

BIG PICTURE APPROACHES TO THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

Edited by Silvia Dorado, Helen Haugh,
R. Daniel Wadhvani and Ralph Hamann

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RESEARCH IN THE
SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

VOLUME 96

BIG PICTURE APPROACHES TO THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2026

Editorial matter and selection © 2026 Silvia Dorado, Helen Haugh, R. Daniel Wadhvani,
and Ralph Hamann.

Individual chapters © 2026 The authors.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83608-529-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83608-528-7 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83608-530-0 (Epub)

ISSN: 0733-558X (Series)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>About the Editors</i>	ix
<i>About the Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Foreword: Research in the Sociology of Organizations</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
Introduction: Big Picture Perspectives on Social Innovation <i>Silvia Dorado, Helen Haugh, R. Daniel Wadhvani and Ralph Hamann</i>	1

PART I HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Advancing Phenomenon-Based Research on Complex Societal Challenges: The Case of Homelessness <i>Christian Seelos, Johanna Mair, Charlotte Traeger and Fenja Nolting</i>	25
Productizing Pedagogy: Educational Television, Wicked Problems, and the Study of Social Innovation <i>Amal Kumar</i>	51
A Temporal Narrative View of Social Innovations: How World Central Kitchen Delivers Food Relief as “A Plate of Hope” <i>Silviya Svejenova, Miriam Feuls and Iben Stjerne</i>	71
Social Enterprises as Chameleons: The Rise of Social Enterprises as Innovative Solutions to Complex Challenges in Italy <i>Francesca Capo, Riccardo Maiolini and Tommaso Ramus</i>	97
Property Rights Regime Change and Business Model Social Innovation <i>Helen Haugh</i>	127

PART II SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

Design Guidelines for Transformative Social Innovation and Change <i>Sandra Waddock</i>	155
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Zooming Out and Zooming In: Studying Social Innovation Through Systems Thinking and Leverage Points <i>Jonah Zankl and Matthew Grimes</i>	171
Systems Mapping, Social Innovation and Social-Ecological Transformations Across Scales <i>Domenico Dentoni and Marija Roglic</i>	197
The Adaptive Cycle: A Model of the Evolution of Social Innovations for Wicked Problems <i>Silvia Dorado, Jill Purdy and Nino Antadze</i>	225
PART III DISCUSSION	
At the Roots of Social Innovation <i>Ola Tjörnbo and Frances Westley</i>	251
Grand Challenges: An Historical Institutional Analysis <i>Roy Suddaby, Amit Sharma and Sudhir Nair</i>	269
The Ironies of Social Innovation: The Role of History in Democratic Views of Social Transformation <i>R. Daniel Wadhvani</i>	293

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FOREWORD: RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

Research in the Sociology of Organizations (RSO) publishes cutting-edge empirical research and theoretical papers that seek to enhance our understanding of organizations and organizing as pervasive and fundamental aspects of society and economy. We seek provocative papers that push the frontiers of current conversations, that help to revive old ones, or that incubate and develop new perspectives. Given its successes in this regard, RSO has become an impactful and indispensable fount of knowledge for scholars interested in organizational phenomena and theories. RSO is indexed and ranks highly in Scopus/SCImago as well as in the *Academic Journal Guide* published by the Chartered Association of Business schools.

As one of the most vibrant areas in the social sciences, the sociology of organizations engages a plurality of empirical and theoretical approaches to enhance our understanding of the varied imperatives and challenges that these organizations and their organizers face. Of course, there is a diversity of formal and informal organizations – from for-profit entities to nonprofits, state and public agencies, social enterprises, communal forms of organizing, non-governmental associations, trade associations, publicly traded, family owned and managed, private firms – the list goes on! Organizations, moreover, can vary dramatically in size from small entrepreneurial ventures to large multinational conglomerates to international governing bodies such as the United Nations.

Empirical topics addressed by RSO include the formation, survival, and growth of organizations; collaboration and competition between organizations; the accumulation and management of resources and legitimacy; and how organizations or organizing efforts cope with a multitude of internal and external challenges and pressures. Particular interest is growing in the complexities of contemporary organizations as they cope with changing social expectations and as they seek to address societal problems related to corporate social responsibility, inequality, corruption and wrongdoing, and the challenge of new technologies. As a result, levels of analysis reach from the individual to the organization, industry, community and field, and even the nation-state or world society. Much research is multilevel and embraces both qualitative and quantitative forms of data.

