

# A Person-Centered Approach to Innovation in Canada



In contribution to a Canada-wide discussion on “the role of the social sciences, arts, and humanities in stimulating and advancing innovation in Canada”, organized by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies

A Workshop Series, University of Regina, January 2024

### **Land Acknowledgement**

I would like to respectfully acknowledge that the University of Regina is located on Treaty 4 land. These are the traditional territories of the plains Cree, Anihšīnāpēk, Nakota, and the homeland of the Dakota, Lakota, and Métis/Michif Nation. I acknowledge that I inhabit this land as a settler, have benefited from its colonial past and hold a responsibility to honour the treaty relationship through my personal and professional actions.

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## Introduction

The concept of innovation has developed to be readily associated with technological or industrial innovation specifically (Godin, 2015). Throughout time, the connotation and understanding of the term has oscillated (Godin, 2015). However, with the introduction of economic and commercial dimensions in the twentieth century, innovation has become primarily a positively connotated term associated with economic development and commercialization (Godin, 2015; Krlev et al., 2018; Ziegler, 2017). As a result, the term ‘innovation’ as it is typically used refers to a specific form of innovation termed, ‘technological innovation’. Contrarily, another specific form of innovation termed social innovation, arising through socialist critiques of capitalism, has developed as a means to challenge systems and structures in a way that contributes to social reform (Godin, 2015; Krlev et al., 2018). Like technological innovation, the connotation and understanding of the term has swayed throughout time. However, in recent times social innovators have become storied as social reformers, forming solutions to problems requiring a socially driven perspective and challenging hegemonic discourses (Godin, 2015; van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016; Ziegler, 2017).

Due to technological innovation’s market ties, its legitimacy as a valuable function of society is rarely questioned (Krlev et al., 2018). Meanwhile, social innovation faces barriers due to its ambiguity, being often comprised of immaterial outcomes and having differing beneficiaries and funders – experiences often foreign to technological innovation (Krlev et al., 2018; Mulgan, 2008). This messiness demands conversations surrounding its definition, value, and practice. This workshop series provided the space for social innovators to engage in discussions surrounding these topics, leading to conversational themes around the role of the social sciences, humanities, and arts in developing relationships, valuing subjective experiences, and advancing methodological practices.

## Workshop Format

A series of three workshops were held the week of January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024 with a total of eleven participants. Representation from a variety of disciplines were present including Social Work, Education, Public Policy, Aging Studies, Kinesiology, and Health Studies. Two of these workshops were held in person and one was held virtually via Zoom. The workshops consisted of three sections, titled: *Introductions*, *Discussion*, and *Creation*.

### Introductions

The workshops began with participant introductions in which all present shared their name, pronouns, relevant identity markers, program of study, and thesis topic or area of study. Afterwards, the workshop itself was introduced with an explanation of the collaborating bodies: the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), Canadian Association for Graduate Studies (CAGS), and twelve Canadian universities, including the University of Regina (U of R). Followed by an outline of the workshop goals: (a) to discuss our ideas surrounding the role of social science, humanities, and arts graduate students in enhancing innovation in Canada, and (b) to better conceptualize and articulate the value that our specific research or area of study provides for innovation in Canada. This was accompanied with a disclaimer that the workshop is student led and therefore the goals and approach may change as the discussion develops.

### Discussion

The discussion portion involved dynamic conversations surrounding understandings of (a) innovation, (b) the role of social science, humanities, arts, in innovation, and (c) the role of the participants specific theses and areas of study in innovation. First, a shared understanding of the meaning and role of innovation was constructed. This was done by sharing subjective understandings, which then informed an agreed-upon definition. This definition was then compared and contrasted with the definition provided by SSHRC and CAGS. Second, a shared understanding of the role of social science, humanities, arts, in innovation was explored through the medium of mind maps. The participants divided into groups and engaged in discussions while creating collaborative, visual representations of their conversations to then share with all participants. Third, a group discussion was held prompting each participant to share further details about their thesis or area of study and its potential role in stimulating and advancing innovation in Canada. All other attendees then engaged in a collaborative brainstorm alongside the initial participant, exploring any additional avenues of innovation that they had not previously considered.

### Creation

The creation portion involved each participant constructing a visual art piece. The participants were instructed to create a piece that encapsulated or further explored whichever element of the previous discussions that most significantly impacted them. In-person attendees had access to pencils, markers, paint, and clay. Virtual attendees had access to AI image generating software. Once the pieces were finished, the participants shared theirs with the group and described their thought processes throughout its creation.

