Examining the social processes of 'Innovation' to inform the development of a new framework for making sense of ' Social Innovation'

CHAPTER 10

Examining the social processes of 'Innovation' to inform the development of a new framework for making sense of 'Social Innovation'

Patrick Dawson*
School of Management and Marketing
University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia
University of Aberdeen Business School, University of Aberdeen, Scotland

Lisa Daniel
School of Commerce
University of Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

*corresponding author
Email: patrickd@uow.edu.au

Abstract
In the face of increasing pressure to change and adapt to the needs of highly competitive business markets, it is not unusual for management to focus on the commercial payback on technical innovations and to downplay social processes. Typically, company survival is explained in terms of an 'innovation imperative' where new products and services are part of the dynamic business environment for securing and maintaining competitive advantage. Historically, the focus has been on how to translate innovations in science and technology into commercial applications. We contend that whilst largely downplayed, social processes have always been essential to understanding innovation and that with the growing public concern with societal well-being, there is an increasing interest in the broader elements associated with social innovation. From a selective historical examination of innovation, we examine the conceptual links and various attempts to delineate the 'social' and 'technical' aspects of this process. Some of the earlier academic work on the social shaping and social construction of technology is considered and the use of Socratic dialogue as a tool for accommodating different viewpoints in assessing processes of innovation is discussed. We conclude by calling for more debate and critical assessment on this concept of social innovation and the need to clarify how this contrasts and compares with related concepts of technical and business innovation.

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Introduction

Theories of innovation have been at the centre of academic concern for a number of decades. Adam Smith's (1998) classic book on how to generate wealth stimulated a raft of research into

aspects of innovation and productivity at work. Burns and Stalker's (1961) seminal work on *The Management of Innovation* highlights the importance of organisational design on a firm's ability to innovate. The focus of these studies is largely on the exploitation of new ideas in the commercial realisation of business innovations. For example, Bessant and Tidd (2007, p.29) summarise innovation as: "the process of translating ideas into useful – and used – new products, processes and services". These innovations range from incremental improvements to radical change, and comprise: product innovations; service innovations; process innovations; management innovations; and market innovations (Andriopoulos and Dawson 2009, p.31-33). This emphasis on commercial concerns raises questions about how these may compare and contrast with assumptions that underlie the emerging concept of social innovation. In our exposition of social innovation, we aim to uncover some of the similarities with previous concerns and interests in integrating innovation into the human experience (Orlikowski 1992), as well as show how a shift in emphasis can shed useful insight on how to promote and develop innovations that provide new and novel ways of tackling 'problems' which provide collateral outcomes that will ultimately benefit society as a whole. Whilst company innovation remains rooted in the world of commerce and competition, social innovation is linked to notions of social beneficence and change that supports the well-being of people in organisations, communities and society.

Innovations in science and technology have led to a range of different products and services that have both improved (e.g. community health) as well as those that have threatened the life of others through the development of ever-more sophisticated military equipment. There are spin-offs from military research and space programs that can have major social benefits, such as developments in materials science and knowledge of advanced compounds, which can be used to improve construction, the insulation of homes and so on. Similarly, one could anticipate that innovations with good social intentions could result in unanticipated outcomes, such as the well-known example of the introduction of rabbits into Australia. We therefore contend that innovations driven by social or commercial concerns may produce unexpected outcomes, and that whilst influenced by objectives are not determined by them. In other words, whilst commercial innovations may compliment social developments, these two types of innovation can also come into direct conflict.

