



Social entrepreneurship as an essentially contested concept: Opening a new avenue for systematic future research



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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as an active area of practice and research within the last three decades. Nevertheless, in spite of its growing popularity, scholars and practitioners are far from reaching a consensus as to what social entrepreneurship actually means. This has resulted in a number of different definitions and approaches within the field of social entrepreneurship. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the ongoing contestation of social entrepreneurship and to offer a novel conceptual understanding of the concept that can facilitate the development of systematic and structured future research. To this end, we analyze social entrepreneurship on the basis of the theory of essentially contested concepts, which was proposed by Walter Bryce Gallie in 1956. Building upon this theory, this article shows that social entrepreneurship can be regarded as an essentially contested concept and that a universal definition that would be accepted among contestant parties is hardly possible. Responding to this recognition, the article proposes the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept, which can serve as a conceptual tool to help advancing social entrepreneurship as a coherent field of research despite its contested nature.

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1. Executive summary

It is generally agreed upon that social entrepreneurship is a contested concept. To date many competing definitions of the concept exist and no unifying conceptual framework of social entrepreneurship has yet emerged. Consequently, even after more than two decades, research on the concept is still considered to be in its infancy with minimal progress in theory development. As some researchers have noted, in the face of the ongoing contestation of social entrepreneurship and the lack of a unifying framework, it will remain difficult to conduct progressive research and to establish its legitimacy as a research field. Several researchers have addressed the disparities between different conceptions of social entrepreneurship and have attempted to map out the different meanings, logics, and schools of thought implicitly assumed in these conceptions. Nevertheless, a solution to the definitional problem which would enable researchers to collectively develop the field of social entrepreneurship is still clearly lacking.

The purpose of this article is to address this gap in the current literature. In order to do so we first establish the essentially contested nature of the concept of social entrepreneurship, and then propose a means, through the idea of the 'cluster concept', to provide a definitional foundation which can help to advance the development of systematic future research.

The theory of essentially contested concepts, which was proposed by Walter Bryce Gallie in 1956, suggests that a group of concepts exists which inevitably leads to endless disputes about the proper meanings of these concepts. These essentially contested concepts share specific characteristics which were specified by Gallie in seven key conditions. The seven key conditions

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are (1) appraisiveness, (2) internal complexity, (3) various desirability, (4) openness, (5) aggressive and defensive uses, (6) original exemplar, and (7) progressive competition. This article analyzes if social entrepreneurship fulfills the seven key conditions. Based on this analysis, it is shown that social entrepreneurship can indeed be regarded as an essentially contested concept, and that a universal definition that would be accepted among different parties is, therefore, hardly possible. Responding to this finding, the article proposes a conceptual understanding of social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept. According to this understanding, social entrepreneurship can be viewed as a conglomerate of several sub-concepts which are identified as (1) social value creation, (2) the social entrepreneur, (3) the social entrepreneurship organization, (4) market orientation and (5) social innovation. These sub-concepts can be regarded as the basic characteristics of social entrepreneurship, and any particular instantiation or conception of social entrepreneurship must, therefore, contain at least some of these sub-concepts. However, except for the sub-concept of social value creation, which is considered to be a precondition for social entrepreneurship, the cluster concept conceptualization of social entrepreneurship does not specify which or how many of the sub-concepts have to exist in actual instantiations. The article proposes that conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept enables researchers to state their specific understanding of the concept, provides a basis for developing social entrepreneurship ideal-types, and can further serve as a broad research agenda for the field.

The contribution of this article is twofold. Firstly, it provides an in-depth explanation of the contested nature of social entrepreneurship and shows that a universally accepted definition of social entrepreneurship is hardly possible. Secondly, it offers a novel conceptual understanding of social entrepreneurship which may open a new avenue for systematic future research despite the contested nature of the concept.

2. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as an active area of practice and research within the last three decades. Leading foundations in the field like Ashoka, the Skoll Foundation, and the Schwab Foundation actively promote social entrepreneurship by highlighting the achievements of individual social entrepreneurs (Dacin et al., 2011). Also, governments have started supporting social entrepreneurship by establishing new organizational frameworks in order to encourage the formation of new social entrepreneurial initiatives and by providing funding to these initiatives. Within the last decade, an increasing number of social entrepreneurship centers have been set up at universities all over the world, and new scientific journals on social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, and social innovation have been launched. Also, the number of conferences and special issues in scientific journals devoted to the topic has increased significantly.

In spite of these developments, scholars and practitioners are far from reaching a consensus as to what social entrepreneurship actually means. Many scholars have acknowledged that the term 'social entrepreneurship' is inconsistently used and that it lacks a unified definition (for example, Certo and Miller, 2008; Hill et al., 2010; Mair and Martí, 2006; Mort et al., 2003; Short et al., 2009). Many competing definitions and meanings of social entrepreneurship exist to date. For example, for some researchers social entrepreneurship refers to not-for-profit organizations in the search for new funding strategies through business activities (Boschee and McClurg, 2003; Lasprogata and Cotten, 2003). Others view social entrepreneurship as the creation of businesses to serve the poor (Seelos and Mair, 2005), and again another group of researchers views social entrepreneurship as the use of social innovations to solve social problems and to bring about social change, irrespective of whether commercial activities are involved or not (Dees, 1998a; Martin and Osberg, 2007). Nicholls (2010: 611) contends that it has become axiomatic in recent years for scholars to note that there is no consensus as to what social entrepreneurship actually means and that the research agenda for the field is still date not clearly defined. Short et al. (2009: 162) assert that the "lack of a unified definition makes establishing the legitimacy of a field or construct difficult" and that the disparity of terminology "also hinders empirical research seeking to examine the antecedents and consequences of social entrepreneurship". Also, Dacin et al. (2010: 38) conclude that the current state of conceptual confusion impedes theory-based advances in the field of social entrepreneurship. Not surprisingly, Short et al. (2009: 168) further assess that research in social entrepreneurship is consequently characterized by minimal progress in theory development despite more than two decades of research. This, however, is an unfortunate development since social entrepreneurship has proven to be a promising and important global phenomenon which certainly deserves rigorous academic attention.

Several researchers have addressed the existing disparities between the different social entrepreneurship conceptions and have mapped out the different meanings found in literature (Hill et al., 2010), identified different schools of thought and practice (Dees and Anderson, 2006; Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Hoogendoorn et al., 2010), and different discourses and narrative logics of social entrepreneurship (Nicholls, 2010). However, a solution to the definitional problem, which would enable researchers to collectively develop the field of social entrepreneurship, is still lacking.

The purpose of this article is to close this gap in current literature by addressing the following questions: Why is it so difficult to define social entrepreneurship? Is a universal definition of social entrepreneurship that would be accepted among researchers and practitioners possible at all? And, if not, is there a way out of this definitional problem? The consequences of the definitional problem are obvious: It impedes both future research on social entrepreneurship, and the establishment of social entrepreneurship as a coherent field of research (Certo and Miller, 2008; Short et al., 2009). Thus, in order to answer these questions, we analyze social entrepreneurship on the basis of the theory of essentially contested concepts and, based on this analysis, propose the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept in order to pave the way for systematic future research.

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