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# What is social innovation?

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# Purpose

- Based on a review of recent literature in the area, this deck seeks to illustrate and deconstruct differences in how the concept of “social innovation” is used by different authors/commentators
- Though not exhaustive, the illustrations and deconstructions that follow aim to help avoid possible misunderstandings between and among policymakers and analysts and proponents of the concept...
  - ... especially in relation to further policy research and (ultimately) the potential development of new policies to support such innovation



## There is no “correct” definition of “social innovation”

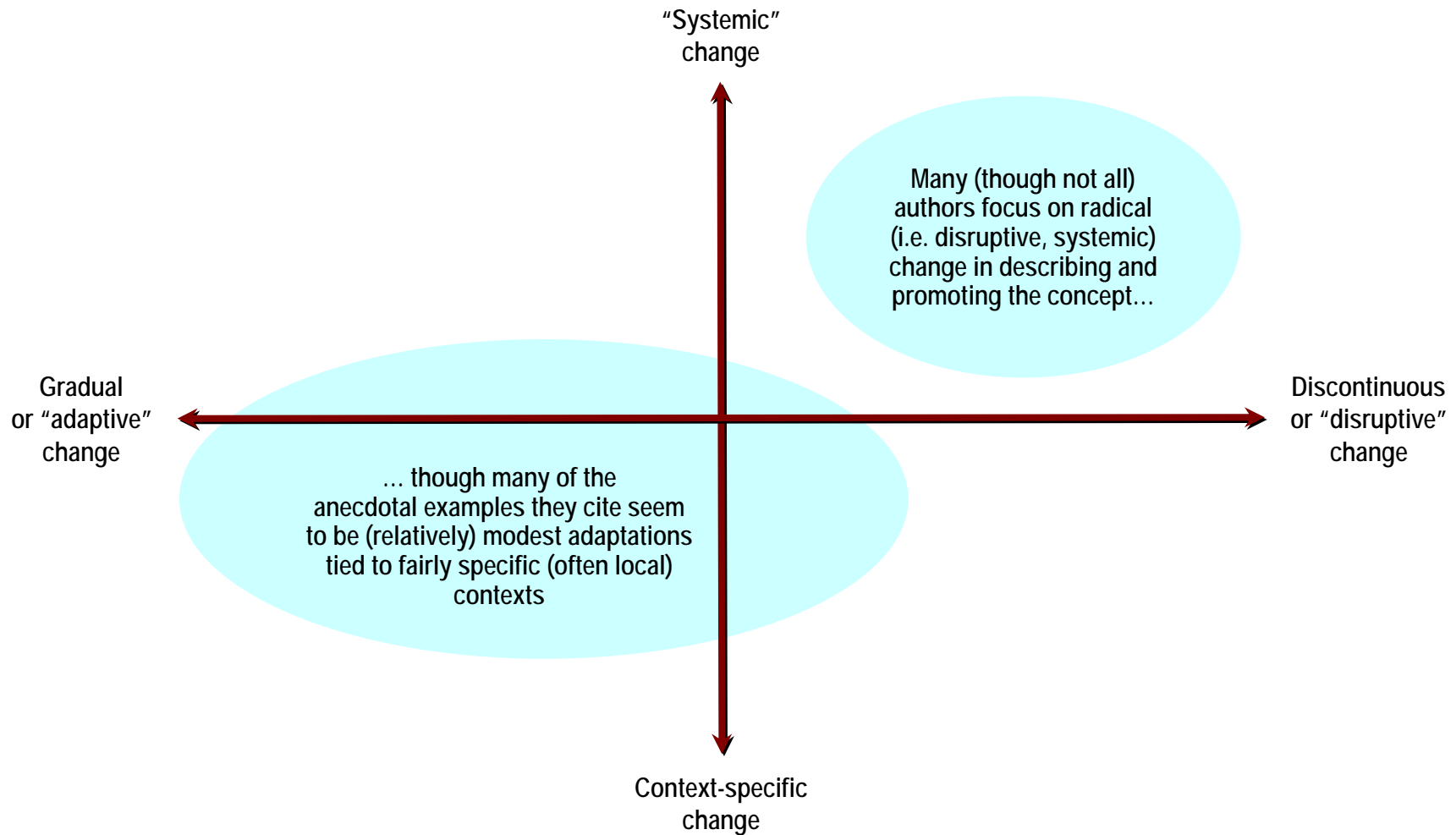
- Usage of the term “social innovation” is of relatively recent vintage (dating back at most a decade or two)...
  - ... though the phenomena it is used to describe are generally not new
  - ... and can be said to constitute long-standing practices among human societies (though many authors would argue its prevalence has grown significantly in recent decades)
- Given its recent vintage, it is hardly surprising that a wide variety of meanings appears to have been attached to “social innovation” (often by the same authors/commentators)
- While the current multiplicity of meanings may eventually coalesce into a common definition enjoying broad consensus, there is currently still a significant risk of “dialogues of the deaf” in discourses on it



