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The quandaries of social entrepreneurship studies – a discursive review of the discipline

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to investigate the ways in which social entrepreneurship knowledge is both propelled and hindered by the socioeconomic circumstances. We examine the existing body of research and identify different conceptualizations and main schools of thought. We then demonstrate how the process of constructing academic representation is shaped by the prevalent public discourses. Our analysis leads to the differentiation between social *entrepreneurship as mitigation* and social *entrepreneurship as transformation*. We conclude that a better alignment of the two approaches – broadening research focus from outcome to process – would reveal their complementarity and contribute to the conceptual advancement of the discipline. We propose expanding the existing approaches with the politics of social entrepreneurship studies and stress the importance of increased reflexivity on the plight of the new discipline.

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Introduction

While scientific knowledge has an important role to play in political decision-making, a heated debate continues about the extent to which scientific discourse may venture into the realm of advocacy. While it is generally agreed that sound policy development ought to be guided by impartial scientific expertise, it is also recognized that all knowledge is profoundly ideological in nature (Fairclough 1995; Lyotard 1979; Van Dijk 2003).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the ways in which social science knowledge is both propelled and hindered by socioeconomic circumstances. We take

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the emerging discipline of social entrepreneurship studies (SE) as a strategic site to illustrate the process of discursive construction of academic representation. The argument of this paper proposes that social entrepreneurship studies emerged and gained popularity as a discipline due to a specific set of economic conditions (Dees 1998; Leadbeater 1997). We further explain how the range of topics understudy, the employed rhetoric and disciplinary monopoly in social entrepreneurship studies have over time become an exponent of particular political agendas. In view of these results, we propose widening the scope of approaches with politicized social entrepreneurship and call for enhanced reflexivity over the future of the discipline (Bourdieu 2004; Fairclough 1995).

The paper is based on a wide literature review, compiling both research articles and theoretical conceptualizations within the field of social entrepreneurship studies. It draws on the critical analysis theory that conceives discourse as institutionalized structures of knowledge production, distribution and consumption that manifest themselves in disciplinary paradigms (Foucault 1980). We draw critical discourse analysis theory to unravel how power imbalances arise and how they are embedded in texts and other social practices – a feature that makes them more or less intractable (Fairclough 2003: 209, see also Bhaskar 1986). We offer insights into the ways in which scientific discourse reproduces and reinforces the relations of power in society (Fairclough 1989). Our analysis is performed at a macro level, and is aimed at identifying the mechanisms and prevalent features of the knowledge production processes (Fairclough 1995). In particular, we demonstrate how the placement of the social entrepreneurship studies within the disciplines of business and management has contributed to the methodological monopoly, prioritizing testing and measurement over in-depth analysis and process explanation (see Nicholls and Cho 2006). Our analysis leads to the differentiation between social entrepreneurship as mitigation and social entrepreneurship as transformation. We argue that a better alignment of the two approaches – shifting research focus from outcome to process – would reveal their complementarity and contribute to the conceptual advancement of the discipline. Investigating these issues is of special importance in the context of social entrepreneurship studies, a discipline acclaimed for its potential of achieving systemic change and ushering into a new era of alternative socio-economic organization in societies (Mair *et al.* 2005; Martin and Osberg 2007).

The paper opens up with a description of the origins of social entrepreneurship studies as an academic discipline. This section is followed by a short presentation of the main trends in the existing literature and their categorizations. Next, we present a theoretical exploration of the relationship between scientific knowledge and power, comparing the two identified orders of discourse. The last section identifies, describes and critically examines the topics understudy, the prevalent rhetoric and employed methodological approaches within SE, shedding light on what Foucault calls the 'intimate and necessary relation of knowledge to power' (1977, 1980). The paper closes with a discussion of the

role of reflexivity as a tool to continuously invigorate the growing body of SE research.

The origins of social entrepreneurship – the global north and the global south¹

Even though some examples of social economy (associations, cooperatives, trade unions, solidarity groups) can be traced back to the Middle Ages, the discipline of social entrepreneurship studies emerged in the seventies and eighties (Teasdale 2012). It was then that the disillusionment with the omnipotence of the welfare state led to increased interest in alternative economic systems. As observed by Defourny and Develtere, social economy organizations are ‘born of pressures resulting from significant unsatisfied needs; they address acute problems, (and) respond to a “condition of necessity”’ (2009: 22). The authors further observe that, for social entrepreneurship, these ‘conditions of necessity’ emerged independently in the global North (the U.S. and Western Europe) and in the global South (Africa, South America, and parts of Asia). The combination of interdependent geopolitical conditions not only fueled the interest in social entrepreneurship as a new organizational form but also shaped the ways in which social entrepreneurship was approached and assessed by policy makers (Smith and Stevens 2010).

In the global South, wide-scale privatization and deregulation programs were being implemented, following the World Bank’s and International Monetary Fund’s structural adjustment policies (Kerlin 2009). The withdrawal of the State from the social sector has driven the populations to rely on the markets (Anheier and Salamon 1998; Defourny 1992). Nongovernmental and nonprofit organizations stepped in, but their scale was nowhere near enough to account for the growing numbers of needs. In order to scale-up, development organizations were encouraged to explore the organizational model of a for-profit social business, acclaimed for its cost-efficiency and empowering effect on populations (Fowler 2000; Klees 2008; Sesan 2006).

