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Feeling capable *and* valued: A prosocial perspective on the link between empathy and social entrepreneurial intentions

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ABSTRACT

Empathy is a key trait distinguishing social entrepreneurs from traditional entrepreneurs, and an important antecedent of social entrepreneurial (SE) intentions. Yet, little research explains the mechanisms through which empathy motivates SE intentions. We argue that studying the link between the prosocial trait of empathy and the prosocial outcome of SE intentions requires a prosocial lens that traditional entrepreneurial intent theories cannot offer. Building on prosocial motives research, we propose that empathy explains SE intentions through two complementary mechanisms: self-efficacy (an agentic mechanism), and social worth (a communal mechanism). We find support for our hypotheses in a study of 281 university students.

Executive summary

Empathy is regarded as an essential trait of social entrepreneurs (Dees, 2012) and, as such, as an important antecedent of the “social” aspect of social entrepreneurial (SE) intentions (Mair and Noboa, 2006), especially compared with more traditional commercial entrepreneurial intentions. However, two limitations characterize our current understanding of the “social” in SE intentions. First, not all empathic individuals find the prospect of starting a social enterprise attractive, and in any case not all intend to start such an enterprise (Ersnt, 2011; Tiwari et al., 2017). This raises the question of what mechanisms link empathy to SE intentions. Second, the little we know about this link is based on research on traditional entrepreneurial intentions, which are mostly self-oriented (Miller et al., 2012a) and miss on the prosocial nature of SE intentions.

Heeding recent calls for more entrepreneurship research building on the insights of prosocial motives literature (Shepherd, 2015), and following on the empathy focus of leading practitioners in the SE ecosystem (e.g., Ashoka, 2016), in this study we ask: If a person's ability to feel and react to others' experiences can potentially spark positive social change, what mechanisms help catalyze that individual's disposition into intentions to engage in social entrepreneurship?

To address that question, we build on prosocial motives research (e.g., Grant, 2007; Grant and Gino, 2010), and we propose that empathy explains intentions to engage in social entrepreneurship through two complementary mechanisms: an agentic mechanism, and a communal mechanism. Specifically, the agentic mechanism refers to self-oriented feelings of personal competence (self-efficacy), and the communal mechanism refers to other-oriented feelings of connection to and regard by others (social worth) (Grant and Gino, 2010).

We test our model on a sample of 281 university students who participated in two types of social entrepreneurship courses: one

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taught at a university in the northeastern United States, and one taught in South Africa. Data were collected via online questionnaire surveys between May 2014 and August 2016 (response rate > 90%) using validated scales adapted from the literature. Our analyses, using Structural Equation Modeling Partial Least Squares (Wold, 1985), support our model explaining the mechanisms that link empathy to SE intentions.

This study thereby contributes to the SE and traditional entrepreneurial intent literature in important ways. First, we extend our understanding of the prosocial nature of SE intentions by showing that they may be driven not only by self-oriented motives of self-efficacy, but also by other-oriented motives of social worth. Second, by considering that individuals see themselves in terms of agency and communion, we highlight the duality of self-views in the social world (Bakan, 1966) as a relevant framing to entrepreneurship research. Thus, we reveal the communal mechanism of social worth as a missing piece in the research aiming at illuminating the “social” in social entrepreneurship. Third, we shed light on the motivating mechanisms through which empathy raises SE intentions. By considering that empathy can drive both agentic (self-efficacy) and communal (social worth) views of oneself, not only do we improve our understanding of the relationship between empathy and SE intentions, but we also contribute by suggesting a new antecedent to self-efficacy in entrepreneurial intent models. Finally, this study offers practical insights for social entrepreneurship educators into the importance of recognizing empathy in the classroom, and into which interventions can channel students' specific empathic dispositions into SE intentions, through experiences that enable the self-views of agency and communion.

