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Women as social entrepreneurs

Dr Anne Laure Humbert

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Abstract

This paper argues that research on social entrepreneurs does not given adequate consideration to gender. Furthermore, given the lack of research on women's contribution as social entrepreneurs, this paper suggests other possible areas of study to advance this field of research. It brings together the literature on social entrepreneurs and female entrepreneurs, while also drawing on the gender/diversity literature. This paper is of interest to researchers who wish to examine aspects related to women as social entrepreneurs. It is also relevant to government agencies and social enterprise organisations who are looking to gain a more nuanced understanding of social entrepreneurs, their characteristics and the issues they face. It provides key avenues of further work to better understand the way in which sex and gender interact with the practices of social entrepreneurs.

Keywords

Women, gender, social entrepreneurs, third sector, entrepreneurialism.

Acknowledgements

Contents

Introduction

Despite the increase in research on social entrepreneurs in recent years, very little consideration has been given to the contribution that women make as social entrepreneurs. Some work in academic research has started to profile social entrepreneurs, describe why they choose to become social entrepreneurs, the obstacles they face and the strategies they employ. Although the quantity and breadth of research on the topic of social entrepreneurs is increasing, it is still largely based on an idealised vision of who the social entrepreneur is, often restricting the concept to a narrow pool of individuals and not taking into account the actual diversity within this category. One such category which has been largely ignored in the literature consists of the contribution that women make as social entrepreneurs (Teasdale et al., 2011).

It is therefore to women as social entrepreneurs that this paper turns to. For the purpose of this paper, we will discuss the concept of social entrepreneurs independently of social entrepreneurship (the process of change, innovation and/or creation of social value) or social enterprises (often a form through which this can be achieved). This will avoid difficulties linked to the fact that not all social enterprises may be 'entrepreneurial' (depending on the definition of entrepreneurial) or that not all social entrepreneurship comprises social enterprises. The premise of this paper is that much of the literature on social entrepreneurs is heavily influenced by mainstream literature on management and entrepreneurship, and as such the work on female social entrepreneurs may follow the same trend. Much of the work in the field of sex/gender and management/entrepreneurship has changed focus over the past two to three decades, moving from a largely descriptive field of research to a much more analytical one. One of the key characteristics has been the progressive move from 'sex to gender', going from looking at 'if' sex makes a difference, to 'how' gender makes a difference (see Carter and Shaw, 2006 for a fuller account). The literature on women entrepreneurs has adopted an increasingly critical stance, denouncing the implicit maleness of the entrepreneur as a construct. One of its main criticisms is the androcentricity inherent in much of the entrepreneurship literature, which often relies on very gendered and stereotypical assumptions as to the role of men and women.

The mainstream literature has given much attention to the topic of traits, looking for the actual social or psychological attributes possessed by successful entrepreneurs. However, the gendered nature of these very traits has been heavily criticised by scholars in the field of gender and entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2006; Marlow et al., 2009). In opposition to trait theory, which relies on a social-psychological approach, a more sociological approach has been proposed to look at identity construction rather than traits. This gives a voice to alternative groups (e.g. women), for example in the male-dominated Science, Engineering and Technology (SET) incubators (McAdam and Marlow, 2010) or among ethnic female entrepreneurs (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Humbert and Essers, 2012). This paper builds upon this body of work to provide a critical view of existing work on (female) social entrepreneurs and to shape a future research agenda.

In particular, it aims to provide a brief account of current research on social entrepreneurs, followed by some of the findings directly related to the contribution of women. Because of the limited amount of material on women as social entrepreneurs, the paper also draws on literature on women within the

third sector, with applications to the case of social entrepreneurs where feasible. This review is informed by a focus group organised in June 2009 in London that brought together key informants such as policy makers, female social entrepreneurs and academics. Finally, the paper aims to provide a reflective gendered account of how these bodies of literature can be combined to inform further research on women as social entrepreneurs, before suggesting some possible avenues for research on the topic in the future.

