

Title

The construction of social innovation and undesirable consequences of innovation - a critical reading of the European Union's social innovation policy

Authors

Beata Segercrantz, Hanken School of Economics, P.O.Box 479, Helsinki 00101, Finland.
E-mail: beata.segercrantz@hanken.fi

Hannele Seeck, Visiting Senior Research Fellow, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK.

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Introduction

This paper examines the social construction of social innovation in the European Union (EU) context, with a particular focus on how unintended and undesirable consequences of social innovation are addressed within this context. A wide range of meanings have been attributed to social innovation. It is not rare to read that social innovation is a relatively new field of research and policy (for example, European Commission, 2010) or even a buzzword (Pol and Ville, 2009). Pol and Ville (2009, 878) argue: ‘The term “social innovation” has entered the discourse of social scientists with particular speed, but there is no consensus regarding its relevance or specific meaning in the social sciences and humanities’. However, Godin (2012) shows that the concept of social innovation is two hundred years old. He illustrates how social innovation, having first been associated with socialism and social reform, is currently and dominantly seen as an alternative to established ways of addressing social needs.

In this paper we do not adopt any of the definitions listed above as a starting point. Instead we draw on a social constructionist stance and are interested in exploring how meanings around social innovation are constructed in and through EU policy documents and websites. That said, we are not interested in social innovation as a social process as such, but in the so-called ‘desired effects’ attributed to social innovation in the EU context. Various desired effects are described, for example, in a report from the Bureau of European Policy Advisers (2010, 7, emphasis as in the original) as follows:

‘... **social innovation can offer a way forward in coping with the societal challenges and the crisis that the EU is facing.** At a time of major budgetary constraints, social innovation is an effective way of responding to social challenges, by **mobilizing people’s creativity** to develop solutions and make better use of scarce resources. Social innovation can also promote an innovative and learning society. It is a starting point for creating the social dynamics behind technological innovation.’

In other words, we are interested in social innovation because, despite a variety of different definitions, this particular type of innovation has increasingly been highlighted by, for example, policy makers and funding bodies as an important *solution* to various contemporary social goals, demands and challenges. Although we focus on this particular type of innovation, we argue that various forms of innovation are often strongly interconnected. For

example, technological innovation is often an important element of social innovation or vice versa, as shown, for example, in the quotation above.

In addition, we wish to explore the construction of unintended and undesirable consequences of innovation in the context of social innovation. Undesirable consequences of innovation can potentially follow from any kind of innovation and can thus potentially increase as social innovation is diffused and involves more and more people. Unintended undesirable consequences of innovation have so far gained very little attention in innovation research (Rogers, 1983; Sveiby et al., 2012). Therefore, it seems important to reflect upon the construction of social innovation in policy-making and whether such constructions open up opportunities to minimize unintended undesirable conditions and consequences of innovation. We believe it may be fruitful to study social innovation and unintended undesirable consequences of innovation simultaneously because social innovation seems to be one of the types of innovation that explicitly, although not exhaustively, attempts to deal with undesirable social conditions related to, for example, ageing populations, rising unemployment and climate change (Bureau of European Policy Advisors, 2010). Undesirable social conditions are, of course, not synonymous with undesirable consequences of innovation, but they may or may not be interrelated or overlap.

Before we proceed, we wish to emphasize that this paper does not argue that the foremost consequences of innovation are negative and undesirable: there are numerous examples of how innovation has improved the well-being of many social actors and groups. Nonetheless, there seems to be a call for more studies focusing on the previously relatively unexplored unintended and undesirable consequences of innovation in order to create more efficient social innovation policy design, implementation and evaluation.

Theoretical frame of reference: a social constructionist approach to social innovation

We draw on a social constructionist theoretical perspective (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1985; Segercrantz, 2009), as well as on translation theory (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) and glocalization theory (Czarniawska, 2008), in order to examine (1) how social innovation is constructed in key EU documents and websites, and (2) how unintended undesirable consequences of innovation are included/excluded in these documents. By adopting a social constructionist approach we want to develop an understanding of the

discursive practices by which knowledge around social innovation and the consequences of innovation are developed in the EU context (Berger and Luckmann, 1966).

