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A conceptual overview of What We Know About Social Entrepreneurship

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Whereas the original paper presents a conceptual and empirical overview of social entrepreneurship, this chapter is restricted to the conceptual overview. In addition, the original paper is part of a collection of essays on social entrepreneurship (Hoogendoorn, 2011).

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1. Introduction

“The idea of ‘social entrepreneurship’ has struck a responsive chord”, wrote Dees in 1998 (Dees, 1998, p. 1). One may conclude that in the ten years since Dees’ statement, the “responsive chord” has only become more responsive, given the growing attention from media, support organizations, policy-makers, and targeted university research centers and teaching programs. Where entrepreneurship is widely acknowledged for bringing growth and economic wealth to society, social entrepreneurship is assumed to play the same role in creating social wealth in times where pressing social and ecological needs are abundant.

In spite of numerous contributions, the scholarly field of social entrepreneurship is still in a stage of infancy (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006; Dorado, 2006; Light, 2008; Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009, Hoogendoorn et al., 2010). The aim of this chapter is to provide a conceptual overview of different perspectives on social entrepreneurship. Four schools of thought on social entrepreneurship are presented, key defining characteristics of each school are described and findings of empirical studies concerning each school are discussed.

This chapter is structured as follows. In the next section, a broad description of social entrepreneurship is provided. In section 3, four different approaches to social entrepreneurship are presented followed by a section dedicated to describing the defining characteristics that distinguish these approaches from each other. Conclusions and a discussion of empirical findings of each school of thought are presented in the final section.

2. Defining social entrepreneurship

Despite a growing focus on social entrepreneurship (and much like the entrepreneurship field in its early days), the field of social entrepreneurship lacks a unifying paradigm, and its boundaries are fuzzy with respect to other fields of research (Mair *et al.*, 2006). This situation is not surprising because a variety of conceptual perspectives have been applied to social entrepreneurship derived from a number of different domains, such as entrepreneurship, philanthropy, public management, non-profits, and social issues in management. For example, notions of social entrepreneurship include the following: non-profit organizations that apply business expertise to become more efficient in providing and delivering their social services (Boschee and McClurg, 2003; Reis and Clohesy, 2001; Thompson, 2002); for-profit businesses run by non-profits to help offset costs and become independent from grants and subsidies (Wallace, 1999); high donor control philanthropy, where donors pursue their own personal social vision (Ostrander, 2007); and socially responsible businesses that offer innovative solutions to persistent social, economic, and ecological problems using market-based models (Dees and Battle Anderson, 2006; Dorado, 2006). In addition, a range of closely related terms exists such as sustainable entrepreneurship, community-based entrepreneurship, indigenous entrepreneurship, and the fair trade movement. As such, “[s]ocial entrepreneurship represents an umbrella term for a considerable range of innovative and

dynamic international praxis and discourse in the social and environmental sector” (Nicholls, 2006:5).

In general terms social entrepreneurship may be described as a type of entrepreneurship that concerns the process of discovering, evaluating, and pursuing opportunities primarily and intentionally aimed at the creation of social value by addressing social needs. Although the distinctiveness of social entrepreneurship may lay in its motives and mission (Dacin *et al.*, 2010; Zahra *et al.*, 2009), the activities and processes through which individuals and organizations achieve these specific outcomes bear on the field of conventional entrepreneurship. It is the social component which adds to the concept’s inherent complexity (Cho, 2006). In general, social value creation is the contribution of the individual’s entrepreneurial effort to the broader society, such as the provision of clean water and education to deprived communities, the empowerment of women, and providing jobs for disabled people. What contributes to the complexity of the social component is that there is no consensus on which social objectives benefit society. According to Cho (2006), this discussion inevitably requires political choices and hence involves a ‘value’ dimension, with regard to which concerns can claim to be in society’s ‘true’ interest (Cho, 2006). However, within the extant literature on social entrepreneurship even within conceptual articles, the social element is often taken for granted.

3. Four distinct approaches to social entrepreneurship

The growing attention paid to social entrepreneurship from both a practitioner’s and an academic point of view can be explained by several general developments in recent decades such as a growing awareness of the persistent social and ecological ills of our time, decreasing funding by the government in face of free market ideology and an increasing demand for improved effectiveness and efficiency for both the social sector and non-profit institutions. These and other¹ general developments together with region specific factors such as socio-economic conditions gave rise to dissimilar approaches to social entrepreneurship in different contexts and resulted in various schools of thoughts².

In this section two American schools of thought (i.e. The Innovation School of thought and The Social Enterprise School of thought) and two European approaches (i.e. EMES approach and UK approach) are explored. Although the approaches are often mixed in popular discourse, they reveal different perspectives and research preferences. In order to compare the schools of thought, the main distinctions and commonalities are summarized in the subsequent section.

