# Chapter 3
# Evolution of Social Innovation Research

## ABSTRACT

*The objective of this chapter is to trace the evolution of social innovation research. From 1966 to 2019, there are three key periods identified and discussed. Social innovation research is seen to be growing exponentially, following two sluggish periods of growth between 1966-2002 and 2003-2009. A total of 2,489 publications produced between 1966 and 2019 indicate exponential growth and this is particularly noticeable after 2010. Most of the publications are in journal articles carried by 159 research journals indicating the multidisciplinary nature of the field. The number of knowledge clusters within the body of research is increasing, with the social entrepreneurship cluster becoming the most popular recently. The initial four knowledge clusters in the field are grounding in experimental social innovation and dissemination (ESID). Since 2009, the discussion around urban governance has become more popular, signifying a substantial change in the literature. A few new thematic areas, including grassroots innovation and creativity research, have now entered the field.*

## INTRODUCTION

Social innovation has been understood in several ways by different scholars and organizations. The earliest references to social innovation are found in the 1960s in relation to experimental research (Young Foundation, 2012). Mumford (2002) observed that this term was used as far back as the 19th century, by Benjamin Franklin. Godin (2012) also notes that the term - social innovation - has been in regular vocabulary use since the 1860s and particularly after the publication of the book on "Social innovators and their schemes" in 1858 by Sargant; the first scholar to develop a complete discourse on social innovation. In 1903, American sociologist L.F. Ward established the first theoretical framework for the discipline, providing the sociological roots for the evolution of social innovation theory. Late 19th century and early 20th century development of social innovation theory incorporated crucial new elements, including technological innovation and social change.

Until the 20th century, social innovation was understood in three different ways. Starting in the 1830s in Europe, and France in particular, social innovation was associated with humanism. In the 19th century, social innovation was viewed as "socialism" firstly, and later, as "social reform" through the influence of the French revolution and religion (Godin 2012). In the 19th century, scholars defined social innovation broadly as "anything new or any invention in social matters". This conception generated interest amongst academics and policy makers in the following centuries. Drucker (1987) posits that social innovation largely became a managerial task in the 20th century, transforming from its original conception as a political act. He provides a few examples, such as "The Research Lab, Eurodollar, commercial paper, mass and mass movements, farm agents and management" as social innovations. These examples highlight the technological and economic underpinnings of social innovation. Generally, however, 20th century scholarship recognizes social innovation as a "social change" mechanism (e.g. Gershuny 1982; Gray and Braddy 1988; Henderson 1993). In the 21st century, academic dialogue about social innovation was further extended to the consideration of social transformation, the long-term process of altering the norms, levels and relationships within the social setting. Most recently, social innovation has become a multidisciplinary concept, as seen through several perspectives, including the multi-level (Moulaert, MacCallum, and Hillier 2013), transformative and co-evolutionary (Avelino et al. 2019) perspectives. Social innovation is now recognized as an effective, efficient,

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