1. Introduction

Social entrepreneurial (SE) intentions are a subject of growing interest in the entrepreneurship literature (Liñán and Fayolle, 2015). In contrast to traditional entrepreneurial intentions—“the intent to start a business, to launch a new venture” (Krueger, 2009: 55)—SE intentions can be generally understood as the intent to pursue a social mission by starting a business or launching a social venture. Looking to explain the “social” aspect of SE intentions, researchers build on a long tradition in psychology research that links empathy, or responsivity to the experiences of another (Davis, 2015), to the display of helping behaviors (Davis et al., 1999; Eisenberg et al., 1989). Indeed, social entrepreneurs, in their pursuit of a social mission, aim to assist others in need rather than serve their self-interests (Miller et al., 2012a; Santos, 2012). Following this rationale, social entrepreneurship scholars propose that empathy is a key distinguishing trait of social entrepreneurs compared with their commercial counterparts (Dees, 2012), as well as an additional antecedent in traditional models of entrepreneurial intent (Forster and Grichnik, 2013; Hockerts, 2017; Mair and Noboa, 2006).

However, this current approach to understanding the “social” in SE intentions has two limitations. First, not all empathic individuals find the prospect of starting a social enterprise attractive, nor do all intend to do so (Ersnt, 2011; Tiwari et al., 2017); hence it is important to understand how empathy translates into SE intentions. Yet, we know little about the mechanisms through which empathy motivates SE intentions. Second, current models explain SE intent through the self-oriented lens of traditional entrepreneurship research (Miller et al., 2012a). Whereas the pro-self nature of traditional entrepreneurial intent calls for feelings of personal competence and capability (i.e., agentic motives), the prosocial nature of SE intentions also requires feelings of connection to and regard by others (i.e., communal motives).

To address these limitations, we draw on prosocial motives research (e.g., Grant, 2007; Grant and Gino, 2010) and propose that empathy—defined as a disposition to understand others' points of view (perspective-taking) and to experience feelings of warmth and compassion for others (empathic concern) (Davis, 1983)—explains SE intentions through two complementary motivating mechanisms: an agentic mechanism and a communal mechanism.

Agency and communion are the two dimensions along which individuals view themselves in the social world (Bakan, 1966; Fiske et al., 2007). On the one hand, agency refers to perceptions of self-efficacy, that is, “judgements of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations” (Bandura, 1982: 122). On the other hand, communion refers to feelings of social worth, that is, “a sense of being valued by others” (Grant and Gino, 2010: 947).

As empathy shapes how one responds to the experiences of another (Davis, 2015), we argue that it influences individuals' feelings of SE self-efficacy—which we define as one's confidence in one's competences and abilities to perform SE activities—and social worth. In turn, SE self-efficacy motivates empathic individuals to develop SE intentions by facilitating the appraisal of information that they may use to judge their personal capabilities (Bandura, 1982) to become social entrepreneurs, while social worth raises SE intentions by enabling empathic individuals to envision the likely impact of their work on potential targets of help (Grant and Gino, 2010).

This study contributes to the social entrepreneurship and traditional entrepreneurial intent literature in important ways. First, we heed recent calls for entrepreneurship studies to build on insights from prosocial motives research (Bolino and Grant, 2016; Renko, 2013; Shepherd, 2015), and consider that SE intentions may be driven not only by agentic motives of self-efficacy, but also by communal motives of social worth. Second, by considering that individuals see themselves in terms of agency and communion, we highlight the duality of self-views in the social world (Bakan, 1966) as a relevant framing to entrepreneurship research. This framing complements traditional entrepreneurial intent research, which frames self-efficacy as a sign of the perceived feasibility of starting a venture (Krueger and Brazeal, 1994; Krueger et al., 2000). Further, it reveals the communal mechanism of social worth as a missing piece of the puzzle in research aiming at illuminating the “social” in social entrepreneurship. Third, we shed light on the motivating mechanisms through which empathy raises SE intentions. By considering that empathy can drive both agentic and communal views of oneself, not only do we improve our understanding of the relationship between empathy and SE intentions, but we also contribute by suggesting a new antecedent to self-efficacy in entrepreneurial intent models.

In the remainder of this paper, we start by examining what links empathy to SE intentions, and then discuss the importance of SE self-efficacy and social worth in this relationship, followed by our proposed research model. Next, we detail our methodology and

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