## Workshop Summary

It was apparent that the attendees' inherent understanding of innovation aligned with the common association of innovation with technological innovation. Despite this, almost all present challenged this understanding by expressing its shortcomings in considering how innovations impact humans, especially those oppressed or marginalized. In this sense, the attendees categorized themselves indirectly as social innovators. Due to the paradigms of those present as graduate students, the conversations often centered around the role of social sciences, humanities, and arts research in relation to the development and implementation of innovation. As a result, the terms 'innovator' and 'researcher' will be used interchangeably. Within these conversations, those present expressed the role of social innovation in emphasizing the tie between human experience and technological innovation processes and products – often using the term “person-centered” or “patient-centered” as derived from Carl Roger's “Person-centered” therapy model. In the past, Carl Roger's ideas have been considered to relate to what is now known as social innovation (Haasis, 2013). In 2013, Haselberger and Hutterer's book chapter, titled *The Person-Centered Approach in Research* introduced the idea of applying Carl Roger's person-centered therapy model to a research praxis. Because of the research focused direction of the workshop discussions and the emphasis on person-centered approaches throughout, much of the conversation themes paralleled with the topics of this chapter. This included the role of the social sciences, arts, and humanities in enhancing innovation through developing relationships, valuing subjective experiences, and advancing methodological practices.

### Relationships

Social innovators have a crucial role in connecting technological and social innovation. Throughout the discussions, it was commonly suggested that there is a divide between technological and social innovators, which is often representative of the divide between quantitative and qualitative researchers or “hard” sciences and “soft” sciences. Attendees expressed a general distaste for this divide, demonstrating a need for a connection between the different forms of innovation due to their reciprocal influence. One graduate student stated that due to social innovators' skill sets and approaches, it may be their role to initiate the bridging of this divide. This proposed connection was posited as having the potential to improve technological innovations by enhancing the understanding of the individuals impacted and encouraging ethical development and implementation. These ideas are further explored in the art pieces and descriptions of Figures 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

### Subjective Experience

The attendees expressed that social innovators are responsible for providing additional context to technological innovations by asking person-centered questions that provide the

