

Social Entrepreneurship Research Trend: Peeking Through a Theoretical and Conceptual Lens

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines scholarly research papers on definitions and conceptual theories with the purpose to find evolutionary patterns in social entrepreneurship research field. A total of 139 conceptual and theoretical research papers were filtered out from total bigger drawn pool of 549 research papers on social entrepreneurship and social enterprise research field and quantitative analysis was carried out. It is concluded that due to lack of consensus on definitions and conceptual frameworks in this research field, concrete theory development followed by validation has not been there as much as compared to traditional entrepreneurship research field. Though there has been significant increase in theoretical and conceptual research in this field, there have been vast disagreements on the boundaries of this field. More rigorous and formal research work is required to build consensus to take this field forward. This study will provide theoretical and conceptual research trend to research scholars, which may provide future research direction in this field to create consensus on the boundary of this research field.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Social Enterprise, Conceptual Framework, Theoretical Framework, and Definitions

I INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship continues to be a field of interest that crosses academic disciplines and challenges traditional assumptions of economic and business development (Dart, 2004; Leadbeater, 1997). Some even suggest that the phenomenon transcends the individual domains of entrepreneurial studies, social movements, and nonprofit management (Mair & Marti, 2006; Perrini, 2006).

In this paper we examine the trend of the social entrepreneurship literature through conceptual and theoretical framework lens, to identify how the field has developed so far as a research field, how the conceptual and theoretical issues where researchers' views converge and diverge, thereby broadly suggesting the future conceptual and theoretical research avenues for academic researchers in this research field.

II METHODOLOGY

The relevant research papers on social entrepreneurship were retrieved using sample frame consisting of four sources; namely Sage Publishing (384 journals), Emerald Insight (50 journals), the online scholarly research database www.jstor.org and www.scholar.google.com. The publications (Sage Publishing and Emerald Insight) were selected from SSCI index, which was last updated in May 2017 (http://mjl.clarivate.com/publist_ssci.pdf).

The following search terms were used to search for research papers available using 4 sources: "Social Entrepreneurship", "Social Entrepreneur", "Social Enterprise" and also included India as additional search term to for India centric research papers in this field. Though the terms "Social Entrepreneurship", "Social Entrepreneur" and "Social Enterprise" have been used extensively in this research field, a similar evolutionary pattern was identified among the three datasets having these three keywords from the sample, evidencing that the concepts did not have different evolutions and could be found as synonymous in the literature (Patel, 2018; Granados et al., 2011). Other words suggested by the literature, such as, "Community enterprise", "Social venture", "Non-profits", "Third sector" in combination with "Entrepreneurship" were included too, due to the initial purpose of this study and the pertinence to the central discussion of this study.

A total of 1,330 bibliographic records (research papers) were retrieved using above search terms on sample frame. The sample was then trimmed down to 549 using filters: language (English only), duplicate records, journal articles and books, search words on the abstract, title, and keywords and relevance to the study subject. Finally, only the conceptual and theoretical papers were selected for the purpose of this study. Using these filtering parameters, the sample dataset was further trimmed down to 139 research papers, which then were finally selected and studied. (The selected research papers were from those, which were published till March 2018.

Table 1
Characteristics of the sample selected

Search terms	(1) “Social Entrepreneurship” or “Social Entrepreneur” or “Social Enterprise” (2) “Community Enterprise” or “Third Sector” or “non-profit” or “Social Venture” and “Entrepreneurship” (3) Above “terms” and “India”
Cut-off time line	1986- March 2018
Sample Frame	(1) Sage Publishing (www.journals.sagepub.com) (2) Emerald Insight (www.emeraldinsight.com) (3) JSTOR - Online scholarly database (www.jstor.org) (4) Google Scholar – Online scholarly database (www.scholar.google.com)
Search Limitations	Only scholarly journal papers and books were selected

The findings from these articles were then recorded in excel datasheet using various parameters as columns. If any record was found to have multiple keywords from above table, it was split in to as many records with one keyword. This resulted in swelling of total global dataset size from 139 to 174, while Indian data-subset increased to 31 from 28.