One example is the development of pharmaceutical products to make a profit and the drive for low cost drugs to alleviate health problems in the developing world. In these cases, social innovations may compete with hard commercial ventures and be a threat to business objectives. Under such circumstances, socially responsible and environmentally beneficial innovations may be stifled and patents secured in order to sustain market domination for certain types of products and services. For example, Mike Cooley (1982), at the Lucas Aerospace Combine, showed in the 1980s how commercial products are often purposefully developed to require higher levels of maintenance since most of the profit is based on the need for users to replace products or components over ever-shorter timeframes. From an advanced engineering perspective, this is clearly not an innovation in technical performance. It is a business innovation to secure market share and maintain income flows as customers need to replace worn components. They demonstrate how it is possible to design irrigation systems that require little maintenance. While this would not be technically difficult to achieve, the experience highlights how business market pressures can frequently skew innovations in the development of new products and services

away from those that support social well-being and towards the profit needs of companies.

The following sections examine the social dimensions to innovation through a brief historical analysis of the industrial revolution in Britain. We examine the link between the social and technical aspects of innovation and identify how the scope of our definition is important in delineating our phenomena of interest. Some of the earlier academic work on the social shaping and social construction of technology is considered and the use of Socratic dialogue as a tool for accommodating different viewpoints in assessing processes of innovation is discussed. We forward a provisional model for making sense of social innovation that integrates two key knowledge domains and highlights the complex processes involved. We conclude by calling for more debate and discussion on this emerging theme of social innovation that links to other topical areas, such as social business, social entrepreneurship, social capital and corporate social responsibility.

A brief history of Industrialisation: the social dimension
In the transition from a mainly agrarian society to an industrial economy (late 19th and 20th century), social factors were critical to understanding processes of innovation. This historical period was marked by major changes in the relationship between nations, our attitudes to work and the family, and to the ways in which we make sense of the world in which we live. For example, during the early phases of industrialisation considerable emphasis was placed on the effective utilisation of machinery (Dawson 2003, p.26). The new industrial entrepreneurs were inventors, quick to adopt new ideas and to find new ways of doing things. For example, Richard Arkwright established a mill in Nottingham that used a water-powered spinning frame that he had developed. Steam provided the basic source of power for mechanisation (Thomas Newcomen built the first usable steam engine in 1712 which was considerably improved in 1781 by James Watt). The harnessing of steam power to newly developed machines enabled rapid improvements in productive output. The abundance of rich mineral resources, particularly in coal and iron ore, led to the construction of bridges and canals, the building of ships and the development of railways. George Stephenson built the first practical railroad locomotive in 1829 and his famous 'Rocket' could travel at 36 mph. New industrial towns developed around Glasgow, Newcastle, Manchester and Birmingham, and new forms of industrial organisation were imposed on workers seeking employment in these growing urban centres. In its infancy, the industrial revolution offered wealth to the new industrial owners and hardship for working families who often had to suffer long hours and poor working conditions for little pay. Rapid urbanisation brought with it many social problems and prior to the UK *Factory Act in 1833,* many people – including children – suffered under unregulated factory regimes (Cooke-taylor 2009). During this time, employees had little say about the changes imposed on them by owner-managers other than through classical forms of resistance, such as industrial sabotage (Dawson 2003, p.27).

Processes of innovation were central to the industrial revolution which, through the development and refinement of 'steam power', transformed the way people worked, lived and travelled. It also lowered the cost and increased the availability of products and services. Interestingly, the innovative steam engine – the major driver for change – was not a specific technical innovation but more of a synthesis of discrete knowledge domains. In this example, the control mechanisms associated with the watchmaking industry, together with the skills and knowledge associated

with boiler construction (developed as part of the brewing industry), and the expertise to produce finely-honed and accurate barrels in the design of cannons (for the military) were all brought together in the development of the steam engine. These three domains of knowledge had existed for some time but there had been little cross-fertilisation of ideas. In linking control mechanisms with boilers (that can hold steam under pressure) and engineered barrel technology (for the design and development of pistons), it was possible to harness the power of steam and this innovation subsequently brought about radical social change (Andriopoulos and Dawson, 2009, pp.360-1). In this example, we see a mutual shaping of the social and technical in the processes of innovation that bring about significant change. As Hobsbawn (1969, p.60) notes:

> The early Industrial Revolution was technically rather primitive not because no better science and technology was available, or because men took no interest in it or could not be persuaded to use it. It was simply because, by and large, the application of simple ideas and devices, often of ideas available for centuries, often by no means expensive, could produce striking results.