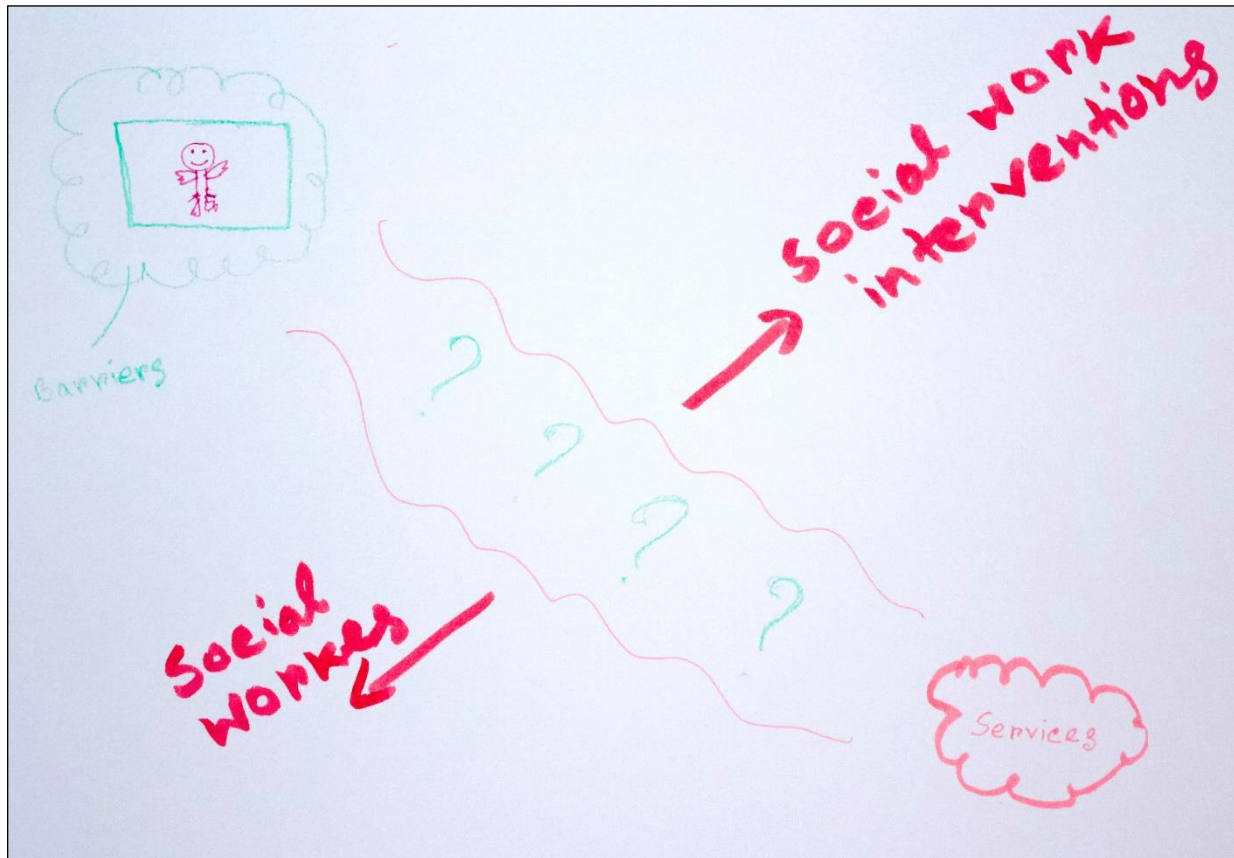
“stories behind the numbers”. As one participant said “What good are innovations unconnected to the human experience?”. These person-centered questions include: Who is benefiting from an innovation? Who is being harmed by an innovation? What is the experience of those impacted by an innovation? Discussions delved into the ethical dimensions of innovation, showcasing the importance of addressing equity, diversity, and inclusion. The participants expressed that technological innovations often fail to consider the experience of and impact on diverse populations. In some ways, it can even amplify previously existing inequities. As a result, social innovators have a responsibility to connect with those without access or who are negatively impacted by technological innovations to (a) amplify their voices and (b) explore innovations that properly support them. These ideas are further explored in the art pieces and descriptions of Figures 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

### **Methodologies**

The participants shared that they saw the social sciences, humanities, and arts as having a role in innovating what research looks like, pushing the envelope of acceptable research practices. The attendees expressed that this was primarily done by introducing new methodologies or methods or using existing methodologies or methods in new ways. In connection with the previous themes, the primary examples of emerging methodologies were primarily person-centered approaches such as narrative inquiry and participatory action research. Similarly, the primary example of innovation in existing methods was the practice of bringing a person-centered approach to already established methodologies such as ethnography or phenomenology. The value of integrating a person-centered approach to research is further explored in the art pieces and descriptions of Figures 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8.

