



Can and Should Social Workers Innovate? Two Case Studies of Hidden Social Innovation

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ABSTRACT: This paper advances the possibility of understanding social work as a hidden form of social innovation. This term has been developed in the last two decades in opposition to exclusively economic and technological innovation. Taking the ideas of von Hippel, George Mulgan, and others, you can define the innovation in Social Work as a specific one that tries to satisfy the urgent needs of the people. For this, two cases that could be understood as hidden social innovation from social work will be studied. Housing First project, developed in the United States in the late 1990s, will be analyzed. It is an innovation based on the complete rethinking of what a specific homeless subject requires, one that suffers from mental problems. In the second place Open until Dawn is a case of how to confront unemployed youth in a city in northern Spain. In this case, it was an NGO that developed a free time program with the participation of young people. As a conclusion, it will be understood that Social Work has been an innovative profession from a hidden social innovation point of view. It will be understood that this innovation is not something that has happened in recent years because of the economic crisis, but rather it has to do with its own nature.

Keywords: Social Work, Social Hidden Innovation, Housing First, Open until Dawn



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1. Is social work an innovative profession?

Social work professionals have often defined themselves as agents of change in an environment of structural injustice. Therefore, its purpose is to transform the social environment so that it becomes more just, more inclusive and more receptive. That allows to combat difference, inequality, and exclusion. Logically, it follows that this profession should be essentially innovative. Innovation is then the main way to transform society in a better direction. Ideas, protocols, and methods are put into circulation to transform inequalities and injustices by professionals. But, there is another sense, where innovation is a crucial issue for social workers; they face a world and a society that changes constantly. They appear unexpected new issues, contexts, and situations such as economic crisis, war, new illnesses or addiction. As a result, they have to reinvent themselves at every moment. Between the Hull House of Jane Adams and present times, exclusion has transformed itself significantly. For instance, welfare policies have changed for the last two decades: they have suffered setbacks and have been resized. The so-called welfare state seems to be vanishing. For instance, no government organizations (NGO) have become another

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player in the field of social assistance and welfare. NGOs become another sector with a wide range of action and innovation. All the new factors necessarily require reorganization, re-adaptation, and invention of new forms of social attention. Also, the needs of users vary historically, and means must be redesigned, in many cases that mean simply and plainly to innovate.

However, the literature on Social Work and innovation shows a profound gap (Alonso, 2016). For a long time, it has been considered that Social Work is not particularly an innovative profession. Classical reference reports such as Oslo or Frascati handbooks (OECD, 2002, OECD, 2005) do not include that profession as a true innovative activity. In fact, these reports have not considered the social realm as a likely factor for innovation until relatively recent times (Echeverría, 2014). It could be said that, in reality, innovation in Social Work has been almost completely ignored because there have been no conceptual tools able to make it visible. In fact, that also happens with other disciplines such as Sociology or Law which have seen their innovative capacity hidden or ignored. After more than 40 years of studies on the field, it seems that there would be something interesting between society and innovation.

Innovation studies have expanded in the last decade. There has been an analytical turn to include the social as can be seen in different proposals such as NESTA or the Young Foundation. Indeed, if we look at how the classical scholar on innovation studies Schumpeter (1939) any proper innovation should be considered social; if not there should be classified as invention, that is, without social reception and use of the general public. Differentiation between innovation and invention affects both technology and processes or dissemination. All of them have that component that distinguishes them from the mere invention (without social reception). In any case, there are two types of social innovation; the first is that already the various institutions of the European Community (Alonso & Echeverria, 2016) have incorporated into their agenda for development and research. Even traditional manuals begin to identify a second way to understand what is branded as hidden social innovation (Mulgan, Tucker, Rushanara, & Sanders, 2007). Innovating does not necessarily imply the creation of a new product or its production and placement in a better fashion for markets. Sometimes rescuing old procedures and adapting them to new contexts is enough to be considered as such (Alonso, 2016). Anyway, social innovation is not just about expanding the scope of a category. It is clear that social innovation does not have the same priorities as the economy and therefore there must be a new set of concepts and categories. Sometimes innovation improves the economy but does not improve social conditions for the disfavored. The last few years have shown that the macroeconomic categories can grow significantly and at the same time large sectors of society impoverish.