Commercial microfinance provides a good example of the for-profit shift in developing countries. From donor-based, through self-sustainable, to for-profit, the micro lending sector has undergone a transformation, consolidating its facet as a market operating global business (Fernando 2006). A form of philanthrocapitalism – the idea that the demand for microfinance in developing countries can only be met by sustainable institutions providing their services commercially – for-profit microfinance is characterized by a strong belief in double-bottom

¹We use the terms ‘global North’ and ‘global South’ as functional constructs and not as descriptors of homogeneous / exhaustive categories. In principle, the use of the terminology is to reflect the geopolitical relationship between the dominant and the subaltern regions of the world. While we acknowledge that the blanket terminology obscures the complications of what we understand as modernity, we find the generalization justified in the context of the issues raised in this paper.

lines (Robinson 1995: 2). In commercial microfinance, private resources are to increase in volume and compensate for a predicted abatement in state-administered aid, a mechanism that is believed to lead to a large-scale economic and social change (Robinson 2001). In fact, in Zimbabwe, a large number of later social enterprise initiatives originated from women's savings clubs and other not-for-profit organizations (Masendeke and Mugova 2009). At the same time, when accounting for the commercialization of the microfinance sector, Fernando (2006) observes that MFIs have frequently superimposed entrepreneurial identities onto their women clients and effects vary significantly across contexts. For example, a study of Nepalese microfinance by Shakya and Rankin (2008) reveals that the clients routinely contest their entrepreneurial identities by engaging in subversive and evasive practices (see also: Guérin *et al.* 2013).

A new wave of Bottom of the Pyramid approaches (the so-called BoP 3.0) is another example of the entrepreneurial trend, with its value-proposition of emphasizing sustainable co-creation and frugal innovations as a development strategy for the near-subsistence markets (Kolk *et al.* 2013). In this way, BoP 3.0 has laid the ground for social enterprises, encouraging cross-sector partnerships and promoting entrepreneurship-based development frameworks (Caneque and Hart 2015; Cieslik 2016). Using the example of South Africa, Fury (2010) writes how the social entrepreneurship model gradually gained legitimacy over government-led interventions because of its (comparable) market-driven efficacy in the delivery of services. At the same time, it over-scored conventional businesses in terms of social trust, accountability, and purpose and the nonprofit sector in terms of leverage and access to capital.

In the global North, in the period following the World War II, it was believed that social provision, together with full employment and rising real wages, was bound to improve the welfare of all citizens (Morel *et al.* 2012).² Nonetheless, it soon transpired that the system of state social insurance, designed with the purpose to protect people against the loss of earning power, was failing (Leadbeater 1997). Basic services: retirement pensions and unemployment benefits, disability and sickness allowances, were not being delivered by society to all of its members, resulting in exclusion, discrimination, and destitution (Defourny and Nyssens 2010). The technological advances in health care opened up new demands, further aggravated by the sharp population increase (Hemerijck 2012). The proportion of elderly was rising fast and providing childcare facilities and schooling proved beyond the capacity of the state (Jensen 2012a, 2012b). 'The trouble is, the welfare state was designed for a world that no longer existed' – concluded Charles Leadbeater, one for the early scholars of social entrepreneurship (Leadbeater 1997: 16).

²For a more nuanced analysis outlining the differences between SE in Europe and in the U.S. consult Kerlin (2006).

An often underestimated factor contributing to the welfare collapse and the subsequent 'rise of the social entrepreneur' (Leadbeater 1997) is the emancipation of women. While a number of researchers attribute the economic crisis to the demise of the traditional nuclear family, few acknowledge the mounting influence of women's rights movements (O'Connon *et al.* 1999; Orloff 1996; Mink 1998). Up until the pre-war period, a vast number of social issues used to be delegated to the domestic sector of women's unpaid labor; including childrearing, tending to the sick and assistance to the elderly. The sudden unearthing of the dramatic shortages in the provision of social services is linked to the gradual emancipation of women, and the subsequent refusal to proceed with uncompensated care work (Sainsbury 1999). Carol Hanisch's landmark essay, *The Personal Is Political* (Hanisch 1970), describes how the feminist ideology managed to enter the political arena by pointing out that domestic labor, traditionally attributed to the sphere of the 'private', was in fact the main driver of Keynesian economies (see also: Ferguson 1997).