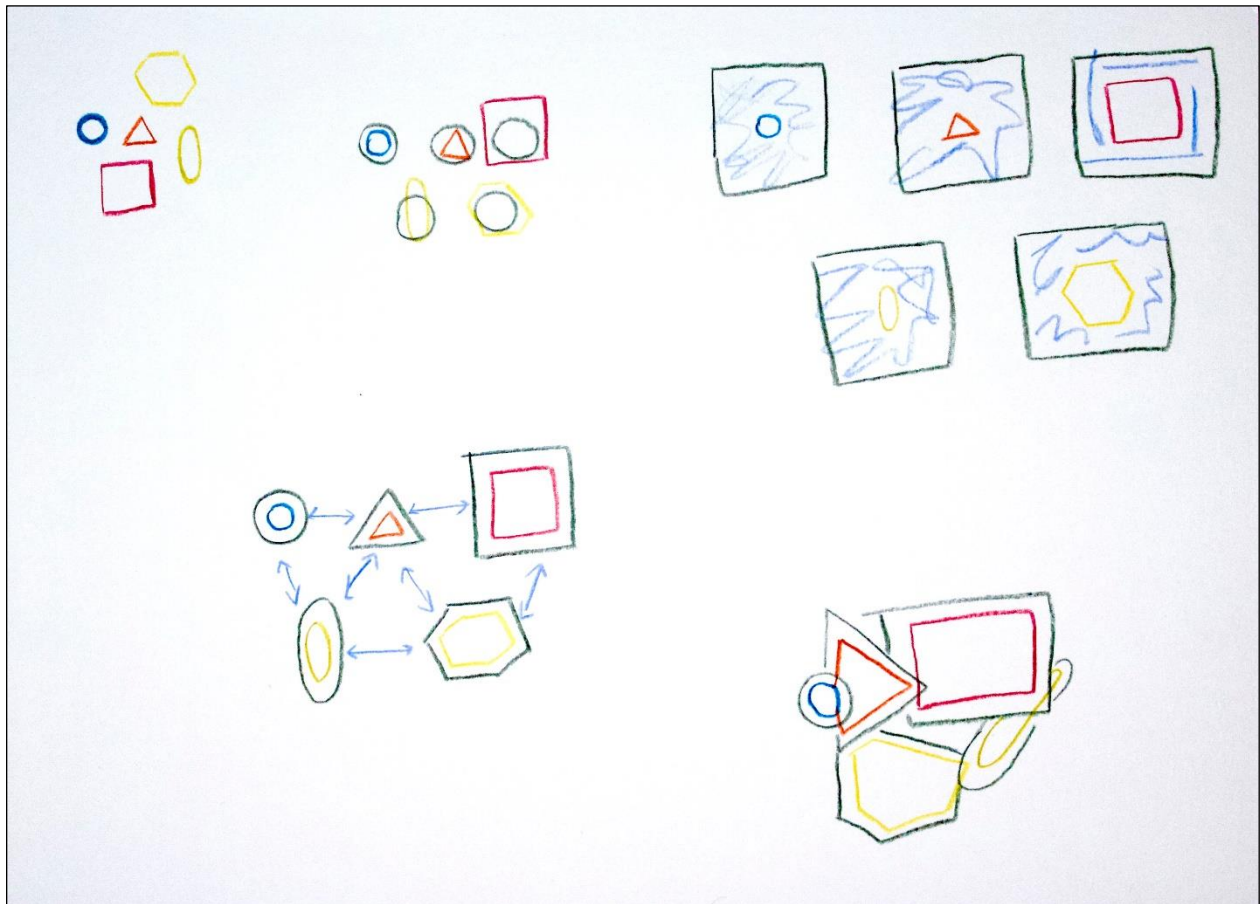


Figure 1



This art piece by Abu Nasser Assaduzzaman displays the role of social workers as social innovators in connecting individuals to services. An individual is depicted as distanced from the services they need and surrounded by barriers to access. A path exists between the individual and the services they require, but they cannot use it as it is bumpy and windy. However, social workers and their interventions can build a bridge through innovation. This innovation is currently unknown but is becoming known through the work of social worker researchers as social innovators.

Figure 2



This art piece by Ekin Büyükkakten presents ideas around the relationship between complex identities and innovation. This is displayed through the experiences of five different shapes in four different scenarios with varying outcomes. Each coloured shape represents an individual with unique and interconnected identities and each grey border represents a space for the coloured shapes to be put into. In the first scenario, the coloured shapes are all put inside of the grey border specifically designed for the blue circle. While some may fit, they do not fit well. In the second scenario, the coloured shapes are all put inside large grey borders. They all fit. In the third scenario, the coloured shapes are all put inside their unique grey borders. They also all fit. However, in both scenarios two and three, the coloured shapes are unable to connect to one another, leaving them to feel lonely. If we find a way to shape innovation in a way that fits everyone and encourages connection, it allows individuals to be themselves and feel a sense of belonging, like the shapes represented in scenario four.