The analysis was carried out using pivot tables applying various data filters and sorting methods, and charts created from this datasheet for graphical and tabular representation for easier understanding.

III FINDINGS

(a) **The Trend:** The trend of global dataset and India data sub-set of sampled conceptual and theoretical research papers from 1986 - March 2018 is presented in figure 1 and figure 2 in form of line chart.

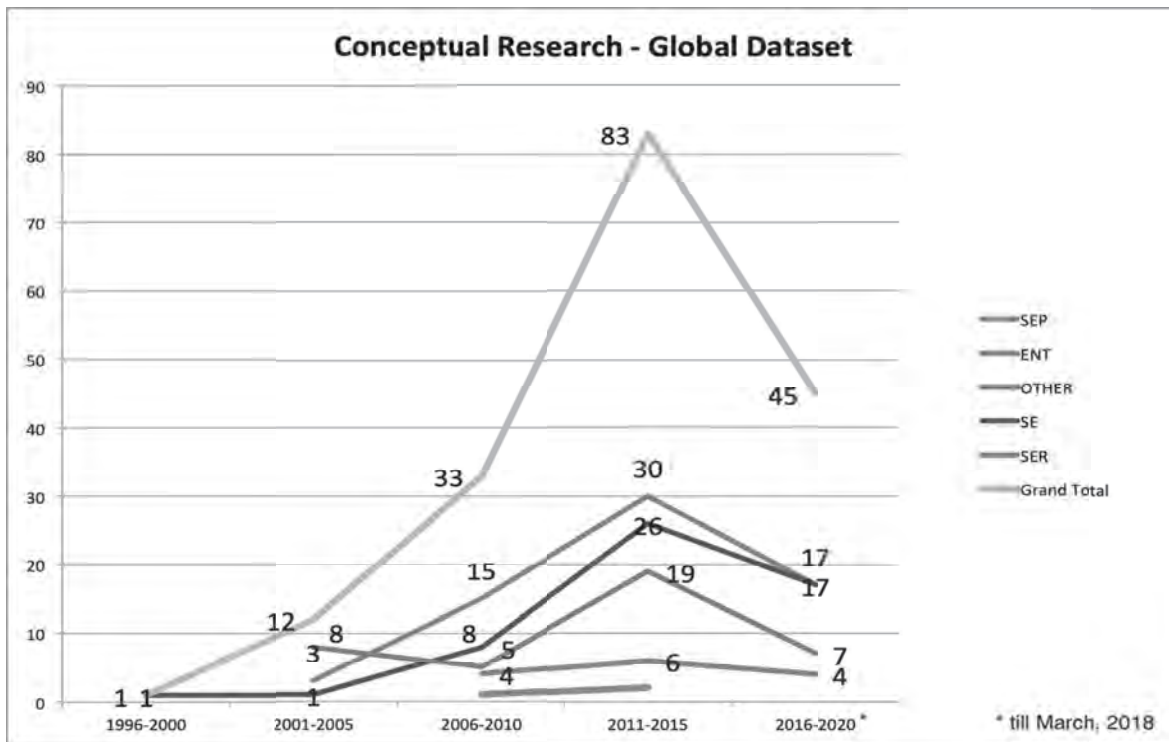


Fig. 1: Trend of global dataset of sampled conceptual and theoretical research papers (key-word wise)

