities to policy makers and practitioners to convey meaning through their socially innovative activities, the often-conflicting interpretations can also lead to confusion. Hence, we sought to understand how practitioners navigate these meanings. Our study initially sought to apply the BEPA definition of social innovation to develop a matrix to help assess whether, and how, an activity or organization is socially innovative. The study involved only a small purposively sampled group of participants who were involved in social enterprise-led social care in Scotland. It could be argued that the focus on a 'sector' with obvious social impact could distort our findings and future research could usefully replicate aspects of our study within other contexts.

Participants were initially enthused by the idea of a relatively simple tool to assess social innovation. All tended to concur with the BEPA definition. The Social Innovation Definitional Matrix resonated with practitioners and funders, and when applied to popular exemplars of social innovation, correctly identifies them as such along each of its five dimensions. However, subsequent discussions suggest that each of the dimensions are imprecise and open to considerable interpretation. Moreover, as participants noted, each of the dimensions are not exclusive to social innovation. From a constructivist perspective, almost any activity can be seen by some people as meeting some, or all of the five dimensions. Hence, the study fails its initial objectives since the matrix will also lead to 'false positives'.

However, our research, in viewing the academic/policy concept of social innovation through the lens of practitioners, highlights its shaky foundations. In essence, a concept symbolically enthused with positive meanings is revealed as meaningless when deconstructed by practitioners. The concept (or signifier) can be considered 'floating' in that it absorbs meaning and becomes subject to multiple, often contradictory interpretations. In many ways, social innovation acts as an empty signifier which has been ritualized and fetishized 'carrying the aura of the timely and modern, which can then be employed for the communication of diverse and contradictory

semantic contexts and associations' (Offe 2009, 550–551). Here we make six reflections which we hope serve as provocations aimed at taking the field forwards. Firstly, social innovation is perhaps best conceived as an umbrella concept seeking to unite progressive advocates of social change (Ziegler 2017). As different academic and policy/tractional traditions gather around the term, some form of consensus has emerged around its definition. This is reflected in the widespread adoption of the BEPA definition. However, while correctly identifying most examples of what might be considered social innovation, the BEPA definition conceivably incorporates almost any organization or activity. Social innovation might be returned to its roots as a more neutral concept used to investigate the links between (technological) innovations and social processes (e.Tarde 1899). This approach, most evident in the work of Jurgen Howaldt, would focus on how innovations shape and change social practices (whether for 'better or worse'). However, the permeation of the concept into popular discourse, where it has assumed universally positive connotations (Ayob, Teasdale, and Fagan 2016), makes this almost impossible to achieve. In essence we have gathered a broad-based movement of people supportive of social change, but with no common understanding of what kinds of change are desirable, and what we would like the new world to look like (Teasdale et al. 2021). Here we would call for academics using the concept to be more open about their normative standpoints (see for example, Moulaert 2009) and for practitioners to be more open as to the contours of the social change they aspire to. This may lead to fragmentation in the movement, but we would see this as preferable to a movement calling for 'nice things' without specifying what these nice things should be.

Second, our participants suggested the focus on 'new ideas' is misplaced to the extent that ideas do not suddenly emerge from nowhere. They evolve and mutate as they travel across time and context (Tarde 1899). As academics, our research questions might usefully focus on how ideas labelled as social innovations have evolved. Historical methods can divert attention to the positive and negative aspects of social innovation through placing them in their wider geographical and historical contexts. For example, Teasdale et al. (2022) show how commercial microfinance (a precursor the credit crisis of the late 2000s) can be traced back via Grameen Bank, Women's collectives, and the village bank movement in Germany, to mutual aid responses to the problems brought about by capitalism during the industrial revolution in England. Ideas are not the property of a single individual or organization, and focusing on the collective dimension to their evolution can aid understanding of the social processes leading to innovation.

Third, the notion that social innovations should meet social needs more effectively than alternatives is well placed, but almost impossible to conclusively demonstrate. The social world is not a laboratory and what works in one context may not work in another context even if it were possible to entirely replicate it. As such, the fetish with scaling successful social innovations maybe slightly misplaced. We need to be mindful of what it is we are trying to scale. Is it the outcomes of successful social innovations or the collective processes (see Torfing 2019) that can lead to these outcomes?

Relatedly, the idea that social innovations leads to new collaborations is important. But here we need to be mindful of what kinds of collaborations we are referring to. Almost all market activity leads to new collaborations, as one of our interviewees highlighted. However, a more radical approach to social innovation than implied in the BEPA definition (e.g. Moulaert 2009) would focus on the

transforming of power relations within these collaborations. Researchers, policy-makers, funders and practitioners should focus on how organizations can transfer power to beneficiary groups (e.g. Avelino et al. 2019) rather than leaving them as passive consumers of services.

Fifth, the idea that social innovation should be good for society is problematic since who determines what is good for society? Our participants tended to focus on their beneficiary groups rather than society as a whole, assuming that any net gains must be by default good for society. This perspective, common in much of the academic literature, ignores that innovation has winners and losers. Rather than hide away from this, we call for more attention to be given to the losers from social innovation (see Brandsen 2016; Nicholls and Ziegler 2019).

Finally, social innovation should enhance society's capacity to act. This dimension was somewhat neglected by participants in our study, as it is in much of the academic literature. Rather than critique this dimension we call for greater attention to be paid to how social innovation(s) can enhance collective agency. Despite thousands of years of 'progress' the world is arguably in a more perilous state than ever before. It is easier to hide away from these problems than to act since, as individuals, we are unable to combat global warming, war or COVID. Yet, as the participants in this study remind us, the gradual rights won by the social care movement in Scotland by and for people with dementia was a collective effort fought over many years. As a more affirmative critique (see Dey, Steyaert, and Teasdale 2012), we therefore conclude by re-emphasizing our call for scholars of practitioners of social innovation to enter debate as to what the world should look like as we build movements to get us there.

Note

1. In the (Scottish policy) context of this paper, the term 'social enterprise' refers to third sector organizations that rely on trading for at least half of their income. However, we recognize that the term is subject to as much contestation as social innovation.

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