Throughout the 19th century conditions for factory workers were hard and there were considerable health hazards from the accumulation of large numbers of people in the new urban centres. In fact, the development of the oval glazed sewerage pipe was one of the most significant social innovations in this period, as it improved sanitary conditions and reduced the health risks of urban living. Nevertheless, factories presented hazardous working conditions and relatively poor wages. Henriques (1979, p.76) captures the plight of children working in the cotton, flax and woollen mills of this period: "there were accidents and industrial diseases. Machines were too close together and children drowsy from fatigue, caught their hands, or lost their fingers while cleaning moving machinery during mealtimes". In England, the *Ten Hours Bill* and other forms of legislation were implemented to improve the well-being of employees and in particular, the treatment of children in the workplace (see, Kydd, 2010).

Although social processes have always been an essential part of the successful uptake of new innovations, much of the emphasis in the 20th century has been on innovations for commercial success. The well-known study by Trist and Bamforth (1951) illustrates how it was only when the new longwall innovative methods of coal mining failed to produce their expected business benefits that recognition was given to the importance of the social dimension (see also Trist & Murray 1993). In recent years, the emphasis has shifted from a commercial focus towards a greater recognition of the importance of pursuing innovations that are commercially viable whilst also accommodating the needs of societal well-being. Changing contextual conditions, as well as media coverage and public debate, have all raised public awareness about social and environmental issues. Moreover, with the growing disparity between top income earners and the rest of the working population, the assumptions behind the drivers for economic prosperity are being called into question. New bodies, such as the *Institute of Contemporary Scotland*, have emerged and developed with the aim of supporting social innovations that improve the education and well-being of individuals, groups and communities in economically constrained and remote areas. Thus, the 'economic' and 'technical' imperatives that have long been assumed as the drivers for innovation are now being questioned with the re-emergence of social issues, the rise of the social entrepreneur (Leadbeater 1997) and notions of social business (Yunus 2008).

Definitional scope of the social and technical dimensions

One question that arises from our brief examination of innovation centres on whether a distinction can be made between the social and technical aspects of this process. Also, whether there is value in making a distinction between the purpose and intent of an innovation. For example, does a well-intentioned innovation that ultimately has a destructive capacity warrant the label 'social innovation'? Furthermore, we suggest that considerable confusion can arise from debates between protagonists where the difference is largely of definitional scope (not arguing about the same thing) rather than more substantive matters. In this case, it is worth looking briefly at some of the debates around technical innovation. For example, a central concept in the sociology of technology perspective is that of 'interpretative flexibility' (see MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999; McLoughlin 1999). From this perspective it is argued that science and technology can be used in a number of different ways in the design and development of new products and innovations. At the outset of this process, the range of possibilities and options for design are as broad as our interpretive abilities allow. However, as we hone in on our choice of designs and reject other possibilities our minds become more focussed on a common understanding of what an innovation can and cannot do. This process – of moving from a wide range of choices and options towards particular technical developments – is referred to as 'closure' (the closing off of other possibilities). Once a particular perspective of a technical innovation becomes established and commonly accepted, then it is seen to have stabilised. Pinch and Bijker (2000) discuss the use of pneumatic tyres on bicycles as an innovation that took some time to be socially accepted by the public, as for some time it was viewed as being an unsafe and rather ugly addition ruining the symmetry of the bicycle (see Pinch & Bijker 2000, p.709). Today, however, it would be difficult to imagine a bicycle without pneumatic tyres.