Second-wave feminist thinkers (Dale and Foster 1986; Humm 1989) were quick to observe that social policy is a reflection of the dominant social reality and, as such, it is heavily affected by the structure of the labor market and the patterns of maintenance and dependence prevalent in society (Pendersen 1993: 418). While not against the idea of welfare *per se*, they pointed out that its business model was designed to preserve and perpetuate the institution of the family as we know it, with the tasks of caring for children, the elderly, and the sick assumed to be the uncompensated responsibility of only one sex (Keister and Southgate 2011). The cult of motherhood, reinforced by the rhetoric linking womanhood to sacrifice and martyrdom, were in fact a discursive tool of control, aimed at perpetuating the established labor relations and consequently, the neo-liberal economic system. With the sudden non-compliance of the women, a new socioeconomic formation was in demand to uphold the swaying structure of economic organization (Henrekson 2005). It is then that the growing role of social entrepreneurs was brought to the public light, together with the promise to bridge the gap between the failing state, and the imperfect market (Thompson *et al.* 2000). As a reaction against neo-liberalism, Social Entrepreneurship has been promoted as the solution to welfare problems brought about by social change and persistent unemployment (Cook *et al.* 2003: 57). Jolted by the worsening socio-economic conditions, governments turned to social entrepreneurs, expecting them to shoulder the state in its care-provisioning task (McRobbie 2000; Genz 2006). With its focus on the ability of nonprofit organizations to become more commercial, the conception of social enterprise has become the model of choice for many western welfare-based governments, such as in the U.K. and Australia (Roy and Hackett 2016). Accordingly, the nonprofit organizations, foundations, and some public service providers were encouraged – and later required – to undertake entrepreneurial ventures and the government welfare funding was pooled under the control of local initiatives

(see Cook *et al.* 2003 for a more extensive analysis of the relationship between social entrepreneurship and the welfare state).

The rise and Fall of the social entrepreneur

A number of scholars observe that the study of the social entrepreneur, the 'risk-taking individual who, against all odds, creates social change', actually preceded the study of social entrepreneurship (Dees 1998; Light 2006: 48). Using business tools and applying managerial logic, the social entrepreneur was supposed to amend the many social issues, and in so doing, professionalize and commercialize the social sector. Multitude of studies have been devoted to the figure of social entrepreneur, analyzing their character features, predispositions, special skills and talents, altruistic inclinations, and pro-social aptitudes (see e.g. Bornstein 2004; Cools and Vermeulen 2008; Dees 1998; Leadbeater 1997; Mair and Noboa 2006; Thompson *et al.* 2000). As Light put it: '(...) dozens of stories have been written about Wendy Kopp of Teach for America, Alan Khazei of City Year, and Vanessa Kirsch of Public Allies, but few have asked how a small corps of teachers might be able to change the prevailing wisdom about the most effective way to teach (...)' (2006: 48).

This concentration on the individual in the early stages of the discipline bears certain discursive consequences. As Dey and Steyaert observe, such a 'messianistic' vision of social entrepreneurship evokes the hope of providing solutions ('redemption') without any need for participation or change on the part of society at large (Dey and Steyaert 2010). Critiquing the academia for its concentration on the social entrepreneur, the authors note that 'the narrative of the innovative, romantic hero (see: Nicholls and Cho 2006: 106) might flippantly be interpreted as a mere re-performance of American culture of individualism' (Dey and Steyaert 2010: 91, see also Hjorth and Bjerke 2006). As observed by Berglund: '(...) to construe the world in terms of those people who are entrepreneurs and those who are not, produces one particular type of knowledge, which brings power inequality between different social groups' (2006: 238). Quoting Ogbor (2000), she adds: 'entrepreneurship is conceptualized by a concrete ideological orientation as if it were a concrete means by which the rational European/American male exhibits the propensity to take risks, to conquer the environment and to survive in a Darwinian world' (Ogbor 2000: 618).

It is with this reasoning in view that Dey and Steyaert introduce the metaphor of 'messianism without a messiah' that dismisses of the 'nostalgic reference to the sovereign, heroic entrepreneur' (Dey and Steyaert 2010: 86). Seeing the social entrepreneurial process as a 'complex web of reciprocal interactions between culturally embedded actors closely connected to each other' (Lindgren and Packendorff 2006: 211) allows for the recognition of everyday socially entrepreneurial practices, performed by a variety of individuals across all sectors of society. . Montgomery, Dacin and Dacin explore this new approach in their

paper on collective social entrepreneurship, where they analyze how social alliances, movements and networks create social value via framing, convening, and multi-vocality (2012). It is these social alliances and networks that have recently become the focus of attention at the frontiers of social entrepreneurship research, thus initiating a paradigm shift for the discipline. It is a shift from sacrificing individualism to collective activism; from providing one-off solutions to pressing social ailment, to systemic social change (Alvord, Brown and Letts 2004). The next section illustrates how the manner of defining social entrepreneurship has changed over time, in response to the dominant discourse of the day.

The evolution of definitions

The high expectations surrounding the newly emergent discipline of social entrepreneurship are reflected in the large number of definitional approaches that have attempted to describe the phenomenon (Defourny and Nyssens 2008). Importantly, setting the defining criteria is also inherently political: delineating the boundaries too harshly excludes many nascent social projects from the category, cutting off structural support and diminishing funding opportunities. As some scholars observe, the choices that have been made often significantly 'reduce the inventory of success stories to a very familiar few that almost always seem to win the national awards', and exclude projects like advocacy, social activism, or community appraisal on the basis of not providing 'tangible services' to populations (Light 2008: 11, 14). At the same time, leaving the question of the definition in disarray turns the discipline into 'an immense tent into which all manner of socially beneficial activities fit' (Martin and Osberg 2007: 4).

