

Main research areas and methods in social entrepreneurship

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Abstract. *The main specific objective of this paper is to explore the content of research as well as methodological issues on social entrepreneurship in the context of corporate social economics and entrepreneurship. Therefore, in order to obtain an overview of the research done on this theme, we conducted a literature review using the exploratory analysis as methodology. We focused on the studies and articles which were published in the most important academic periodicals that cover subjects as management, economics and business. The articles were identified based on the presence of selected keywords in their title, abstract and body of the article: 'social entrepreneur', 'social enterprise', 'social entrepreneurship', 'corporate social entrepreneurship' and 'social economy'. Using this method, there were selected articles and studies published starting from the last decade of the 1990s up to 2015. We were also interested in international publications on the topic and also in books that approached social entrepreneurship.*

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, social innovation, social entrepreneur, social enterprise, research methods.

Introduction

According to Dees, even though social entrepreneurship is a concept that we have only recently become acquainted with, it is not a new phenomenon (Dees, 2001). The concept is rather new, but we can find examples of social entrepreneurs throughout history, such as Robert Owen or Florence Nightingale (Banks, 1972; Drucker, 1979). In his work, Nicholls (2006) places the first use of the concept between 1970 and 1980. Nonetheless, the term became widespread only in 1990, when the social problems expanded globally (Bornstein, 2004). Another interesting development of social entrepreneurship is that despite the fact that organizations with a social purpose are not new and have existed for years, only recently they have been taken into consideration by scholars and by the government (Leadbeater, 1997).

Starting with the 1990s, social entrepreneurship has been a topic of interest, proved by an increased number of studies (Mair and Marti, 2006). In their studies, the researchers on social entrepreneurship mainly focused on describing the phenomenon (Choi and Majumdar, 2014). Most of the articles focused in describing the motivations, main characteristics and success factors of social entrepreneurs. Therefore, the social entrepreneurship literature lacks rigorous methods and formal hypotheses and instead of empirical articles, conceptual studies are predominant (Short et al., 2009).

The literature review reveals that the research on the topic focused on success factors and leadership as well as personal characteristics and renewed social entrepreneurs' experiences. The most interesting aspects of social entrepreneurship are still hard to find amongst the scholars' favourite subjects. Therefore, there is little evidence regarding how the environmental factors promote or inhibit the social entrepreneurial activities (Urbano et al., 2010). Even though we can find various case studies and theoretical works (Bacq and Janssen, 2011; Desa, 2012; Dhesi, 2010; Estrin et al., 2013; McMullen, 2011), most of them treat the subject from a descriptive and inconsistent perspective. Moreover, the scarce empirical resources make it difficult to

completely understand the social entrepreneurial activities and so it becomes important to focus our attention and resources on this direction (Short et al., 2009).

Methodology

This paper's main specific objective is to explore the content of research as well as methodological issues on social entrepreneurship in the context of corporate social economics and entrepreneurship. Therefore, in order to obtain an overview of the research done on this theme, we conducted a literature review using the exploratory analysis as methodology. We focused on the studies and articles which were published in the most important academic periodicals that cover subjects as management, economics and business. The articles were identified based on the presence of selected keywords in their title, abstract and body of the article: 'social entrepreneur', 'social enterprise', 'social entrepreneurship', 'corporate social entrepreneurship' and 'social economy'. Using this method, there were selected articles and studies published starting from the last decade of the 1990s up to the present (2015). We were also interested in international publications on the topic and also in books that approached social entrepreneurship (Hockerts et al., 2010; Kickul and Lyons, 2012; Seymour, 2012; Volkmann, Tokarski and Ernst (ed.), 2012).

Status of the research on social entrepreneurship

Definitions and meanings of social entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship has turned into a substantial factor as far as the development and well-being of societies is concerned. Similarly, social entrepreneurship turned into an important field in which entrepreneurs develop their activities with the fundamental aim of generating social value (Abu-Saifan, 2012; (Drumea) Gauca 2015).