So where does this take us? At one extreme, all innovations could be seen to be social insofar as they represent social processes and cannot be viewed as a discrete technical artefact; at another, a broader concept of what constitutes the 'technical' could lead us to consider all major innovations as technical innovations that have various social effects when they are taken up and used. What becomes important is our definitional scope. In other words, what matters is the extent to which our conceptualisation of the 'technical' involves social elements and/or the stages at which we incorporate notions of the 'social'. Do we consider the conceptualisation and translation of new ideas as essentially a technical, social, or mutually shaping process? What is the relationship between these dimensions in the design and development of innovations? These questions are not easily resolved and may be further complicated as innovations developed in one context may become stabilised, de-stabilised or reconfigured in another context. Users may adopt products and services in ways that were never intended by the developers and the experience of users may feed back into future developments and innovations. In circumstances where competing and changing belief systems exist, then the direction and use of innovations are likely to vary.

In understanding these social and technical dimensions, the key is not agreeing on a common dividing line between the social and the technical, but rather in understanding that there will always be interplay between the more material elements of innovations and the social processes that inevitably form part of their design, development, uptake and use (McLoughlin & Dawson 2003).

Conceptualizing social innovation

As we have seen, innovation can be conceptualised in several different ways. We suggest that a good starting point is to view innovation as 'new ideas that work'. This differentiates innovation from improvement (which implies only incremental change); and also from creativity and invention (which are vital to innovation but lack the hard work of implementation and diffusion that make promising ideas useful). For Bessant and Tidd, successful innovation is a complex and difficult process that involves transforming ideas into new products or services that 'make a mark' (2007, p.440). Their emphasis is largely on the profit-driven version of innovation but they do consider social entrepreneurship in discussing the growing public concern for greater Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). They argue that these social entrepreneurs seek innovations that make a social difference, are socially valuable, and that improve the health and well-being of society. Social entrepreneurs do not measure success in terms of performance and profitable returns on investment but instead aim to achieve long-term changes of significant social value. A good example of this would be the Aravind Eye Care system in Madurai, India, that performs over 200,000 cataract operations per year. Interestingly, in a manifesto for social innovation, the *Young Foundation* (Mulgan 2006, p.5) notes that it is surprising how "little is known about social innovation compared to the vast amount of research into innovation in business and science". Yet, as already shown, innovations that bring about significant change are necessarily composed of both social and technical dimensions, and they are not devoid of social processes in the creation of new ideas and their implementation and broader diffusion. Spotlighting these social processes and their place in technological and organisational change as well as the intentions and agendas behind these developments helps us to improve our understanding of this concept of social innovation. As Josephine Green (2005, p.18) states: "if you only concentrate on technology research then you invariably get technology innovation, but if you also research the social and the cultural, then you get social innovation. Technology and social innovation promises a more balanced quality of life and a more inspiring future".

But once again ambiguity around this concept of social innovation can obfuscate rather than clarify debate. Social objectives are a common driver behind discussions on what social innovation is and how it should be defined. However, there can be different intentions behind the development of innovations ranging from business, economic, political, social or militaristic. Social innovations often aim to contribute to the welfare of society and to improve the social capital of people in organisations and communities. Such innovations may involve using existing skills and knowledge in innovative ways to meet social goals, or using existing or new technologies in new ways to improve social circumstance by addressing domestic, infrastructure or environmental goals. Consequently, whilst there is a mutual shaping of the technical and social, the economic and political dimensions also come into play in securing the uptake and development of these innovations in the pursuit of well-being. For our purposes, we commence with a simple definition, namely: *Social innovation refers to new ideas that meet social objectives, often in conjunction with other organisational, technical or scientific goals*. Defined in this way the term has, potentially, very wide boundaries – from gay partnerships and new concepts of 'family' to new ways of using mobile phone text messaging, and from new lifestyles to new products and services (Mulgan 2006, p.9). It can occur at several different levels of society, such as: broad communities and regions (e.g. EEC); the nation state; regional areas within countries; and local communities.