Figure 3



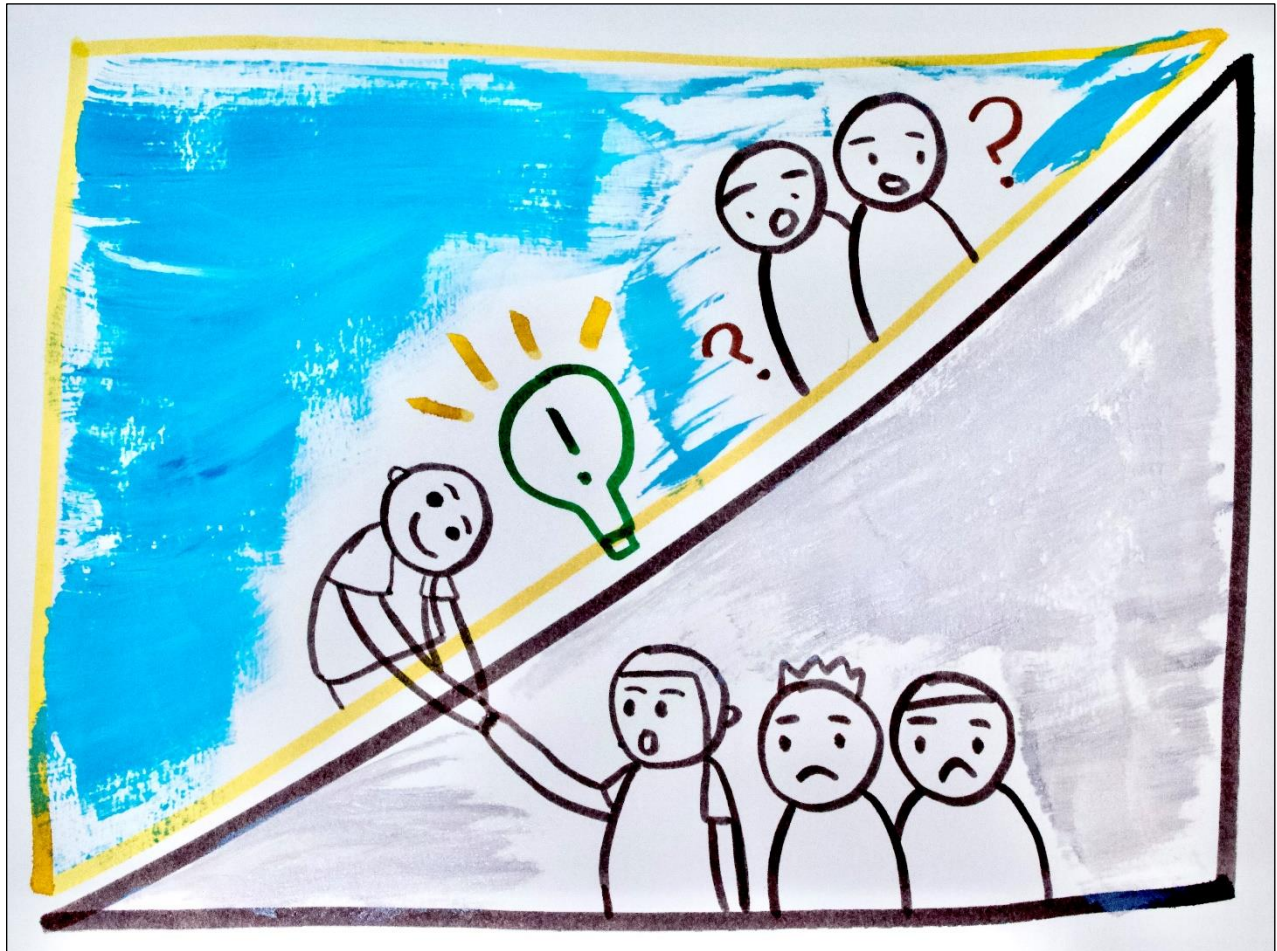
This art piece by Elise Melanson exhibits the role of social innovation in its relationship with technological innovation. The lightbulb represents social innovation and the shapes surrounding it represent technological innovation. Within the light bulb are various faces, symbolizing the person-centered nature of social innovation. The lightbulb is lighting the shapes, enhancing their colour, adding dimensions, and providing enlightenment. This demonstrates how social innovation and research use its humanizing approach to strengthen and deepen the innovating process, products, and implementation.

