

The Social of Social Entrepreneurship: Building a New Field using a New Paradigm

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Abstract

Social entrepreneurship is an emerging academic field generating a rapidly expanding literature on a growing range of topics. While the early stage of its development was nourished by many of the rich ideas developed within the “conventional” entrepreneurship literature, this is beginning to change as the social entrepreneurship landscape has become a more fundamental part of the collection of entrepreneurship practices. This paper considers the way that social entrepreneurship, as reflected in the aims and objectives of a collective of academics and practitioners, is beginning to develop a new research paradigm, and considers ways in which this research approach is different from, but complementary to, mainstream entrepreneurship research.

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship is no longer just a topic within business studies but is in many ways emerging as a new field in its own right. Academic research in social entrepreneurship has attracted a wide range of researchers from an array of other disciplines, bringing with them a variety of models, methods and theories with which to investigate and explain entrepreneurship phenomena (Drucker 1989; Nicholls 2006). Indeed, academics engaged in social entrepreneurship research come from a wide variety of perspectives and backgrounds, some of whom have been entrepreneurs, policy makers, or engaged in other forms of entrepreneurship practice. The way social entrepreneurship has been theorized, and its status as an academic discipline has been outlined by academics, reflects some of this diversity, but has been limited in its scope by a range of factors related to its status as an emerging discipline. For example, some academics argue that it is a branch of entrepreneurship, which should use the models, theory and techniques developed by mainstream commercial entrepreneurship research, and imitate its field building approach by directing its attention to achieving research outputs of the type research assessments rate highly (Austin, Stevenson and Weiskillern 2006; Thompson, Alvy and Lees 2000). This article instead argues that among the strengths of recent social entrepreneurship research has been the way that different scholars and practitioners have made effective use of its position as a new field or emerging discipline to develop new approaches to research. This research illustrates the way effective engagement between academics and practitioners is able to contribute to the objectives of field building while serving entrepreneurial practices (Steyaert and Hjorth 2006; Mair and Marti 2006). The objectives of this paper are to show that social entrepreneurship is a coherent field rather than a passing fad, and that the way practitioners and researchers engage offers a different approach to academic field

building than the methods typically recommended, and generally applied to other academic disciplines. The paper will argue that social entrepreneurship is different from entrepreneurship as it is presently conceived, not because it explores a social “context” of innovation, but because it examines the way innovation, opportunity and entrepreneurship emerge and are pursued through exchanges afforded by networks of heterogeneous organizational types, in contrast to the business, financial and market networks through which conventional entrepreneurship is pursued. This is particularly striking with the emergence of social entrepreneurship through the formation of relationships and alliances between organizations and groups with different motives, structures, decision making protocols, measures and missions (see also Johannisson and Nilsson 1989). Analysing such relationships is important for social entrepreneurship research, but these relationships provide a challenge to various organizations participating in social entrepreneurship practices, such as social welfare providers, academic researchers, activists and social entrepreneurs but, due to the significant growth potential of new types of business opportunities and their impact on consumers and policy makers, such as “green” businesses, new emerging economies and social marketing (see, for example Prahalad 2009: 73-88), they present a challenge to mainstream business and thus researchers concerned with mainstream entrepreneurship.

2. The “social” of social entrepreneurship

The emergence of entrepreneurship as an academic field or discipline has been analyzed by a growing number of commentators (see, for example Gartner 1985; Low and MacMillan 1988; Shane and Venkataraman 2000; Murphy, Liao and Welsch 2006; Cornelius, Landstrom, and Persson 2006, Peredo and McLean 2006; Reader and Watkins 2006; Zahra 2007). The majority of such evaluations focus primarily, if not exclusively, on the commercial and wealth creating aspects of entrepreneurship. The reason for this tendency is very clear: this relatively narrow focus has accumulated a large literature and more academic analysis than all other entrepreneurship research combined, and this material, as identified as the mainstream, is therefore assumed to be the best place to begin when examining entrepreneurship as a concept. Another feature of this literature is that the individuals publishing their ideas on the topic tend to be university-based academics. This feature is also explicable: academics have a great deal of expertise in different methods, theories and perspectives with which to enable them to analyze data, address problems or develop models that generalize beyond a case in ways that practitioners, even with greater expertise and knowledge, may not have; disseminating ideas is also a central feature of academic practice (see Rynes, Bartunek and Daft 2001: 340-341). In this way, the research literature on entrepreneurship and the issue of field building or developing a discipline, generally begins with a discussion of the emergence and growth of entrepreneurship in the commercial sector, the importance of innovation in exploring opportunities in commercial markets and a discussion of the way academics and/or business managers as different classes of analysis, have tried to make sense of these practices (see, though, Stevenson and Jarillo 1990: 22-23). This implies that to understand entrepreneurship as a series of practices or as an academic field, requires an understanding of narrowly focused commercial