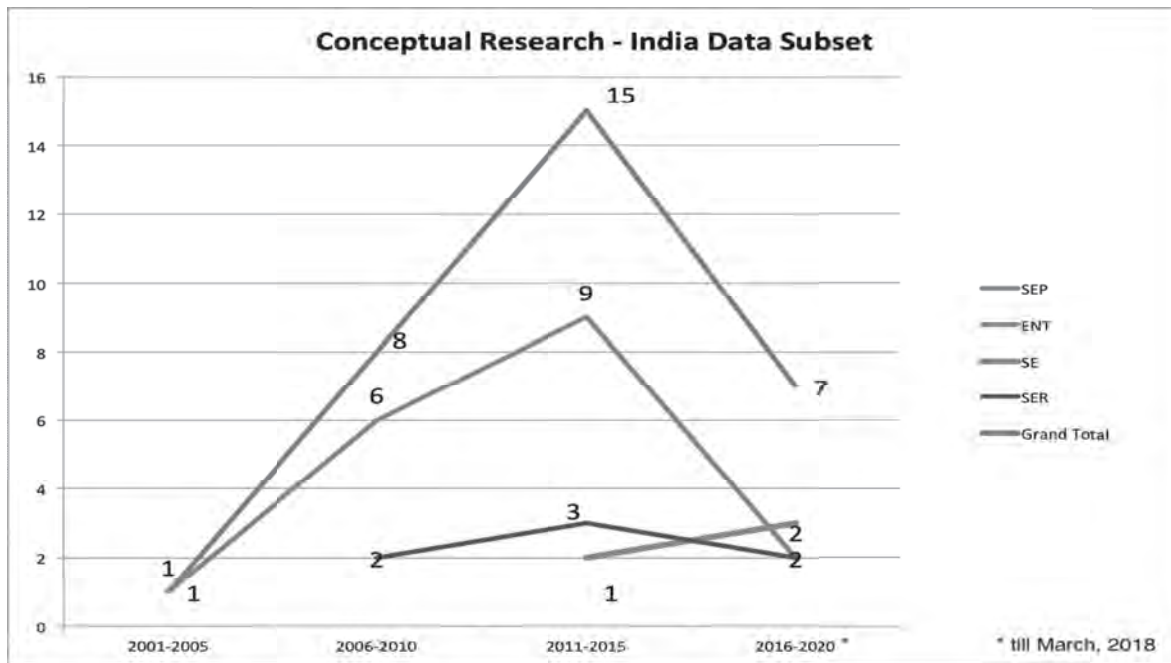


Fig. 2: Trend of global dataset of sampled conceptual and theoretical research papers (key-word wise)

Above charts show that, though the papers started immerging almost at the advent of 21st century, there has been significant increase in conceptual and theoretical research in this field since then globally (174). However, there has been hardly much done at India level (31) though. This raises question about level of Indian academic researchers’ interest in conceptual and theoretical research in this field.

To see it in different perspective, the sampled research papers were distributed in major three categories, namely, “India”, “Other developing countries” and “Developed Countries”; the fourth

being “combined” which is combination of any of these three categories. Figure 3 presents this distribution, which shows that 73 % (127 papers) of conceptual and theoretical research had been conducted in developed countries, while developing countries other than India contributing just 5% (9 papers) with India’s contribution at 18% (31 papers). The contribution of developing countries (other than India) being significantly negligible may be due to limitation of this study, which focused on India centric conceptual and theoretical research in developing countries along with over all global focus.

