

“Bridging business innovation and pure social innovations in extensive network settings”

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Abstract

This study investigates the emergence of business innovation and pure social innovation in an extensive network setting (Aarikka-Stenroos et al. 2017). The study addresses a gap in our understanding of whether and how pure social innovations can be bridged with a for-profit motive, including for-profit motivated business innovations. In exploring this gap, we address the need for empirical contributions to the debate about the potential dark side of commercialising social innovations. We use the context of Australian social impact bonds (SIBs) in one Australian state to explore two research questions: (a) *can business innovation and pure social innovation be bridged in extensive network settings?* and (b) *if so, how is the process of bridging business innovation and pure social innovation peculiar compared to traditional conceptions of the business innovation process?* SIBs can be described as a product on the social impact investment market, which is a concerned market (D'Antone et al. 2017) that seeks to generate social and business innovation through cross-sector organisational alliances. We draw on a Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT) framing, which posits that cognitive diversity of the type found in extensive network settings is required for innovation generation. We find that pure social innovations and business innovation can be bridged in an extensive network setting, but that these organisational alliances are peculiar in that the large scale diffusion of a pure social innovation does not necessarily accrue a commensurate diffusion of business innovation and financial benefit. We propose a reconceptualisation of the combined business-pure social innovation process in which commercial value is found primarily in the processes which link the stages of innovation, rather than in diffusion.

1. Introduction

Studies of the nexus between social and business innovations have largely focused on social entrepreneurship (Phillips et al. 2015) and on bifocal innovations which have the potential to generate profit whilst also contributing to quality or quantity of life (Pol & Ville 2009). Little work has been undertaken to understand whether and how a for-profit motive, including for-profit motivated business innovations, can be bridged with pure social innovations. Pure social innovations are those which cannot satisfy a free market profit motive as they *“have both of the central features of a public good: it is virtually impossible to exclude others from the benefits of the new idea, and the marginal cost of an additional person making use of the new idea is zero”* (Pol & Ville 2009). Addressing this gap provides a significant contribution to the public debate over a growing trend toward the commercialisation of innovations traditionally seen as the domain of the welfare state, such as improvements in public social services and the alleviation of complex social problems like homelessness, prisoner recidivism and early childhood disadvantage (Joy & Shields 2013; Schinckus 2017).

To address our two research questions, we use a longitudinal, qualitative, constructionist case study method to investigate the emergence of social and business innovation in social impact bonds in one Australian state. We frame our study with Complexity Leadership Theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey 2007), which proposes that the interactive struggle for meaning-making between all individuals within a network setting influence innovation generation. We focus on events and processes in time (Halinen, Törnroos & Elo 2013; Langley 1999) as revelatory of the exploratory and exploitative learning required for innovation (Rosing, Frese & Bausch 2011).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical framing

A Complexity Leadership Theory framing of extensive network settings perceives networks as Complex Adaptive Systems of the type described in the physical sciences, including biology, chemistry and physics (Mitleton-Kelly 2003; Stacey, Griffin & Shaw 2000). In a human Complex Adaptive System (CAS), the exchange of information and meaning among people is the 'fuel' or energy that allows the system to adapt and survive (Stacey 1996; Allen 2001). Accordingly, understanding the processes and mechanisms of meaning making and information sharing which occurs in the relational interactions between people is of paramount importance to understanding how innovation emerges in an extensive network setting. This relational perspective harmonises with the Industrial Marketing and Purchasing (IMP) approach to innovation networks, which focuses on the use of relational influence to strategically contend with the heterogeneity of extensive network settings (Corsaro, Cantù & Tunisini 2012). The leadership focus of Complexity Leadership Theory extends the IMP approach by allowing for an understanding how and why certain actors within the network exert disproportionate influence on the relational dynamics of that network.

