Is variety valuable? Comparing methods used to study social entrepreneurship and social action start up process

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ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship is a process of organised action to address social issues. It results in a new organisation, but new organisations are vulnerable to closure and many do not survive more than five years. Despite this vulnerability, there is limited research into the process of starting new social entrepreneurship organisations. Research from other forms of organised action for positive social change, such as social movements and collective action, may offer insights. The process of starting these social actions appears to be similar to that used in social entrepreneurship. Each starts with a small group of people concerned to take action on a social issue. The founders create some forms of systems and structures during the organising process, and the process operates in a situation of constrained resources. Considering these similarities, methods used to study these organised social change actions were compared with those used in social entrepreneurship research. The review highlighted significant differences in research methods. Implications of these differences are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade social entrepreneurship has been increasingly evident in the academic literature. Social entrepreneurship has a prominent problem solving quality which generates innovative approaches to solve local social problems (Johnson 2000; Mair and Marti 2006). Social entrepreneurship is not limited by current resources but proactively creates social value (Wade 2000; Sharir and Lerner 2006; Weerawardena and Sullivan Mort 2006; Sullivan Mort and Weerawardena in press). Social entrepreneurship acts as a civic change catalyst, seizing opportunities and mobilising others in the local community to work towards their collective well being (Henton, Melville et al. 1997). Social entrepreneurship, then, is a process of organised action to address social issues. It purposefully generates social value. An example of social entrepreneurship might be the creation of a microfinance scheme for poor women to start small enterprises; or in deprived areas it might establish resident services that are partly funded by associated income generating ventures. Social entrepreneurship is the process. The social enterprise, the organisation, results from the change actions of the social entrepreneur, the individual who organises the change actions. Social entrepreneurship research investigates processes of change rather than the institution of the organisation or the agency of the initiator. There is limited research, however, into social entrepreneurship start up processes. New social entrepreneurship organisations contribute to building a vibrant civil society by responding to changing social needs, but starting new social organisations is a challenging task (Douglas 2006). The start up process is initiated by activist citizens, but many have limited experience of creating similar organisations which increases vulnerability (Sharir and Lerner 2006; Douglas, Sullivan Mort et al. 2007). Generally social organisations start with few resources and

limited financial capital or human resources until the organisation becomes known (Douglas 2007). After four or five years the volunteer founders become fatigued at which stage the organisation may close (Hager, Galaskiewicz et al. 1996). Researching the start up of new social organisations will provide valuable insights that may contribute to their survival.

Is social entrepreneurship the same or different from other forms of organised social change actions, such as social movements or collective action? Each has an intention of achieving positive social change. Social movements are 'organized effort by a significant number of people to change some major aspect of society… groups and organizations outside the mainstream of the political system… purposeful and organized…specific goals, formal organization and a degree of continuity' (Marshall 1998). Mothers Against Drink Driving (MADD) is a familiar example of a social movement. One mother started MADD after her son was killed in a car crash. The organisation grew rapidly and became a well structured social movement which aimed to reduce drink driving (Boohaker, Ward et al. 1996). Collective action may operate either in well structured or informal systems. Collective action is a dynamic process involving a group of people with shared interests who voluntarily initiate some kind of common action that results in a formal organisation or informal institutionalised systems of interactions (Meinzen-Dick, DiGregorio et al. 2004). Collective action is defined variously as 'linking of individuals to a collective cause' (Adair 1996) 'acting collectively it advance common interests…via an organization or group…advancing a cause' (Abercrombie, Hill et al. 2000) 'creation of collective identities and organisational structures' (Houtzager 2000). When collective action is organised as an informal 'club' it may be, for instance, a communal system of seed exchanges aiming to improve agricultural sustainability. When it operates with more formally structured arrangements it may be an alliance of organisations with a common interest in homelessness acting as a policy advocacy group.

Considerable convergence is apparent in these three concepts of collective action, social movements and social entrepreneurship. In particular the start up process appears to be similar. Each starts as a process initiated by concerned citizens rather through a 'top down' government program. Each starts with a small group of concerned people aiming to address social issues. In the beginning these arrangements are always informal. Through a dynamic process of organised action each creates some form of structure during the organising process. Each operates in a situation of constrained resources, particularly access to financial capital. Each produces an outcome that can be evaluated against the desired goal. Considering these similarities in the creation processes, it is reasonable also to compare the methods used to research these organised actions for positive social change. Are similar or different methods used to research the start up process? This paper reports the results of an exploratory review conducted to clarify this question. In doing so, it will consider which research methods are most appropriate to investigate the initial phase of establishing social entrepreneurship organisations.