Social entrepreneurs: traits and limitations

Some of the traits attached to social entrepreneurs are starting to be well documented. Some studies suggest that social entrepreneurs are younger, possibly due to a higher risk propensity related to lower levels of family responsibilities (e.g. Prabhu, 1999). Evidence from the UK suggests however that very young individuals are not very well represented among social entrepreneurs (Ramsay and Danton, 2010). It is important to consider the effect of age as there may also be potential links with the type of social enterprise being set up: younger social entrepreneurs may work on transformational actions while older social entrepreneurs may tend to focus more on charitable organisations. It might also be alternative forms of organisations that are adopted by younger social entrepreneurs.

Other studies focused on the development of social capital which is seen as important in the creation and subsequent development of social enterprises (Leadbeater, 1997; Thompson, 2002). Research into the potential importance of social capital among social entrepreneurs shows some evidence that personal/family history of (social) entrepreneurship may have a positive influence on the creation of social ventures (e.g. Spear, 2006) but overall remains inconclusive. In the entrepreneurship literature, women are portrayed as being particularly influenced by this personal/family history (Marlow et al., 2009). This raises the question of to what extent this is also a factor among women social entrepreneurs.

Social entrepreneurs are able to show "drive, determination, ambition, charisma, leadership, the ability to communicate vision and inspire others and their maximum use of resources" (Shaw and Carter, 2007:422). In order to do so, as Alvord et al. (2004) suggest, a characteristic associated with successful social entrepreneurs is that of a 'bridging capacity'. This capacity is shaped by a social entrepreneur's background and experience which in turn is shaped by gender relations.

Some authors have focused on developing a universal definition of social entrepreneurs, one which is heavily linked to, and directly derived from, the definition of an entrepreneur. One of the definitions adopted by Nicholls (2006:224) draws on Dees (2001) and bears some similarities with Chell (2008). It is worded in the following terms: "Social entrepreneurs play the role of change agents in the social sector, by:

- adopting a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value);

- recognising and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission;

- engaging in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation and learning;

- acting boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand;

- exhibiting a heightened sense of accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created".

This definition assumes that there are fundamental differences between 'mainstream' entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs. Chell (2007:18) has worked on reconciling the two definitions and concludes that the differences can be eliminated by adopting the following: (social) entrepreneurship is the process of "recognizing and pursuing opportunities with regard to the alienable and inalienable resources currently controlled with a view to value creation". This definition, while providing a platform for renegotiating theoretical differences between entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs is still proving to be a very polarised stringent definition. This problem is in part resolved by adopting an alternative viewpoint where the 'ideal' social entrepreneur should not necessarily fulfil all criteria in the above definition fully, but that there are different degrees of fulfilment for each and that a social entrepreneur does not necessarily need to meet all of them (Dees, 2001).

If there are many commonalities between mainstream and social entrepreneurs, academic discourse bestows social entrepreneurs with extra, special, traits which underline the importance of their commitment and dedication to social aims. Not only are social entrepreneurs largely described as different in the literature, they are also often described as extraordinary individuals. Dees (2001:2) for instance describes entrepreneurs in the following terms: "their reach exceeds their grasp. Entrepreneurs mobilize the resources of others to achieve their entrepreneurial objectives". Chell (2007:5) portrays a similar vision of the entrepreneur as "a household name with a personality that is 'larger than life'". These quotes present a view of the entrepreneur as both metaphorically and literally uncontainable. Further research needs to explore how this discourse relates differently to men and women.