The approach adopted builds on the assumption that social innovation, like any social reality, is socially constructed through continuous processes of ‘differentiating, fixing, naming, labelling, classifying and relating’ (Chia, 2000, 513). Through these processes, various social categories often come to seem so ‘natural’ to people over time that social actors begin to take them for granted, thus producing and reproducing certain social orders. When these categories and the resulting social orders are experienced as natural, they gain the status of an ‘independent’ or ‘pre-existing’ object rather than being seen as a product of social interaction.

An important aim of the approach adopted is to explore and reveal interactions and processes through which taken-for-granted knowledge of reality - for example of social innovation - emerges (Gergen, 1985). In particular, the attempt is to draw attention to potentially silenced voices and to ask, for example, as Gergen and Thatchenkery (1996) do: ‘to what extent are the existing modes of human activity desirable, for whom, and in what ways?’ And: are there any problematic features of the prevailing views on social innovation? Social constructionist accounts thus highlight the ways in which different actors do not have equal opportunities to make use of and construct discourses in specific contexts (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Some voices gain more legitimate positions in policy-making while others are marginalized or silenced (Grant et al., 2005). This implies that in the context of policy-making there are always a number of discourses that construct specific versions of social innovation while excluding others. Hence, it can be argued that the dominant construction of social innovation, as of any social reality, appears potentially to have suppressive effects. Dominant social constructions of social innovation, which shape policy documents and websites, may therefore have implications for how undesirable consequences of innovation are addressed when strategies of social innovation are implemented and social innovation is diffused. Moreover, social innovation policies may have implications for how social actors in different subject positions and at various levels of society can or should act, that is, for how social innovation emerges and unfolds. In other words, policy documents and websites on social innovation may act both as resources that actors can draw on in their interaction with others and, on the other hand, also as discursive constraints that limit their actions.

Data material and methodology: discourse analysis of policy documents

In order to explore the social construction of social innovation, data material was obtained from the Internet. With an interest in EU policy documents, we began with a reading of the official European Union website (<http://europa.eu>) in order to find key documents on social innovation. A search on the EU websites with the key word 'social innovation' resulted in a large number of hits. These hits of key documents on social innovation led to moves from one link to another and to several different EU websites. We identified the European Commission's Innovation Union website (http://ec.europa.eu/research/innovation-union/index_en.cfm) as a particularly interesting website for our study. This was because the Innovation Union website focuses mainly on innovation as one of the seven flagship initiatives of the Europe 2020 strategy (the EU's latest strategy), and can therefore be interpreted as a website of high priority and importance. On this website one can find a list of the Innovation Union's key initiatives, one of which is Increasing Social Benefits. The website provides several links to other EU websites (for example, http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/innovation/policy/social-innovation/index_en.htm) that define and discuss social innovation. We chose two documents for analysis: (1) the brochure *This is European Social Innovation* and (2) the report *Empowering People, Driving Change. Social Innovation in the European Union*. To analyze how the documents enter into understandings of social innovation at a different level we also chose to include in the analysis the website of the EU Social Innovation Europe initiative. This was because the Social Innovation Europe website was launched after the publication of the documents analyzed and we wanted to explore how those documents had influenced the work of the Social Innovation Europe initiative. We were interested in particular in the part of the website where each EU member state presents a description of social innovation in its own national context because this provides an opportunity to analyze complexity, paradoxes, contradictions, tensions and flexibility around the dominant discourse on social innovation.

In line with social constructionist thought, the study was carried out as a discourse analysis. We view discourse as practices of talking or writing which brings objects such as social innovation into being (Hardy, 2001). For example, the dominant discourse on innovation has constructed innovation as 'always being good' and thus promotes a neglect of undesirable consequences of innovation (Sveiby et al., 2012). More specifically, a discourse can be said to constitute a set of texts. Texts may, for instance, be written or spoken language, cultural

artefacts and so on (Grant, Keenoy and Osrick, 2001). These texts invoke certain practices in which the material realities of social innovation are generated; the texts produce a certain version of events (Burr, 1995). One could say that discourses are ‘embodied in texts, but exist beyond the individual texts that compose them’ (Hardy, 2001, 26). Moreover, a specific text, for example a policy document, is a ‘discursive component’ or a manifestation of discourse; it is interrelated with other texts which together give clues to the nature of the discourse and is in that sense not meaningful on its own (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). However, texts not only embody discourse; meanings and discourse are also produced and contested in and through texts. This implies that the contexts in which texts are located and discourses are generated are important and must be taken into consideration when exploring discourse and discursive effects. Hence, it must be emphasized that the focus of concern is not texts as such, as in textual analysis for example, but rather the relations between text, discourse and context (Phillips and Hardy, 2002).