From the relational perspective of CLT and the IMP approach, to investigate innovation is to study the process of meaning making and information sharing which lead to changing social and organisational structures (Bradbury & Lichtenstein 2000). Actor-network theory (Latour 2005) is commonly used in the IMP literature to investigate these relationally created social dynamics of innovation (Halinen & Tornroos 2005). CLT is similar to actor-network theory in its emphasis on investigating the paradoxical tension between human agency and the unpredictability of networks. However, CLT focuses only humans agents, and explains unpredictability as the result of interplay between human "agentic behaviors" and "non-agentic social dynamics" (Uhl-Bien & Marion 2009), rather the interplay of the agency of inanimate artefacts with human agency. The agency question in CLT is focused on understanding the limitations of human agency and what can be done to influence social dynamics beyond agentic control, rather than on a presumption that all things emerge agentially.

This emphasis on the not-necessarily-agentic processes of social construction places our study of innovation within a constructionist ontology, rather than the constructivist ontology of actor-network theory. Constructionism posits that reality is shaped by a collective, shared sensemaking endeavour which is expressed through language and other human relational exchanges (Uhl-Bien 2006), and results in outcomes such as stable social structures (Kennedy et al. 2012) which despite their apparent stability, are in a continual process of being re-negotiated through collective meaning-making (Giddens 1984). Thus reality is neither shaped by individuals (relativism/constructivism) nor exists independently of a human understanding of that reality (post positivism); rather, it is found and constructed in the interactive spaces between people as they talk and act reality into being (Bradbury & Lichtenstein 2000).

2.2 Context

Social impact bonds are a contractual arrangement for the provision of social services with private capital, are characterised by the diversity of individual and institutional goals and cultures amongst partners engaged in the alliance, and are deeply affected by relational processes of influence (Mollinger-Sahba et al. 2018). SIBs are a topical feature of the Australian social impact investment industry, with four of Australia's six State governments signed up to or developing social impact bonds (Tomkinson 2017) and recent Federal Government and industry reports recommending increased allocation of public resources toward SIB development (Treasury 2017; Muir et al. 2017). SIBs are highly relevant to our research question, as not only are they positioned within extensive network settings, but it can also be strongly argued that the innovations which SIBs purportedly promote are pure social innovations. These innovations take the form of preventative public social services and may involve, for example, a new and more effective way of making families safe so that children in out of home care can be restored to their family of origin, a new way of preventing prisoner recidivism, or a new way of guiding recovery for those

experiencing mental illness (Gustafsson-Wright, Gardiner & Putcha 2015). Further, the contractual variations on the 'prototype' SIB contracted in 2010 in the UK in relation to prisoner recidivism can be considered business innovations (Dear et al. 2016). Through enabling the commoditisation of public social services, SIBs offer new ways to accrue a return to institutional and private investors.

3. Methods

This multiple case study features an embedded design in which the units of analysis in each case are leadership processes and mechanisms, events in time, and meso and macro structures shaping and being shaped by leadership processes and mechanisms. According to the theoretical framing, leadership is interpreted as micro-processes and mechanisms of influence over meaning making (Hosking 1988), which contribute to the interactive dynamic from which innovation processes arise (Uhl-Bien, Marion & McKelvey 2007). Case selection was purposive and involved theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt 1989), in that social impact bonds were chosen for their ability to illuminate the focus of the research questions: bridging social and business innovation in extensive network settings. The seven cases consisted of six in one Australian state, which we call our 'focus' state, and one social impact bond from a different Australian state. The incorporation of this comparison case allowed for the use of replication logic in the analysis (Pettigrew 1997; Yin 2009).

