

# Marzena Starnawska

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## Social Entrepreneurship Research - Challenges, Explanations and Suggestions for the Field Development

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# Social Entrepreneurship Research – Challenges, Explanations and Suggestions for the Field Development<sup>1</sup>

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**Marzena Starnawska\***

Employing critical review of the key literature in the area of entrepreneurship and management studies on social entrepreneurship, this paper aims to outline the current challenges this field is facing, also introducing related explanations and suggesting required changes. The field of social entrepreneurship research is at its nascent stage, determined by ongoing definitional debates and low legitimacy in the scholarship, leading to limited theory development. The key challenge lies in the lack of consistent theory and weak research infrastructure. What lies behind these challenges is the complexity and diversity of the social entrepreneurship phenomenon and academic discourses. There are significant institutional and economic differences between individual countries and regions, which in the end constitute the complexity of the phenomenon. The related definitional debate generates challenges in developing the research infrastructure, which is strengthened by functionalist approach. At the same time, there is a strong need to employ the contribution of other, affiliated disciplines, not limited to entrepreneurship and management, feeding on sociology, anthropology, political science, economics. Their conceptual framework, research methods, particularly derived from sociology, may serve as a useful framework for the field development. This may generate scholarly interest in moving towards other research paradigms, employing subjectivist approaches, or assuming radical change in the society. Moving beyond dominant functionalist paradigm may give voice to initiatives and ventures in social entrepreneurship that have so far been marginalized in research. This, in result, could develop social entrepreneurship research field.

**Keywords:** social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, research paradigm, research, discourse.

## Przedsiębiorczość społeczna – wyzwania, przyczyny i sugestie dla obszaru badawczego

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W oparciu o krytyczną analizę kluczowych tekstów przeglądowych w obszarze przedsiębiorczości społecznej, artykuł przedstawia wyzwania związane z jego rozwojem, ukazuje ich przyczyny i oferuje rozwiązania. Obecny stan badań i konceptualizacji kluczowych pojęć jest na zbyt niskim poziomie zaawansowania, aby służyć dalszemu rozwojowi teorii wyjaśniającej to zjawisko. Istotny problem w obszarze przedsiębiorczości społecznej polega na braku spójnej teorii i braku danych wtórnych pozwalających oszacować skalę i rozmiary zjawiska, dokonać porównań na skalę międzynarodową. Przyczyn tego stanu rzeczy upatruje się w złożonej naturze przedsiębiorczości społecznej, który pojawia się w wielu zróżnicowanych kon-

\* **Marzena Starnawska** – dr, Faculty of Management and Economics, Gdańsk University of Technology.

Correspondence address: Gdańsk University of Technology, Narutowicza 11/12, 80-233 Gdańsk; e-mail: mstarnaw@zie.pg.gda.pl.



tekstach wynikających z różnic gospodarczych, instytucjonalnych, stanowiących o jego podmiotowości, co owocuje różnorodnością tego typu przedsięwzięć, a tym samym wyzwaniem definicyjnymi. To zaś utrudnia zbudowanie właściwej, uznawalnej przez wielu badaczy infrastruktury badawczej co wzmacniane jest preferencjami dla funkcjonalizmu. Zauważalna jest też potrzeba wykorzystania dorobku innych dziedzin, pokrewnych do zarządzania i przedsiębiorczości, które stanowią cenny potencjał teoretyczny i metodologiczny. Oznaczać to może potrzebę skierowania dalszych badań w kierunku innych paradygmatów badawczych, wykorzystujących ujęcie subiektywne rzeczywistości lub zakładających radykalną zmianę i brak równowagi na poziomie społeczeństwa. Wyjście poza funkcjonalizm może udzielić głosu dotychczas niedocenianym i mniej zauważalnym inicjatywom i przedsięwzięciom z obszaru przedsiębiorczości społecznej, na poziomie realiów praktyki życia społecznego i gospodarczego, a równocześnie na poziomie teoretyczno-badawczym. To zaś może przyczynić się do rozwoju tego obszaru badawczego.