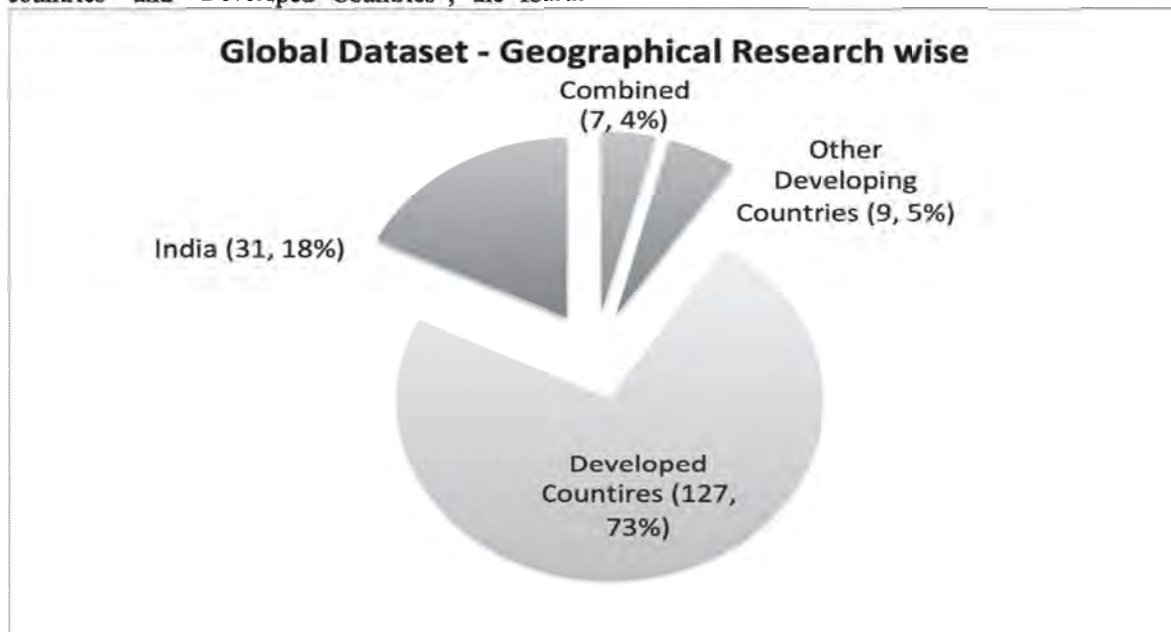


Fig. 3: Geographical distribution of sampled conceptual and theoretical papers

(b) The Definitions:

Much of the research carried out on social entrepreneurship focuses on definitions of the concepts, comparatively centering more on concepts and theory research than empirical research (Short, Moss, & Lumpkin, 2009). Most of the definitions found in social entrepreneurship literature refer to social entrepreneurship as an ability to leverage resources to address social problems, though there is very little consensus beyond this generalization (Dacin P., Dacin M. and Mataer, 2010). The definitions of social entrepreneurship seem to have different versions due to diverse context of geographic locations, academic backgrounds and the economic development of the countries (Kerlin, 2009; Defourny and Nyssens, 2006; Patel, 2018). Thus, the debate is still on among the academicians and practitioners over the exact definitions of social entrepreneurship (Mair and Marti, 2009; Robinson et

al., 2009; Thompson, 2002; Peattie and Morley, 2008; Spear, 2006; Jones, 2007; Hockerts, 2006; Haugh, 2005; Defourny and Nyssens, 2006; Alter, 2003; Dart, 2004).

The Table 2 presents a representative selection of the various definitions found in the conceptual and theoretical social entrepreneurship literature; arranged in chronological order to identify an evolutionary trend of the definition, if any. The definitions were analysed for inclusion of "Social mission" or "Social objectives", "Entrepreneurial characteristics", and "Profit-making as an objective" and focus on these terms in respective definitions. The other definitions offered during and after the timeline depicted in Table 2, present the same argument and cover similar focus areas, albeit in different words. The definitions picked up in Table 2 thus represent the views of the scholars quite clearly.

Table 2
Social Entrepreneurship Definitions

Period	Definition	Focusing on*
1996-2000	"The persons, who create or manage innovative entrepreneurial organizations or ventures, whose primary mission is the social change and development of their client group" (Prabhu, 1999)	S; E
2001-2005	"The social entrepreneurs are one species in the genus entrepreneur. They are entrepreneurs with social mission" (Dees, 2001)	S; E
	"They have the same core characteristics as their traditional business entrepreneur peers. What defines a leading social entrepreneur? First, this is an entrepreneur with a powerful, new, system change idea, along with four other necessary ingredients: creativity, widespread impact, entrepreneurial quality, and strong ethical fiber, Secondly, a social mission in addition to financial objective" (Drayton, 2002)	S; E
	"The people with the qualities and behaviors, we associate with the business entrepreneur but who operate in the community and are more concerned with caring and helping than "making money" (Thompson, 2002)	S; E
	"A social entrepreneur is any person, in any sector, who uses earned income strategies to pursue a social objective, and he differs from a traditional entrepreneur in two important ways: traditional entrepreneurs frequently act in a socially responsible manner; and Secondly, traditional entrepreneurs are ultimately measured by financial results" (Boschec and McClurg, 2003)	S; E
	"The social entrepreneurship means nonprofit organizations that apply entrepreneurial strategies to sustain themselves financially and having a greater impact on their social mission" (Lasprogata and Cotton, 2003)	S; E; P
	"A multidimensional construct involving the expression of entrepreneurially virtuous behaviour to achieve the social mission, a coherent unity of purpose and action in the face of moral complexity, the ability to recognize social value creating opportunities and key decision making characteristics of innovativeness, pro-activeness and risk-taking" (Mort, Weerawardena & Carnegie, 2003)	S; E
	"The social entrepreneur creates innovative solutions for social problems and mobilizes the ideas, capacities, resources, and social arrangements required for sustainable social transformations" (Alvord, Brown and Letts, 2004)	S; E
"The social entrepreneurs are people with new ideas to address major social problems, and who are relentless in pursuit of their visions, and who will not give up until they spread their ideas as far as they can" (Bornstein, 2004)	S E	