The research question necessitated a study of nested CAS both within and surrounding social impact bonds. The study of nested systems poses a methodological challenge that compels a research design which is both longitudinal and multi-level (Makkonen, Aarikka-Stenroos & Olkkonen 2012; Halinen, Törnroos & Elo 2013). Accordingly, the research investigated the temporal aspects of each social impact bond case by developing an event trajectory of their emergence through both retrospective and real time analysis of leader narratives of that unfoldment. The event trajectory accounted for and explained the links between context, processes and outcomes across macro, meso and micro level events and structures. Data was collected via 40 semi-structured interviews with purposely selected leaders involved in the cases, and triangulated with second order data in the form of publicly available documents such as web pages of organisations involved, industry newsletters and media articles. Additional triangulation was achieved by feeding back initial findings to informants (Beverland & Lindgreen 2010) in the form of a draft social media article titled "A Tale of Two Contracts: the Evolution of SIBs into PPPs". Informant feedback on this article indicated that many of the preliminary findings were both novel and controversial. In integrating informant feedback from this article into the analysis, special care was taken to analyse reflexively the role that the researchers played via this article by inserting themselves into industry debates surrounding the evolution of social impact bonds and the business and social innovations emerging from them.

4. Findings

In addition to the generation of analytic memos during data collection, a number of transcripts have so far been reviewed by informants, and a preliminary analysis of some transcripts and informant responses to the draft social media article has been undertaken. Our initial findings indicate that that pure social innovations and business innovation can be bridged in an extensive network setting, but that these organisational alliances are peculiar in that the large scale diffusion of a pure social innovation does not necessarily accrue a commensurate diffusion of business innovation and for-profit benefit to the network. We theorise that the nature of pure social innovation calls for a reconceptualisation of innovation as a linear process which starts with basic and then applied research, and ends in commercialisation via diffusion. We propose that instead, bridging business and pure social innovation relies on finding

commercial value primarily in the processes which link the stages of innovation together, rather than in the end diffusion of pure social innovations arising from an organisational alliance.

4.1 Large scale diffusion of pure social innovations

Several of the cases had generated pure social innovations. For example, one case had led to development of more holistic and integrated way of both funding and delivering services: *“what I basically did was pull together a few components of what we currently do. So we’re funded separately, in separate streams for the different service model components. And I thought – wouldn’t it be great to bring it all together into a flexible arrangement. And that’s what I did.”* – NFP informant. However, only those SIBs which were at a more mature stage of contract delivery had resulted in the wide scale diffusion of a pure social innovation. In these mature cases, which all dealt with a similar complex social problem, pure social innovation took the form of a radical new way of perceiving what success looked like in terms of the life outcomes for those vulnerable people who were engaged in the social services delivered under the SIBs. This new paradigm was operationalised in new multi-billion-dollar contractual requirements for government-funded not-for-profit service provider organisations: *“So we’ve been going through a massive thing, and we’ve just rewritten those contracts. Like, gone out to the market and renegotiated everything and completely changed the model.”* – Government informant. These new contracts were dyadic, government-NFP contracts which took no account of the private sector and intermediary actors involved in SIBs.

In addition, bridged social and business innovations in the form of a new way of contracting public-private partnerships (PPPs) for built infrastructure had arisen in part out of the learning from the social impact bonds. We termed these “PPNFPs” (an acronym for public-private-not-for-profit partnerships) in the draft social media feedback article sent to informants. All of the PPNFPs highlighted in the article had been brought to the attention of the researchers by informants during the interviews. One was large scale and valued in the billions of dollars, and most others were small scale and still in the negotiation phase. All PPNFPs were innovative in the way in which social outcome goals were delivered alongside built infrastructure, and social service delivery integrated with the potential for investor financial returns. One informant in particular whose work bridged both the private and government sectors, saw PPNFPs as the outcome of SIBs and the future of social impact investing in Australia: *“People are just ignoring the reality that this is the future, not SIBs”* – paraphrased from untranscribed interview with Private sector informant. The innovative nature of these PPNFPs was highlighted by several informants through comparison with a local PPP currently being delivered but under intense public scrutiny for its lack of socially sustainable and responsible practices: *“What they’re doing is just crazy, they didn’t think about it properly in the first place, its not what people wanted or needed”* – paraphrased from untranscribed interview with Philanthropic sector informant.