Answering the popular demand for more orderly approach, Low (2001: 20) proposed a paper with a 120 cell matrix, the aim of which was to categorize all the emergent definitions of social entrepreneurship. Weerawardena and Mort (2006) enlisted and analyzed 26 different definitions proposed by leading authors around the globe, while Brouard and Larivet (2010) devoted an entire book chapter to gathering together the existing understandings and explaining the relationships between them. While the first definitions made little distinction between social entrepreneurship (the process of pursuing sustainable solutions to social problems) and social entrepreneurs (the person involved in the said pursue), later conceptualizations tend to focus on different aspects of the process (compare: Dees 1998; Drayton 2006). Accordingly, Hudon and Sandberg (2013) and Zahra *et al.* (2009) enlist features of different socially entrepreneurial models while Peredo and McLean dissect the concept into 'the entrepreneurial' and 'the social' (2006). Hockerts attempts to define the entrepreneurial opportunities (2006, see also: Mair and Marti 2006), while others focus on social innovations (Mulgan 2006) or entrepreneurial systems (Martin and Osberg 2007). Finally, Dacin, Dancin and Matear undermine the

assumption that social entrepreneurship is at all in need of a definition, as they propose integrating it within the existing disciplines and theories (2010).

Here again, a trend can be traced in the evolution of the concept of social entrepreneurship over the last ten years (see for example: Brouard and Larivet 2010). Specifically, the key mainstream terms like 'viable economic structures' (Fowler 2000: 649), 'business tools and techniques' (Bates *et al.* 2001: 1), 'multiple bottom lines' (Bibby 2002: 38; Lasprogata and Cotton 2003: 69) or 'sustainable strategies for nonprofits' (Pomerantz 2003: 25) have been complemented with researching 'fundamental innovation' (Sullivan *et al.* 2003: 76), 'transformative social change' (Roberts and Woods 2005 : 49), 'pro-activeness' (Weerawardena and Mort 2006 : 32) and 'creating a new equilibrium' (Martin and Osberg 2007: 35). The observed shift from predominantly economic discourse of 'handling' the social to a civic narrative of sustainable social change maps new directions for the discipline. Hjorth writes that, conceptualized as such, social entrepreneurship would stretch far beyond accommodating the social dimension within the neoclassical economic behavior, becoming a 'social force creating society and not primarily an economic force creating companies and products' (Hjorth 2010: 314, 315, see also Steyaert and Katz 2004). In the next sections, we compare and contrast three mainstream classification attempts, and discuss their shortcomings: the market and disciplinary bias.

The existing body of research

In the previous section, we presented the evolution of definitional approaches to social entrepreneurship. We now proceed to illustrate how the interest in social entrepreneurship surpassed its scope of simply providing solutions to intractable social problems, ushering into new lines of research. Depending on the element of main focus, the differing approaches can be classified into schools of thought.

Dees and Anderson delineate two threads of research, comprising Social Enterprise School and the Social Innovation School (Dees and Anderson 2006). The Social Enterprise School, which originated in the early 90s with the writings of Drucker (1992, 1993), Boschee (2006), Boschee and McClurg (2003) and Leadbeater (1997) views social entrepreneurship as 'the art of simultaneously pursuing both a financial and a social return on investment'. The School's main focus encompasses generating 'earned income' in support of a social mission, as it advocates applying market solutions to social problems, multiple-bottom-line impact assessment and increased sustainability (to the point of commercialization) of nonprofits. More recently, the school has been represented by such authors as Emerson (2006), Austin (2000), and Austin *et al.* (2006).

The Social Innovation School, on the other hand, represented by Bornstein (1998, 2004), Khan (1996), Nicholls (2006, 2010) and Mulgan (2006), concentrates on the power of new ideas and market-based innovation. The School

recognizes socially entrepreneurial ventures outside the nonprofit sector, seeking entrepreneurial acts in public and market institutions. It incorporates Social Corporate Responsibility initiatives, recognizing them as institutional social entrepreneurship within the market sector. Interestingly, both research orientations are characterized by an intense interest in the individual. Social entrepreneur as the innovation-driven and innovation-driving agent remains at the center of researchers' attention, as is the environment in which he operates. He is the innovative 'manager' of social problems, whose creative spirit and pattern-breaking ideas bring about 'new ways of doing things' together with increased efficacy and transparency of organizations. The innovation itself is supposed to cause incremental social change and lasting improvement of a particular disadvantageous context.

Defourny *et al.* (2000), on the other hand, propose a geographic division of social entrepreneurship thought. In a their seminal paper, 'Social Economy – North and South', they propose a distinction of the third sector studies as performed in the developing world and in Europe/North America. Since developing economies tend to – willingly or deterministically – reproduce certain economic trends performed by the global North, some characteristics of the budding third sector happen to be remarkably similar (Fowler 2000). Nonetheless, a distinguishing feature of the Northern societies is the omnipresent role of the state, which has facilitated the third sector's growth and maturation. Contrastingly, in the South it is the absolute absence of the state supported services that fuels the nascent social entrepreneurial initiatives.