Period	Definition	Focusing on*
2001-2005 (Contd.)	"The social enterprise differs from the traditional understanding of the non-profit organization in terms of strategy, structure, norms, and values, and represents an innovation in the nonprofit sector" (Dart, 2004)	S; E
	"They are traditional businesses with social objectives whose surpluses are reinvested back in business for social objectives or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximize profit for shareholders and owners" (Harding, 2004)	S; E
	"The social entrepreneurship can be broadly defined as use of entrepreneurial behaviour for social ends rather than for profit objectives, and alternatively, that the profits generated are used for the benefits of a specific disadvantaged group" (Hibbert, Hogg & Quinn, 2005)	S; E; P
	"The social entrepreneurship is the construction, evaluation, and pursuit of opportunities for transformative social change carried out by visionary, passionately defected individuals" (Roberts & Woods, 2005)	S; E
	"The social entrepreneurship combines the resourcefulness of traditional entrepreneurship with a mission to change society" (Seclos and Mair, 2005)	S; F
2006-2010	"The social entrepreneurship as innovative activity, which creates social value, which can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, or government sector" (Austin, Stevenson & Wei-Skillern, 2006)	S; E
	"A set of institutional business practices combining the pursuit of financial objectives with the pursuit and promotion of substantive and terminal values" (Cho, 2006)	S; F
	"They are entrepreneurs whose work is aimed at progressive social transformation. They run the business to drive this transformational change. While the profits are generated, the main aim is not to maximize financial returns for shareholders or owners but to grow the social venture and reach more people in need effectively. The wealth accumulation is not a priority; revenues beyond costs are reinvested in the enterprise in order to fund expansion" (Hartigan, 2006)	S; E; P
	"The social enterprise is a collective term for organizations, which operate for a social purpose. They adopt one of different legal formats but have in common the principles of pursuing business-led solutions to achieve social aims, and the reinvestment of surplus for community benefit at large. Their objectives focus on socially desired, non-financial goals and their outcomes are non-financial measures of the implied demand for and supply of services" (Haugh, 2006)	S; P
	"The social purpose business ventures are hybrid enterprises straddling the boundary between the for-profit business world and social mission driven public and non-profit organisations. Thus they do not fit completely in either sphere" (Hockerts, 2006)	S; E; P
	"The social entrepreneurs are defined as individuals or private organisations that take the initiative to identify and address important social problems in their communities. Organisations and Individuals that develop new programs, services, and solutions to specific problems and those that address the needs of special populations" (Korosec and Berman, 2006)	S; E
	"A social entrepreneur is an individual, group, network organisation, or alliance of organizations that seek sustainable, large-scale change through pattern breaking ideas in what or how governments, nonprofits, and businesses do to address significant social problem" (Light, 2006)	S; P
	"A process involving the innovative use and combination of resources to pursue opportunities to catalyze social change and/or address social needs" (Mair and Marti, 2006)	S; E
	"The social entrepreneurship is exercised where some person or group: (1) aim(s) at creating social value, either exclusively or at least in some prominent way; (2) show(s) a capacity to recognize and take advantage of opportunities to create that value ('envision"); (3) employs) innovation, ranging from outright invention to adapting someone else's novelty, in creating and/or distributing social value; (4) is/are willing to accept an above-average degree of risk in creating and disseminating social value; and (5) is/are unusually resourceful in being relatively undaunted by scarce assets in pursuing their social venture" (Peredo & McLean (2006)	S; E
	"The social Entrepreneurship is defined as a dynamic process created and managed by an individual or team (the innovative social entrepreneur), which strives to exploit social innovation with an entrepreneurial mindset and a strong need for achievement, in order to create new social value in the market and community at large" (Perrini and Vurro, 2006)	S; E

