

Expanded abstract

Theoretical foundation of social innovation: the problem of modeling in an unconsolidated field of study

Objectives

This paper aims to provide a systematic exposition of the main models that underpin social innovation in the literature. It will also proceed to analyse the different components present in these models, using as an analytical strategy the identification of the elements that configure a theory of change (the idea underlying the processes of social innovation). This analytical strategy will also allow us to discuss the degree of elaboration and congruence of these models, as well as to establish a taxonomy based on them.

Ultimately, the main interest of this work is to advance in the consolidation of knowledge in a field of study that is still under construction.

Design/methodology/approach

For this purpose, a narrative review has been carried out. The main objective of narrative reviews is to explore, describe and discuss a given object of study, paying special attention to the theoretical and contextual elements that determine the object of study and its evolution.

Although there are frequent criticisms of some limitations to this type of methodological approach (Ferrari, 2018), it has important potentialities that make it a highly appropriate methodology. Among these potentialities are that “it is a strategy that facilitates the understanding of a given topic, since it describes it in a broad way; it usually has a theoretical and/or contextual basis; it allows the inclusion of different types of information, considering different sources; it requires critical and reflective skills on the part of the researcher. In addition, it enables learning through the definition and detailing of concepts; it obtains previously conducted studies on the same topic, considering the historical process and advances in the area; as well as identifies and selects references, methods and techniques to be used in future research” (Ferrari, 2018).

Results/research limitations/implications

The narrative review of the literature confirms that there is no consensus on establishing theoretical and methodological foundations for SI processes. However, social practice does have the capacity to identify a number of common descriptors.

Secondly, it is clear that the SI as a field of study is a field that is being progressively constructed from a process of differentiation with respect to traditional innovation, in which mul-

tiple disciplines and approaches have participated, which has resulted in a weakness of an epistemological nature (Hernández-Ascanio et al., 2016).

An analysis of the literature has shown that the study of the process of IS development has been polarised, fundamentally, by two approaches, one centred on the individual action of the agents and the other, centred on the socio-structural context as determinants of IS (Cajaliba-Santana, 2014). The interest in the actors involved in the SI has not been paralleled by an attempt to investigate elements of a processual and methodological nature. In this particular aspect, we find that attempts to explain processual aspects tend to be extrapolations of technological and general innovation (Mulgan and Albury, 2003; West, 2003).

Practical conclusions and Original value

The above panorama highlights the need to continue advancing in a theoretical foundation in the field of social innovation, which, despite being a growing object of study, lacks sufficient epistemological, theoretical, conceptual and methodological foundations.