Call for Papers:

Special Issue on

Social Entrepreneurship, Social Innovation and Business Ethics

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Guest editors:

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Introduction

There are practical, theoretical and profound philosophical reasons why deepening our understanding of social entrepreneurship and social innovation is important (Chell, 2007). Practically speaking, when economic systems are in or just emerging from recession they tend to laud entrepreneurship and innovation as vehicles to provide ready solutions to economic woes. Whilst entrepreneurship concerns taking products or services to market and generating value, innovation focuses on the creation of something new, which may be taken to market through entrepreneurial processes.

In addition, over the past decade governments, academics and practitioners have begun to place greater emphasis on social entrepreneurship and social innovation. These activities imply that the products, services and outcomes of both the entrepreneurial and/or the innovative process have a social value beyond the direct effects on the transactional parties. Theoretically, there is a need to develop sound models of how such initiatives, such
processes might work, how they might be supported in order to work more effectively, and to identify what are the key constraining factors. Zahra et al. (2009) provides an excellent starting point for understanding different kinds of social ventures, their associated processes for identifying relevant opportunities, and the motivations of social entrepreneurs.

However, there are profound philosophical reasons for deepening our understanding of social entrepreneurship and innovation. There is a presumption that because something is socially-oriented the motivation is likely to be ethically sound; that it is principled, morally justified, and ethically legitimate. We want to test this assumption through this Call. What are the motivations of social entrepreneurs and innovators from a moral standpoint; might they simply have spotted an opportunity in this social space and at best be ethically neutral? On the other hand, what would models of ethically-founded social businesses look like and in what ways are they supported?

Research on social entrepreneurship and social innovation within a business ethics framework

The focus for the proposed special issue is to make a substantial contribution to the research on social and innovative enterprises from the standpoint of business ethics. Social entrepreneurship and innovation are broadly assumed to have good ethical and moral credentials, ostensibly because the key driver is generally seen to be one associated with broader social or environmental — rather than solely economic — benefit. The research evidence to support this claim is however lacking. This issue also raises, from a research perspective, what is the appropriate unit of analysis. Is it the enterprise, the individual entrepreneur or innovator, the team, the stakeholder group, the wider socio-economic context or a combination of any or all of these?

Two relatively recent contributions in this area include Cornelius and colleagues (2008) who have examined the relationship between Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and social enterprise and Murphy and Coombes (2009) who focused on the special case of social entrepreneurial discovery. Some learning can also be drawn from research on ethics in small business, since social enterprises are often also smaller organizations (Spence & Rutherford, 2003; Moore & Spence, 2006; Morsing and Perrini, 2009). A special issue published by the
The framing of social innovation and social entrepreneurship from a disciplinary perspective raises a number of issues (Perrini, 2006). Bull, Ridley-Duff, Foster & Seanor (2008) distinguish between economic, social and ethical capital. An economic approach opens the question of a blurring of the difference between profit and not-for-profit social enterprises (Chell, 2007); the motivations of social entrepreneurs; the impact of the market mechanism on business decision-making, weakening an ethical approach; raising concerns about the inadequacy of the neo-classical economic approach to business. The issues have tended to highlight relationships, at individual-level, within the enterprise and with the community. This suggests the need to consider the social embeddedness of social and socially innovative enterprises (Jack and Anderson, 2001) with ethical concerns comprising trust, cooperation and commitment relations (Bull et al, 2008; Seanor & Meaton, 2008).

This is a considerable gap in our understanding of opportunity recognition, individual motivation, socially innovative enterprise and the market mechanism. We could just as easily presume that the social innovator/entrepreneur starts out with assumptions that are ethically sound but over time, negotiating his or her way through a path laden with obstacles, begins to lose that ethical basis to his or her judgements, just as the converse may be true. Sound research of a longitudinal nature may shed light on such questions.

The ethical framing of social enterprise should be further developed theoretically and tested in the field. Communitarian, virtue theory, ethics of care and philanthropy are obvious frameworks but finer and more nuanced deconstruction of ethical stances needs to be carried out. Should social innovators and entrepreneurs be found to have more in common
with economic (profit-seeking) entrepreneurs and innovators then questions concerning their moral agency would be worthy of investigation. Bull et al (2008) in discussing moral agency identify rule enforcers (observers of social and ethical conventional wisdom) and rule creators (people who take a more critical approach to conventional morality). Arguably, where a social innovator/entrepreneur is attempting to grow the moral capital of the business by drawing on consequentialist and deontological ethics this can lead to virtuous development and the production of other capitals (including financial), though examples of such enterprises tend to have both charitable as well as a social foundations (e.g. the Eden Project in the UK). Again we come back to the dearth of empirical data. However, the construct of rule-led behaviour is an interesting one when levelled at the entrepreneur or innovator, where it might be hypothesised that entrepreneurs and innovators are more likely to be rule-creators or indeed rule-breakers than rule enforcers; but might this still hold true of social innovators/entrepreneurs?

Accordingly, we anticipate papers for the special issue on Social Entrepreneurship, Social Innovation and Business Ethics which address some of the following areas.

1. What models of social innovation and entrepreneurship work effectively and are ethically sound? What research designs and methods of investigation are required to uncover the multiple layers and levels of complexity that are evident?

2. What are the ethical and moral frameworks evident in socially innovative enterprises? How do they vary according to type and characteristics of the social enterprise?

3. Are socially-oriented, innovative businesses motivated by ethical principles? What happens over time? Do such businesses commence from an ethical position and lose this over time or vice versa?

4. How do the ethics vary between socially innovative enterprises and conventional private sector businesses of similar sizes? What is the impact when organizations undergo a transition from the social to the private sector or vice-versa?

5. Taking Corporate Social Responsibility as one possible model, how constraining is such a model especially where the socially-oriented enterprise wishes to operate
innovatively? How do responsibilities play out? Where do the costs and benefits of social innovation lie and how do social entrepreneurs’ conceptions of business ethics change over time?

6. What is the relationship between the scaling-up of socially innovative enterprise activities and ethics? What particular ethical challenges arise?

7. An economic approach to understanding the relationship between business ethics and social entrepreneurship and social innovation raises a number of issues. How do social ventures deal with apparent conflicts between profit-making considerations and the social objectives of the innovative activity?

8. How do the organizational ethics of socially innovative enterprises align with the environmental or social good which they pursue?

9. A socially-oriented business model suggests the importance of relationships. How does the social embeddedness of social and socially innovative enterprises (Jack & Anderson, 2001), align with ethical concerns comprising, for example, trust, cooperation and commitment relations (Bull et al., 2008; Seanor & Meaton, 2008).

10. Can standard business ethics frameworks (CSR, stakeholder theory, etc.) be transferred meaningfully to social and socially innovative enterprises? For example, who are the salient stakeholders in these enterprises and how do they interact with the organization? Does it make a difference where an organization’s primary motivation is social/environmental rather than economic?

The deadline for submitting your paper is March 1 2012.

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References