The portrayal of social entrepreneurs relies on highly individualistic characteristics. For example, Thompson (2002) develops an entrepreneurship process, described originally by Sykes (1999), in which the social entrepreneur envisions, engages, enables and then enacts. Social entrepreneurship is too often equated with the social entrepreneur, conceptualised as the sole individualistic social enterprise effort. While academic discourse describes social entrepreneurs as exceptional individuals with many specific traits, empirical evidence suggests that those setting up and leading social enterprises may be different to the conceptualisation of the 'heroic' individual. For instance, Amin (2009:39) describes those leading organisations in his study as mainly "directors answering to a board of trustees or management committee, and working with a small team of people responsible for specific tasks such as finance, operations, sales or human resources. They are not heroic figures, but rather, 'career' professionals or experienced social economy actors". However, Amin's definition of a social entrepreneur is a broad one, which may influence his findings accordingly. Others, such as Roper and Cheney (2005), see the social entrepreneur as an individual drawing on the social and economic capacity of her/his environment while embedding these resources in the current capability of their organisation and position in society. This had led to the creation of a typology of social entrepreneurs, including what Roper and Cheney (2005) call the 'CEO as social entrepreneur', described as sharing many characteristics with mainstream entrepreneurs, 'social entrepreneurs in the public and third sectors' and 'philanthropy and social entrepreneurship'. Such approaches assume a hierarchical structure of organisations with a leading individual. However, many social enterprises are run by entrepreneurial teams, particularly those with a tradition from the cooperative sector. In terms

of a gendered approach, it would be important to understand how men and women operate in social entrepreneurial teams.

It is also important to examine the role of women in the governance of social enterprises, The Social Enterprise Coalition's State of Social Enterprise Survey (Social Enterprise Coalition, 2009) show that the social enterprise sector provides a more egalitarian environment for women, as can be seen in terms of presence on boards; 41% of social enterprise board members in the SEC Survey 2009 are women (Humbert, 2011). However, this differs considerably between sectors.

There is a strong need to recognise diversity among social entrepreneurs. Indeed 'mainstream' entrepreneurship studies have often been criticised for failing to address heterogeneity (Ahl, 2006; Essers and Benschop, 2007) and it appears that these issues are at least as pronounced with regards to social entrepreneurship. An emphasis on entrepreneurial traits can therefore be criticised as being overly reductionist in that it discursively creates a hegemonic model of the social entrepreneur as s/he ought to be. Furthermore, it embeds the characteristics of social entrepreneurs into individualistic and economic settings, while disregarding the impact of the socially interactive and emotional settings (Goss, 2005).

Social entrepreneurs: motivations, obstacles and strategies

In addition to work focusing on who social entrepreneurs are, other studies analysed why they choose to become social entrepreneurs, the obstacles they face in doing so, as well as some of the strategies they employ to overcome these. This approach departs from attempting to describe successful social entrepreneurs in that it does not solely rely on 'natural' characteristics but also recognises the importance of the environment, for instance through cultural or social influences.

As such, social entrepreneurial awakening can be seen as a multiplicity of trigger factors in individual, personal, familial and professional backgrounds. Becoming a social entrepreneur can be seen as the end result of a more or less long maturing journey, characterised by a range of positive and negative inputs which are interpreted in a time-dependent cultural, societal and personal context. Amin (2009) talks about two main routes that lead to becoming a social entrepreneur. One is about being nurtured with the social economy and using the skills and resources acquired within that setting. The other is to come from the public or private sector and apply skills gathered there in the context of the third sector.

Motivations for social entrepreneurs are extremely complex, with evidence that rational choice theories are inappropriate due to the complexity and range of different inputs and their interpretations (Spear, 2006). Most studies find that there are usually many similarities between the motivations of 'mainstream' and social entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurs may not rate independence and income security highly, but give a lot of importance to their social objectives (Shaw and Carter, 2007). These social objectives are often portrayed as additional factors (Prabhu, 1999; Spear, 2006; Hudson, 2009) and include factors such as altruism, ethical/social concerns or ideological aims.

While there is a significant degree of overlap among these categories, all of these extra motivations rely heavily on an individualistic identity construction, without considering the collective identity's role. Furthermore, social entrepreneurs' motivations remain conceptualised using the entrepreneur's model,

albeit with some added elements. This approach of adding extra elements is replicated when looking at the obstacles faced by social entrepreneurs. These are presented as being quite similar to those faced by 'mainstream' entrepreneurs (Thompson, 2002). Future research will need to consider how some factors such as ethnicity and gender affect the magnitude of the obstacles encountered.

