Social Innovation (SI) is a concept that has many definitions and ideas associated with it, with none being agreed upon universally (Howaldt, 2017). However, during the design process, a set of criteria is required to restrict the design outcome and keep it in line with its goal. In designing for SI, designers and innovators face the challenge of choosing which of these many definitions and ideas they should use as a guide to create for, or as a set of dimensions to create within. This challenge is difficult to solve, as there are many dimensions in which the definitions differ, including how SI manifests itself, where it starts, its goal, and the context in which it can occur. This can be due, in part, to the many perspectives from which SI is approached (Bitencourt et al., 2016). Most scholars agree on one idea: that SI changes society (Bitencourt et al., 2016; Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017; Goldenberg, Kamoji, Orton, & Williamson, 2009; Howaldt, 2017; Ionescu, 2015). In performing a review of literature whose focus is defining social innovation, the questions of how, who, why, and what about changes to society were researched. A total of 15 definitions were analyzed, in addition to the use of a systematic review that included 252 definitions by Edwards-Schachter and Wallace (2017). Each definition was assessed for its key elements, and these elements were compared to one another to determine variables of differentiation. The findings are discussed below.

**Current Definitions of SI Found in Literature**

From the definitions found, several variable levels differ significantly, such as the context the definition is being used for. North America was found to use different elements to define social innovation compared to the continent of Europe, changing the focus of the definition to the process of social change rather than sustainable development (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017). For designs where businesses and governments were involved in the process, the definitions included specification on the type of company involved, such as non-profit vs for-profit organizations (Goldenberg et al., 2009). Scope, a determining factor of context, seems to remain unaddressed by current definitions, as no mention of it was found. For example, there was mention of businesses and governments involved, but not at what scale and what size of project the social innovation outcome was intended for. Thus, there is difficulty applying definitions to design outcomes, as the context of SI cannot be defined properly. Scope can also determine several elements of a design outcome for SI, such as how it is implemented. Other definitions not focusing on the context of SI instead seem to follow a description such as fundamental changes that meet social needs (Bitencourt et al., 2016; Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017; Goldenberg, Kamoji, Orton, & Williamson, 2009; Howaldt, 2017; Ionescu, 2015). However, within this broad idea, there is debate over elements such as new vs rearranged functions in society causing the change, social challenges vs social needs and the inclusion of this goal for SI, and platforms for social innovation – how. Variety in the manifestation of SI includes products, services, legislation, policy, organizations, ideas, and values (Goldenberg et al., 2009). The degree of variety included in a definition differs across the literature, depending on the specificity and thoroughness of it, as well as the perspective from which the definition is driven (Ionescu, 2015). Thus, the question of universally defining SI remains unanswered, with the variation of key ideas being vast. With respect to the field of design, these differences
leave designers unable to truly understand what they are designing for, and thus are left without a set of criteria to design for when designing for social innovation. This leads to the question: “How can we design for something we cannot define?”

Proposal for a New Perspective

Stemming from the perspective of encouraging diversity (Bitencourt et al., 2016), a recommendation by this author in response to the variation across the definitions is to view SI as a field with enough diversity to create categories of social innovation with their own defining elements, to enable a universal understanding of social innovation, and the many different scenarios in which it can manifest. As determined above, current definitions of social innovation, from which a set of criteria would be formed, are too varied to be able to be used as a guide for design. Sectioning social innovation into categories that address the factors of scope, context, and manifestation could more easily allow for SI to be used as a guiding principle of various types of design, as these three factors seemed to the most variant and recurrent in the definitions of social innovation analyzed. These categories can be organized in a hierarchy or ‘tree’, according to type, as they follow a specific order.

Scope: in addressing scope, social innovation can be considered much like the field of economics, in that there are multiple scales where it can occur. When describing economics, there are two main levels of scope, macro- and micro-economics and within each there are more scales that are addressed. Definitions for SI can use a similar approach in being categorized by scale: global, national, provincial, and municipal. These four scales also follow government levels, thus allowing for the government to be determined as an actor in social innovation, though it is not necessary. In addition, designing for social innovation at a chosen scale informs the designer of obstacles to be considered in the design outcome, such as how to ensure full acceptance of the outcome at the chosen scale, and which social challenges the design is addressing.

Context: the context of the innovation was mentioned above as a factor in describing social innovation. Some definitions used context as a focus, whereas others did not use it at all; the latter group lacked specificity, however the former were too specific to be used as a universal definition of SI. Thus, context can be another type of categories, in which the definition to be used for an SI design depends on where it is found. The main existing contexts found in the review performed for this paper are businesses and their infrastructure, communities, and legislation. This author proposes that these main contexts be used as more categories for SI, falling under scope in the hierarchy of SI being proposed.

Manifestation: the manifestation of design for SI is an important factor to consider as it can change throughout the design process. Since one idea can have many different manifestations, each can be considered during the design process and one decided on for the outcome. Thus, it can be placed on the tree as another factor of separation for SI that can be used to better understand how it comes about. However, manifestation is not required in the hierarchy since it is a smaller detail in the concept of social innovation and its instances, and it does not determine other considerations such as who and what is involved in social innovation design, as scope and context do.

In addressing SI as a field with a hierarchy for categorization, much like taxonomic levels of living things, designers can use this tree to understand what it is they are designing for when describing their project as a design for social innovation. For practical application of this proposed hierarchy, there is much to be considered and researched. Elements not addressed by the hierarchy have been included in many current definitions of SI, such as the goal of meeting social challenges and needs. These neglected elements can be included in the definition of the field of SI, which can be a broad statement at the top of the hierarchy. This raises the question: what is the fundamental concept of SI? As mentioned above, scholars seem to agree on one idea: that SI changes society. The goal of the change, and its roots, are to be debated and included in a future definition for SI as a field.

References included at the end of the document
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References

Design for Social Innovation: Redefining Social Innovation to Include Categories