Within business organisations, social innovations may occur across industries and industry sectors, within multinational companies, at the organisational level and at the local branch, plant or site operations. An organisation's ability to innovate is necessarily a result of the collective capabilities of its individuals and their activities and relationships in supporting the organisation to reach its business goals. The social system internal to the organisation is fundamental to the development and adoption of innovations, because without social sanctions the changes necessary to achieve successful integration of new or different regimes or technologies are likely to fail. The organisational context presents a pertinent parallel to broader social issues in the regional and national adoption of technologies and innovations. Social innovation within organisations is therefore a confluence of factors across the various domains in the internal environment, which are further moderated by numerous contingencies in the external environment relative to the social concerns and interests of organisational participants. As such, social innovation is more than just Research and Development (R&D) or product and process developments; rather it is an innovation that recognises an essential commitment to the people to whom the change seeks to contribute. Whilst business innovations remain rooted in the world of commerce, social innovations seek social well-being and the public good, and they attempt to resolve economic, social and environmental challenges and not simply to provide market rewards.

To make sense of social innovation, we offer a synthesis which integrates two key knowledge domains.   We contend that innovation processes and social processes can be characterised as two distinct fields of knowledge that interlink and overlap in practice.   Whilst the emphasis and focus can vary, we argue that these domains come together as a complex event that is captured by our proposed conceptualization of social innovation (see, Figure 1). An event which occurs in a complex social system will inevitably have multiple dimensions. In order to manage that inherent complexity we propose that social innovation has four fundamental elements by which it can be understood. These consist of: i) the *people;* ii) the *challenge* (which may be a problem or an opportunity); iii) the *process* (by which that challenge is negotiated and understood); and iv) the *goal* (the resolution of the challenge and hence increased social well-being).
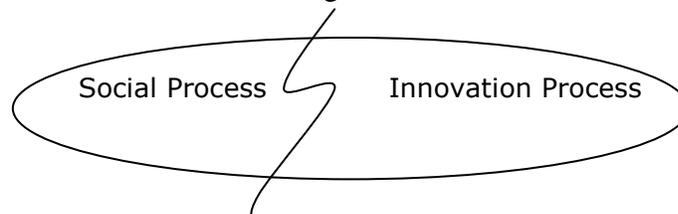

Figure 1. Conceptualizing social innovation as a complex event

Each of these four elements is a source of complexity within themselves. The *people* involved in these processes may be part of a formal, informal or spontaneous group that are linked by special interests, common goals or a shared agenda. It is suggested that the need for cohesion and delineation are fundamental to the successful management of social innovation projects. The *challenge* may be either a problem or an opportunity for the group. In situations where the resolution of the challenge involves ambiguous new strategies, then concepts or tools may be required to aid clarification, negotiation, and prioritisation. The challenge may be internal or external to the group, and it may be radical or apparently intractable, disruptive, incidental or dynamic (shifting). The *process* will necessarily be complex, contingent on context, culture and

politics, and it is likely to be further compounded by functional and relational issues. It may be spontaneous, radical, fragmented or emergent, but it will ultimately be unique. The *goal* of social innovation is not about delivering breakthrough technologies or novel scientific advances, but rather to resolve social challenges that will advance social well-being. The management of these innovations will require iterative negotiations to re-evaluate resolutions and outcomes to ensure fit with the community and the continuous inclusion of shared knowledge, evolving perspectives and interactive experiences. An example of social innovation can be seen in the use of song and dance as a method to deliver health education to illiterate communities in remote Indonesian islands to overcome preventable chronic diseases and ultimately to improve social well-being.