Very little work has looked at issues of diversity among social entrepreneurs. The UK Government Equalities Office (2008) examined the motivations and obstacles associated with women social entrepreneurs within BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) communities. This work identifies a tendency to get involved with one's community as a motivating factor while at the same time experiencing multi-disadvantage and discrimination. Multiple, and interacting, layers of identity can therefore be seen both positively and negatively.

Generally social entrepreneurs report experiencing difficulties in accessing finance, as do mainstream entrepreneurs. Alternate sources of funding are used with little reliance on the three Fs (family, friends and fools), but instead finance is sought from charitable trusts or the public sector (regional, national, and European) (Shaw and Carter, 2007). This differs from the situation among 'mainstream' entrepreneurs, who are more likely to rely on 'bootstrapping' methods of financing their business (relying on internal funds rather than raising money externally). Women entrepreneurs are themselves more likely to rely on bootstrapping, raising the question of whether this is also the case among women social entrepreneurs.

Another characteristic of social entrepreneurs is that they tend to operate in locations and sectors where they have experience (Shaw and Carter, 2007). Although this could be presented as caused by lack of experience, it could also be explained by the fact that they use available resources in a way that maximises their experiential capital. Alternatively, it could also be a strategy to minimise risk. As Shaw and Carter (2007) stress, in the context of social entrepreneurship, social and personal risk are more prevalent as opposed to financial risk. No discussion of the concept and experience of risk among women social entrepreneurs exist in the literature to the author's knowledge.

Generally comparative work between 'mainstream' entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs identify some differences, in terms of networking patterns or a different level of engagement with outside organisations (e.g. banks, government, voluntary sector etc.). There is also evidence of varied ways of operating (e.g. charity status, commercial venture) and with a different strategic viewpoint (social versus economic growth) (Nicholls, 2006). Shaw and Carter (2007) stress the importance of opportunity recognition, economical and/or social need, with the latter of key importance for social entrepreneurs. While they also stress the importance of networks for 'mainstream' and social entrepreneurs, particularly in providing credibility, it is seen as instrumental in identifying and assessing local social needs among social entrepreneurs. This is important since, as Shaw and Carter (2007) argue, there is a local embeddedness in social entrepreneurship, often with an emphasis on identifying and meeting local social objectives. The extent to which this process itself may be gendered though is unknown.

Women in the third sector

To understand the area of female social entrepreneurs, and given the paucity of material available, this paper will therefore take a broader view by examining research on gender and the third sector more broadly defined before discussing how the findings in those fields may apply to social entrepreneurs. Labour can be subdivided into at least three categories: self-employed, domestic and community work. While the experiences of women in both self-employment and domestic work have been well documented, less work has been undertaken on their community work and volunteering. This section aims to present some of the key findings in the literature on women's paid and voluntary labour in the third sector generally.

Women have had a positive impact on society through their involvement in the third sector, by putting some topics such as children, family, women's health, violence and discrimination towards certain groups of population on the social agenda. Research also suggests that women may use the voluntary sector to counteract negative attributes such as re-entry to the labour force or building up skills (Mailloux et al., 2002). Generally, the involvement of marginalised groups, be they women, ethnic-minority groups (or both), are associated with greater levels of change. This can be seen through the involvement of women in supporting women's issues, sometimes within particular communities which may otherwise not benefit from the services or products provided. Caputo (1997) for example finds a link in the US between black women volunteering and changing social conditions.

Research on women in the third sector, whether in paid work or volunteering, attempts to generate a profile of these women and what they do. The proportion of women involved in the third sector is greater than other parts of the labour market, as shown by example by Mailloux et al. (2002) and Teasdale et al. (2011) in Canada and the UK respectively. Their activities are contrasted to that of men and studies show that there are differences apparent in the type of work performed by women, the type of organisations they are involved with, as well as the nature of their involvement within these organisations.

The portrayal of women in the third sector is rather stereotypical. Caputo (1997:157) de facto positions his paper by stating that "today, increased numbers of women balance marriage, motherhood and employment". His analysis is also based on a succinct review of literature summarising some of the traits associated with women volunteers or activities. Women volunteers are portrayed as being: 'healthier' (whatever that may mean); with 'greater aspirations for paid work'; and 'higher levels of education and income' (Caputo, 1997:158).