The Innovation School of thought. The Innovation School of thought focuses on the social entrepreneurs as individuals who tackle social problems and meet social needs in an innovative manner. According to one recent examination, “[t]he school is focused on establishing new and better ways to address social problems or meet social needs” (Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006:41). Social entrepreneurs do so by either establishing a

¹ See for a more detailed description of these developments Hoogendoorn *et al.*, 2010.

² These approaches draw on work of Dees and Battle Anderson who can be credited with the distinction between the Social Innovation School of thought and the Social Enterprise School of thought (Dees and Battle Anderson, 2006) and Bacq and Janssen (2011), Degroote, (2008), and Kerlin, (2006).

nonprofit enterprise or a for-profit enterprise. For both schools of thought within the American tradition, private foundations that promote the strategic development of the sector and their founders have contributed significantly to the fundamentals of the schools. For the Social Innovation School of thought, Bill Drayton, founder of Ashoka, is considered the leading figure. This school of thought on social entrepreneurship is rooted in the body of knowledge of commercial entrepreneurship on the discovery, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities. In the case of social entrepreneurship, these opportunities are found in social needs exploited by innovative means to satisfy those needs.

The Social Enterprise School of thought. Within the Social Enterprise School of thought, the main subject of study is the enterprise, described as an entrepreneurial, nonprofit venture that generates “earned-income” while serving a social mission. In order to guarantee continuity of service provision, this school focuses on generating income streams independent from subsidies and grants. In addition to the theme of funding, this school also promotes the idea that adopting business methods is a successful way to improve the effectiveness of nonprofit organisations and make them more entrepreneurial. Edward Skloot is one of the pioneers of this school of thought. He founded New Business Ventures for Nonprofit Organisations in 1980, the first consultancy firm working exclusively for non-market companies, thus acknowledging a new niche and a relevant topic of interest for the third sector. The National Gathering of Social Entrepreneurs³, led by Jerr Boschee and Jed Emerson, amongst others, became an influential private initiative promoting the development of a more effective and independent nonprofit sector.

Both above mentioned schools of thought that are part of the American tradition where social entrepreneurship refers above all to market-oriented economic activities that serve a social goal irrespective of sector (Nyssens, 2006). Within this tradition, social entrepreneurship is considered a sub-field of entrepreneurship that results in scholarly attention from both business schools and social sciences. Strategic development such as the promotion of social entrepreneurship and the creation and improvement of sector infrastructure is orchestrated by private foundations, of which Ashoka and the Skoll Foundation are probably the most well known.

The EMES approach. The Emergence of Social Enterprise in Europe (EMES) Research Network began in 1996 and consists of scholars cooperating in order to investigate the social enterprise phenomenon and establish a broad definition that allows for the national differences within the European Union. The main objective of the research of the EMES network is the emergence and growth of social enterprises within the European Union. The ‘ideal typical’ definition used by the EMES Network defines the characteristics of the social enterprise within this approach. As in the Social Enterprise School, the unit of observation is the enterprise. In the case of the EMES approach, the social enterprise has an explicit aim to benefit the community, is launched by a group of citizens, enjoys a high degree of autonomy, is participatory in nature, and does not base decision-making power on capital ownership. In general, the organisations

³ In 2002, The National Gathering of Social Entrepreneurs was renamed Social Enterprise Alliance after merger with SeaChange, a foundation with comparable aims.

within this approach consist of the following types: associations, co-operatives, mutual organisations, and foundations. In contrast to the Social Enterprise School, which applies a non-distribution constraint to profits, the EMES approach allows for some profit distribution due to the inclusion of co-operatives. Although such co-operatives exist within the United States, they are not subject to the social enterprise discourse.

UK approach. Despite the broadness of the definition applied by the EMES Research Network, the UK approach to social entrepreneurship is distinct from the EMES approach and the American tradition and therefore allows for a separate approach. When the Labour Party came to power in the UK in the late 1990s, it proactively tried to stimulate partnerships between civil society, the public sector, and the private sector. In order to promote the establishment of social enterprises throughout the country, the Blair government launched the Social Enterprise Coalition and created the Social Enterprise Unit within the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI). The DTI defined social enterprise as being comprised of “businesses with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximize profits for shareholders and owners”⁴. Since 2006, all social enterprise affairs have been the responsibility of a newly established ministry of the Third Sector dedicated to improving the professionalism of the sector, ameliorating access to financial sources, and refining the legal framework in favour of sector growth. UK social enterprises are subject to a limited distribution of profits and can be initiated by individuals, groups of citizens, or by legal entities. In contrast to the EMES approach, the goods and services provided can be related, unrelated, or central to the venture’s mission. In addition, the social enterprises in the UK are trading within the market.