entrepreneurship theories and practices, representing a restricted section of the entrepreneurship terrain. Instead, this article argues that social entrepreneurship is the broader superset, with a range of attributes potentially able to provide a new research paradigm, one derived from exploring the interdependencies of practitioners and academics.

The recent growth in social entrepreneurship as a practice and as a research theme provides an opportunity and some examples with which to present this new research paradigm. This article is not an attempt to critique the way entrepreneurship researchers have approached field building, nor does it accept that “the goal is to indicate how entrepreneurship might become social” (Steyaert and Hjorth 2006: 3) nor to shoehorn the concept into existing sociological frameworks (Mair and Marti 2006: 40-42). Instead it begins with the assumption that the “social” is not a confining context or domain, but a way of connecting the elements that are needed for innovation to take place: entrepreneurship is a social practice with or without the social prefix, though with the social prefix, entrepreneurship can include social change, social theory and social relationships as part of its core research program.

Before detailing why the position of social entrepreneurship enables it to become the source of innovative concepts and practices for academics and practitioners, two issues need to be resolved. Firstly the concept of social entrepreneurship needs to be clarified, particularly its relationship with wholly commercial entrepreneurship, and secondly the factors that contribute to the emergence of academic fields and disciplines need to be described and analysed. In addition, contrasting the field building approach of the more established commercial entrepreneurship with that of the social variety will illustrate why developing an alternative field building paradigm is both timely and important.

Social entrepreneurship has been conceptualised in very different ways and the definitions used to capture the range of heterogeneous practices fall into different categories. One set of definitions emphasise the non-profit dimension:

We define social entrepreneurship as innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, or government sectors (Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern 2006: 2)

Alternatively, it is defined in terms of the social responsibility of the commercial sector or the commercially insightfulness of the social sector. For example, Charles Leadbeater suggests that social entrepreneurship occurs where the private sector, public sector and voluntary sector overlap (Leadbeater 1997: 10). Other definitions emphasise the application of innovation towards social change or transformation, in terms of the actions of change agents in the social sector (Dees 1998: 4; Steyaert and Hjorth 2006: 1-3) or as a catalyst “to galvanize major changes across society” (Bornstein 2007: xv).

While such definitions cover much of the territory of existing social enterprises and the mission of promoting social values, a much bolder description is required in order to capture the immense variety of potential applications of innovation appropriate to entrepreneurship practice. A key problem in capturing this variety is to coherently delineate a domain without severing all connections to complementary disciplinary perspectives able to analyse such phenomena in their diversity. While the definitions above do so by staking out a subset, or a specific application, of entrepreneurship as conceived as a business school discipline (see Shane and Venkataraman 2000: 218-219), this paper will do the reverse. Entrepreneurship research, as conventionally conceptualised, will be thought of as a subset of social entrepreneurship, i.e. the area of research directed exclusively to the narrow commercially profitable dimension of business organizations, though a tremendously important area of research, as reflected

in the weight of literature it has accumulated. Social entrepreneurship will be conceived of, then, not simply as the development of special types of goods and services, but rather the combination of tangible innovations that emphasise their social impact, coupled with the social matrix from which opportunity and innovation emerge. The complexity of this conception of social entrepreneurship will be exemplified rather than defined, a position consistent with Donald Sexton's view that entrepreneurship research should not be obsessed with developing the perfect definition but developing "an adequate description of the sample so that others can replicate study results or utilize the data in other research efforts" (Sexton 1988: 6).

This exemplification will take the form of an analysis of a case studies in section three of this paper, but before turning to the features that divide social entrepreneurship from the more established notions of entrepreneurship, it will be helpful to clarify the commonality in order to identify how the research addressing each form can be positioned in relation to the other.