Women perform extra volunteer work on a regular basis (e.g. care work) without recognising it as such in the formal voluntary sector (Mailloux et al., 2002). In addition, the link between lower earnings and women seems to also apply in the third sector, with lower salaries and benefits than in the private sector in a Canadian context (Mailloux et al., 2002). The popular misconception that involvement in volunteering is a way of occupying free or leisure time, particularly among privileged groups, needs to be challenged given that, in fact, much (less formalised) volunteer work is being undertaken by members of marginalised groups in order to counteract negative circumstances (Neysmith and Reitsma-Street, 2000).

The motivations of women in the third sector do not appear to be specific to women. They can consist of wanting to make a difference, to act, to help; belong to a group; build links with the community (Mailloux et al., 2002), thereby suggesting that there is a strong community embeddedness in the voluntary sector. Neysmith and Reitsma-Street (2000:336) emphasise that what they call 'the participatory component' should not be underplayed and that volunteers attach importance to being "part of something that […] is 'ours', not 'mine' or 'theirs'". The motivations for volunteering are therefore seen as wanting to build relationships with others, developing life and work skills, getting ownership of the fruit of one's labour and combating negative social stereotypes.

However, volunteer work is devalued in contrast to paid work. One aspect of this devaluation is through the invisibility of volunteer work. Volunteering has been "theorized as an extension of women's family work, reinforcing separate spheres of ideology where men's work is defined and rewarded, as a public contribution but women's work, even though done in the community, is defined essentially as an extension of their private responsibilities to family" (Neysmith and Reitsma-Street, 2000: 342). Further research should examine the extent to which expectations of such gendered roles are present in the third sector.

In terms of paid work, Gibelman's (2000) research suggests that the glass ceiling is still prevalent in the US nonprofit sector, along with evidence of a gender pay gap. An analysis of HR policies revealed a set of anti-discrimination affirmations with usually no plans for implementation. Furthermore, policies related to facilitating access to management for women (i.e. flexitime or help with caring arrangements) were seldom addressed. The study however fails to examine the role these policies play in (dis)advantaging (wo)men. Indeed, Moore and Whitt's (2000) findings indicate that men are disproportionately more present on voluntary organisations' boards, more likely to occupy multiple seats and to be involved in a various number of sectors compared with their female counterparts. As they state, "nonprofit boards in the United States remain bastions of white, male privilege" (2000: 324). Overall, the authors conclude that attention needs to be given to the lack of access to boards to promote greater gender equality rather than on how individuals fare within the boards once they get in.

In the context of the UK, Teasdale et al. (2011) show in their analysis of the Labour Force Survey that both vertical and horizontal segregation is common in the third sector, but the former is less prevalent than in the public or private sector. The third sector, where men are disproportionately represented at higher levels (Teasdale et al, 2011), conforms to Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations. Teasdale et al (2011) show that 21 percent of men work in a higher managerial or professional capacity, as opposed to just 10 percent of women. Moore and Whitt (2000) argue that this is translated in the third sector by a supremacy of men over women in positions of power but also through the networking practices of these board members.

The notion of conflict for women between traditional and modern gender roles is an important one to draw upon. Very little work has been done on this topic, but some US and Canadian evidence suggests that even though women hold a desire to break away from traditional gender roles, there are advantages in using these along with punishment for moving to a more modern structure (Mailloux et

al., 2002). However, this move to more modern gender roles may have a detrimental effect, particularly on volunteering, with lower participation from women (Caputo, 1997).

The extent to which these patterns of inequality are found amongst social entrepreneurs is largely under-researched. In addition, since many of the sources quoted above are based in North America, the degree to which these findings could be extrapolated to Europe, or the rest of the world, remains a serious concern. Current European studies (e.g. Teasdale et al., 2011; Humbert, 2011) infer that there are many similarities, but their number and scope remains limited. In their study, Teasdale et al. (2011), support many of the findings highlighted in this section, and are not able to examine social entrepreneurs operating in either the public or private sector.