At the same time, it is wrong to affirm that all innovation is good and desirable because it is innovation. Present times show how societies are completely fascinated by innovation (Nowotny, 2011). Recent years have shown how destructive innovation can be in the financial sector (Godin, 2008, 2015); The securitization of mortgages, a recent banking product created at the beginning of the 21st century, provoked the greatest economic crisis in Western history. As every human agency can play a role in innovation, it necessarily means taking into account values and more in a profession such as Social Work. Therefore, pure technological development may represent a danger for societies if values and social welfare goals are not taken into account. Although almost all the disciplines on technology have their own deontological standards including innovation, they

are not always coincident (Alonso, 2016). Nor does the policy of companies that employ technological systems necessarily show respect for these values. History is full of these cases of social harm. One of the dangers that run in the present is to understand innovation simply as optimizing resources; giving them a new meaning as a response to the lack of means denied in the current downsizing policies on welfare. The implications for such stand are several and not all easily acceptable. It has been said, for example, that in times of economic boom –assuming the belief there are gone forever- social workers have not done enough in times of abundance. There is a need to reshape social services just as industry and services have been endured due to the economic crisis. In the contemporary discourse of individual entrepreneurship and the atomization of social relations, that reinvention becomes a must for social workers too. There is also corresponding discourses about "social entrepreneurship" as a way to cope with the lack of funding. The reasons adduced for this change is also found in the progressive thinning of the welfare state in general and the withdrawal of the social scene that should be occupied by private initiative. Therefore, the weight that falls on social workers is twofold: on the one hand, they face cuts for a social situation that has worsened considerably. In short, it is forced to do much more - Western society is impoverished in an unprecedented way in the last forty years - while deeply limiting the resources destined to cope with this situation. In the midst of everything, there is the danger that innovation is understood from professional politicians as the panacea to solve a situation completely new in the history of recent Social Work.

2. Innovation in social work.

In fact, the idea of hidden social innovation is part of a larger context that could be called the domain of the open –taking open as open software and open paradigm in general (Chesbrough, 2006). The easiness to exchange information about experiences and theoretically the openness to reproduce the proposals has made a turn in the practice of innovation. This has been called open innovation and includes not only the manufacture of concrete products but also the ways in which the projects are financed -crowdsourcing-, how the groups are organized around them and even how their results are evaluated and disseminated. From the old notion of "prosumer" (Cossetta & Palumbo 2014) to the most modern of the innovative user, all of them refers to the possibility of an innovative performance that does not come from the classic institutions and networks for innovation and that, nevertheless, seem to play an important role in such process. Von Hippel (2001, 2005) is perhaps the author who has devoted the greatest effort to measuring and proposing how users are an innovative force of great interest to the business world. The indications and proposals of users to improve the products and services of companies become a valuable source of knowledge that increases competitiveness. Again, it must be pointed out that this idea of society as a driver of innovation may fall into the danger of economization, simply becoming a way of saving costs.

Therefore, the costs and effectiveness being important as it could not be all that matters; the objective of the hidden innovation reaches beyond that economic principles. Accordingly, Mulgan defines a realm where "innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting a social need and that are predominantly developed and diffused through organizations whose primary purposes are social" (Mulgan et al., 2007; 8). The insistence on the social is

precisely to separate this type of innovation from the simple economy. In that sense, says Mulgan, the diversity of activities is remarkable: "Self-help health groups and self-build housing; telephone helplines and telethon fundraising; neighborhood nurseries and neighborhood wardens; Wikipedia and the Open University; complementary medicine, holistic health and hospices; microcredit and consumer cooperatives; charity shops and the fair trade movement; zero carbon housing schemes and community wind farms; restorative justice and community courts. All are examples of social innovation – new ideas that work to meet pressing unmet needs and improve peoples' lives" (Mulgan et al., 2007: 11). From the point of view of Social Work, it could be said that obviously, the economic issue is secondary to other more important values such as social justice, for instance. However, political change and its downsizing require other alternatives of attention and effort to be explored and innovation, although it may not be the definitive solution, helps to improve some particular situations.