**Słowa kluczowe:** przedsiębiorczość społeczna, przedsiębiorstwo społeczne, paradygmat, cel społeczny, metodologia.

**JEL:** B40, L26, L30, M14, O35

## 1. Introduction

Social initiatives and ventures aimed at solving social problems through economic means are not a new phenomenon – these have had a long history. Interestingly, the scholarly interest in the social entrepreneurship<sup>2</sup> has grown dynamically only in the last 25 years. The first work, as claimed by entrepreneurship scholars, referring to idea of SE is the paper on community entrepreneurship by B. Johannisson (1990). Gradually, entrepreneurship scholarship has begun to become acknowledged within the realms of public sector (Boyett, 1996), third sector (Defourny et al., 2001), and private sector entrepreneurial efforts. Though SE has gained growing interest among scholarship and practitioners, it has been described as ‘accumulative fragmentalism’ (Nicholls, 2010). There are a number of reasons for this fragmentalism and for the popularity of the phenomenon. First, SE is a very broad theoretical construct and phenomenon, encompassing a variety of enterprising efforts of individuals, groups, societies, organizations, situated in and between three sectors of society (profit, non-profit and public) (Defourny and Nyssens, 2012; Starnawska, 2015a), following different country/context institutional and historical trajectories. Moreover, it has been a subject of interest not only to SE affinity areas like CSR or sustainability or affiliated disciplines like management or entrepreneurship, but it has found strong interest in: political sciences, sociology, economics, psychology, anthropology. Another reason for this interest is the increased publication potential. In 2009 there were only 57 papers in top entrepreneurship and management journals on SE (Short et al., 2009), whereas by 2013 the number of these had grown more than by 2300%<sup>3</sup> (Batillana and Lee, 2013). At the same time, many governments promote the SE idea as a panacea for painful social problems, and delegate many of the public tasks to the third sector organizations, or outsource these to other agencies.

Thirdly, this popularity could be owed to the idea of social mission as associated with altruism, considered as something intrinsically good, a positive phenomenon. Therefore, many researchers find this area attractive, as it is associated with positive action (Dey, 2006; Dey and Steyaert, 2010) and therefore push for SE development per se (Pacut, 2015; Starnawska, 2016).

In this paper, the author aims to overview the SE research and associated challenges, possible explanations and suggestions for the deeper theoretical, quality development of the field. In the first part of the paper, the author puts forward the important challenges and problems. In the following part of the paper, the author introduces explanations for these, and in the last part, some suggestions are reviewed and introduced as a response to these challenges.

## 2. Challenges in Social Entrepreneurship Research Field

Some important challenges could be identified that limit the development of the SE field. The first one is the lack of theory of SE (Short et al., 2009) and the second is lack of legitimacy of this nascent field. These two are set in the third challenge which is the definitional debate characterizing the field (Figure 1).

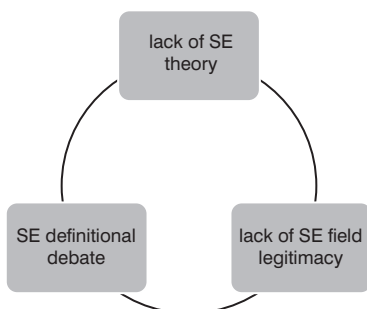


Fig. 1. Social entrepreneurship field research challenges. Source: the author's own elaboration

In case of the first, no SE theory has been developed so far. There have emerged two contrary views on whether a new theory of SE is needed or not. Nicholls (2010) claims that SE research is at the pre-paradigmatic stage and needs a *de novo* theory with its own conceptual framework and research methods. In turn, other authors (Dacin et al., 2010) claim that there is no need for a new theory and researchers should use the existing management and entrepreneurship theory or/and build an SE theory in this context. It is also highlighted (Nicholls, 2010; Mair and Marti, 2004; Nicolopolou, 2015) that the field has been too much phenomenon-driven,

i.e. practice has developed much further than theory. Also, what should be noted here is that the management theory has been dominated by the classical, profit-driven model of organization (Newbert and Hill, 2014). Thus, the SE field finds it challenging to test assumptions of classical management theory. Only humanistic management significantly appreciates the non-profit driven organizing, namely organizations as strongly embedded in society as reflected in sociological theories of organization. The author refers to the role of social context in explaining the phenomenon in further sections of this paper.

At the same time, limited or even lack of the legitimacy of the SE field generates the vicious circle. The less recognition the field gets, the less resources are made available to push its theoretical boundaries ahead and scholars are less willing to engage in the development. Pfeffer (1993) and Short with others (2009) emphasize that scholars, for their promotion and tenure, are dependent on the field legitimacy. The legitimacy of this field is endangered by its multi-disciplinarity, particularly in the Polish research environment, considering the disciplinary and subdisciplinary divisions in academic promotion. Although academics voices point that there are some areas in the economic sciences that feed on the multi-disciplinarity (see: Gorynia, 2015), particularly through employing theoretical concepts and research methods from other disciplines – set beyond economic sciences, it is not clear how acceptable this might be in the SE field development. The less established the field is, the less scholarly effort will be made into developing the theory and research.