While it might be the case that "definitions of entrepreneurial phenomena are hardly able to capture the whole picture" (Mair and Martí 2006: 37), entrepreneurship of all types share the characteristic of value creation by developing processes that assemble and associate resources in novel ways. As such, entrepreneurship activity depends upon innovation, responding to opportunities in the face of risk, and it is facilitated through specific organizations and networks. Importantly, the value that is created inevitably has an economic, social and cultural dimension, even if the economic value is the only type a firm might intentionally pursue or measure. Social and wholly commercial entrepreneurship are not, then, divided by the value that they produce, the opportunities or risks they engage with, the profitability of their ventures or the types and structures of organizations that they describe. Instead, the collective motives of the key decision

makers, as reflected in the way the mission of the organization is carried out, and, perhaps more importantly, as indicated in the relationships the organization makes with other organizations and individuals, are the main differences between both the entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial organizations and, as the case studies will illustrate, between the wholly commercial and social forms. So while in theory four organizational types can be identified (businesses lacking innovation, entrepreneurial businesses, social entrepreneurial organizations, non-profit organizations lacking innovation), in reality, the nature of innovation and entrepreneurial activity mean that the types of alliances that an organization makes and the networks it forms can be more indicative of its status than a close reading of its mission statement or financial accounting records.

In this way, researching social entrepreneurship has involved asking questions about networks and relationships that management science has not considered a central part of its problematic (see, though, Aldrich and Zimmer 1986), and such research typically involves developing closer links with a wider range of practitioners than other forms of entrepreneurship research. These relationships have, to some degree, informed the way researchers have approached theory building (see Nicholls 2006) and as social entrepreneurs emerge as a new cohort in creating business opportunities (Dees 1998) so too those investigating this phenomenon often identify themselves as part of a new approach to research (see Bornstein 2007; Leadbeater 1997). If this were the only element informing field building in social entrepreneurship research, then it would be indistinguishable from a fad. Instead, the literature on field building suggests that the scope of social entrepreneurship research and the emergent strategies such research is developing represents the pattern of a sustainable paradigm rather than a passing fad, and it is this literature that the paper will now briefly examine.

3. Towards a New Paradigm in Field Building

The literature on the development and evolution of academic disciplines is relatively small. There are, though, a number of key texts that engage with the process of field-building and discipline development as their central theme (see for example Kuhn 1970; Whitley 1984; Abbott 2001; Becher and Trowler 2001). While these texts present in-depth descriptions of how different types of fields and disciplines have emerged and the factors and pressures shaping this process, many of the descriptions have been treated as though they were prescriptive models or indicators of disciplinary status (see, for example Banville and Landry 1989: 55-56) and some of the descriptions have been interpreted as applying to topics, themes and fields very different in scope than those studies in the literature (Coyner 1983; Craig 1999). A clear example can be found in the enduring, though implicit or unacknowledged, influence of Thomas Kuhn.

Using the term “normal science” Kuhn describes the research approach used by established scientific disciplines. A discipline develops a paradigm and canon with which to shape the problems for the community of research practitioners to address, demarcating the discipline and drawing in individuals to act as advocates. This occurs, Kuhn argues, through the formation of journals, societies or specialist groups, which develop the discipline through articles that are directed to their colleagues who accept the paradigm. Normal science is thus a description of the puzzle-solving aspect of scientific research once the research boundaries have been agreed upon.

Normal science is, as Kuhn suggests, an indication of maturity and professionalism within an established scientific discipline, this does not, though, mean that imitating such a strategy is appropriate or desirable for other fields of research. Indeed, according to Richard Daft and Arie Lewin, in the absence of a normal science approach, researchers and academics have a degree of flexibility which can be more

conducive to producing important research findings, but once a paradigm is in position, researchers are trained to rigidly conform to its conventions:

The boundaries of a paradigm can put the field in an intellectual straitjacket. Research may be generated at a fast pace, but contributions will typically defend the extant point of view, and are unlikely to lead to fundamental new insight. (Daft and Lewin 1990: 2)

The danger, then, is that in pursuit of rapid growth, a field or discipline, by focusing on normal science indicators, could direct research towards inappropriate or secondary issues. This is because the reward process for academics, such as promotion to the rank of professor, encourages journal article-length “slight modification on existing work” outputs or framing projects in accordance with existing research council priorities, overspecializing and marginalizing other categories of knowledge, hierarchical (and politically invested) setting of priorities and discourses, and compliance with established conceptual paradigms. Additionally, credibility to challenge the paradigm will often only be afforded to those who have most to lose by challenging it, while younger academics, a likely source for fresh ideas, know that an academic career depends upon meeting such targets and designed their research accordingly.