Brown collects this definition of what would be specifically understood as innovation in Social Work: "Those changes worth recognizing as innovation should be globally (or at least locally) new to the organization, be large enough, general enough and durable enough to appreciably affect the operations or character of the organization"(Brown, 2013). Brown also maintains that, unlike other forms of innovation, the agents involved in this process are basically three: politicians, organizations, and users. In standard innovation, there are only two agents: companies and users. From the interaction of these three groups occurs some changes that deserve being labeled as true innovation. There is also a difference that is worth noting: traditional innovation is always part of an agent - the company or the innovation institution - and the user solely reacts by proposing or evaluating at most. In the case of Social Work, it may well be that concerned groups take the initiative in line with the user innovation models (Morrison et al., 2000; Bogers & West, 2012). Later politicians and organizations are those who adopt the proposal and put things in motion. In short, confronting the classical model of top-down innovation, there are also genuine bottom-up actions that sometimes occur. Precisely the case studies proposed below are good examples of that second forms of innovation.

Another relevant issue is the practicality required for innovation studies (Brown, 2011). In fact, and given the existing pressure, the need comes from adapting and taking advantage of existing experiences, both from organizations and from users and politicians. That adaptations have the advantage of saving time and mistakes for others interested in those innovations. Also, in terms of innovation, two fundamental qualities should be taken into account: the capacity of diffusion and the capacity of replication that such experiences show. It is also necessary to anticipate the ability to sustain such an innovation over time when it becomes an usual and assimilated transformation. However, despite many attempts that have been proposed to identify those successful cases. It is difficult to find criteria to measure and encourage social innovation and even more so if it pertains to that hidden category. Despite proposed models (Arundel, Bloch & Ferguson, 2016), there are no stable structures from those spring, and possibly their identification always occurs late: only once it has been launched and has been successful. There is no way to plan and anticipate, and successes are "a parte post." This is important for possible governance, how to manage and promote social innovation. Therefore, efforts to encourage, direct, disseminate and reproduce social innovations represent only a part but not all possible

innovation.

Not only those risks and difficulties exist; it is also important to point out the danger of homogenization that such perspectives and measurements can impose on the object being treated. To achieve a successful innovation according to standards, there would be a suspicion that, basically and subtly, it permeates with an economistic spirit: proposed models for social innovation would be just a way just to save resources. But existing and real social innovations that have happened are far from that reductionist goal. Then, it seems more profitable to analyze specific cases and try to learn certain lessons. Later, taking into account different situations and contexts, those examples could be extended to other areas and specific situations.

The two chosen cases represent innovations produced within and from outside the Social Work. Those cases have been reproduced and readjusted from public instances and by the social workers themselves (which include, in a broad sense, many social intervention professionals). The new ways of treating homelessness or the leisure of young people in order to avoid harmful behaviors are two clear examples of that innovation advocated by Mulgan. It is about seeing the needs of the user applying programs that may have worked in their time but had the need to innovate because of changing contexts. Another reason to take these two examples also has a temporal criterion; both programs began on similar dates, that is, the 90s of the last century. Its permanence up to today speaks about its success; they are not only still valid today but also that historical trajectory makes it possible to look with a perspective not based on an immediacy that would end abruptly. History teaches valuable lessons. The second element worth to underline is its replication in other contexts and countries. That is important because it also proves its success, has become a real innovation that can spread to other places and societies.

3. Housing first

The need for a home, housing or shelter seems to be universal for all humans around the world. In fact, even the Constitutions of some countries include the need to have a home as a basic human right. For instance, the Constitution of Spain includes in its article 47, stressing the need as a basic right and states: "All Spaniards have the right to enjoy decent and adequate housing. The public authorities will promote the necessary conditions and establish the pertinent norms to enforce this right, regulating the use of land in accordance with the general interest to prevent speculation" (1978). Without it, it is not possible to live a dignified life. This need has been reflected from the very beginning of Social Work practice: since its foundation was perceived the need to welcome those who, for different reasons, lost their place and ended up living on the street. The so-called homeless depends on circumstances as varied as unemployment, drug addictions, mental problems, refugees from countries at war, etc. However, although it is clear that the reasons for ending up on the street are very different, it is not easy to find a single formula to deal with this multifaceted problem. Until relatively recently the procedure was practically the same all around: the individual is identified, he or she is welcomed to deal with what has pushed him onto the street and once the problem is solved, it is about providing him with a home, a place to live, in what has come to be called the "ladder intervention model" or "continuum of care", as the predominant intervention model in Europe (Busch-Geertsema, 2012). Curiously, the problem of homelessness has been growing especially in societies that have

increased their wealth in recent decades (for instance in Spain; INE, 2012 or US).