Both challenges are grounded in the definitional efforts and problems. For almost three decades now, the field has struggled with a definitional debate on what SE, social enterprise, social innovation is. There is no widely accepted social enterprise or SE definition that would meet the claims of different researchers. Dacin and others (2010) review 37 definitions and identify their four main elements: features of individual entrepreneurs, main mission and outcomes in SE, operating sector of SE, processes and resources associated with SE. They argue that the issues of social mission, social value, social outcome seem to be a common theme among definitions. Still, some authors consider SE definitions as too exclusive – building ‘small tents’ (Light, 2006; Dacin et al., 2010) whereas others (Martin and Osberg 2007; Dacin et al., 2010) as too inclusive – setting SE under a ‘large tent’ (Santos, 2012). The former, disintegrative approach, allows to qualify social enterprises in different, smaller and internally homogenous groups (e.g. based on the area of operation, sector of activity, other). Newbert and Hill (2014) remind that for the development of a legitimate field, the researchers should have capacity to identify common antecedents, consequences and associated processes within, which can only be done when similar effort is made by scholars thinking and working in the same manner (Gartner, 2001). The debate can be without doubt explained by the assumptions behind and dif-

ferences between *homo economicus* and *homo politicus* (Nyborg, 2001) as two different individuals, unable to combine what is economic and what is social at a time. When the SE construct is disentangled into ‘social’, ‘economic’ or ‘entrepreneurship’ elements, it reflects scholarly inconsistencies and disagreements regarding what the elements stand for. Is ‘social’ related to social problems or social needs (the former – ‘problem’ approach may seem stigmatizing for the beneficiaries of the SE)? Also, the ‘social’ requirement changes depending on the context – time dimension or geographical setting. Should malnutrition be equated with women’s rights, for example? Should a broader context of entrepreneurship meaning its embeddedness into society and its impact be taken into consideration? Another SE element is also discussed by scholarship – ‘entrepreneurship’ and ‘economic’ – displaying various kinds of approaches and understanding. For example, any kind of continuous manufacturing/service provision activity (EMES<sup>4</sup> works, see more: Defourny and Nyssens, 2012) works as the economic criterion for ‘social enterprise’, whereas other authors emphasize the revenue generation in the open market (Dees and Anderson, 2006). At the same time ‘entrepreneurship’ element is associated with innovation (Drayton, 2006). Yet, there is no agreement what innovation means in the social context, what impact it has – is it on the level of an individual organization, is it a technological solution for a social problem, is it an innovative solution on the policy level or basically new venture creation? (see more: Caulier-Grice et al., 2012). Such a debate is endless and the author does not aim to provide a detailed overview of the ongoing discussion. Having overviewed the scholarly output, Dees and Anderson (2006) as well as Defourny and Nyssens (2012) introduce three dominant ‘schools of thought’ in the definitional debate:

- ‘social innovation’ – where research has focused on the efforts of individuals, who as agents lead to social change thanks to the introduced innovations. This approach has been popularized by B. Drayton, the founder of Ashoka, which has become an important institutional actor shaping the field of SE practice and research;
- ‘earned income’ named as social enterprise school of thought born in the 1980s in the USA that grew from the need for non-profit organizations to generate market income, as E. Skloot advised to non-profits (not only donor or government funding based), and at the same time from for-profit companies’ interest in provision of human social services (inspired by W. Norris, who opened Alpha Center to support for-profit enterprises delivering human services);
- ‘EMES school approach’ – based on the scholarly effort of the network of researchers from different countries and universities, EMES proposes 9 guiding criteria (categorized into three: social, governance, economic). The closer an organization gets to the criteria, the closer it resembles the ideal type of social enterprise. This approach is particularly useful, considering the diversity of social enterprise organizations all over the

world, and does not require any verification whether an organization is a social enterprise or not. The ‘social enterprise’ is more of a label that can be given to an organization.

The author does not adhere to any of the schools that have emerged in the definitional debate. It is important to use ‘social enterprise’ as an analytical tool or metaphor, which leads to implementation of inclusive approach to the phenomenon, sensitized to various political, geographical and social contexts.

### **3. Explanations for the Challenges in SE Field Development**

There are a number of explanations for the definitional debate that has occupied majority of scholarly output in the SE area. The first is the argued dichotomy between the social and the economic element (be it the aim of SE, be it the outcome of SE) of the phenomenon. Some research claims (Batillana et al., 2012) that these two are mutually exclusive, as adherence to economic sustainability generates social mission drift, therefore there is a trade-off between the two (Santos, 2012). This discussion is also set in the operating sector for social enterprises. Although it is mainly acknowledged that their roots are traced in the third sector, over decades, social problem solving and provision of public goods have moved towards public and private sector, as well as at the intersection of the three. This, in turn, positions SE as hybrid organizations within conflicting institutional logics (e.g. market, charity) (Thorton et al., 2012) and determines SE organizations’ dual identity (Batko and Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2015; Moss et al. 2010) as both: utilitarian and normative (Albert and Whetten, 1985).