Within the European approach, social enterprises are generally of the nonprofit or co-operative type, are dedicated to the creation of social impact for the community, and combine revenue generation with the work or participatory activity of program beneficiaries (Defourny, J. 2009; Nyssens, 2006). Strategic development is initiated by governments rather than by private foundations. In contrast with the American tradition, social entrepreneurship mainly attracts scholarly attention from the social sciences.

4. Distinctions between different approaches

Although the different schools of thought and approaches are distinct from each other, there are no strict boundaries between them. In fact, they are still evolving, a point well illustrated by a recent argument proposing to converge the two American schools of thought into a single concept called “Enterprising Social Innovation”(Dees & Battle Anderson, 2006). Despite this blurring of boundaries, exploring the distinctions and commonalities contributes to an understanding of conceptual differences.

The approaches, as described above, share one main commonality: their emphasis on the creation of social value. While it is a long-held belief that entrepreneurs contribute positively to society, it is motivation and the relative importance of social value creation

4 See www.socialenterprise.org.uk

(as opposed to economic value creation) that distinguishes social entrepreneurs from commercial entrepreneurs (Hoogendoorn, 2011).

The distinctions of the different schools of thought are described along seven lines and summarised in Table 1. Taken together, the ideas behind these distinctions and the creation of social value reveal a broad overview of the main research subjects within the field.

Table 1. Distinctions between schools of thought on social entrepreneurship.

		American Tradition		European Tradition	
Distinctions		Social Innovation School	Social Enterprise School	EMES approach	UK Approach
Unit of observation	of	Individual	Enterprise	Enterprise	Enterprise
Link mission – services	–	Direct	Direct / indirect	Direct	Direct / indirect
Legal structure		No constraints	Nonprofit	Some constraints	No constraints
Innovation		Prerequisite	Not emphasised	Not emphasised	Not emphasised
Profit distribution		No constraint	Constraint	Limited constraint	Limited constraint
Earned income		Not emphasised	Prerequisite	Not emphasised	Important
Governance		Not emphasised	Not emphasised	Multiple stakeholder involvement emphasised	Multiple stakeholder involvement recommended

Unit of observation. The Social Innovation School assigns the social entrepreneur an important role. Illustrative is the following quotation from Bill Drayton: “People understand this field by anecdote rather than theory, so a fellow we decide to elect becomes a walking anecdote of what we mean by a social entrepreneur.” (Bornstein, 2007:120). For the other approaches, the enterprise is the central unit of observation, and attention shifts from the individual to teams of entrepreneurs. In addition, the initiator of the social enterprise differs between the various approaches. Within the Innovation School, the initiation of a social venture is mainly associated with a single individual, whereas within the EMES approach the initiator is by definition a group of citizens. The remaining two approaches are less explicit in this respect, and individuals, groups of citizens, or legal entities can initiate the establishment of a social enterprise.

Relationship between mission and services. A second dissimilarity is the connection between the mission and the products and services provided. Within the Social Enterprise School and the UK approach, a direct link between mission and activities is not a necessity. Goods and services provided can be related, unrelated, or central to the venture’s mission. This allows for more flexibility in running for-profit

ventures aiming to generate an independent income stream. In both of the other approaches, the connection is either central or related.

Legal structure. The Social Innovation School and the UK approach put no limitation on legal structure. The Social Enterprise School exclusively considers nonprofits. Within the EMES approach, it is the degree of autonomy of the venture that is important, a focus that allows for certain restrictions on the juridical form. Social enterprises are not to be managed directly or indirectly by public authorities or other organisations.

Innovation. Innovation is clearly one of the defining features of the Innovation School. The level of innovativeness is one of the main criteria for Ashoka in the decision process of supporting a social entrepreneur. “Ashoka cannot elect someone to the Fellowship unless he or she is possessed by a new idea—a new solution or approach to a social problem—that will change the pattern in a field, be it human rights, the environment, or any other.”⁵ For those involved in this school of thought, fundamental change or Schumpeterian change is considered a prerequisite. The other approaches acknowledge the importance of creativity and innovativeness, but neither principle is fundamental to the basis of any of these approaches.

Profit distribution. The Social Innovation School leaves the entrepreneur free to choose whatever is necessary to achieve her goals; this means no constraints on the distribution of profits. In contrast, for the Social Enterprise School, a non-distribution constraint on profits is one of the fundamental principles and is inherent to the nonprofit status of the enterprises within this particular school. Social enterprises within the EMES and the UK approaches encompass enterprise types that are subject to a total non-distribution constraint as well as those, such as co-operatives, that may distribute profits to a limited extent as long as profit maximizing behaviour is avoided (Nyssens, 2006).

Earned income. The Social Enterprise School, and to a lesser extent the UK approach, emphasis the importance of raising commercial income independent of grants and subsidies to secure sustainability and financial viability. Within the EMES approach, “financial viability depends on the effort of its members to secure adequate resources to support the enterprise’s mission” (Nyssens, 2006:12). The viability is irrespective of the amount of income generated by the enterprise. Hence, income generation is not an important issue within this approach.