## What constitutes a social “innovation”?

- There appears to be general consensus among the literature surveyed that social “innovations” entail novel applications of ideas...
  - ... though the ideas themselves need not necessarily be new: the process often involves adaptations (or novel recombinations) of existing ideas and their application to new areas
- There also tends to be a “systems” focus (i.e. an interest in social innovation as a mechanism for achieving systemic change)...
  - e.g. as a way of tackling underlying causes of social problems rather than just alleviating symptoms
- There is less agreement, however, on how widespread an innovation should be (or the magnitude or time frame of its impacts) for it to be properly considered a “social innovation”

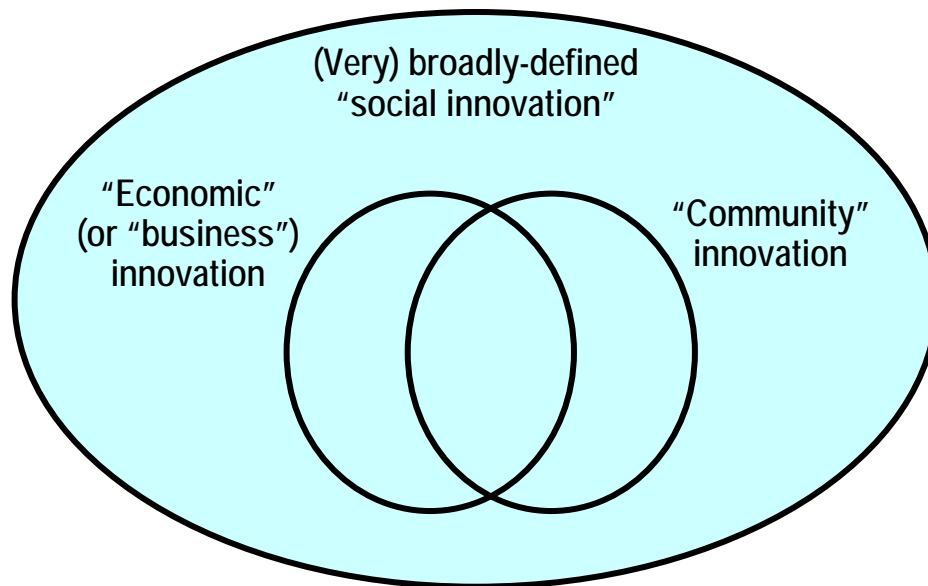
# What constitutes a social “innovation”?



# What's "social" about "social innovation"?

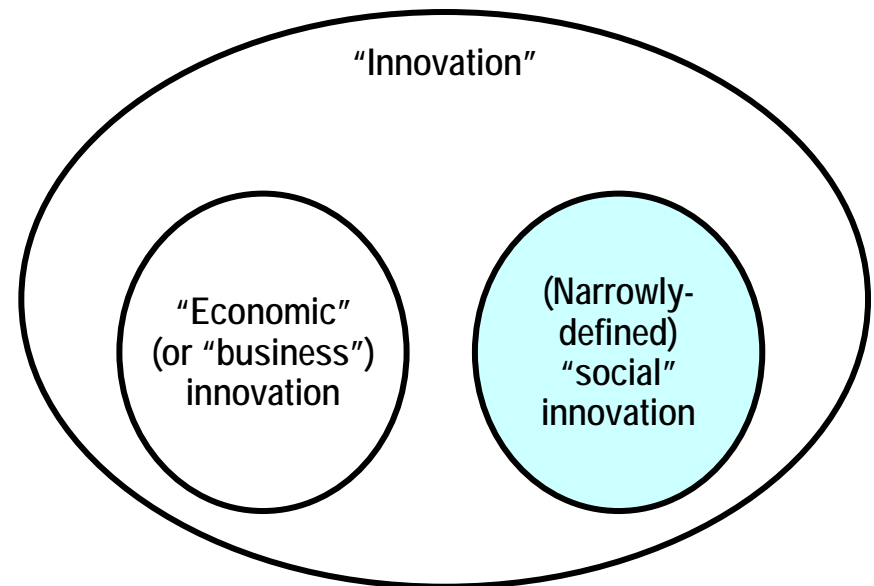
There appear to be a variety of ways for innovation to be seen as "social":

Some definitions are so broad that they can encompass even the more familiar concepts of business or "economic" innovation...



... since businesses too are social actors that are typically embedded in and/or overlap with broader social structures

Toward a different extreme, some definitions appear to make hard and fast distinctions between "economic" and "social" innovation...