Figure 4



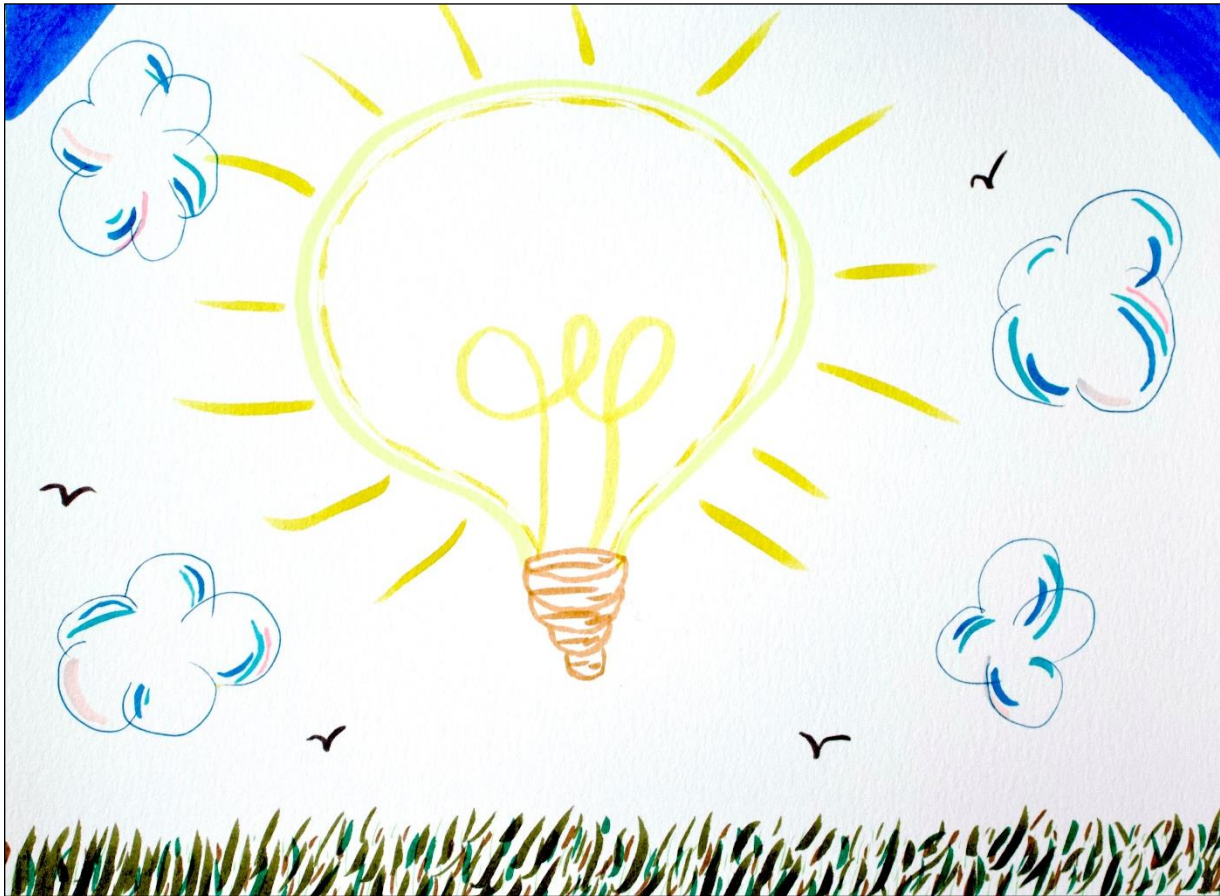
This art piece by Jeanette Orpe displays the role of social innovators in understanding the diverse needs and experiences of individuals. The puzzle pieces represent different individuals with unique experiences. Throughout, some elements have mixed colours, making them appear messy. This represents what happens when everyone is treated the same without consideration for their uniqueness. If we “paint everyone with the same brush”, everything gets messy, and people get left behind. The hands represent the social sciences working to clean up the mess and make the picture clearer. With a clearer picture, everyone's unique experiences are better understood, allowing innovations to be developed and implemented in a way that provides everyone with adequate supports and solutions that meet them where they are at.