Diverse theory is employed or constructed to enhance our understanding of these topics. While anchored in the discipline of sociology and the field of management, RSO also welcomes theoretical engagement that draws on other disciplinary conversations – such as those in political science or economics, as well as work from diverse philosophical traditions. RSO scholarship has helped push forward a plethora of theoretical conversations on institutions and institutional change, networks, practice, culture, power, inequality, social movements,

categories, routines, organization design and change, configurational dynamics, and many other topics.

Each volume of RSO tends to be thematically focused on a particular empirical phenomenon (e.g., creative industries, multinational corporations, and entrepreneurship) or theoretical conversation (e.g., institutional logics, actors and agency, and microfoundations). The series publishes papers by junior as well as leading international scholars and embraces diversity on all dimensions. If you are scholar interested in organizations or organizing, I hope you find RSO to be an invaluable resource as you develop your work.

Professor Michael Lounsbury
Series Editor, *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The editors thank Michael Lounsbury for his vision and support in the production of this volume. They also acknowledge his thoughtful comments to their introductory paper (Big Picture Approaches to the Impact of Social Innovations).

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INTRODUCTION: BIG PICTURE PERSPECTIVES ON SOCIAL INNOVATION

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ABSTRACT

Current research largely relies on a progress perspective grounded in Enlightenment assumptions to explain how social innovation drives transformational social impact in addressing grand challenges – wickedly complex social and environmental problems. This volume compares the progress perspective with two Big Picture perspectives, historical and systems, which offer alternative views. In this introductory paper, we model the similarities, complementarities, and differences among these perspectives (progress, history, and systems). The three perspectives propose distinct mechanisms to explain how social innovation drives the social transformations required to address grand challenges. The respective mechanisms are: (i) scaling (progress); (ii) narrative dynamics (history); and (iii) adaptive change (systems). Each mechanism is rooted in two key assumptions: (a) temporal sequencing – how transformation unfolds over time – and (b) part-whole relationality – how individual efforts connect to broader societal outcomes. The 12 papers in this volume discuss these mechanisms and explore the assumptions. Together, their contributions offer valuable insights into the dynamics of social innovation in addressing grand challenges. We draw on our comparison and the papers to

Big Picture Approaches to the Impact of Social Innovations
Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 96, 1–21
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Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited
ISSN: 0733-558X/doi:10.1108/S0733-558X20250000096001

suggest future conversations on how social innovation drives transformational social impact.

Keywords: Social innovation; transformation; impact; history; systems; grand challenges; progress; Big Picture

INTRODUCTION

The controversies around Steven Pinker's book *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (2018) illustrate the polarized views on how social innovation addresses grand challenges – the wickedly complex social and environmental challenges that have confounded policymakers for decades, even centuries (Ferraro et al., 2015). The book explores the betterment of society on a range of societal problems that have plagued humanity. Pinker draws from centuries-long chronological statistical data documenting improvements in life expectancy, child and maternal mortality, wealth, and social spending (Pinker, 2018, pp. 54, 56–57, 85, 108). Reducing the temporal span to decades, he also notes declining rates of hunger, poverty, and pollution (Pinker, 2018, pp. 72, 86, 129).

The book was praised by organizations interested in social innovation, such as the Gates Foundation, for its optimistic message about humanity's ability for agentic and purposeful action to tackle grand challenges (Spencer, 2018). But many others criticized the book as naïve and even dangerous (Davies, 2018; Gopnik, 2018; Smith, 2022), and for disregarding the barriers that perpetuate these enduring challenges (Dorado et al., 2022; George et al., 2016).