In the table below we synthesized a comparison regarding the classic notion of entrepreneurship and the modern concept of social entrepreneurship.

Table 1. *Comparative view between entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship*

Entrepreneurship	Social entrepreneurship
Conceives new markets	Conceives new markets specially designed for social necessities
Establishes new jobs	Establishes not only new jobs but also social equity
Creates the mobilization of resources	Creates the mobilization of resources addressing social challenges
Introduces innovative technologies, industries as well as products	Conceives social capital
Aims customers	Aims beneficiaries as well as customers

Source: Bibu et al., 2008, p. 79.

As with any newly emerging field, the literature on social entrepreneurship has grown and there have been several attempts to define the main concepts such as social entrepreneurship, social entrepreneur and social innovation, among others. There is a broad range of possible interpretations of the concept. In this sense, and in line with previous studies (Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Hill et al., 2010) there is no clear definition of its domain (Agoston, 2014) and it remains fragmented. Hence, at the moment, the literature has not provided clear-cut answers to these questions. The most inclusive perspective is the one promoted by Dees (1998) for whom social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in the social sector by adopting a mission to create and sustain social value, recognizing and pursuing opportunities, innovating, taking risks and displaying a sense of accountability.

During the last years new fields of expertise on social entrepreneurship have emerged which lead to a development of the literature on the subject and, more important, a significant effort was made for the definition of concepts such as social entrepreneurship, social innovation or social entrepreneur. However, so far, the literature has not provided articulated answers to these problems. Considering that there are numerous possible interpretations of this concept and acknowledging the studies of authors as Choi and Majumdar or Hill, we can see that the work in this domain is still heterogeneous and fragmented and no clear definitions can be identified (Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Hill et al., 2010).

The growing literature on the topic is not the only proof for the interest in social entrepreneurship, but also in the large circulation of terms used to identify the concept itself. In their work, Chell et al. (2010) and Bacq and Janssen (2011) explain that the fragmented definitions are a normal response to the different perspective people have on social entrepreneurship. People come from different places; the different geographical and cultural contexts as well as the differences in welfare and labour markets, it all influences how they understand social entrepreneurship. Friedman and Desivilya (2010) suggest that the different meanings are influenced by two major cultures – the European and the Anglo-Saxon traditions. Social entrepreneurship is a broad concept and it includes various types of social entrepreneurial activities, for example: non-profit organizations adopting business tools, venturing, social cooperative enterprises or hybrid organizations (Smallbone et al., 2001).

Even though heterogeneity is a characteristic of the concept, all definitions seem to have agreed on the social mission as the central driving force of social entrepreneurs (Leadbeater, 1997). Regarding the proper organizational form a social enterprise, scholars argue that the chosen format should be the solution to the problem of effectively mobilize the resources in order to produce a social impact on the current social institutions (Chell et al., 2010).

Table 2 illustrates the effort invested by the scholars in defining the key concepts related to the subject: 'social enterprise', 'social entrepreneurship', and 'social entrepreneur'.

Table2. Main research areas

Area	Major research aims	Studies
Defining the phenomenon	The definition of social entrepreneurship	Short et al. (2009); Chell et al. (2010); Bacq and Janssen (2011); Ebrashi (2013); Choi and Majumdar (2014); Zahra et al. (2014)
	Characteristics of social entrepreneurs	
	Characteristics of social enterprises	
Social entrepreneurship versus various different types of organization	Comparative perspective regarding social and commercial entrepreneurship	Williams and Nadin (2012); Lumpkin et al. (2013); Almarri et al. (2013); Bacq et al. (2013); Luke and Chu (2013); Bargsted et al. (2013);
	Similarities and differences between social entrepreneurship and other types of activism?	
Fundamental parts of social entrepreneurial process	Development of the social entrepreneurial process	Corner and Ho (2010); Dhesi,(2010); Chalmers and Balan-Vnuk(2013); Kaneko (2013); Renko(2013); Salamzadeh et al. (2013); Meyskens et al. (2010); Ozdemir(2013); Tobias et al. (2013); Gras and Mendoza-Abarca (2014);
	Functions of social opportunities	
	Impact assessment of social entrepreneurs	
Identification of major predictors	Major environmental elements impacting the process of social	Urbano et al. (2010); Di Domenico et al. (2010); Smith and Stevens (2010);