The degree to which different empirical work in discourse analysis focuses on the content of discourse *and/or* the processes of social construction varies (Phillips and Hardy, 2002). We view meanings and processes of meaning-making as tightly intertwined. That is, meanings are seen as only gaining their ‘content’ in relation to the local practices of interaction within which they are produced; meanings are ultimately also language practices rather than abstract objects detached from specific contexts. This implies that an emphasis in a study either on meanings or on the process through which they emerge should only be seen as an analytical separation between the meanings and their production (Jokinen and Juhila, 1999). Our focus is primarily on the processes through which language constructs various social phenomena (Phillips and Hardy, 2002), such as social innovation. Moreover, we are interested in how social innovation is discursively constructed in and through EU documents and websites, although we also pay some attention to the types of meanings attributed to social innovation.

In order to analyze the processes of social construction around social innovation, this analysis was divided into three stages. The starting point for the analysis is to examine EU policy documents as rhetorical accounts in and through which meanings emerge (Jokinen and Juhila, 1999). Our aim is to develop an understanding of *how* specific meanings are produced in a convincing way in certain local conditions in order to persuade an audience to accept these meanings. This should contribute to an improved understanding of interactive language usage around social innovation in the specific local contexts of EU policy making.

We begin with an analysis of explicit definitions of social innovation in the selected EU policy documents. More specifically, we first carried out an analysis of the introductions to the documents analyzed, where definitions of social innovation are defined as providing a starting point for the rest of the document.

During the second stage, we analyze the full documents in order to explore how the definitions are used in different ways and how arguments are constructed. We pay particular attention to how social innovation is potentially interconnected with undesirable social conditions and with undesirable consequences of innovation.

In the final stage of the analysis, we draw on translation theory (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) and glocalization theory (Czarniawska, 2008). We operationalize Czarniawska's ideas by examining how the discursive production of social innovation in the documents analyzed during stages one and two is translated by the different EU states in their contributions to the Social Innovation Europe website, again with a particular focus on undesirable consequences of innovation. We believe that differences between these EU-level documents and this country-specific web content tell us something about glocalization, that is, about how the same ideas are translated differently in different contexts.

Concluding remarks

Innovation research has increased significantly, in particular during the last two decades (Fagerberg, 2005), while unintended undesirable consequences of innovation have so far gained very little attention within this field of research (Rogers, 1983; Sveiby et al., 2012). Mainstream innovation studies have predominantly constructed innovation in positive terms and this so-called 'pro-innovation bias' seems to have contributed to a neglect of undesirable consequences of innovation (Sveiby et al., 2012): innovation is seen as solving, and not as itself contributing to, undesirable social conditions. By comparison with innovation as a whole, social innovation has only more recently gained increasing attention on the agendas of scholars and policy-makers. We think it is important already at this stage to draw attention to unintended and undesirable consequences of (social) innovation in order to ensure that such unintended consequences will not be as marginalized within processes of social innovation as they have been within the field of innovation as a whole. As we have already highlighted,

undesirable consequences can potentially follow from any kind of innovation and hence have the potential to increase as social innovation is diffused and involves more and more people. Hence we wish to explore whether dominant constructions of social innovation open up opportunities to minimize unintended undesirable conditions and consequences of innovation. Our aim is to study and challenge the 'discursive becoming' of social innovation, including dominant discourses, as to facilitate conceptual resources for social actors seeking to transform potential suppressive effects within social innovation. We believe that, by unmasking the 'becoming' of certain effects, we can produce new alternatives for the future (Gergen and Thatchenkery, 1996).

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<http://europa.eu>

(The European Union website)

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(The European Commission's website 'Innovation Union')

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/policies/innovation/policy/social-innovation/index_en.htm

(EU website with links to Social Innovation material)

http://ec.europa.eu/enterprise/flipbook/social_innovation/

(Brochure "This is European Social Innovation")

http://ec.europa.eu/bepa/pdf/publications_pdf/social_innovation.pdf

(Report "Empowering people, driving change. Social Innovation in the European Union")

<http://www.socialinnovationeurope.eu/>

(The EU initiative "Social Innovation Europe" website)