Governance. Governance is an important subject within the EMES approach. Multiple stakeholder involvement, democratic management, and the participative nature of the ventures are all fundamental to this approach. Within the UK approach, governance is considered an important topic, but direct or indirect involvement of stakeholders can vary in accordance with the legal structure of the enterprise. It is by no means as fundamental for the UK approach as for the EMES approach. The Social Innovation School is in favour of involving stakeholders by creating partnership and networks through which ideas, knowledge, and expertise can flow between organisations aiming to achieve the same social objective. Democratic management is not considered an issue. The Social Enterprise School is in favour of leaving the founders of the

⁵ See www.ashoka.org

enterprise complete freedom to achieve their goals. From this perspective, multiple stakeholder involvement is to be discouraged if it hinders the effective management of both economic and social goals.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The main contribution of this chapter is to define more clearly the concept of social entrepreneurship and to characterize the four main existing schools of thought. We lay out the goals and approaches of each school. However, it is very difficult to assess the extent to which goals are met and how much actual practices reflect the commitments of the school's adherents. Hoogendoorn and colleagues (2010) analyzed the content of the 31 empirical studies and some of the main findings concerning each school of thought are summarized below.

The defining characteristics of the Innovation School of thought are twofold: (1) the individual social entrepreneur who is assigned a series of exceptional qualities and (2) innovation in order to bring about structural social change. The empirical results on the individual level neither confirm nor deny the presence of exceptional qualities that the Social Innovation School tends to assign to social entrepreneurs. Apart from some specific motives and use of language, social entrepreneurs do not seem to be very different from their commercial counterparts. In fact, current research provides little insight on the individual entrepreneur compared with the findings obtained for popular themes in research on conventional entrepreneurship such as demographics, personality characteristics, attitudes towards risk and financial rewards, and educational experiences.

With regard to innovation, some studies captured this topic, but extensive empirical research remains scarce. Especially within this particular school, the absence of research on disruptive change, addressing and changing the structures that caused social and environmental problems in the first place, is a glaring omission. In fact we may conclude that innovation is one of social entrepreneurship's defining elements, rather than being empirically-grounded.

When it comes to the Social Enterprise school the defining characteristics of this research tradition are two: (1) earned income strategies and (2) the non-distribution constraint. Earning a commercial income in the market and becoming or staying independent from grants and subsidies is one of the fundamentals of the Social Enterprise school of thought. Surprisingly, earned income and income strategies seem to be almost completely absent from the reviewed articles irrespective of their research tradition.

We encounter another gap when considering the second key characteristic of the Social Enterprise School, namely, limited or complete profit distribution. None of the empirical studies pay attention to this subject, despite the fact that the effects of the constraints on otherwise presumed profit-maximizing behaviours are interesting, especially in light of the current discussions on misconduct in profit maximizing behaviour by commercial enterprises.

Governance is an important distinction in the EMES approach. Several studies focus on this particular defining characteristic with mixed results. Whereas a study by

Nyssens and her colleagues (2006) reveals that the representation of numerous stakeholders on the board is indeed a good way to efficiently manage the multiple goal character of the social enterprises, other studies draw less favorable conclusions about the governance of social enterprises. Sharir and Lerner (2006) conclude that governing board performance is poor and Borzaga and Defourny (2001) found that multiple stakeholder involvement is a source of inefficiency in the case of conflicting interests since it limits the ability to react to a changing environment.

The defining distinction of the UK approach is not a single characteristic that sets it apart from the other schools of thought. The wide scope of the construct and, hence, the flexibility of the approach is what makes it distinct from other traditions. The discussion so far in this final section has focussed on an individual and on an organisational level of analysis. With regard to the UK approach, we would like to switch to a macro or aggregate level of analysis. Research on a national, regional, and even a sectoral level is completely lacking in our inventory of research findings, and the achievement of the UK in putting “social entrepreneurship” successfully on top of the agenda offers a chance to address this void. Evaluation of current UK policies, the factors obstructing and promoting policy implementation, and possibilities for replication are particularly relevant for policymakers. Even on a more basic level, it is worthwhile to explore the actual degree of social entrepreneurial activity in a country, as well as potential differences and determinants that might explain these differences. Although some insights regarding the level of social entrepreneurial activity are available for the UK (Harding & Cowling, 2006), this is not the case for other countries. Actually, the macro level of analysis opens a new field of unexplored research opportunities concerning subjects such as employment, investments, policy formation, and service provision.

If social entrepreneurship is to be considered a valid means of achieving social goals it is important that research is employed to determine whether the approach is successful, and if so what are the aspects of each model that are crucial to success. We also need to better understand the contextual and resource constraints and supports that relate to more and less successful ventures.

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