Some of the partners to the social impact bonds stood to benefit financially or through the social impacts accrued as the result of PPNFPs. However, their benefit derived not directly from the diffusion of the pure social innovations in the social impact bonds, but rather because these organisations had developed a strong professional knowledge base about assessment of and engagement in ventures which involved the bridging of both business and pure social innovations, and were therefore uniquely positioned to take advantage of the opportunities to partner in PPNFPs: *“well, you know, we knew from our work with social impact bonds that we had to keep the model simple”* – paraphrased from untranscribed interview with NFP informant. Similarly, many leaders involved in SIBs had developed their capacity to engage in a SIB through a hybrid professional history in which they had worked across diverse sectors and organisations: *“What made the difference for me was actually that I’d done law I reckon. So you think very much, well, what does the state have control over – what actually would impact on their budget, bottom line. So I think that understanding that is fundamental to a good social bond proposal and not that many people*

have that, mysteriously. The people who work on service level have never really thought about who does what and why.” – NFP informant.

4.2 Informant reactions to initial findings

With only one exception, all informants who responded to the draft social media article sent to informers by the researchers as a way of feeding back these preliminary findings, and who were not from the government sector, were not aware of the widespread diffusion of the pure social innovation in the mature cases until they had read the article. In addition to expressing surprise at the diffusion, a few informants from organisations with a primarily for-profit mandate expressed a sense of disappointment: *“the challenge is that the social investor market is not actively nurtured by those that seek to take advantage of it” – Private sector informant.* These informants had expected any such diffusion to be accompanied with commensurate diffusion of the SIB contractual form and financial return to investors and intermediaries (arranging consultants) engaged in those contracts. Others anticipated this sense of disappointment and so found our interpretation of events alarming, yet did not deny its plausibility: *“This will give the [social impact investment] market the wrong idea!” – Government informant.*

In relation to the mutation of SIBs into PPPs that the article proposed, some informants denied that the form of these new PPPs was causally related to learning arising from the SIBs: *“I don’t think this is a fair comparison ... the comparison is apples vs oranges” – Private sector informant.* Others perceived our findings to be somewhat plausible, and expanded upon technical similarities and differences between the two contractual forms. Both of these types of responses paid much more attention to the forms of the contracts – the actual innovations – rather than to the processes of learning which linked those forms. Still others found our interpretation of events plausible but did not see our interpretation of the chain of events as crucial to the ongoing sustainability of their work. These informants were largely from an NFP background, and saw both PPPs and SIBs as just two of many innovations in a ‘toolbox’ of mechanisms which they would leverage to meet their organisational vision: *“for us social impact investment is just another tool to provide a broader range of services to people” – NFP informant.* For them, engaging in the ongoing processes of learning involved in these innovations was more important than the form of the contracts. On the other hand, one informant found the new-form PPPs somewhat dark and sinister, and the ongoing adaptation in the form of such organisational alliances filled with potential for harm to the public good: *“If PPNFP’s are what we all have to look forward to I worry even more about what will happen in civil society.” – Philanthropic informant*

5. Discussion

5.1 Linear and non-linear approaches to innovation

We explain this diversity of opinions over the SIB innovation process by proposing that practitioners perceive pure social innovation through two primary theoretical lenses. The first is an innovation mindset of general linear reality which, through the use of algebraic representation of social realities, has shaped empirical research of the social world (Meyer, Gaba & Colwell 2005). This approach to innovation is embedded in the ‘theory of change’ program logic (the relationship between inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes) used in the design of social services programs, a logic which has been popularised over the last decade in part through adoption by large, international philanthropic organisations (Kellogg Foundation 2017; Gates Foundation 2010). Informants who viewed the social impact bonds through a theory of change paradigm harboured strong expectations that wide scale diffusion would result in commensurate financial profits, and less easily related to the narration of a non-linear diffusion of innovation through transmutation of the social impact bond contractual form into the new form PPPs. This linear approach to innovation and to the management of public and philanthropic resources has been called into question by scholars from multiple disciplines who base their work on a Complex