Finally, Defourny and Nyssens categorize social entrepreneurship research with regards to established academic centers (2010). They distinguish between the North American traditions, centered mostly on the Ashoka organization; the EMES school, represented by the scholars from the University of Liege; and other European centers, notably the British one, with the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship and ISIRC scholars. The U.S. school, represented by Dees (1998), Bornstein (1998) and Austin (2000) corresponds to the Anderson's 'Social Enterprise School', and focuses on employing entrepreneurial behavior and market tools for increased social benefit. The EMES school, on the other hand, incorporates all themes related to the management of the third-sector organizations. Finally, the British school, closely related to the Anderson's Social Innovation School, concentrates on ways in which the workings of the public sector can be 'entrepreneurialized' for increased social benefit and 'economized' for the sake of shouldering the state budget.

Undoubtedly, these categorizations help to conceptualize the notion of social entrepreneurship, synthesizing emergent literature into clear-cut research threads. Mapping the research domain according to focus (Anderson and Dees), geography (Defourny, Develtere and Fonteneau 2009) and academic orientation (Defourny and Nyssens) provides a panoramic retrospect of the work that has already been done so far within the discipline of social entrepreneurship studies.

While the above presented schools and conceptualizations differ in scope and research focus, it is important to observe that a vast majority of them are still represented by scholars of economics, management and related fields. Be it the management of nonprofits, development economics or third-sector studies, the above listed approaches all assume the supremacy of the 'entrepreneurial' over the 'social'; which in turn translates to exploring the potential of market solutions as applied to the nonprofit/state sectors (Dey and Steyaert 2010, see also: Hjorth 2013). The next section explores the said 'rhetoric of the market' and the discursive consequences for the discipline.

The rhetoric of the market

Several authors have noted already that the market-based approach has been predominant in all social entrepreneurship schools of thought (Anderson and Jack 2002; Austin *et al.* 2006; Bygrave and Minniti 2000; Dorado 2006; Dey 2006; Eikenberry 2009). As pointed out by Steyaert and Katz, 'one does not need an extensive discourse analysis to illustrate that approaches to entrepreneurship and entrepreneurs are affected in a mainly economic discourse' (Berglund 2006: 238; Steyaert and Katz 2004). The majority of studies seem to focus on the penetration of business ideas, management practices, and market principles into the world of nonprofits (Harding 2004; Rosengard 2004; Phills *et al.* 2008, see also: Ostrander and Langton 1987; Steyaert and Hjorth 2006; Dey and Steyaert 2010). All its resource-efficiency appeal notwithstanding, the omnipresence of the enterprise discourse results in a 're-description of the social as a form of the economic', turns 'the social' into an 'epiphenomenon of the market', 'citizens into consumers'; and the crucial element of civic agency is irreversibly lost (Hjorth and Bjerke 2006: 101, see also: Alexander *et al.* 1999; Dey and Steyaert 2010; Eikenberry and Kluver 2004; Ryan 1999, Steyaert and Hjorth 2006; Swedberg 2000; Weisbrod 1997, 1998). Indeed, in the times of the economic crisis the potential of the 'enterprise discourse' is very promising (Doolin 2002). However, in the name of cost-effectiveness and increased productivity, citizens have become 'individualized' and 'responsibilized', compensating for the diminishing state aid (Dey and Steyaert 2010, 2012; Steyaert and Katz 2004).

The focus on economic sustainability, and on ways to achieve it, has become the prevalent rhetoric of social entrepreneurship studies. The mainstream research approaches focus primarily on financial viability studies and impact assessment, portraying social entrepreneurship as a new strategy of proficient third-sector management. The next section sheds light on the dangers that such a disciplinary bias poses to the emerging field of social entrepreneurship, potentially diminishing its scope and academic promise.

Disciplinary bias

In her article from a decade ago, Haugh (2005) outlined the 'research agenda' for social entrepreneurship studies as eight themes: defining social entrepreneurship, the environmental context, opportunity recognition and innovation, modes of organization, resource acquisition, opportunity exploitation; performance measurement, and training education and learning. Similarly, in their paper from 2009, Short, Moss and Lumpkin delineated the 'areas of interest' for social entrepreneurship studies as encompassing management and entrepreneurship, and 'social studies'. Gras, Mossakowski, and Lumpkin constructed a rating of 327 topics in social entrepreneurship studies based on potential interest and theory development, pointing at 'business models, organizational forms and innovations' as the highest-scoring research areas (2011). All three of these review papers seem to argue that the direction for social entrepreneurship studies is within/parallel to business, economics and management studies. As if responding to the powerful entrepreneurship discourse, these conceptualizations exemplify the general trend in approaching 'the social', comprising of efficient operationalization and/or quantification.

'The idea that scientific knowledge holds the key to solving social problems has long been the exponent of neo-liberalism' – writes Alice O'Connor (2001: 3, see also: Deaton and Kozel 2004). O'Connor's narrative describes how, over the twentieth century, the broad range of analyses of the causes of social problems including religion, culture and politics has been reduced to enlisting the individual attributes of the poor. She further explains how defining poverty as a lack of certain resources, abilities and assets reduces the complex social phenomenon to a series of measurable characteristics. She concludes that the stress on quantification in social studies is symptomatic of the neo-liberal approach to social science as a whole: utilitarian, cost-efficient, condensed; providing definite answers, and instant solutions.