The criticisms of Pinker's book illustrate the skepticism within social innovation scholarship (see e.g., Beckman et al., 2023) toward the progress perspective he advocates. The optimistic progress perspective draws from research on the social transformations resulting from technological innovations (Barley, 1990; Rao, 1994; Schumpeter, 1934; Tushman & Anderson, 1986; Tushman & Nelson, 1990). But many scholars question both the applicability of the rationalistic views of innovation beyond a market context (Lounsbury & Gehman, 2024) and the inherent limitations of technological solutions to grand challenges (see e.g., Hoffman, 2020; Kumar, 2025). Specifically, scholars have argued that social innovations do not unproblematically address grand challenges through institutionalization and diffusion (Dorado et al., 2022; Ferraro et al., 2015). Furthermore, research has shown how the transformational social impact of innovations is frequently undermined, as they are coopted for the benefit of existing interests (Selznick, 1949) and their impact curtailed to protect existing social structures (Khan et al., 2007; Martí, 2018).

In this volume, we aim to enrich the debate by moving beyond discussions of advantages and limitations of the progress perspective. Building on research that argues for broadening our understanding of social innovation (Wijk et al., 2019), the volume brings in two Big Picture perspectives – history and systems – that emphasize the contextual conditions shaping the social transformation potential of innovations. The nine papers assembled discuss social innovation addressing

a plurality of grand challenges, including homelessness (Seelos et al., 2025), lack of employment opportunities for people with disabilities (Dorado et al., 2025), hunger in conflict zones (Svejenova et al., 2025), economic opportunity in rural areas (Haugh, 2025), lack of access to welfare services (Capo et al., 2025), and quality education (Kumar, 2025). There are also three papers offering insights on approaches and methodologies for social innovations to lead to profound social transformation (Dentoni & Roglic, 2025; Waddock, 2025; Zankl & Grimes, 2025). In addition, we include three discussion papers that address these themes in a synoptic fashion (Suddaby et al., 2025; Tjörnbo & Westley, 2025; Wadhvani, 2025).

Unlike most research rooted in the progress paradigm, the history and systems perspectives adopted in the papers in this volume prioritize long time horizons, spanning decades or centuries (Braudel, 1980; Wallerstein, 2009). They widen the analytical lens to include unfolding events, lateral interactions and broader social, historical, and economic dynamics. This expanded temporal and contextual scope reflects a deeper understanding of grand challenges as enduring, complex and multifaceted social problems. Such problems cannot be solved outright – only re-solved over and over again (Rittel & Webber, 1973).

We start this introductory paper by setting out the model we developed, which draws from the papers and reflects on the similarities, complementarities, and differences in how progress, history, and systems perspectives answer the research question: how do social innovations drive transformational social impact to address grand challenges? We explain the model and then discuss the papers in the context of the mechanisms driving transformational social impact within each perspective: These mechanisms are: (i) scaling (progress); (ii) narrative dynamics (history); and (iii) adaptive change (systems). The paper ends with a discussion to stimulate and guide future conversations on Big Picture approaches for explaining how social innovation drives transformational social impact.

SOCIAL INNOVATION, SOCIAL IMPACT AND TRANSFORMATION

There are many definitions of social innovation (for reviews, see Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2017; Moulaert et al., 2007). In this paper, we describe social innovation as “the agentic, relational, situated, and multilevel process to develop, promote, and implement novel solutions to social problems in ways that are directed toward producing profound change in institutional contexts” (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Lawrence et al., 2014; Wijk et al., 2019, p. 890). This comprehensive definition emphasizes transformation, which is central to the debate about the potential for social innovation to address grand challenges. Building on prior research on technological evolution, this definition suggests that the impact on grand challenges follows from transformations driven by the institutionalization and diffusion of social innovations (Wijk et al., 2019).

All three perspectives we discuss in this volume can build upon the above-mentioned definition of social innovation and its emphasis on transformation, but they differ in their assumptions about how this transformation unfolds. In the

progress perspective, social innovation follows from actors' rational and purposeful agency to address societal problems. Transformation ensues as knowledge is accumulated and the social innovation becomes the basis of widespread, purposeful organizing, resting on the assumption that such organized efforts will produce learning and interventions when needed. These assumptions, while familiar, even comforting, offer a limited perspective on how social innovation drives transformational impact. When a social innovation institutionalizes and diffuses, transformational social impact is assumed to follow, via the displacement of prior ways. However, it is not obvious whether profound transformation necessarily occurs as a byproduct of diffusion. This is occasionally observed in practice, as evidenced for example by the diffusion of cellphone technologies, which have addressed grand challenges associated with lack of connectivity and access to information in distant communities. Yet, the assumption that institutionalization and diffusion alone lead to transformative impacts on grand challenges cannot be taken for granted (Khan et al., 2007; Selznick, 1949).

