Is the firm a meaningful unit of analysis for social innovation?

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December 11, 2020
QUASI Seminar Series
Disclaimers

- Resist a microeconomic concept of the firm ... use organization instead
- Favor a concept of the organization as a political arena - site of multiple agendas, motives and goals
- Image of the organization as a force of positive change

- Social innovation broadly defined as a process to address social problems or societal challenges in new ways

The organization as the ideal site for research on social innovation
Why organizations are ideal sites to study social innovation

1. Understand Innovation and Scaling

Innovation does not create impact...

Seelos and Mair (2012) Innovation is Not the Holy Grail, SSIR
Seelos and Mair (2013) Innovate and Scale – A Tough Balancing Act, SSIR
Seelos & Mair (2016) Innovation and Scaling for Impact, Stanford University Press

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Why organizations are ideal sites to study social innovation

1. Understand Innovation and Scaling

Opening up a spectrum of questions:
• What are pathologies that derail organizations from a productive path to impact?
• How do organizations suppress or remove such pathologies?
• What are different archetypes of how innovation and scaling hang together?
• ...

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2. Understand transformation processes

- How can one organization make a difference?
- Use programs organizations design and implement as empirical windows to understand transformation process on the ground
- Studying how organizations intervene in social systems requires deep engagement with the organization, the problem, the people and communities affected and take stock of existing knowledge
- Opportunity for us as community of scholars: mechanism based inquiry to develop a repertoire of transformation processes
3. Interrogate the mandate of organizations

- How do we justify and appraise organizations doing social innovation?
- Most of our research is not clear about normative claims but is based on normative assumptions
- *Common good anarchism vs societal division of labor*

- How do organizations complement and supplement the ideal societal division of labor and facilitate transition to a more just society?
- Should social innovation carried out by organizations proliferate? if so how?
We ought to
• Stop asking how organizations cope with conflicting logics
• Start asking how they make progress on social problems and societal challenges and what is their mandate to do so

My own hope and wish for research on social innovation
• as disciplined imagination and disciplined exploration
• based on conceptual clarity, empirical rigor and practical usefulness