O'Connor's argument on poverty discourse echoes the reasoning developed by Robert Chambers back in the seventies with regards to international development studies. Chambers argued that the categories applied in poverty measurement refer 'not to deprivation, nor even to wealth and income, but to NSS records of consumption. The data-sets and methods of analysis take over, and poverty in India becomes what has been measured and is available for analysis' (Chambers 1980: 4, see also: 2007). Chambers argued that quantification and measurement are seen as the tools to understanding and consequently solving social problems, whereas in fact they are only surface indicators of the symptoms. Social objectives, like wellbeing and standard of living, measured in economic terms, become represented as accumulated assets and liquidity. It is this very process that James Ferguson (1990, see also: Ferguson and Gupta 2002) memorably described as the 'anti-politics machine', referring to research as an exercise in power.

Accordingly, research approaches stemming from anthropology, sociology, ethnography, or human geography are relatively underrepresented within the discipline of social entrepreneurship studies research. A notable exception of an edited volume by Steyaert and Hjorth, 'Entrepreneurship as Social Change. A Third Movements in Entrepreneurship Book' (2006) comprises social science approaches to social entrepreneurship which by large tend to explore, problematize, and question as opposed to explain, determine and direct. Accordingly, they 'lack' the efficiency and unambiguity of economics and management approaches, 'clouding' the image of the discipline as a universal tool to society's betterment – a much needed constructive critique.

The concentration on management and business-related fields can partly be accounted for by the above mentioned logic of efficacy. In social entrepreneurship studies, the pressure to optimize and 'efficiencize' the process of knowledge production becomes evident when one reviews the titles of the discipline's groundbreaking publications (e.g. the aforementioned position *How To Change the World* by Bornstein; see also the detailed analysis of Dey and Steyaert [2010], where they provide more examples of the degree of utility/performativity that the discipline is expected to deliver). Following Jacobs, the authors argue that subjecting social projects to the efficiency logic, a 'logic which reduces reality to a set of simplified, pre-defined activities, inputs, outputs, and outcomes' oversimplifies the composite, multi-layered social dependencies into an agenda of business deliverables (2006: 250; see also: Gould 1996).

The focus on 'success stories' and on providing instant solutions that took over the discipline of social entrepreneurship studies is a discursive strategy that diverts public attention from the underlying power relations in societies. In a recently published systematic literature review, Conway Dato-on and Kalakay (2016) point out how the omission of key concepts like empathy or responsibility from mainstream research obfuscates the multi-dimensionality of the social entrepreneurship construct. The next section explains how the alternative approach to social entrepreneurship – SE as social transformation – counterbalances the market and disciplinary biases, recognizing the multi-facet, civic nature of social entrepreneurial acts.

Braving the political

The condition of both social and economic destitution is irreversibly linked to social relationships and structures within which the deprived groups are embedded (Bebbington and Kothari 2006; Hickey and du Toit 2007; Hulme and Green 2005). Bringing lasting change in societies entails not only providing the missing service to the destitute but also targeting the political structures that are oppressive to them. Accordingly, all socially entrepreneurial activity entails a political component.

Contrastingly, the mainstream literature on social entrepreneurship is inherently a-political. Apart from some works that analyze the aforementioned relationship between social entrepreneurship and the welfare state, most authors choose to study the legislative (regulation) rather than the executive (power structures) realities (see e.g. Henrekson 2005; Thompson *et al.* 2000). In so doing, the academic representation gives away to the power of discourse; as social entrepreneurship is in fact deeply political.

Conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as social transformation allows for the recognition of the political aspects of bringing about lasting social change. Politicized social entrepreneurship takes into account the initiatives that provide effective and sustainable solutions to the needs of the marginalized, the disadvantaged, and socially excluded while stressing the importance of civil society that actively opposes the structures that are oppressive to them – a view already represented by such authors like Hjorth, Steyaert, Dey, and Lundgaard Andersen. Understood as such, social entrepreneurs are all citizens who, through their actions, attempt to advance a systemic change, modify dysfunctional behavioral patterns and perceptions in order to arrive at more polycentric governance and achieve equitable development. Achieving ‘systemic change’ is thus conditional on ending the system of injustice in the global socioeconomic sphere. What characterizes the re-politicized social entrepreneurship model (or a systemic change approach) is the belief in ‘alternative economy’; a system of increased social justice and more equitable distribution of resources. Among others, this approach has been signaled in the writings of Light (2008), Peredo and McLean (2006), Mair and Marti (2006), as well as in the more recent works of the classic mainstream authors like Bornstein and Davis (2010), Drayton (2006), Cook *et al.* (2006) and Yunus (2006, 2007, 2010).

The following section provides a structured comparison of the transformational social entrepreneurship and the existing approaches.