regarding social entrepreneurship	entrepreneurship	Nga and Shamuganathan (2010); Nicholls (2010a); Nicholls (2010b); McMullen (2011); Desa (2012); Smith et al., (2012), Bhatt and Altinay (2013), Ladeira and Machado (2013); Maclean et al. (2013); O'Connor (2013); Roy et al. (2014);
	Interaction between social entrepreneurs within their area	
	Key antecedent factors in social entrepreneurial mechanisms	

Source: Author's own conclusions.

The development of future research and in particular, the development of empirical studies is limited by the previously mentioned lack of consensus regarding the definition of the main concepts that configure the paradigm of social entrepreneurship such as social enterprise, social entrepreneur or social innovation (Bacq and Janssen, 2011; Choi and Majumdar, 2014).

A rather large number of studies has been dedicated to describing the distinctions and similarities between social and commercial entrepreneurs (Austin et al., 2006; Williams and Nadin, 2012), corporate social responsibility (Seelos and Mair, 2005; Dima et al., 2013; Dima and Vasilache, 2013) and non-profit enterprises (Fowler, 2000). Referring to the distinctions between social and commercial entrepreneurs, Austin et al. (2006) argue that the main difference has to do with their purpose, meaning what the enterprise is trying to maximize. Bacq et al. have made a comparison between Belgium and Netherlands in terms of social and commercial entrepreneurship and found that social entrepreneurship organizations are younger when compared with commercial ones. They also observed that the entrepreneurial process is yet in an infancy stage. Moreover, they argue that in terms of employment growth, social entrepreneurs are less ambitious than commercial ones (Bacq et al., 2013, p. 54).

Comparing social enterprises to the non-profit organizations, Thompson and Doherty (2006) highlight a series of differences in their innovation, engagement in training, entrepreneurial approach to strategy (Bratianu, 2007, 2009) and pursuit of social goals. In his study from 2000, Fowler realised a complex social entrepreneurship typology and observed that the social entrepreneurial activities can be divided in three broad categories. Concerning the three categories, in the third model Fowler stresses the distinctions between the economic activities that also provide social benefits and those that do not. Moreover, he highlights that the former place more complex and stringent demands on an organization than the latter.

Finding how social opportunities are discovered, created and exploited is another topic that concerned scholars leading to a series of papers published (Corner and Ho, 2010; Gras and Mendoza-Abarca, 2014). The process of identification and evaluation of social opportunities was defined by Weerawardena and Mort (2006) as the distinct activity of entrepreneurs trying to create social value. Also important is that elements like the context, social mission and organizational sustainability simultaneously influence this process. Similarly, Dees (2001) argues that the recognition and pursuit of social opportunities in order to create social value are amongst the entrepreneurship components of social entrepreneurial activities. Moreover, Mort et al. (2003, p. 82) highlight social entrepreneurs' 'ability to recognise opportunities to create better social value for their clients'. Taking this into consideration, the main goal of social entrepreneurs is to find solutions for the market value and to address the issue of public goods ineffectively (Austin et al., 2006).