Perhaps standardized procedures for homeless could make sense for some cases such as those who lose a job and are unable to get ahead or for those displaced by other causes, or also for those who are victims of the real estate dynamic, as has been proven in recent years in different countries and still growing. The paradox for some cases is that even having a job, it is impossible to take charge of the rent or pay the mortgage. This is a novel situation in the last decades for richer countries. These cases, if they do not become chronic and users enter a similar chronic situation should be relatively easy to solve: policies favoring social rents for instance or transforming public governments in landlords. Another completely different question is what to do with those who are in extreme situations. For example, how to cope with cases of mental illness that are not permanently cured or people with addiction problems who are not able to rehabilitate themselves. A strategy based on beginning treatment to get a recovery before housing may be completely out of reach for some users. As the initiator of the Housing First program, Sam Tsemberis points out (Tsemberis, 2010, Tsemberis & Eisenberg, 2000; Tsemberis, Gulair & Nakae, 2004; Padgett et al, 2015), it is extraordinarily difficult to get people living in such situations to comply with procedures, appointments, treatments and standards that are imposed on them by experts and professionals. The principles that Tsemberis proposes constituted a completely new methodology. In accordance with its initial idea, housing is a basic principle; users deserve respect, compassion, and warmth in the treatment. Therefore the commitment of assistance will be as long as necessary; the accommodations will be in independent apartments and distributed all around the city to avoid marginalization or ghettoization. Accommodation is separated from social services; the user can choose and be autonomous, guidance for recovery and seek to reduce the evils that afflict them. That is why Tsemberis innovated the process by reversing the stages and interests of the two sides of the problem: the experts and the users. For the former, the logic that must be taken is based first on the recovery of what has caused the situation and understand that this is a priority.

Basically Tsemberis stated that the priority of the user is just the opposite of caregivers, easily understandable: first, it should be a place to live and then fight against the causes of the situation. The fact of having achieved that minimum, of having facilitated that essential need, can serve precisely for the user to commit himself more deeply with the treatments and protocols that would help him. In fact, Tsemberis' approach was for many equal to subvert what common sense says. Users suffering from these problems would seem unable to live in accommodation provided by social policies because they have already demonstrated their lack of autonomy. Adding to that, the private sector, the owners of the flats, part of the rental program, must be recruited, something easier to say than to do. It is difficult to think that the landlords are willing to rent their properties to this type of tenants. If the demand is broad enough, if there is competition with other more "reliable" tenants who do not have these problems, it is difficult to convince otherwise. The work of the promoters of the program thus required negotiating first with the authorities on the viability of the project and secondly with the private sector on the benefit that this program could have for them.

However, the program, begun in the 1990s, showed its success in two different but relevant issues: first, the dropout rate of the program was much lower than other intervention

strategies with homeless people. Second, the final economic cost of rehousing in the USA. It was slightly smaller or at least the same as the other programs. (Tsemberis, 2010).

One of the key elements of a true social hidden innovation must be the possibility of its dissemination (Rogers, 2003) and the possibility of replicating these experiences adapted to different environments (Mulgan, 2006). Then, the success of this program is also identified in other ways. The program that begins in the USA also moved to Canada and from there to Europe. The project Housing First Europe (HFE) (Busch-Geertsema, 2013) is created, an experimental project funded by the European Commission for employment, social policies and inclusion in 2011. Within the Progress project, five European cities that applied this methodology were evaluated – Amsterdam, Budapest, Copenhagen, Glasgow and Lisbon- and the conclusion is that in all cases its success rate has been higher than other procedures. Even NGOs have adopted this methodology. In Spain, the RAIS Foundation has adopted this model of intervention and has extended it throughout most of the country. The purpose and methodology used are in all cases the same, although it certainly changes the legal and social policy framework so that it can adapt to the context in which the experience is framed (FEANTSA, 2008).

