

Chapter 9

Building Theories– in–Practice on Social Innovation in Disability Nonprofit Organizations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the key theoretical and empirical steps undertaken throughout the authors' previous-but-related mixed methods studies on social innovation in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in the Australian disability sector with the aim of using the key findings of these studies to develop 'theories-in-practice' in disability NPOs. In this chapter, the authors summarize the associated theory-building processes deployed to explain how disability NPOs develop and implement social innovations and the societal 'system-level' impacts of such innovations. These theory-building processes involve two broad phases, and the culmination of these phases (grounded in the abductive logics of inquiry, complexity theorizing, and set-theoretic methods) leads to the development of several 'theories-to-practice' that not only convey the interactivity of contextual causal mechanisms leading to social innovation by NPOs, but also outline change-oriented solutions for managers who are working to address complex social challenges.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND DESIGN

The authors' research studies (i.e., Taylor, Torugsa, & Arundel, 2018a,b; Taylor et al., 2019a,b) explore the emerging phenomenon of social innovation within the context of nonprofit organizations (NPOs), with the focus on how NPOs develop and implement social innovations. By developing a systemic understanding of such a perplexing phenomenon through a rigorous-and-innovative research design, the

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current research chapter revitalizes theories to better capture the contingent and asymmetrical trajectories of NPO-based social innovation.

Social innovation – which has been recognized as a practice-led domain – can be broadly defined as a service and/or process that contributes to generating a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable or just than existing solutions, and for which the value created primarily benefits society as a whole (Phills, Deiglmeier, & Miller, 2008). Despite gaining immense popularity and being viewed as a potential mechanism for addressing complex or wicked problems, academic research on social innovation has failed to establish a coherent conceptual foothold or strong empirical grounding (Ayob, Teasdale, & Fagan, 2016; Phillips, Lee, Ghobadian, O'Regan, & James, 2014). This is evidenced by a dearth of systematic analysis of the organizational capabilities, outcomes and theories associated with this phenomenon (Howaldt & Schwarz, 2017). Within the nonprofit sector, social innovation is considered a nascent area of research that has yet to mark out its own theoretical territory (Taylor et al., 2018a).

To overcome the hurdles presented by this pre-theoretical domain, the authors undertake a context-driven inquiry that explores interlinked practice-theory questions, and employs a multi-staged research design to ensure that experiential knowledge and scholarly understandings are advanced hand-in-hand. The distinctive features of this research design include: (1) employing 'abduction' (Peirce, 1955) as the primary method of inquiry for discovering new knowledge of social innovation within organizational contexts; (2) complexity theorizing (Byrne, 2005; Taylor et al., 2018b) for interpreting the complex, multiple realities of social innovation; and (3) using set-theoretic methods grounded in complexity theory to determine social innovation's patterns of emergence at a broader systems (i.e. sectoral) level.

The critical role of context permeates and informs each of these methodological aspects of the authors' research. This is deemed vital to ensure that the research can capture the complexity of social change processes manifesting in social innovation's contextualized expressions (Westley, Antadze, Riddell, Robinson, & Geobey, 2014). Thus, this research uses the Australian disability sector as an illustrative example and embed this context in the research design, where the aim is to explore organizational capabilities for social innovation and the outcomes of social innovation in nonprofit organizations (NPOs) as part of developing a theory of social innovation in NPOs. The Australian disability sector is specifically chosen as the context for the study due to the recent introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Considered the most significant social reform in Australia for over 40 years (Connellan, 2014; Goggin & Wadiwel, 2014), the arrival of the NDIS is expected to increase the need and potential for socially innovative responses by NPOs in the sector (Green & Mears, 2014).

To explore social innovation in the context of disability NPOs, the authors' research design incorporates two broad phases. Phase 1 embeds abductive logic in methodological framing. This phase results in: (i) the development of the framework of *Nonprofit Social Innovation (NSI)*, i.e. a social innovation enacted specifically in the disability NPO context, and (ii) the generation of the theoretical propositions, i.e. abductively-derived working hypotheses. The theoretical propositions that are put forward at the end of Phase 1 are then subsequently tested in Phase 2. Phase 2 uses a whole-of-sector lens and Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) to test the NSI framework and verify the working hypotheses.

A complete diagrammatic overview of the steps in this multi-staged research project is depicted in Figure 1 below. Sequential practice-theory building processes can be seen to thread through each stage of this research journey.

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