Environmental sustainability is another key area of the research on social entrepreneurship (Di Domenico et al., 2010). Gnyawali and Fogel (1994) noted that emerging social organizations are influenced by distinctive elements related to economic, cultural or market factors. Referring to the elaborate, fluctuant and

unpredictable environment that social entrepreneurs have to overcome in trying to fulfil their social and economic goals, Neck et al. (2009) raise the issue of the factors which influence social entrepreneurship. Also, according to Amin et al. (2002) the differences in political and institutional contexts and in welfare systems reflect the cross-country differences in social entrepreneurial activities. The context in which social ventures operate is the main focus of the research in this area. This context has a direct influence on social enterprises' ability to meet the goal of creating social value while simultaneously creating a business model that is financially stable. Therefore, researchers show for the emergence and implementation of social actions we must take into consideration the environmental factors (Nicholls, 2010b). For instance, studies show that social entrepreneurs are prone to address issues like the creation of new social opportunities that the other sectors have failed to address or like the unsatisfied social needs (Corner and Ho, 2010). Moreover, one of the main constraints that social entrepreneurs have to overcome in fulfilling their social mission is the lack of finance available for the development of social capital (Sharir and Lerner, 2006). Hence, as Zahra et al. point out, institutional factors are linked to social opportunities (Zahra et al., 2008).

As previously advanced, in order to achieve better results in this area of expertise, the institutional approach is the best choice as a theoretical framework (North, 2005). This decision is based on various reasons and the first main factor is determined by the literature review of the most important studies published in renowned journals in the last years. The analysis has shown that most of these articles have as a starting point for their thesis two elements: formal institutions and/or informal institutions. The second main factor is that a series of studies on entrepreneurship have offered useful and efficient theories for understanding the environmental factors and their impact (for example, Alvarez et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2011; Veciana and Urbano, 2008). More accurately, some authors are beginning to recognize and support the viability of the institutional approach as a valid theoretical framework related to the area of social entrepreneurship (Desa, 2012; McMullen, 2011; Nicholls, 2010b; Urbano et al., 2010).

Social entrepreneurship and research methods

It cannot be said when the concept of 'social entrepreneurship' was coined, but academic sources place it for the first time in William N. Parker's publication from 1954. Thus, in a publication within *The Journal of Economic History*, Parker describes a particular type of entrepreneurship emerging in Germany "To the individual German in the mining industry, all three types of activity appeared as outlets for enterprise and ambition. The first is most obviously 'economic entrepreneurship' on a job, and contributed clearly to the functioning of the economy and, under other favourable conditions, to its growth. The individual's interest in the second (which may be called 'social entrepreneurship') depended on the fluidity of the German social structure, the standards for advancement, and the individual's own restlessness" (Parker, 1954, p. 400). According to him, this so called social entrepreneurship lead to an increased social mobility allowing individuals belonging to the working class to reach highly-paid, intrapreneurial management jobs because they proved entrepreneurial behaviour. It is true that definitions of social entrepreneurship keep changing and improve, however, the contribution to social mobility keeps standing a fundamental objective for plenty of social entrepreneurs. Consequently, on the long path of the concept's history, Parker's article could be considered a basic start in the studies on social entrepreneurship.

However, it was not until 1985 that the concept was used again (if we do not mention the five isolated publications which were not cited at all during these three decades) within two articles, one from the US and the second one from the Netherlands. Further on, the number of publications highly increased, but the real boom occurred between 1999 to 2000, when their number doubled. This was the moment when social entrepreneurship turned into a major-trend in entrepreneurship studies. During the past years, numbers kept on increasing. Thus, according to Google Scholar in 2009 the new publications including the concept surpassed a thousand, meanwhile two years later, the same source indicates 2370 new issues on the research topic. Accordingly, “the number of yearly publications more than doubled within only two years” (Sassmannshausen and Volkmann 2013, p. 7). By August 2015, the number of publications containing the search term has reached about 31,900 in total, which represent more than the existing social entrepreneurship corporations.

Considering the infancy stage of the social entrepreneurship field of research, it can still be observed an increased attention paid to this subject by the literature on social issues in the business, economics and management areas. Since 2006, the publications on topic have become more numerous and are also a subject of interest if we consider the series of articles, studies and special issues on social entrepreneurship that have been published in renowned academic journals such as: International Small Business Journal (2013), Academy of Management Learning and Education (2012), Entrepreneurship and Regional Development (2011), Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice (2010), Journal of Business Venturing (2009) and Journal of World Business (2006).