Another useful illustration is provided by the micro-credit financing initiative of Muhammad Yunus (founder of Grameen Bank) who has also developed the concept of social business (Yunus 2008). He has demonstrated how social good and business success need not be in conflict but can in fact service each other. He identified a group of entrepreneurs who had a common goal and shared agenda around the issue of securing funds for business activities. However, these aspiring entrepreneurs were unable to secure funds from the traditional banking sector. The challenge was how to support economic and social development from below and develop an innovative solution to these financial barriers. The process involved examining the issues and engaging in open dialogue, and the goal centred on resolving impediments to entrepreneurial activity. This social innovation was achieved through the development of a micro-financing system that provided the necessary funds to promote entrepreneurial activity and generate economic growth. In this case, it involved identifying a need that conventional business saw as an unfeasible commercial venture and then implementing an innovative solution that enabled the energies and ideas of those wishing to be innovative to be realised. This has stimulated activity and growth in an area that was previously unable to innovate due to lack of funds (see Yunus 2008). These achievements of Muhammad Yunus were recognised in 2006 with the award of a Nobel Peace Prize.

This case example illustrates the need for interpretive flexibility and dialogue to enable complex interrelationships to contribute to the patterning of goal determination. A shared focus through common agendas and shared expectations is likely to provide some boundaries for the group; however priorities and differing experiences mean that interpretations of the nature and scope of the problem will vary. As such, open dialogue, constructive negotiation, and reflective decision-making are essential tools in the management of social innovation, since it is dialogue and not design that is central to the processes of social innovation. In the section that follows, we propose that Socratic dialogue can be used as a useful tool in sustaining this type of open and reflective dialogue.

The contribution of Socratic dialogue
Over the last 30 years there has been an ongoing interest in the place and use of dialogue in management processes. David Bohm, an American-born quantum physicist, made an important contribution in his reflections on thought and dialogue (Nichol 2002). He forwarded the notion that thought is not an individual but a collective phenomenon and that stories create dialogue space within which various meanings may flow (Bohm 2000). He contended that 'free space' – under what became known as the 'Bohm Dialogue' – could accommodate different personal beliefs and aid more effective communication. In the case of tackling ethical dilemmas,

Maclagan (1998, p.48) argues for the use of the dialogical as opposed to traditional judgemental approaches to decision-making, as this enables individuals with conflicting views to reflect on those of others. The use of dialogue has also been taken up in a number of key management areas (see Isaacs 1993; Jacobs & Coghlan 2005, and Heracleous &Barrett 2001) such as leadership development (Mirvis & Ayas 2003), organisational learning (Schein 2003) and knowledge management (Kakabadse, Kakabadse & Kouzmin 2003).

Peter Senge (2003), in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, promotes dialogue as a way to achieve a common understanding and reduce conflict. Senge (2003, p.10) notes that: "The discipline of team learning starts with "dialogue," the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together".   To the Greeks dia-logos meant a free-flowing of meaning through a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually. When these have been attained, Senge suggests participants are more likely to listen more effectively and to contribute more constructively to the development and evolution of ideas and the arrival at an agreed position (see also Schein 2003).   He also explains how this form of dialogue differs to contemporary discussions and debates between individuals and groups then tend to be rooted in what he terms as 'concussion' and 'percussion' where the aim is to persuade people over to accepting 'your ideas'.   As he explains: 'literally a heaving of ideas back and forth in a winner-takes-all competition' (Senge 2003, p.10). This is similar to the Socratic dialogue techniques which contend that goal evaluation can best be achieved through the mutual reflection and critical enquiry by participants of their own position, as well as of the position of others (see Nelson 1940). In so doing, a forum for communication is established that can facilitate sustained and constructive dialogue. Socratic dialogue requires that participants go beyond reflecting on their own perspective and relinquish previously held views and refute previously held beliefs. Unconscious perspectives and implied or assumed knowledge must be made explicit to ensure that all information is available for critique. Exposition of such tacit understandings ensures that knowledge is accessible to all participants. In this way curiosity and open-minded reflection are encouraged (Skordoulis & Dawson 2007, p.1003).