Period	Definition	Focusing on*
2006-2010 (Contd.)	"The social entrepreneurship is defined as a process that includes: the identification of a specific social problem and a specific solution... to address it; the evaluation of the social impact, the business model and the sustainability of the venture; and the creation of a social mission-oriented for-profit or a business-oriented nonprofit entity that pursues the double (or triple) bottom line" (Robinson, 2006)	S; P
	"The social entrepreneur is acting as a change agent to create and sustain social value without being limited to resources currently in hand" (Sharir and Lerner, 2006)	S; E
	"The social enterprises defined simply are organisations seeking business solutions to social problems" (Thompson & Doherty, 2006)	S; E
	"The social entrepreneurship is defined as having the following three components! (1) Identifying a stable but inherently unjust equilibrium that causes the exclusion, marginalization, or suffering of a segment of humanity that lack the financial means or political clout to achieve any transformative benefit on its own; (2) identifying an opportunity in this unjust equilibrium, developing a social value proposition, and bringing to bear inspiration, creativity, direct action, courage, and fortitude, thereby challenging the stable slate's hegemony; and (3) forging a new, stable equilibrium that releases trapped potential or alleviates the suffering of the targeted group, and through imitation and the creation of a stable ecosystem around the new equilibrium ensuring a better future for the targeted group and even society at large" (Martin and Osberg, 2007)	S; E
	"A social enterprise is an organization that achieves large scale, systemic and sustainable social change through a new invention, a different approach, a more rigorous application of known technologies or strategies or combination of these" (Schwab Foundation, 2007)	S; E
	"Based on whether a business has a more market- or socially driven mission and whether or not it requires profit, The Social Entrepreneur Matrix (SEM) combines these factors that most clearly differentiate social entrepreneurship from traditional entrepreneurship" (Masseti, 2008)	S; P
2011-2015	"The social entrepreneurship encompasses the activities and processes undertaken to discover, define, and exploit opportunities in order to enhance social wealth by creating new ventures or managing existing organisations in an innovative manner" (Zahra, Gedailovic, Neubaum and Shulman, 2009)	S; E
	"The social entrepreneurship is the enterprise activity undertaken by individuals or groups of people to create, sustain, distribute or disseminate social or environmental value in innovative ways. These enterprises could be either a social enterprise, non-profit, private or public institution" (Granados et al., 2011)	S; E; P

* S = Social and/or Environmental Mission or Objective; E = Entrepreneurial Characteristics and P = Profit Making or Financial objective.

Some scholars define social entrepreneurship as a process demonstrated by government or nonprofit organizations by using traditional business principles (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006; Weerawardena et. al, 2010; Sharir & Lerner, 2006) Some researchers see it as the activities of conventional entrepreneurs who demonstrate socially responsible behaviour (Baron, 2005; Young, 2001) or as outcomes of philanthropy in organized way (Reis & Clohesy, 1999; Van Slyke & Newman, 2006) and social innovation (Bornstein, 2004). While others define it very narrowly, as economically sustainable ventures which generate social value (Emerson & Twersky, 1996; Robinson, 2006).

The critiques of the definitional landscape exist and incidentally these critiques often conflict, too. For example, Light (2006) suggested that the current definitions are too exclusive, while Martin & Osberg (2007) characterized them as too inclusive. Dees (1998) recognized this dilemma early on and suggested that the challenge was to avoid defining social entrepreneurship too broadly, else it will make it void of meaning, or too narrowly, else it will become the province of only a special few. A

perusal of the definitions in Table 2 leads us to conclude that the literature has not yet achieved this balance as suggested by Dees (1998).