Figure 1 portrays the evolution of the publishing activity regarding literature on social entrepreneurship. It can be clearly observed that between 2009 and 2013 there have been published 85% of the studies. Analysing according to the journals, we find that approximately a third, 36% to be precise, of the articles on this subject appeared in only three of the journals, namely Journal of Business Ethics, Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, as well as, Entrepreneurship and Regional Development.

Although social entrepreneurial activities as a scholarly field of research get an increased attention, it is yet in an early stage (Short et al., 2009). In the past decade, scholars have dedicated their time and effort in building a conceptual foundation, resulting in a large number of conceptual studies. Our literature review reveals a predominant conceptual approach aiming to describe and define the key concepts and to understand the mechanisms behind these constructs.

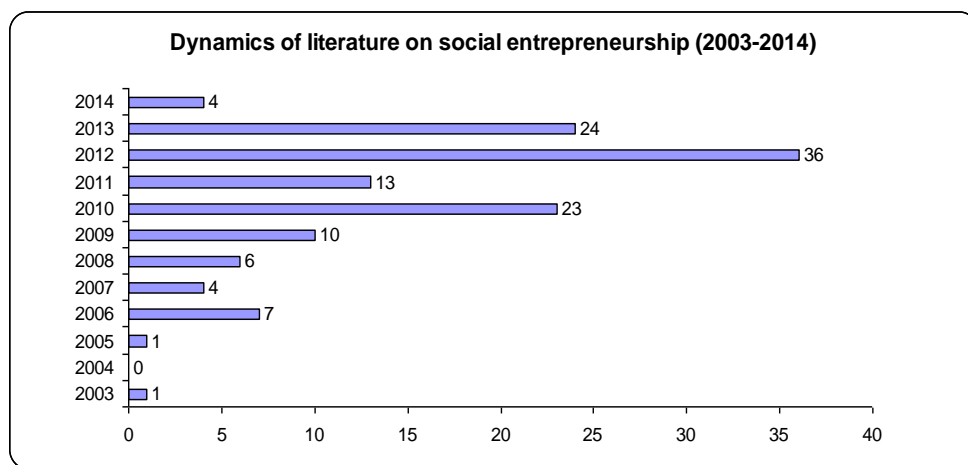


Figure 1. Dynamics of literature on social entrepreneurship

Source: Author's own calculations.

As shown in Table 3, 96.9% of the empirical studies are qualitative researches and, 90.3% of the studies are case-based works that present real and inspiring experiences of particular social entrepreneurs. Our review also shows that 9.7% of the publications concern methodology issues. The few quantitative articles exclusively use descriptive methods and statistics. Also, 87.1% of these quantitative papers had a sample size of only two to five case studies. Only 3.2% of these articles had a sample size of ten cases or more. Moreover, the samples used are very diverse in terms of their scope. To conclude, this type of articles is excessively descriptive and their purpose is mainly descriptive and explanatory.

Table 1. *Major characteristics of empirical researches*

Type of study	Qualitative research	96,9%
	Quantitative research	3,1%
Qualitative publications - methodology	Case study	90,3%
	Grounded approach	9,7%
Quantitative publications - methodology	Descriptive Statistics	100,0%
Case study size of the sample	1 case	3,2%
	Between 2 to 5 cases	87,1%
	Between 6 to 10 cases	6,5%
	> 10 cases	3,2%

Source: Author's own calculations.

Conclusions

Considering this context, we must highlight that the literature on social entrepreneurship lacks, almost entirely, substantial empirical data. However, during the last years, the growing interest in the topic has created an interesting theoretical debate which has definitely contributed to a better understanding of the paradigm. Therefore, the emergent stage of the social entrepreneurship research it is once again confirmed. To summarize, the results of our analysis show that the number of empirical studies is scarce and do not offer generalizable findings. Also, our data prove that social entrepreneurship research needs to incorporate specific hypotheses to be tested and the use of multivariate research methods.

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