Complementary or contradictory? Comparing the orders of discourse

In order to comprehensively distinguish between the mainstream (mitigation) and alternative (transformation) social entrepreneurship studies we turn to critical discourse analysis (CDA). As a methodology of critical social research, CDA concerns itself with ‘continuity and change’ at both: the level of individual texts and the structural, inter-textual space (Fairclough 2003; see also: Fowler *et al.* 1979). Accordingly, CDA looks at texts as individual acts, but also as manifestations of the so called orders of discourse: ‘specific combinations of genres, discourses, and styles which constitute the discorsal aspect of a network of social practices’ (Fairclough 2003: 221). As such, CDA is well-suited for analyzing the scientific discipline of social entrepreneurship studies because it focuses on both social practices (i.e. the production of scientific texts) and their political

dimension (power structures and social change). Fairclough writes that 'critical social research designs and changes its research program to try to respond to the great issues and problems of the day', pointing to the agenda-setting, political function of scientific production (2003: 203).

Ridley-Duff and Bull (2011: 100) argue that 'social enterprises offer either a partial or a complete rejection of established rules of international capitalism'³ (see also Hackett 2010; Roy and Hackett 2016). Building on this idea, we propose introducing a distinction between the discourses that approach the field of social entrepreneurship as mitigation and focus on their corrective function in addressing the state/market failures (the mainstream, hegemonic narrative) and those that see its function as a disruptive/creative systemic transformation (the emergent alternative).

Following Fairclough, we define orders of discourse as networks of social practices and their language aspects (Fairclough 2003). Orders of discourse select certain possibilities defined by languages and exclude others: they control linguistic variability for particular areas of social life. The presently hegemonic SE as mitigation discourse assumes that socially responsible 'businesses' can in fact be accommodated by the existing neoliberal system, that profit and charity can go hand in hand and that doing good and doing well are mutually-supportive aspirations. A good example of the former is exemplified by Anthony Giddens's Third Way: a socio-political theory that advocates greater equality in society through a better distribution of productive capacities and endowments, while rejecting radical restructuring of the global power relations to insure more just income redistribution (2000). Giddens's approach emphasizes personal responsibility and self-actualization (similar to the 'messianistic' belief in social entrepreneurs) as facilitators of positive social change.

The political, disruptive SE as transformation discourse rejects these assumptions. In their article defending the autonomy of the nonprofit sector, Eikenberry and Kluver point out the threat that 'marketization' and 'individualization' poses to democracy and citizenship (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004: 132). Together with other authors, they warn that concentration on individualistic, market-base social entrepreneurialism can be detrimental to 'democratic accountability, citizenship, and an emphasis on collective action for the public interest' (Eikenberry and Kluver 2004: 132, see also: Box *et al.* 2001; de Leon and Denhardt 2000; Dey and Steyaert 2010). The Occupy Wall Street movement can serve as a good example here: by questioning the income inequality and wealth distribution between the wealthiest 1% and the rest of the population, the protesters created a Polanyian 'countermovement': a radical societal initiative against existing social institutions and market fundamentalism (Polanyi 1945; see also: Roy and Hackett 2016) (Table 1).

³While the quote itself refers to social enterprises as organisations, the volume that they co-author takes a much broader perspective, portraying social entrepreneurship as a social phenomenon.

Table 1. Social entrepreneurship as mitigation and transformation – comparison.

| Comparison criteria | SE as mitigation | SE as transformation |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| Role/objective | Mitigation/correction | Transformation |
| Ideological model | Social democracy | Social economy |
| Profile | Apolitical | Political |
| Tools | Market tools used strategically | Alternative economies: solidarity economies, community economies, alternative currencies, cooperatives |
| Agency | Individualistic | Collective |
| Function | Correct market/state failures | Challenge the status quo (existing power structures) |
| Approach | Networks, collaboration | Creative disruption |
| Conceptualizing economy | Economy equalized with markets, the invisible hand | Economy embedded in social relations |
| Disciplinary focus | Economics, business studies, management, organisational studies | Sociology, anthropology, social movements |
| Political position (example) | Third Way | Occupy Wall Street |
| Theoretical framework | Anthony Giddens | Karl Polanyi |

The extent to which the two approaches (SE as mitigation and as transformation) can be reconciled within one, however multidimensional, scientific discipline is perhaps yet to be seen in the coming decade. Until then, finding an in-between the two approaches can help ensure the minimum of coherence within the broadly set disciplinary boundaries. Our proposition in this respect is to shift the focus of research from the outcome of social entrepreneurship to the process. While in terms of outcome, the two approaches seem rather divergent; in terms of process the areas of interest are much more homogenous. ‘Creating sociality’ might go hand in hand with ‘organizational networking’; ‘civic agency’ is reconcilable with ‘personal potency’ and ‘social movement’ with ‘communities of practice’. First and foremost, boosting the economic sustainability of interventions should be seen as a side-effect and not the goal of social entrepreneurship. Simply including the disadvantaged groups in modern markets does not necessarily lead to successful integration with the existing socio-political system. Enhancing agency and promoting civic engagement are in fact equally crucial as facilitators of social sustainability and enablers of positive systemic change.

Conclusion: continuous reflexivity

The evolution of the discipline of social entrepreneurship studies, as presented in the previous sections, illustrates the gradual refutation of the Enlightenment illusion of the separation of power and knowledge. Acknowledging that politics and ideology permeate all human perception leads to irreversible renunciation of ‘the whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can exist where the power relations are suspended and that knowledge can develop outside its injunctions, its demands, and its interests’ (Foucault 1977: 27).



