

Social Entrepreneurship Core Dimensions and Influential Perspectives: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract : The concept of social entrepreneurship (SE) remains ambiguous and deprived of a widely accepted operational definition. We argue that an awareness about the consensual constituent elements of SE from all key players from its ecosystem as well as a deeper understanding of apparently divergent perspectives will allow the different stakeholders (social entrepreneurs, corporations, investors, policymakers, the beneficiaries themselves) to bridge and cooperate for societal value co-creation in trying to solve our most pressing societal issues. To address our research question -what are the dimensions of SE that are consensual and controversial across existing perspectives? - We designed a two-step qualitative study. In a first step, we conducted an extensive literature review, collecting and analyzing 155 different SE definitions. From this initial step, we extracted and characterized three consensual and six controversial dimensions of the SE concept. In a second step, we conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with practitioners that are actively involved in the SE field. The goal of this second step was to verify if the literature did not capture any key dimension, understand how the dimensions related to each other and to understand the rationale behind them. The dimensions of the SE concept were extracted based on the relevance of each theme and on the theoretical relationship among them. To identify the relevance, we used as a proxy the frequency of each theme was referred to in our sample of definitions. To understand relationships, as identified in the previous section, we included concepts from both the management and psychology literature, such as the Entrepreneurial Orientation concept from the entrepreneurship literature, the Subjective Well Being construct from psychology literature, and the Resource-Based Theory from the strategy literature. This study has two main contributions; First, the identification of (consensual and controversial) dimensions of SE that exist across scattered definitions from the academic and practitioner literature. Second, a framework that parsimoniously synthesizes four dominant perspectives of SE and relates them with the SE dimensions. Assuming the contested nature of the SE concept, it is not expected that these views will be reconciled at the academic or practitioner field level. In future research, academics can, however, be aware of the existence of different understandings of SE and avoid bias towards a single view, developing holistic studies on SE phenomena or comparing differences by studying their underlying assumptions. Additionally, it is important that researchers make explicit the perspective they are embracing to ensure consistency among the research question, sampling procedures and implications of results. At the practitioner level, individuals or groups following different logics are predictably mutually suspicious and might benefit from taking stock of other perspectives on SE, building bridges and fostering cross-fertilization to the benefit of the SE ecosystem for which all contribute.

Keywords : social entrepreneurship, conceptualization, dimensions, perspectives

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