The story of Latifa, a mother of three living in rural Bangladesh, is offered by Martí (2018) to highlight the limitations of assuming transformational social impacts automatically follow from the diffusion of social innovations (e.g., microfinance). Martí recounts how, after being abandoned by her husband, Latifa sought to earn income from work that is considered unseemly for women under purdah norms, such as day laboring, carrying bricks and filling road holes. Her self-employment made her a textbook example of someone who could be helped out of poverty by microfinance, a social innovation credited with lifting people out of poverty in Bangladesh (Roodman, 2012). However, microfinance credit officers routinely overlooked women like Latifa, citing requirements to join a group with other women. "Nobody would want to associate with her," they explained, due to the "impurity" from "not respecting the custom of purdah" (p. 969).

This example vividly illustrates the limitation of microfinance in achieving transformational social impact. Even when institutionalized and diffused across multiple communities and countries, microfinance operates within the entrenched norms and systems (e.g., respect for purdah customs) that perpetuate the marginalization of women like Latifa, leaving them trapped at the bottom of the income pyramid.

The papers in this volume further reveal the limitations of the progress perspective's reliance on social innovation diffusion as mechanism for driving transformational social impact in addressing grand challenges. More importantly, they offer two Big Picture perspectives – history and systems – that enrich the conversation by offering alternative mechanisms. Building on our analysis of the papers and reflections on the progress, history, and systems perspectives, we developed a model highlighting the similarities, complementarities, and differences among their respective transformation mechanisms (Table 1).

The model identifies three mechanisms to explain how social innovation drives transformational social impact within the progress, history, and systems perspectives: scaling, narrative dynamics, and adaptive change, respectively. From the progress perspective, scaling reflects a technology diffusion-inspired mechanism, where transformation is viewed as a byproduct of the institutionalization and diffusion of social innovations. The historical perspective focuses on narrative

Table 1. Three Perspectives on the Mechanisms for Social Innovation.

	Progress	History	Systems
Mechanisms	Scaling	Narrative dynamics	Adaptative change
Temporal sequencing	Sigmoidal ^a	Dialectic	Emergent
Part-whole relationality	Cumulative	Situated	Regeneration

^aSigmoidal stands for a S-shaped progression.

dynamics, emphasizing the role of stories shaped by shared cultural norms, human emotions, personal affiliations, and community interests. These narratives are fluid, evolving through reinterpretation and influenced by experiences of the past and expectations of the future, and provide a humanistic lens to understand the role of social innovation in achieving transformational social impact. Finally, the systems perspective highlights adaptive change as its central mechanism, emphasizing the interconnections within and across systems that underpin grand challenges. Here, transformational change emerges from the complex, evolving dynamics of plural, parallel, and nested systems. Unlike scaling, which frames transformation as a byproduct of social innovation's acceptance and spread, or narratives, which focus on cultural and emotional shifts, adaptive change underscores the unpredictability inherent in system complexity and its role in mediating efforts to address grand challenges.

The three mechanisms rely on two underlying assumptions about how transformation occurs: temporal sequencing and part-whole relationality. Temporal sequencing frames social innovation as a “temporally embedded process of social engagement,” explaining how impact unfolds over time (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 963). Scaling employs a sigmoidal temporal view, narrative dynamics adopt a dialectic approach (thesis, antithesis, synthesis), and adaptive change is rooted in an emergence view of how change unfolds. Part-whole relationality focuses on the connections between agency and outcomes, grappling with the vexing problem of “understanding practices, outcomes, and the relationships between them” (Kim, 2024, p. 2; Wijen, 2014). In scaling, these connections are shaped by accumulation, with individual actions aggregating to create broader change; in narrative dynamics, they are based on the situated conditions that frame interpretations; and in adaptive change, they are fueled by the regenerative propensities of systems.

The following sections explain these mechanisms and their assumptions. Drawing on the papers in this volume, we demonstrate their relevance in advancing conversations about transformation, moving beyond critiques of the progress perspective to explore richer, more nuanced history and systems perspectives on how social innovation drives transformational social impact.