Adaptive Systems approach (Beinhocker 2006; Klijn 2008). Some informants saw innovation processes through a theoretical lens more akin to a Complex Adaptive Systems approach. For these informants, innovation and organisational adaptive ability involved multiple mechanisms and processes in which they held their goal or vision in mind but the innovations could mutate unpredictably on the journey toward that goal. These informants more easily perceived the paradox between the theory of change approach and their experience of social and business innovation as a non-linear and unpredictable process, and found the narrated link between SIBs and PPPNFPs plausible. There was of course a continuum between these two paradigms, with some informants perceiving the non-linear nature of innovation in an extensive network setting, yet expecting to be able to control the flow of information and learning arising from that diverse setting in which they were just one actor, if a powerful one. Thus we found that events were perceived by informants through two primary theoretical paradigms: linear, and non-linear.

The two paradigmatic camps into which we categorise our informants cannot necessarily be seen as conflicting, or one as superior to the other in effecting the bridging of business and pure social innovations. Both mindsets had exerted a co-constructive influence on the processes of business and pure social innovation which had eventually enabled not only a bridging of the two, but also the diffusion of a pure social innovation. For example, the linear, theory of change mindset had strongly shaped the approach to methodological rigor in the evaluation of the social service programs delivered under the social impact bonds. It was these evaluations that generated feedback loops of learning throughout the extensive network, learning which identified a successful pure social innovation, and led to the eventual widespread diffusion of that pure social innovation. Yet such diffusion was only made possible by those who did not feel bound to a theory of change mindset as a necessity for large-scale and continuous innovation. This is partly because the theory of change approach to scientific rigor was prohibitively expensive due to the magnitude of professional resources and time required to establish linear causation between the innovation being evaluated and the social outcomes achieved. Yet some partners insisted that as a matter of risk assessment and management, this expensive approach to continuous evaluation was a necessity. Partly because of this insistence, and also for other reasons relating to the commercial unviability of scaling a pure social innovation, government partners in the focus state had diffused the pure social innovation without commercialising it through the inclusion of investors.

5.2 [Reconceptualising innovation in order to build the bridge](#)

Our findings point to a need to reconceptualise what is traditionally perceived as linear, if overlapping, stages of the innovation process, a process for which the end stage is always seen as commercialisation through diffusion (Aarikka-Stenroos & Lehtimäki 2014). We propose a reconceptualisation of the combined business-pure social innovation process in which commercial value is found primarily in the processes which link the stages of innovation, rather than in diffusion. Such a model takes account of the empirical evidence in our case that even though the extensive network setting was vital to generation of both business and pure social innovations, and partners obtained ongoing value from engagement in the networked generation of those innovations, commercial gain and business innovation was not commensurate in scale to diffusion of the pure social innovation. Instead, commercial value took the form of organisational learning. This learning served assessment of and engagement in an ongoing networked process of finding innovative ways to bridge business and social innovation, such as in PPNFPs. Ongoing engagement in bridged innovation ventures could provide a powerful way to strengthen social licence to operate, and to generate shared value (Kramer & Pfitzer 2016) in the form of increased social stability in contexts in which for-profit organisations operate. It could also provide a sustainable source of pure social innovation for those organisations dependent on a public good mandate, particularly government bodies.

One avenue for future research is a focus on how organisational learning influences the processes of bridging social and business innovation while at the same time being generated by those processes. For example, we found that there were individuals in every case we studied who, through their hybrid knowledge of the diverse institutional logics and cultures within the extensive network, were key to facilitating the inter-organisational generation of learning and the resulting innovations. This learning in turn generated more such individuals, who became almost multi-lingual in the sense of their ability to comprehend and operationalise diverse organisational discourses and cultures. Future research could explore the role of such personnel and their relational interactions within the extensive network setting, and the influence of these interactions in the bridging of business and pure social innovations.

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