The field of entrepreneurship illustrates the appeal of the normal science approach to discipline development and some potential costs. Recent literature examining entrepreneurship scholarship argue that the field is quickly developing a normal science approach to research: by stabilizing its topic areas and excluding others, developing into a more exclusively academic community, dominated by a core group of leading authors, and demonstrating a greater specialization of research (see Cornelelius, Landstom and Persson 2006: 395 and Reader and Watkins 2006: 426-427). While these features, as measured by normal science metrics, have been taken as indicative of the

success of mainstream entrepreneurship research strategies success seems to coincide with narrow hegemonic interests that seem to have excluded potential intellectual allies (see Reader and Watkins 2006: 430-432). This in turn suggests less engagement with novel research approaches, greater methodological conformity, and an intellectual distance from non-academic practitioners. This further implies a reduced potential to be innovative in conceptualizing the research problematic (Welsch and Maltarich 2004: 60), less willingness to engage with the complex realities from which entrepreneurship emerges (Steyaert and Hjorth 2006: 1-3), and greater readiness to imitate research patterns with perceived successful outcomes, irrespective of their appropriateness (Zahra 2007: 446). Such convergence can quickly lead to research stagnation, as the following observation notes:

Each August, we (academics) come to talk with each other; during the rest of the year we read each others' papers in our journals and write our own papers so that we may, in turn, have an audience the following August: an incestuous, closed loop. (Hambrick, 1994: 13)

Yet entrepreneurship, as a social practice, reflects an intellectual landscape where ideas, creativity and innovation are most prized by the practitioners that academics study and form the very subject of research, though the pragmatic and business oriented side of entrepreneurship might take the research restraints to be a fair price for rapid progress in expanding its rigorous research literature. The meaning of the social prefix of social entrepreneurship is thus of crucial importance because it offers a complementary approach to researching entrepreneurship.

Daft and Lewin prescribe three strategies, which in turn are able to feed into conventional research practices.

Firstly they emphasize the need to undertake research with a design orientation. By this they refer to research which is both descriptive and prescriptive, examining enough data to develop a theoretical narrative able to relate key variables into a coherent and convincing way, one willing to engage with competing concepts while striving “for relevance and for new insights” (Daft and Lewin 1990: 4). On this they conclude:

The important point for individual scholars, however, is to take on design problems as a path to organizational insights that will ultimately produce new theory valuable to the field of organization studies as well as to practitioners (Daft and Lewin 1990: 5)

Secondly, they express the need to focus on equivocal problems. By this Daft and Lewin refer to problems which reflect multiple or conflicting interpretation of events:

The approach we are advocating can be described as symbol creation research, which is in contrast to symbol communication research [for which] the meaning of concepts has already been agreed on and is relatively clear. Symbolic creation research, on the other hands, involves the creation of new grammar, new variables, and new definitions, thus spawning new paradigms (Daft and Lewin 1990: 5)

Finally, they suggest that following heretical research methods is a way of loosening the negative restrictions they associate with normal science. Such methods, they argue, are important in that they are able to gain organizational insights and alter the research method mix and that if the goal of research is to generate new knowledge, “then outlier research...can be the source of interesting problems and important design implications” (Daft and Lewin 1990: 6). They discuss case studies as such a method and conclude:

Building theory on the basis of in-depth understanding of a few cases is different from the traditional theory-testing goal of statistical rigor, parsimony and generalizability. However, this type of research can provide the genesis for new theory that may spawn further research that uses traditional methods (Daft and Lewin 1990: 6)

Unlike other disciplines, social entrepreneurship research has been receptive to these types of suggestion and is ideally situated to develop a new field building approach, as Mair and Marti argue:

We believe that social entrepreneurship deserves considerable attention as a field of research. It has enormous potential to inform and enhance the field of entrepreneurship, as it provides an excellent opportunity to challenge and rethink central concepts and assumptions (Mair and Marti 2006: 42)

The following section will illustrate that the social prefix can function as a force to make such investigations more inclined to develop knowledge transfer objectives as part of its research agenda as a complement to more traditional normal science indicators.