METHOD

The academic database Web of Science was searched to locate relevant abstracts. This database includes covers many disciplines and thus provides a broad search function. Additionally it is downloadable to Endnote and contains analysis functions, both useful features. Local action for positive social change is a broad subject category, so the

search was limited to papers with 'social entrepreneurship' 'social movement' and 'collective action' in the title. Searches of this database located academic peer reviewed papers published between 1980 and 2007. Book reviews, notes, corrections and meeting reports were excluded. The first search located social entrepreneurship listings. The next search located a very large number of listings related to social movement and collective action. Close examination of abstracts in each subject category allowed exclusion of papers from unrelated fields. Chemistry, medicine, biology science fields, engineering, physics, mathematics, computational and other 'hard' sciences were excluded, but health, education, law, literature, philosophy, ethics and religion were included as well as all applied and interdisciplinary subject categories. Entries located in the two searches were downloaded into separate Endnote libraries, one for social entrepreneurship and the other a combined library for social movement and collective action, renamed 'social action'. Each library was analysed by publication year, journal, subject category, citations and country. Abstracts in each library were examined separately to identify research methodologies used in empirical studies. Entries without abstracts were excluded unless the methodology was clear from the title.

RESULTS

Many more empirical social movement and collective action papers were located than empirical social entrepreneurship studies. Social action papers were published at a regular rate between 1980 and 2007. Social entrepreneurship papers were published from 1985, but the number of publications increased rapidly after 2002.

The first database search located 57 listings with 'social entrepreneurship' in the title. Fifteen without an abstract, 17 conceptual papers and five empirical studies not reporting the methodology were not considered. In the remaining 20 abstracts, eight reported quantitative methods (either surveys or network analysis), ten used qualitative methods (mainly comparative case studies) and two reported a mix of surveys and interviews. The social action search located 364 abstracts identifiable as empirical studies.

Table 1: Comparison of research methods

Social entrepreneurship/Social action	%	%
Case studies	40	17
Survey	25	9
Network analysis	20	3
Survey + various qualitative methods	10	14
Secondary data analysis	5	2
Historical review		11
Ethnography		9
Interviews + other qualitative method (focus group, observation, content analysis etc)		8
Experiment		7
Discourse or document analysis, narratives, action research etc		8
Panel or time series analysis		4
Interviews only		4
Total	100	100

Four listings without abstracts were not considered, nor were 23 conceptual papers or 12 not reporting the methodology. In the remaining 325 abstracts, 80 used quantitative methods (including surveys, network analysis or time series), 200 reported various qualitative methods including document analysis, historical reviews and ethnography, and 45 used various combinations of research methods (see Table 1).

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study is an important development in understanding methods used to investigate the process of social change. It reveals some unexpected results. First it is

surprising almost half the social entrepreneurship papers discussed conceptual issues rather than reporting empirical research. Although evident in the literature for more than 20 years, social entrepreneurship has gained prominence recently, so it is possible scholars may be examining social entrepreneurship in new contexts. It is reasonable to presume more empirical studies will be reported in the near future. Nonetheless there is an obvious space for rigorous social entrepreneurship research, particularly the organisational start up process which was noticeably absent in this review.

Even when taking into account the larger number of social action papers, there are obvious differences between social action and social entrepreneurship research methods. Of concern is the small number of research methods used in the social entrepreneurship papers examined in this study. In the main, social entrepreneurship was researched with surveys, network analysis or case studies. In contrast there was much greater variety of social action research methods. Along with surveys and network analysis, social action employed many qualitative methods such as ethnography, historical and event reviews, experiments, narratives and action research. Case studies and surveys were used together, but additionally social action employed a wide combination of methods such as mixes of experiments, longitudinal interviews, time series analyses, focus groups, ethnography and content analysis. These methods adapt to changing or ambiguous conditions, unlike surveys which take a situational snapshot. Additionally since the process of change is similar in different contexts, research methods transfer readily into change processes in other environments, such as organisational change and innovation. Clearly social action research exploits the dynamic nature of the processes being studied by using flexible methods that adapt to varying circumstances. Evidently the underlying approach for researching social action is different from social entrepreneurship.