SCALING

The scaling mechanism is rooted in functionalist/rational views of social change (Dorado et al., 2022; Lounsbury & Gehman, 2024) and explains how social innovations create transformational social impact through institutionalization and

diffusion (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009; Seelos & Mair, 2017; Wijk et al., 2019). Prior research models scaling as following a diffusion of innovation pattern (Rogers, 2010), involving either replication (Tracey & Jarvis, 2007) or growth of the founding social innovation (Mair & Marti, 2009). For the scaling mechanism to be effective, the solution must gain social acceptance and reach a sufficient scale (Beckman et al., 2023). Transformation is treated as an assumed byproduct, occurring unproblematically after these conditions are met (Bloom & Chatterji, 2009; Chowdhury & Santos, 2010; Seelos & Mair, 2017).

As described by Dorado et al. (2025), the scaling mechanism maps “how social innovations gain social acceptance and mobilize support” (p. 224) and, as these authors suggest, this mechanism captures the transformations required for impact in the case of technological advancements, such as vaccines (Pinker, 2018), or the founding of landmark organizations such as consumer watchdog organizations (Rao, 1998). The potential for transformation associated with scaling is supported by evidence, such as is provided by Pinker, in indicators showing the betterment of our lives when compared with “our ancestors in the Dark Ages” (Rao, 1998, p. 36). It also follows research on technological evolution and replacement (Tushman & Anderson, 1986). However, researchers have identified the limitations of scaling even in studies of technological evolution (Grodal et al., 2023). Most directly, as mentioned by Dorado et al. (2025, p. 225),

there are grand challenges where scaling appears to fail: when responding to social ills such as slavery (Crane, 2013), child labor (Khan et al., 2007), homelessness (Seelos et al., 2025), climate change (Hoffman, 2020), and disability employment (Lovegood & Dorado, 2024).

Our analysis of the temporal sequencing and part-whole relationality assumptions that underpin the scaling model offers valuable insights to further our understanding of this mechanism, its advantages and limitations.

Sigmoidal Sequencing

The dominant temporal image of scaling is captured in the sigmoidal (S-shaped logistic curve) associated with the diffusion of innovation (Rogers, 2010). As discussed by Dorado et al. (2025), this curve reflects an initial slow rate of diffusion, likely because of the obstacles and delays associated with supporting “bold ideas” (Colquitt & George, 2011, p. 432; Grimes & Vogus, 2021) or initiatives that challenge the status quo (Lawrence et al., 2001). Many innovations fail to progress beyond this early stage, but those that do may experience a rapid increase in adoption as momentum builds, with more widespread adoption generating further diffusion. Diffusion slows again when the innovation has been widely accepted, and some degree of saturation has been achieved.

The S-curve thus captures the temporal sequencing of scaling over time. In this mechanism, the connection between past, present, and future follows the principles of experimentation and knowledge accumulation, in which transformation follows as a byproduct. In this model, the past stands as a source of knowledge, and transformation follows from experimentation processes, which create a “ceaseless headway” of scaling proven solutions, even in the presence of punctuated “setbacks and reversals” (Pinker, 2018, p. 11).

In this volume, [Seelos et al. \(2025\)](#) contribute to the discussion of the limitations of the sigmoidal sequencing assumption associated with scaling. From an analysis of a rich historical case study on efforts to tackle homelessness in the United States (1960 to 2021), they conclude that the scope and rate of scaling interventions have not addressed the worsening homelessness problem. As they state, “despite allocating significant resources to develop and scale solutions to the issue, the large number of homeless people in the country today indicates that the scale of the problem is decoupled from the scale of solutions” ([Seelos et al., 2025](#), p. 23). This failure stems from the limitations of sigmoidal temporal sequencing to capture dynamics tangential to social innovation evolution as well as unrelated shifts in social policies and demographic processes affecting this grand challenge.

Cumulative Part-Whole Relationality

The idea of scaling is steeped in “summative” assumptions about society acting collectively, and anchored in research on social contagion ([Burt, 1987](#)). From this standpoint, transformation follows a ground-up directionality via the association between social innovation and the amelioration of complex social problems through aggregation. This ground-up perspective, in which transformation is a byproduct of diffusion, fails to capture the potential limitations of diffusion as a solution to grand challenges. As illustrated by the case of Latifa ([Martí, 2018](#)), social innovation may have a positive impact, but within the limits imposed by incumbent social norms, such as those established by the *pardah*, in defining the economic activities and categories of people worth supporting via microfinance.