Also, SE research has become the subject of interest of the researchers from different disciplines other than management and entrepreneurship, such as sociology, economics, finance, anthropology as well as political sciences (Short et al., 2009). Their common efforts help to identify institutional (social, cultural, legal) antecedents in particular regions/countries and contexts<sup>5</sup> but create methodological challenges related to the specifics of particular disciplines and areas – their conceptual framework, acknowledged research methods and dominating research paradigm.

The attractiveness of the SE has generated interest from a variety of institutional actors. Among them, there are resource rich and strong players in the field who generate their own rhetoric, discourses and promote their own institutional logics (Nicholls, 2010). Thus, the SE field of practice has become a place of inter-play of these different actors and shaped the academic discourse as well, which does not necessarily display the richness and diversity of the field, as less strong actors are marginalized and do not come to the front of public attention. The overall SE discourse has been exposed to different discourses and influence of these strong actors. Nicholls

(2010) suggests that core differences lie in the assumptions regarding the aim of SE and SE logics. Other differences lie in the language, concepts used by particular groups of actors. He introduces some of the key actors: public administration institutions, foundations; associations and networks for social entrepreneurs; and organizations offering grants for individuals (fellowship organizations) in the SE landscape. Among them, there are Schwab and Ashoka Foundations operating worldwide, with their fellow members, that aim to support their fellows (social entrepreneurs). Ashoka associates them with change makers and emphasizes their individual effort and visionary power. Ashoka has been set up by B. Drayton in the USA, and clearly displays a social innovation approach, praise for an individual, 'hero' entrepreneur characteristic of American culture. Ashoka has clearly influenced the European arena, entered CEE countries too, and has also established itself in Poland. In some countries, separate government offices are established to work on the social enterprise and SE agenda<sup>6</sup>. Some countries have also introduced separate legislation for 'social enterprise' as a separate organizational and legal form (e.g. in the UK – community interest companies, in the USA – L3C corporations and benefit corporations have been introduced into legislation). The efforts in the legislative arena strengthen particular organizations and discourses on social enterprise. In the case of Poland, for example, social co-operatives have been widely acknowledged by the public administration agencies and Social Economy environment as manifestations of SE (see more: Starnawska, 2015b) and have been identified as one of the three main models of social enterprise (Ciepielewska-Kowalik et al., 2015). Since 2007, when the Act on social co-operatives was introduced, social co-operatives have grown in numbers, having been given the opportunity for start-up grants from public sources (Unemployment Offices, Centers for Social Economy Support, other) for creating workplaces for their members from public sources. These social co-operatives in many cases have been portrayed as exemplary for SE and 'social enterprise'. SE academic discourse in Poland has been mainly shaped by the public administration and Social Economy support institutions, which have distributed funding to third sector organizations and social co-operatives in the area of work and social integration of the marginalized groups. Polish SE landscape has been very strongly subjected to public funding (from domestic and EU budgets) available to third sector organizations and Social Economy organizations (see more: Ciepielewska-Kowalik et al., 2015). As the capital market in Poland has been less developed, when compared with the USA, where social investment and social venture capital are abundant, it has been nonexistent in practice and academic and public discourse in Poland. Within the scholarship in the Polish context, primary academic output was initiated in the context of social economy organizations among economists and social policy studies (see more: Hausner, 2008; Leś, 2008; Kaźmierczak et al., 2011). This interest was initiated with the start



of EQUAL initiative projects aiming to promote the social enterprise concept in Poland and other CEE countries as of the EU accession. The first noteworthy publication on social entrepreneurship (Praszkiec and Nowak, 2012) was introduced in the context of development of Ashoka program in Poland. Clearly, scholarly efforts on the Polish research agenda have been influenced by the strength of key actors entering the third sector and business and public administration area, thanks to public funding and international support.