Table 2 suggests that definitions of social entrepreneurship focus on key factors like, the individual social entrepreneurs' characteristics (Light, 2009), the operating sector, the business processes and resources used, and the primary mission and outcomes associated with the social entrepreneur. Many researchers including Dees (1998), Light (2006, 2009), Mair and Marti (2006), and Martin and Osberg (2007) also discussed some of these factors in social entrepreneurship definitions.

The Table 2 further shows that there is no definitive evolutionary trend of definition of "Social Entrepreneur" or "Social Enterprise" in terms of it focusing on three broad themes; i.e. "Social Mission" or "Social Objectives", "Entrepreneurial Characteristics", and "Profit making or Financial Objective" used in the definitions. There does not seem to be any consensus about this as well, as can be observed from Table 2. It can be observed that there is no consensus on degree of these three themes, in the definitions used by researchers and

academicians.

Some definitions highlight qualities and behaviors of individuals centered around various issues like motivation, the ability to recognize opportunities and enact change through excellent leadership skills, and/or the ability to get necessary resources (Light, 2009; Tan, and Williams, 2005). Furthermore, individually focused case studies form the basis of quite a bit of the research in social entrepreneurship. As a result, discussions of individual characteristics of social entrepreneurs take the form of insights of particular individuals identified as successful social entrepreneurs, which may lead to bias in the observations. Other biases may arise due to more focus on individual-level characteristics than on the basic ideas underlying an organisation as well as tendency to ignore the resources provided by the organization (Light, 2006). Tan et al. (2005) observed differences between social and other forms of entrepreneurship and suggested a continuum of social entrepreneurs based on descending degrees of altruism that profits society. Much of the discussion of individual-level characteristics comes from the existing literature on other forms of entrepreneurship (Dacin P., Dacin M. and Matear, 2010). This led some researchers to express skepticism about whether these characteristics enable researchers to differentiate among the various forms of entrepreneurship (Gartner, 1988; Mair & Marti, 2006).

IV CONCLUSION

This study examined social entrepreneurship as a unique conceptual and theoretical context of inquiry. This study builds the understanding of social entrepreneurship by evaluating the countless definitions in the conceptual and theoretical social entrepreneurship literature and compares and contrasts it with traditional entrepreneurship. There seems to be broad consensus on the boundary of field about social entrepreneurship being an activity, which creates social value along with entrepreneurial value capture as it can be observed through definitions. Though, the scholarly debate exists about the balance between these two essential ingredients of social entrepreneurship. However, the disagreement seems to be about the form (Social entrepreneurship being government, NGO or business entity), economic sustainability and/or profit for shareholders or owners and degree of social value creation to owners' value-capture. Though there seems to be consensus about it being an activity, which involves essential characteristics of entrepreneurship like innovation, opportunity recognition, availing, mobilizing and utilizing required resources optimally and risk-taking for the objective of social value creation and value capture.

The study demonstrates that while there is quite a bit of overlap and differences between the domains of traditional and social entrepreneurship, there also exist a number of distinctive research opportunities for scholars within the context of social entrepreneurship to compare and base its foundation on traditional entrepreneurship concepts and theory. This study suggests that the most significant opportunity resides in a better understanding of the distinctive nature of the objectives, processes, and various resources leveraged in a social entrepreneurial context. The scholars and practitioners of social entrepreneurship can gain valuable insights by examining various lessons from traditional entrepreneurship, such as those relating to entrepreneurial failure, and/or understanding the processes of resource mobilization currently better understood by those studying traditional institutional entrepreneurship. The study also illustrates that number of promising future avenues for research may emerge if well-established theories from the traditional institutional entrepreneurship literatures are applied to the social entrepreneurship research. Thus study encourages other researchers to also evaluate existing theories used in explaining and understanding entrepreneurial strategies for their use in social entrepreneurship contexts.

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