4. Conclusion

The control systems developed by journals and university departments alike exert a confining if well-meaning hold on the jugular of scholarship, which threatens to strangle the development of new possibilities. (Morgan 1990: 29)

Justification for claims over research territory and, by implication, claims to disciplinary status, are typically measured by their exponents, in journal articles, conferences, research council funding, processing graduate students quickly and departments or centers. Unlike Mode 2 indicators (see Gibbons 2002), such measures are easy to quantify as research outputs and/or demonstrate the strength of a research community and, through peer review, preserve minimum standards. As indicators or measures, they give an important indication of the investment in specific ideas, methods and topics, equated with the values of a group of academics and related bodies. Researchers and academics must continue to strive to disseminate ideas in academic journals, teach specialist courses, bid for research funding and organize specialist conferences, as this builds effective relationships between academics, both in social entrepreneurship and in related fields, although this must not be at the expense of reducing the scope and significance of the research, as the quote that begins this section suggests can sometimes be the case.

This article argues that a normal science approach to developing a research agenda can reduce the relevance of research outputs to a practitioner audience and also limit opportunities for practitioner-oriented and inter/post disciplinary-oriented researchers. It further argues that an overemphasis on normal science measures could result in fewer intermediaries and with younger researchers guided away from practitioner engagement causing the gap between academics and practitioners to widen,

as Lewis Elton suggests: “academic traditionalism in research...has discouraged new developments and interdisciplinary research, and have isolated researchers from practitioners” (Elton 2000: 279).. One of the characteristic features of social entrepreneurship is that the benefits of narrowing the gap have informed the engagement between research and practice for mutual benefit (Nicholls 2006: 6-10).

The previous section concluded that the prefix “social” gives social entrepreneurship research a special status on the basis that it contains all the features of mainstream commercial entrepreneurship, but its landscape includes a wider variety of organizational types, networks and individuals, each of which is striving to make an impact undertaking innovation with a social purpose or developing social processes of innovation. This landscape offers social entrepreneurship researchers a powerful resource for engaging in collaboration, and developing case studies, reflective essays, and inductive theory building, research most likely to resonate with practitioners. These resources are already being capitalized on by social entrepreneurship research; Daft and Lewin’s three principal suggestions for extending the conceptual framework for developing research, supported by Rynes, Bartunek and Daft’s call to explore the “full range of knowledge creation techniques” (Rynes, Bartunek and Daft 2001: 349), are already a part of its research agenda.

In contrast, then, with academic traditionalism, there are strong tendencies in social entrepreneurship research of extending the conceptual framework with which research is developed as a part of its territorial claim, research agenda, and field building project. Indeed, developing a grounded theory approach that emphasizes theory building through a close engagement with the experience and knowledge of practitioner groups has been a key strategy in influential social entrepreneurship research networks, as outlined in recent collections of articles and case studies by researchers and

practitioners (see Young 2006; O'Connor 2006). By building on the existing inclusiveness that social entrepreneurship has so far managed to retain, rather than transferring and applying mainstream commercial entrepreneurship models and methods en masse, social entrepreneurship has been able to innovate in developing methods, models and theories which themselves can form the basis of mutual benefit to both the commercial oriented and social oriented research patterns (Peredo and McLean 2006: 64-65; Steyaert and Hjorth 2006: 3-8; Mair and Marti 2006: 39-42).

Social entrepreneurship can therefore contribute to commercial entrepreneurship investigation by exemplifying research approaches that remain blind spots within the mainstream entrepreneurship literature. This includes many of the key challenges that businesses are only now beginning to systematically address, including developing hybrid networks, balancing the indispensable non commercial aspects of business, creating environmentally acceptable as well as socially (and community) sustainable products and/or services, the well documented benefits of leveraging good will (see Korngold 2005) and the changing demands of shareholders, customers and employees. It can do so most effectively as part of an autonomous research agenda that turns first to the more complex, equivocal but more suitable social and community sites on the entrepreneurship landscape, an agenda that is supported less by its problem solving capacity, than by the legitimacy and focus of developing a movement or a discipline that attempts above all to be a relevant and insightful analysis of practice:

disciplines might be seen as 'essential structures for systematising, organising and embodying the social and institutional practices upon which both coherent discourse and the legitimate exercise of power depend' (Lenoir 1993: 73)

In turn, the mainstream entrepreneurship literature provides a guide concerning the evolution of the type of research issues that explain the innovation process in the many different ways it has developed within the commercial sector, a literature as nuanced as any management research output, meaning that social entrepreneurship need not reinvent the wheel, and by appreciating the key complementarities, and learning the lessons of the success and failures of the struggle of the entrepreneurship research pioneers (see Sarasvathy 2004) can avoid reinventing the *square* wheel.

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