Figure 5



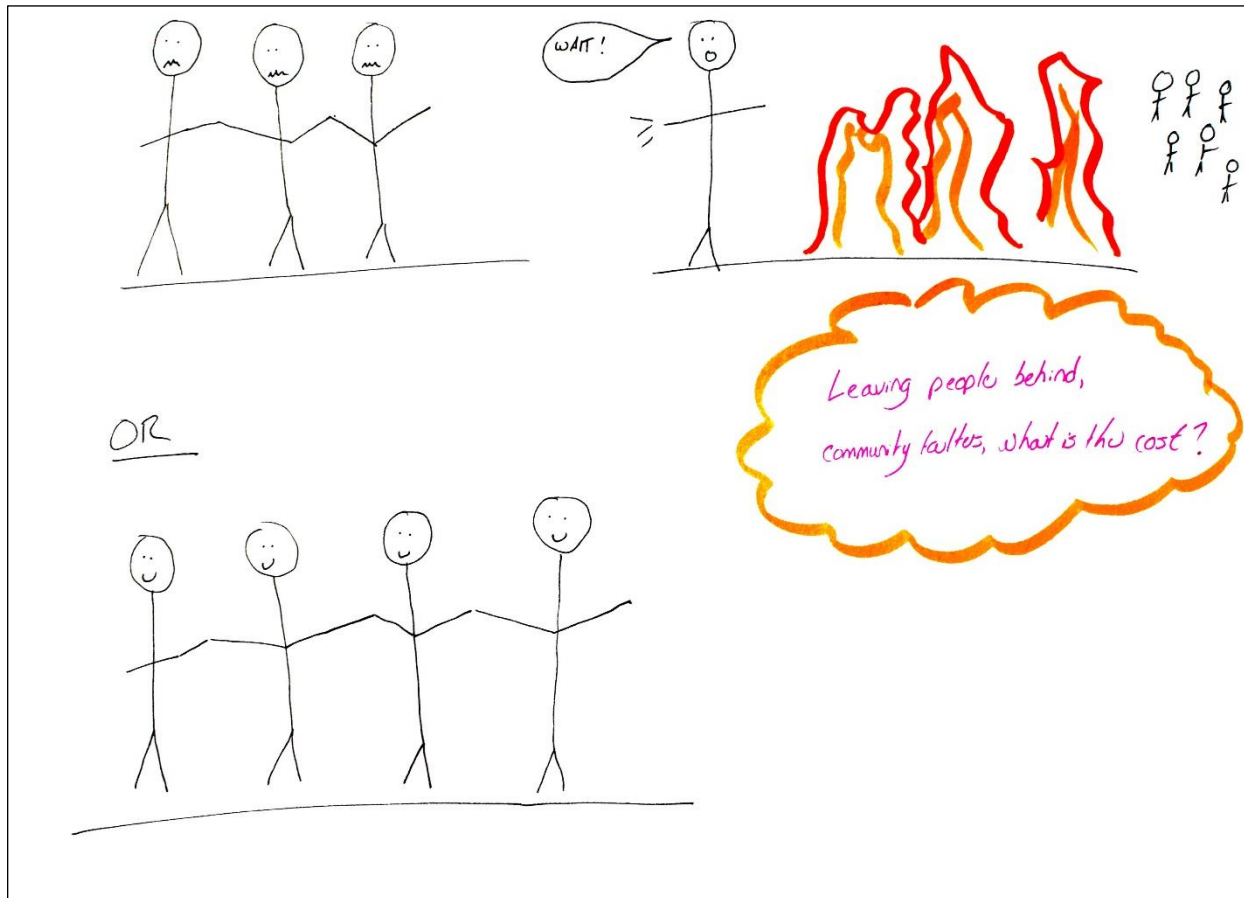
This art piece by Kayoung Lee showcases how the relationships between social innovators, technological innovators, and users of innovation can impact all parties involved. There are two sides to the piece. The light side represents those who have access or who benefit from technological innovation while the dark side represents those who are underserved or oppressed by technological innovation. A social innovator or researcher is reaching out to assist the individuals in the dark side to join the light side. This represents the role of social innovators in providing access and ethical practices around technological innovation. There are confused bystanders (potentially technological innovators or privileged folk) next to the social innovator. They cannot understand why the individuals on the dark side need assistance coming to the light side. The social innovator is helping them to understand the unique experiences of the individuals receiving assistance.