The papers in this volume illustrate the limitations of associating diffusion with the transformation of the structures that give endurance to grand challenges. Most directly, [Kumar’s \(2025\)](#) study of television – as a novel pedagogical tool in postwar American higher education – offers an alternative perspective on the limitations of the summative relationality. He argues that this social innovation functioned as “a solution in search of a problem,” as the technological turn of the era reframed social problems, such as access to education, as “technical problems.” By reconstructing social issues as technical problems, technological reasoning imposed the scaling of televised education as a suitable solution, bypassing more nuanced explorations of root causes of social issues. [Kumar’s \(2025\)](#) study calls our attention to the technological interpretation of how problems are defined, frequently influenced by biases rooted in social trends. Specifically, it critiques the still current tendency to favor technology-mediated social innovations, whose diffusion, support and legitimacy are fueled by their visibility and/or the economic interests behind them (see e.g., [Dwivedi et al., 2022](#)), even in the absence of evident impact on the grand challenge being addressed ([Kim, 2024](#); [Wijen, 2014](#)).

NARRATIVE DYNAMICS

To explain narrative as the mechanism for the history perspective, we trace its origins to the humanistic critique of the Enlightenment assumptions adopted by [Pinker \(2018\)](#). As early as 1725, Giambattista Vico’s (1725/2020) *New Science*

criticized the Cartesian emphasis on scientific and mathematical rationality when applied to human relationships and society and laid the basis for the emergence of historical, sociological, and anthropological perspectives for alternative, Big Picture perspective of social innovation. It was not until the nineteenth century that this began to grow into a robust program of empirical research and theorizing based on the notion that human action and its consequences could not be analyzed in isolation but needed to be understood in historical context, i.e., the temporal and relational contexts in which thought and action take place (Hodgson, 2001). In the 20th century, these views were further elaborated in a number of varying schools of thought about how historical time and place shaped human beings and action, studying the dynamic nature of the temporal and relational dynamics associating human effort and the broader sociohistorical context (Iggers, 2005). In this lineage, narrative emerged as the basis of an alternative way to understand both the origins and consequences of human action, including social innovation (Carr, 1986; Danto, 1965; Hansen, 1994; Hayden White, 1973).

Within management and organizational research, narrative is often associated with strategic or rhetorical storytelling by actors to skillfully pursue premeditated ends in interaction with stakeholders (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Historical views of narrative, in contrast, more often take narrative as more encompassing – as constituting social reality itself (Carr, 1986). That is because narratives offer an alternative to two assumptions of the Enlightenment approach that humanists have long viewed as problematic. First, rather than embracing the kind of universal rationality proffered by the Enlightenment model, narrative embraces the assumption of historically situated rationality for actors between a “space of experience” based in individual and collective memory and a “horizon of expectations” that makes action purposeful and future oriented (Koselleck, 2004). The situated rationality of narrative confers attention on lived experience, context, and culture as crucial factors in constituting the motivations and organization of social innovation, i.e., its *causes*. Second, narrative allows historical reasoning to look far beyond intentionality in explaining the *consequences* of social innovation, i.e., how it has an impact (Hargadon & Wadhvani, 2023). Whereas the scaling perspective assumes that “impact” is a consequence of the cumulative diffusion of innovation, narratives allow for unintended consequences that transform old social challenges or innovations into new ones when looked at from a Big Picture perspective.

The paper by Seelos et al. (2025) (p. 45) showcases how narratives shape actors’ situated understanding of the context of social innovation. Examining efforts to address homelessness in the United States since the 1960s, they identify “two principal causal narratives”: a “culture of poverty” and a “system view of poverty.” Such narratives shape “what factors actors pay attention to and how evidence is constructed.” For example, the rise of the “culture of poverty” narrative during the 1960s resulted in the dismissal of homelessness as a genuine social problem as it was assumed that homeless people were complicit in their fate and, therefore, undeserving of the full attention and support of society. This is in contrast with alternative views that identify factors such as limited welfare services for people with mental illness, or lack of sufficient housing, as the relevant facts when thinking about homelessness.