While there is a dearth of research into gender effects in the third sector, patterns of inequities present in the private sector may be largely replicated in the third sector, albeit on a smaller scale. The extent to which these patterns are similar, or different, remain critically under-researched. Furthermore, none of this work to date has been applied to social entrepreneurs. In the next section, a gendered reflection on these areas of research is provided, along with some possible topics of research into this field.

Conclusion

Research on social entrepreneurs remains largely dependent on the assumption that a common set of characteristics inherent to social entrepreneurs exists. In effect, this has led to attempts to produce a universal definition of the social entrepreneur. This approach, which replicates the development of research on entrepreneurs is problematic in the context of female social entrepreneurs since it relies on individual characteristics and may ignore the collective nature of entrepreneurship and may not address the real diversity of social entrepreneurs. This tendency towards the reification of the social entrepreneur requires further research particularly in terms of how it affects men and women differently and whether it excludes particular groups. This tension replicates the long-running argument in mainstream entrepreneurship as to the degree of inclusiveness that should be bestowed to the definition of an entrepreneur.

This individualistic positioning translates into the discussion on motivations and obstacles. Indeed, this area of research remains highly centred on previous research on entrepreneurs, and merely adds in extra elements, such as the 'social' or the 'female', often ignoring the contribution of the intersection of these two concepts. It is the lack of attention given to the interaction between these two concepts, coupled with a lack of questioning of their stereotypical underpinning, that constitute one of the major drawbacks of this field of research.

The stereotypical position is often evident through studies undertaken on women in the third sector. Women are portrayed as doing different types of jobs, in different types of organisations, at a lower level and for less money. The rhetoric of difference (with men?) prevails. Moreover, women are portrayed as not motivated by pecuniary reasons but more by a desire to act as what can only be described as mothers of the community: women are there to help, to build, for others but never for themselves, and are seldom valued or rewarded for their work.

Research undertaken on social entrepreneurs has often consisted of examining them in contrast with mainstream entrepreneurs (Nicholls, 2006). There is a lurking danger in any comparative stance in that it can easily position one party as the 'deviant other', often implying an inferior position. This is certainly the case with female entrepreneurs (Ogbor, 2000; Bruni et al., 2004; Hytti, 2005; Ahl, 2006). Indeed, previous research has shown that in the case of female entrepreneurs, it might be inadequate to use theories derived from an essentially male experience to describe women entrepreneurs (Stevenson, 1990; Greene et al., 2003). This argument has much deeper implications in that it shows that existing models of entrepreneurs based on the so-called mainstream entrepreneur are models based on what Ogbor (2000) terms the 'white male hero'. These models assume that the entrepreneur does not have caring and/or domestic responsibilities (Ahl, 2006). The challenge resides in creating new models or adapting these to the area of the 'social' and the 'female' simultaneously. Adapting models in entrepreneurship research such as the family embeddedness perspective advocated by Aldrich and Cliff (2003) or the socio-economic context presented by Brush et al (2009) would be beneficial.

The difficulty in conducting research on women as social entrepreneurs lies in paying attention to the discourses briefly outlined in this paper. It is important to depart from these discourses, as "discourse and perspectives about, and for, the nature of entrepreneurialism are fundamental to both theory (how we think about, conceptualize and define terms) and practice (what capabilities and behaviours we believe apply to people whom we refer to as entrepreneurs) and moreover, to how the terms are used in a wider socio-political arena to serve particular ends" (Chell, 2007:7).

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About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

Third Sector Research Centre
Park House
40 Edgbaston Park Road
University of Birmingham
Birmingham
B15 2RT
Tel: 0121 414 3086
Email: info@tsrc.ac.uk
www.tsrc.ac.uk

Social Enterprise

What role can social enterprise play within the third sector? This work stream cuts across all other research programmes, aiming to identify the particular characteristics and contribution of social enterprise. Our research includes theoretical and policy analysis which problematises the concept of social enterprise, examining the extent to which it can be identified as a distinct sub-sector. Quantitative analysis will map and measure the social enterprise sub-sector, and our qualitative case studies will contain a distinct sub-sample of social enterprises.

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