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Social? Sustainable? Entrepreneurial? Lessons in Mapping the Opportunity Space

Norris Krueger, PhD; Max Planck Institute of Economics & Entrepreneurship Northwest
Dianne H.B. Welsh, PhD; University of North Carolina Greensboro
Zoltan Acs, PhD; George Mason University; Mellani Day, PhD; Colorado Christian University

When we ask scholars or educators, the definitions we use for “social (or sustainable) entrepreneurship” can vary remarkably, even painfully reviving memories of the early days of entrepreneurship itself as a nascent field. One early observer waggishly described entrepreneurship research as often the search for the “Heffalump.” Recall that Winnie the Pooh and chums searched for the all-important Heffalump and found its tracks... which were their own footsteps. Whatever it is that we Heffalump hunters are pursuing must be *ipso facto* a Heffalump! And too often we saw exactly that with entrepreneurship research and now again with social and sustainable entrepreneurship. But we are seeing a lot more of it.

“Social & Sustainable Entrepreneurship: Growing or Just Getting Bigger?”

A cliché question in academe is nonetheless useful: Is our field growing or just getting bigger? It is definitely getting bigger but can we identify clear, valuable progress?

A clear-eyed assessment of research into social entrepreneurship (and now sustainable entrepreneurship) shows that the field has done little to move past descriptive research, usually with little explicit theory to guide the way and a relative absence of rigorous methodologies to help the analysis.

However, we also see clear evidence that research efforts could offer significant value in short order. One very promising arena of research derives directly from our “Heffalumping”.

As a young discipline entrepreneurship found itself mired early on in descriptive studies with little theory and simplistic methods, but it had what Feynman called “Great Questions”, questions where people wanted to know the answers. (Is there is any doubt that social entrepreneurship is raising even better questions?) As it matured, the field was increasingly able to identify where it might fruitfully move forward. Entrepreneurship found highly useful perspectives from cognitive science (from social psychology to cognitive psychology to today's work with developmental psychology and especially neuroscience) that offered well-developed theory and well-tested methods.

By looking at how entrepreneurs think, the field could move past definitional squabbles and even turn those squabbles into research insights. For example, different entrepreneurs perceive and enact different opportunities. Think of it as there are different “flavors” of entrepreneur and corresponding different “flavors” of opportunity. Not only is this true for social and sustainable entrepreneurs, we should expect that mapping opportunity spaces for social and sustainable entrepreneurs will yield much deeper, richer insights and no doubt even greater questions.
So where do we begin? As entrepreneurship has grown as a field, it follows the lead of other social sciences (e.g. economics) in drilling deeper. To use Herbert Simon's useful distinction (Figure 1) we are moving analyzing surface activity (what we say and do) to cognitive activity behind that (intentions, attitudes, beliefs) and now beginning to see “what lies beneath” (Krueger 2007), ultimately addressing key biological processes.

![Figure 1. Simon's (1963/1997) Three Levels of Analysis](image)

One need not invest in fMRI machines to take advantage of what neuroscience has to offer; this paper will demonstrate how simply embracing that perspective can pay significant dividends. Neuro-entrepreneurship may be newer than neuromarketing or neuroeconomics but focusing at deeper levels is already paying off and it seems clear that the payoffs will increase as we turn our full attention to social entrepreneurship. Moreover, study of social entrepreneurs should provide unique insights that 'pay forward' to other disciplines. (Where else might we more productively study passion?)

**Mental Prototypes**

One area that is already proving useful is studying mental prototypes. When one thinks of a “social entrepreneur” what are the mental models that make up the concept? (For example, do I see myself as fitting the mental prototype? (e.g. Simms & Robinson 2007)). However, it appears even more useful to analyze the mental prototypes of “opportunity” - what is and is not an opportunity should prove very informative in understanding the when and where of opportunities being enacted.

**Supraeconomic Opportunities**

Building on that and even the simplest opportunities are embedded in a complex social context, we know that “opportunity” has multiple dimensions. But what dimensions are sufficient to motivate intent, let alone action? Simple, purely economic decisions may not permit a rich enough picture but social (and sustainable) entrepreneurs assume multi-faceted supraeconomic opportunities.

Figure 2 suggests that research could categorize and differentiate opportunities based on what criteria are salient. For example, for me to see an opportunity must it be both economically and socially sustainable or can it be either-or? (second and third Venn diagrams). It should be quite illuminating to see what differentiates the types. Current research is already underway and preliminary results will be ready in November.
Passion and Emotions

As already asked, what better venue for studying passion than in social entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurs need to have more than one 'hot button' and, in fact, research presented at the last NYU conference used a partial logit model to do discrete choice analysis on the “must have” criteria for those intending to start a venture (Krueger, Kickul, Gundry, Wilson & Verma 2009) finding two distinct hot buttons, growing fast and being green. Understanding that 'normal' entrepreneurial decisions rest as much on lexicographic preferences, what might we find applying the same tools to social (and sustainable) entrepreneurs? (And neuromarketing research hints that we need not be experts on our own lexicographic preferences, suggesting that social entrepreneurs need not fully understand their own deep beliefs that “lie beneath” their intentions and their actions.

Finally, in this paper we will share new research that explores “hot” cognitions (both emotional and cognitive processing) and how they differ between appraisal of the economic dimension of an opportunity and the social dimension. Cuing subject to appraise the economic dimension engaged only 'cold' cognition; cuing to appraise the social dimension engaged both (Krueger, Grichnik & Welpe 2009).

In sum, this paper will offer the key insights we have found into mapping the opportunity spaces of social entrepreneurs and share the research that is currently underway which, in both cases, shows how studying social entrepreneurs is an ideal domain to study human decision making. We are excited to share our work.