Too often decisions are made on the basis of partial understanding, limited data and unreflective assumptions about people and organisations. We propose that the Socratic dialogue technique provides a useful method for ensuring more reflective decision-making that involves the active participation of people in the process of social innovation. Although it is not possible to give a full explanation in the space provided here, a lively Socratic dialogue allows active participation by all. It also requires a capacity for self-examination, reflection and humility in 'knowing when one does not know'. When thinking Socratically, people discover that they cannot clearly define ideas and concepts that they previously held with certainty. This awareness in turn inspires further curiosity and open-minded reflection, as the quotation below illustrates (West & West 1998):

> I came to see that, though a great many persons, and most of all he himself, thought that he was wise, yet he was not wise ... so when I went away, I thought to myself, 'I am wiser than this man: neither of us knows anything that is really worth knowing, but he thinks that he has knowledge when he has not, while I, having no knowledge, do not think that I have. I seem, at any rate, to be a little wiser than he is on this point: I do not think that I

> know what I do not know.' I tell you that no greater good can happen to a man than to discuss human excellence every day and the other matters about which you have heard me arguing and examining myself and others, and that an unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates in Plato's Apology)

In this exploration of social innovation we have developed a perspective which avoids the commercial agenda typically associated with innovation. We are seeking to develop a theoretical position and conceptual model that can provide a useful perspective for further research into social innovation in organisations. This approach extends the field of innovation management beyond business outcome agendas to acknowledge the innate importance of social agendas. By breaking down the inherent complexity of social innovation into four fundamental elements, we hope to provide a method of accommodating shifting perspectives, collective contributions and novel approaches to the resolution of social issues. In this way, the management of social innovation activities which seek to improve societal well-being through the novel resolution of challenges no longer relies on collateral opportunities but rather on deliberate management strategies that engage in open dialogue and critical reflection.

Conclusion
This initial attempt at developing a new framework for making sense of social innovation still requires further refinement and adjustment. However, it has drawn attention to existing bodies of literature and how these relate to our understanding of social innovation. At the outset, we illustrated how commercial products are often developed to ensure profitability and how this strategy may be achieved by limiting the operational lifespan of component parts. Service, maintenance and component replacement are often integral to innovative product developments. Although improved technical specification (speed, processing capacity and so forth) may form part of these business innovations they differ from purely technical innovations in an advanced science and engineering sense. In turn, social innovations may not seek the most advanced technical solution, but rather identify a pathway that best serves the interests of particular groups or communities. Thus, whilst business innovations may aim to secure profits and maintain or grow market share, social innovations are directed more towards social beneficence and societal well-being. In this paper we have sought to develop a new framework for making sense of social innovation and in so doing, we illustrate that whilst social processes are integral to all forms of innovation (technical, social and business) the aims and intentions behind these innovations can vary significantly.

Our main point of departure has been the argument that all forms of innovation involve social processes and that social innovation involves collaborative understanding through dialogue, and reflection by the people that it impacts upon, as well as flexibility and social consideration in decision-making for the successful exploitation of new ideas that improve societal well-being. Although science and technology can provide the materiality of change, there is always an ongoing socio-technical dynamic that is contextually shaped. In our view, too much of the conceptual debate is caught up with promoting a certain divide between the technical and social, with a focus on dualism rather than duality. The argument resolves around different conceptualisations and definitions rather than on substantive issues around how to promote, support and manage processes of social innovation. We seek to sidestep this diversion in reconsidering the concept of social innovation – an innovation that brings about social benefits *in*

conjunction with achieving particular technological, organisational or scientific advances – and the conditions that promote social innovation in organisations, the community or society. We suggest that a more critically reflective approach could contribute to opening up our minds to interpretive possibilities in the generation of new ideas and their application to innovations that meet social goals. Socratic dialogue provides the opportunity for broader conversations that enable individuals and groups to move beyond 'traditional thinking'. These techniques could also be used in conventional areas to investigate the potential to service social goals in ventures that are commercially viable. Whilst we recognise that the concept of social innovation will evolve (like all new ideas) and new interpretations will present different ways of understanding, we are optimistic that there is enough substance here for critical reflection and constructive debate on the concept of social innovation.

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