Chell (2007) offers one explanation for this difference based on Burrell and Morgan's framework (1979). She suggests the study of social change actions is concerned with the external world of public, social knowledge and is positioned with its roots in sociology. Researchers presume society and knowledge are shaped by social interactions. Filtered through a social constructivist lens, studies are shaped pragmatically around description and explanation of contested social and political positions, perceived events and situations. Research in this paradigm elevates complexity and values reflexivity. Research methods tend towards fluid and dynamic processes, such as ethnography, action research and discourse analysis. Longitudinal studies and historical investigations might offer valuable insights of change over time. Experiments may suggest new interpretations of interactive processes. On the other hand, social entrepreneurship emanates from business fields where knowledge may be assumed as an objective reality separated from social interactions. Here researchers pursue a centrist perspective aimed to build order and consensus, seeking explicit links that establish definitive positions. Testing presumptions offers valuable insights into the nature of activities. In these circumstances research methods tend to articulate into systems and techniques aimed at definitive responses, embedded in routines, orderliness and logic. Surveys, secondary data and panel studies improve certainty. Hence the presumption of knowledge shapes the structures of how knowledge is built.

Whitely (1995) extends this view by including a conscious evaluation of personal and organisational values in the assessment of change actions. Our personal values and beliefs shape the choices we make and influence the organisational business. Consciously or unconsciously, researchers' values translate into preferences and actions.

Researchers may address preferred issues in particular ways to fit with accepted and established systems to build careers. The process of knowledge production is a costly investment in time and resources. It is important that research investigates questions of value, but valuable to whom? Those who fund research may influence the research questions posed, those who investigate decide how. Both these decisions affect what knowledge is created and how it is used.

Social entrepreneurship is a process of creating organisations to produce social value so research could address practical issues that have a social benefit. The usefulness of research products could be improved substantially by allowing experts with specialised knowledge of situations being investigated offer suggestions, such as those creating the new social organisation. Organisations are dynamic during start up. They operate in a state of constant change and uncertainty. The key people involved may change rapidly, critical decision points may appear unexpectedly, relationships with external stakeholders may vary rapidly. Ideally research will clarify mechanisms of change and elements that influence these mechanisms. Research methods should be able to monitor change over time effectively, preferably through blends of methods or interactive processes, such as action research. Action research is a dynamic model of problem solving inquiry that can identify solutions to complex issues (Sarantakos 1998:110-114; McNiff and Whitehead 2002). As a participatory, mutual process, action research can reveal the situational dynamics. It is particularly relevant where change or action is desired, and has the advantage of providing the viewpoints of insiders to clarify norms or attitudes, or issues that might be overlooked. Public forums and discussions with participants can assist to verify conclusions, but action research requires meticulous documentation and reflexivity by the researcher to ensure authenticity of the findings. Action research provides deep learning in complex and dynamic situations, such as start ups, but it is seldom used in formal academic research, possibly due to the high level of expertise required by the researcher (Meinzen-Dick, DiGregorio et al. 2004).

Social entrepreneurship operates in an imagined future, framed in both social and economic structures. It presumes some economic activity that disturbs the status quo and results in changed products or processes. Both the organising processes and interactions with the environment are uncertain. The outcome is always uncharted. Although it may be envisioned, the process of attaining the social mission is indefinite, undecided and undefined. Fundamentally social change processes are about transformation and adjustments by people, organisations and communities. The dynamic and diverse nature of social change suggests the use of fluid and interactive research methods to adjust to ambiguous, complex, undefined and uncertain circumstances. As well it is important research produces the most rigorous result possible that will tolerate detailed examination and be generalisable to other situations. Particularly for policy research, there is confidence in numbers and testing assumptions with large samples, but it is somewhat difficult to find large numbers of new social organisations, although successful techniques have been reported (Douglas 2007). Given these considerations the formation of new social organisations will continue to be examined with case studies. Case studies provide excellent appreciation of crucial elements where the concepts are not yet well established, as in the creation of new social entrepreneurship organisations (Stake 1995; Yin 2003). Given rigorous attention to theoretical sampling as outlined by Eisenhardt (1989) case studies can build unique understandings, and so they are very suitable to investigate the start up of social entrepreneurship organisations.

CONCLUSION

Comparing social action and social entrepreneurship research methods offers valuable insights for researching the early stages of social change actions. It suggests the most rigorous and useful research output will be produced through combinations of methods: those that adjust to complexity, and others that provide some certainty. Social entrepreneurship would benefit by employing a wider variety of research methods as utilised in other forms of organised action for positive social change such as social movements and collective action. There is considerable value in variety.

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