Figure 6



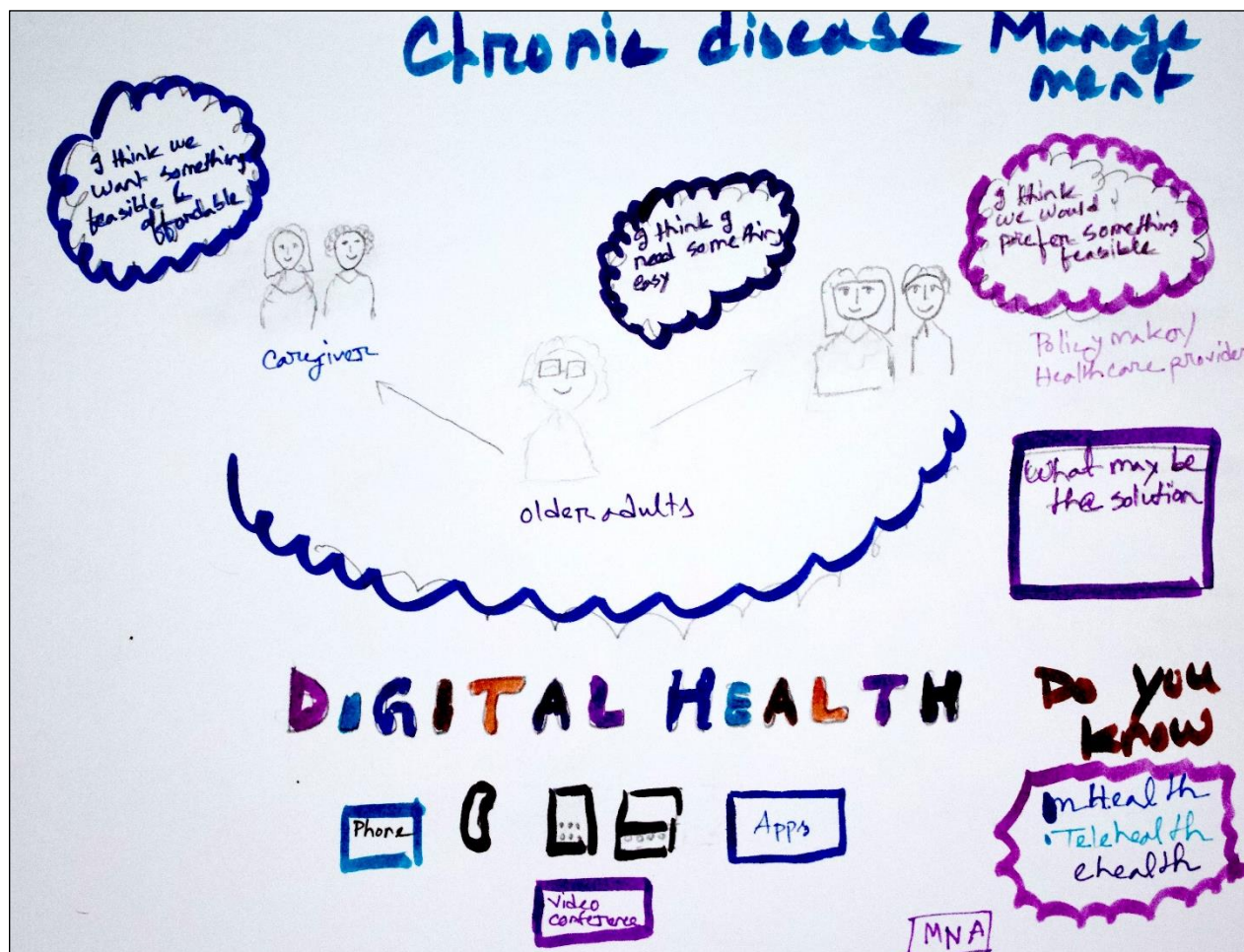
This art piece by Lauren Preston depicts the experience of a social innovator or researcher. The piece showcases a wide-open landscape, evoking a feeling of freedom. This freedom parallels social innovators' or researchers' processes of developing and implementing innovation – one that is accepting of ambiguity. Within this ambiguity lies the ability to comfortably apply alternative approaches and relationality to innovation.

Figure 7



This art piece by Miranda Peace displays the impacts of not considering equitable access to and the impact of technological innovations. There are two options presented in the piece. The first option showcases the result of technological innovation developed and implemented without equity considerations. The fire represents barriers to access holding individuals back. While some individuals are accessing these innovations, they may still lack adequate supports to fully use or enjoy them. As a result, all individuals are distressed. The second option showcases the result of technological innovation developed and implemented with equity considerations. All individuals have access, benefit, and are supported through technological innovations. As a result, they are content. A brief poem accompanies the drawings, reading, "Leaving people behind, community falters, what is the cost?"

Figure 8



This art piece by Nabila Ashraf displays social researchers' role of understanding the perspectives and relationships between health research participants, their supports, their practitioners, and policymakers for the development and implementation of technological innovations. In the depicted scenario, diverse perspectives exist among an older adult with a chronic disease, their caregiver, healthcare provider, and policymakers regarding the optimal approach to managing the older adult's condition. A social researcher's responsibility is to gain a comprehensive understanding of each stakeholder's viewpoints. This understanding then guides the development and implementation of technological innovations, exemplified here by digital health products.



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