4. Open until dawn

The link between leisure and "sin" has been established in Christian societies for many centuries. Leisure can be, for a large number of moralists, the prelude to detour and corruption. Without having to assume this moralizing attitude, in 1997 a group of young people decided that it was necessary to look for alternatives for youth leisure. The usual forms of entertainment in the area (neighborhood of La Calzada, Gijón -Spain- a quite poor area from the city) were reduced to the consumption of alcohol and other harmful substances in the street with the consequent danger of degradation –violence, vandalism, dirt in the streets and growing drug addiction. Also, neighbors suffered all those inconveniences at the street, asking police and public governments to take care. Tensions and conflicts grew also. At that time, the unemployment rate for young people was very high and, consequently, the capacity to purchase or go for different leisure power of young people was very reduced. On the other hand, local governments did not respond in a constructive way apart of repression and legal actions. That did not satisfy neither neighbors nor youngsters. It was volunteers belonging to Youth of Christian Workers of Asturias (JOCA) who created the organization *Open until dawn* in 2001. Their purpose was to open up a different way of enjoying free time and leisure activities (Comas, 2001). Given the success of the initiative, it ended up separating from JOCA and becoming an independent association devoted just to change leisure habits for the youngsters. The historical situation also marked the characteristics of this initiative.

Being a proposal born precisely from possible users –young people- various issues were taken into account. To begin with, the leisure offer would be attractive for that specific target. In the Association own words, it was necessary to present an alternative that ran away from the usual forms of entertainment: drinking and dancing. Also, it was important to be without charges because the purchasing power of users was low and reducing consumerism was an important issue for that NGO: it is false the statement that to have fun, it is required to pay. Schedules were also important. The meeting time of young people is usually on weekends and late night, just when the

official alternative centers for leisure such as libraries, sports centers, and others- are closed to the public. The issue of transport was also important. Moving young people to a distant place could be an inconvenience due to the lack of public transport. Scheduling a moving those proposals to neighborhoods rather than in the center of the city was important because then the project would become more inclusive. But in addition to practical issues, it was necessary to carry out an attractive activity, to recruit people. To this end, volunteers included those that would participate. Designing activities were made both by participants and volunteers from the beginning. This layout complies the approaches that Von Hippel (2001, 2005) proposes since there is no innovation if there are no users. The design of innovation itself it is reformulated by users based on their practice and modification (Alonso, 2016). This ensured that participation was free and met a basic requirement: be a pleasant time. And behind all this was a clear objective: to promote healthy leisure that serves as prevention against substance abuse. The success of the program has been clear: one year after its start-up, it is estimated that some 40,000 users participated and some 31 socio-cultural animators were hired (Arenas, Legaza & Muñoz, 2007). In the 90s and later, the appearance of designer drugs and consumption routes (Infante, 2003, Calafat et al., 2000) led to an exponential increase in drug consumption all around the country (Rodriguez Suarez et al., 2003). It is from 2000 when different regional administrations and the State support the dissemination and replication of this model. The state plan to fight against drugs includes it as one of the possible strategies in this endeavor (Martín & Moncada, 2003).

5. Conclusion

As has been proposed, innovation does not have to introduce new technology or new ways to organize, sell or promote something of economic interest. The analyzed cases show how it is also about changing the process, the strategy of the intervention, the context where the problem appears or the agents that initiate the process of transformation. The reason for making such a change is not just cost savings but trying to respond to more important matters. In the case of *Housing First*, the need was basically to reach some users that traditional intervention methods did not were able. In the case of *Open until Dawn*, the aim was to change radically the context of leisure for young people with a preventive nature from a user's perspective and not of the local governments and official institutions. In both cases, innovation was able to call for both the professionals and those responsible for social policies; they understood there was a space for change. In this sense, the three main players –professionals, users and policy makers- involved in social innovation met and refined a model of change that is successful. Following Mulgan, it is these agents who perceive the need to do things differently. In addition, these hidden innovations serve t to other contexts and situations. There is a basic assumption about the need to modify it and adapt it to different scenarios. Of course, the budgetary issue is important and is taken into account. An action that requires unavailable resources simply does not make sense; It would be equivalent to an unrealizable or utopian approach, something that would never happen. However, the important issue is that economic resources, costs, and funds are means and not ends; they serve a purpose.

It must be assumed that social workers have always innovated with the intention of improving and adapting better to the needs of users, and have subsequently tried to find the

necessary resources to implement such innovations. Also, it is important to notice that social services have always been in a situation of scarcity of resources. Those discourses stating the need to use resources efficiently should be contested. It is not necessary to create an awareness of something that has been experienced since the birth of Social Work. Therefore, as a conclusion, it has to be said that hidden social innovation has always existed in Social Work. This is characterized by starting from the subject's own reality, so that the gaze of the other, the voice of the users, their proposals, are necessary to transform reality. All the actors involved can be and have been the object of social innovation action, including the design, ideation, execution, and evaluation of the different approaches to provide help.

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