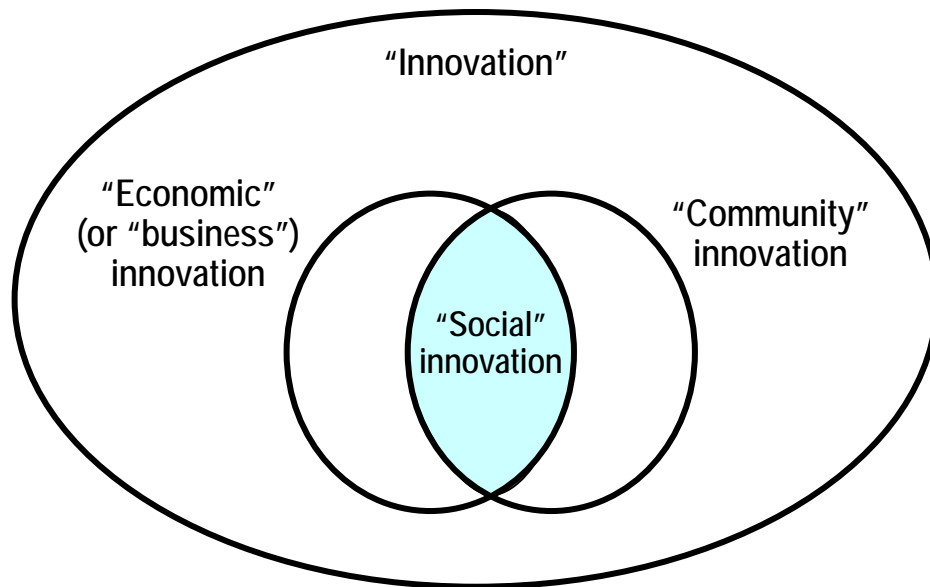


... in which "social" innovation appears to be the preserve of non-business ("community") actors with fundamentally different objectives

# What's "social" about "social innovation"?

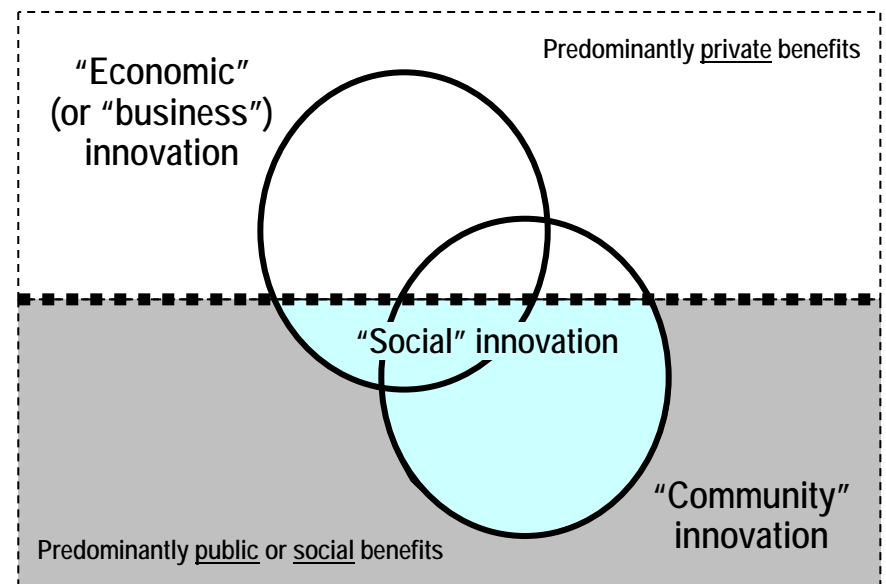
There appear to be a variety of ways for innovation to be seen as "social":

Others still see innovation as "social" when it involves multiple different "social actors" working in partnership with each other...



... e.g. when community sector organizations partner with businesses (or governments) in developing new approaches

Other definitions demarcate "social" innovations along a (somewhat fuzzy) dividing line between "private" and "public"/"social" benefits...



... regardless of who is doing the "innovating" (though there is often a presumption that most social innovation will involve the community sector)



## What's "social" about "social innovation"?

There appear to be a variety of ways for innovation to be seen as "social":

- Others still seem to narrow the focus of "social innovations" to
  - innovations that are "socially motivated" – i.e. whose intent, not (just) their impact may be grounded in achieving socially desirable outcomes
  - innovations in the way government social policies are designed or delivered
- The sense given by most of the literature surveyed to what constitutes "socially desirable" outcomes or motivations reflects the predominant self-identification of their authors as "progressives" ...
  - ... though most (but by no means all) of the definitions surveyed are sufficiently general that they could be grounded in alternative belief systems as well
  - ... and there is a fairly common tone of pragmatic problem-solving in the literature that explicitly appeals for collaboration across a wide range of social actors in relation to challenges on which there is broad consensus



## Possible questions for further research

- What (if anything) is changing/has changed within contemporary society that is acting to increase the appetite for – or capacity to generate – social innovations?
- What (if any) are the key differences between social innovation and other kinds of innovation in relation to:
  - the genesis of “creative” or “innovative” ideas that form the germ of subsequent innovations?
  - the process of converting such ideas into concrete realities “on the ground”?
  - the ease with which concrete innovations can be made widespread/“scaled-up”?
  - the ease with which they can be adapted to different contexts and/or meet different needs?
- What kinds of policy interventions are most likely to be successful in facilitating specifically “social” innovations?

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