Table 2. Social Entrepreneurship subjected to CDA scrutiny.

| | Thick description | | Interpretation | Explanation |
|---|---|--|--|--|
| Dimensions of discourse | Object of analysis | | The processes by means of which the object is produced and received | The socio-political conditions which govern these processes |
| Social entrepreneurship studies (SES) | Social entrepreneurship studies as a social science discipline: definitions, theories, concepts | | Creation of SE knowledge Gaining disciplinary credentials | Geo-political processes (global North versus global South) SE research from the 80s to the present (evolution of the concept) The failure of the welfare state |
| Social entrepreneurship discourse (SED) | (1) The dominant approach: SE as mitigation (existing approaches) (2) The alternative approach: SE as transformation (the <i>politicized</i> social entrepreneurship/ the Nordic School) | | Market bias: structural support for market-based organizational forms as a driving force for market-oriented research Disciplinary (economic/managerial approaches) Power dependencies between donor countries/organizations in the global North and the NGOs in the global South Organisational isomorphism – for-profit logic spreading across the third sector (worldwide) Struggle for legitimacy – the hegemonic language of economic sustainability becomes the legitimizing factor Call for social entrepreneurship research within the civic/public domain | The economic crisis – decreased funding, increased competition for donors Disillusionment with the donor-based development model Growing popularity of entrepreneurial approaches within the third sector (microfinance/BOP) |

In this paper, we attempted to critically analyze social entrepreneurship as an emerging discipline of social science. We have identified the dominant and the emergent, alternative discourses, singled out the underlying processes and interpreted them in the light of the accompanying socio-political processes (Table 2). We came to a conclusion that even though the approaches represent some contradictory interests and ideas, shifting the focus from outcome to process might result in interesting conceptual coalitions.

As Table 2 illustrates, the argument of this paper proposes that social entrepreneurship knowledge is both propelled and hindered by the socioeconomic circumstances. Apart from constituting an emergent social science discipline, the body of literature on social entrepreneurship is also carving a particular discursive space, with – hopefully flexible – ontological and epistemological borders. By engaging in critical reflection over these processes, we are still in a position to influence how these borders are to be set, in particular in relation to other disciplines (Foucaultian ‘interdiscourse’).

By recalling the relevant theories of knowledge production, we argued that the process of constructing the academic representation of social entrepreneurship has been shaped by the prevalent public discourses of the time. In order to counterbalance that process, several authors (Dey and Steyaert 2010; Nicholls and Young 2008; Steyaert and Dey 2010) have called for increased reflexivity on the part of social entrepreneurship scholars.⁴ The practice of reflexivity in research refers to the capacity of a scholar to step outside the scientific process and critically assess it from an ‘outsider’s perspective’. As an approach, ‘reflexivity’ involves continuous consideration of both the author and the subject matter as well as the integrity of the relationship between them. Through reflexivity, researchers examine the ways in which their research acts on and enacts the world, and how the world retroactively acts on their research (Steyaert and Dey 2010: 238).

Promising as it may sound, the practice of reflexivity is not easily attained, with Bordieu hinting at it being rather illusive, or simply unattainable (2004). Limited by the boundaries of their habitus – a generative mechanism – the researcher can only reflect upon their past practices, texts, and contexts and has a rather modest capacity to consciously shape the ongoing scientific-discursive reality. For this reason, interdisciplinary literature reviews of past body of research within SE, comprising both selective/critical and structured/comprehensive approaches, are crucial for the steady advancement of the field. Under this condition, social entrepreneurship studies may be in the position to maintain its ‘dangerous’ – as Steyaert and Dey put it – research agenda for many years to come.

⁴With reference to the distinction presented in the previous analysis, these authors represent the order of discourse identified as ‘social entrepreneurship as transformation’.

'As a field of inquiry, social entrepreneurship is still in its infancy. We do not yet have the deep, rich explanatory or prescriptive theories that characterize a more mature academic field' (Dees and Anderson 2006: 39). The above stance illustrates the so called 'disciplinary novelty paradigm' within SE (Mair *et al.* 2006; Thompson *et al.* 2000). Accordingly, definitions are being multiplied, typologies drawn and sector boundaries remain blurred in order to accommodate the fact that the existing research has rarely reached beyond one-off disjoint case-studies, illuminating the pathways to economic sustainability (Light 2008). At the same time, social entrepreneurship is being taught at major universities and explored by renowned scholars; international conferences are being organized annually; research grants and prizes have been established for academics and research teams. Is it then the time for consolidation, or for increased selectivity, establishing 'the mainstream' and 'the periphery' of social entrepreneurship studies?

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard argues that knowledge gains legitimacy in relation to its performativity. Scientific discovery and cognition is judged against its potential to effectively manage social reality. In social entrepreneurship, the focus on financial sustainability has monopolized the researchers' attention, diverting it from political sustainability, and social entrepreneurship research has not as of yet fully addressed the structures that truly underlie the social problems.

If we redefine 'economic sustainability' to focus on 'participation', study citizen action instead of non-profit management, integrate existing theory – social movement theory, civil society theory, we might arrive at a discipline that Mair and Marti so justly called 'a source of explanation, prediction, and delight' (2006).

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Notes on contributor

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