The strong institutional influence of key actors can be traced to another important explanation set in differences between particular countries, cultures and contexts with their institutional trajectories, historical background, society wealth, and the associated welfare models (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Gordon (2015) identifies six traditions of social enterprise traditions reflecting: the dominant values, primary beneficiaries of SE, legal or organizational forms, primary income sources (mutual, community, altruistic, ethical, private market, public statist). Kerlin (2011) introduces a valuable overview of institutional trajectories explaining the emergence of social enterprise in different countries. The institutional, spatial (in terms of time and place) diversity of the SE phenomenon shows that a unified definition of a social enterprise or SE is an impossible task (Defourny and Nyssens, 2015). Nicolopolou (2014) emphasizes the influence of not only political, economic contexts but also geographical and social ones, and distinguishes 3 trends in the SE field formation: in the USA focusing on 'change agency' and 'leadership' (social innovation), in continental Europe focused on 'participation' and 'representation' (ownership and governance models of cooperative forms) and in the UK on the distinction between 'economic' and 'social' (need of non-profits to move away from grant dependency).

Another important reason is the lack of developed research infrastructure. This lies in the non-existence of social enterprise databases which could be used for large-scale projects on larger populations. Limited infrastructure is also displayed in the lack of universal, unified measurement tools for SE, social enterprise success, social impact and many other variables and categories related to the SE phenomenon (Batillana and Lee, 2014). In effect, secondary data is scarce, disallowing for any comparative evaluation of the scope of SE across countries, for example. In their review work on key management and entrepreneurship papers, published between 1991 and 2008, Short and others (2009) found 152 publications, 16% of which used quantitative research methods. Between 2009 and 2013, this number grew by 41% (31 papers) (Gras, 2013). It is disappointing that only two large quantitative projects on the SE agenda, focusing on nascent entrepreneurship, can be identified worldwide. These two are PSED (Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics) set up in the USA and the globally spread GEM (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor) (for discussion see more:

Zbierowski, 2015). Both focus on the analysis of entrepreneurial intentions in adult population. This works as a natural step forward to develop research infrastructure, where researchers have decided to focus on the individual as a unit of analysis. It also reflects the ongoing struggle and challenge in employing SE organization as a unit of analysis to research the phenomenon on a larger scale, beyond sectoral, model, country boundaries. At the same time, however, there is limited effort in researching individuals like investors, volunteers, founders.

Although there is some country specific, nationwide secondary data and statistics on non-profits, non-government organizations produced by statistical agencies or network organizations, these analyse specific groups or models of social enterprise organizations and do not give more insightful indicators or measurements of researched populations. Yet, at the same time, SE literature in management and entrepreneurship does not undertake testing the existing theory, as scholarly output is more active in attempts to provide descriptions of individual social enterprise cases, with a limited number of inductively based studies (Nicholls, 2010; Nicolopolou, 2015). These cases are usually based on in-depth interviews with representatives and organizational documentation and generated purposive samples are based on snow-ball recommendations. A case study approach can be a natural choice, considering the organizational level of analysis and the complexity of the phenomenon; however, these contribute to theory building to a limited extent. Large scale studies on social enterprise organizations are nonexistent, as there is limited accessibility to potential databases. Another problem in existing research infrastructure is the lack of a widely accepted and employed measurement tool for social outcomes, social impact or social enterprise success. This resonates with the social vs economic dichotomy, but also the scope and depth of impact of SE in the society and economy. ‘Social value’ and ‘social impact’ or ‘success’ are quite general, conceptual categories, and still a lot of methodological effort needs to be made to propose a unified, universal measurement, and particularly objective operationalization of ‘success’ requires sensitivity among researchers (Wronka, 2014). Following this challenge, the lack of clear, universal variables and indicators on micro (organizational, individual), meso or macro levels emerges. There are dilemmas whether these variables or indicators can be employed from other areas or disciplines or whether new constructs, indicators should be put forward. There is some scholarly contribution on the level of personal features of social entrepreneurs (Nga and Shamuganathan, 2010); also GEM has made a significant effort in measuring entrepreneurial intentions (also towards SE), which has increased the potential for comparative studies (Lepoutre et al., 2013; Terjensen et al., 2013). Yet, indicators and variables are missing on the organizational level of research. Ahmad and Ramayah (2012) analyze the mission drift on the organizational level, on the meso level – the scope of socially responsible activities in the region is

measured (Miller et al., 2010). On the macro – environmental – level, in a regional setting, for example, the public expenditure on SE, the number of workplaces generated by social enterprise or the social enterprise density in the region's organizational population could also be employed (Gras, 2013). Therefore, it seems natural to use variables and indicators from other more or less affiliated disciplines, not solely pushing towards new constructs and measurements. The lack of developed research infrastructure might somehow indicate the ongoing need for the functionalist paradigm approach in research on SE. On the other hand, the complexity of the SE phenomenon requires consideration of interpretive approaches. A review by Lehner and Kansikas (2011) on the positioning of SE research across 4 research paradigms (functionalist, interpretivist, radical structuralist, radical humanist) (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) provides interesting results. Having reviewed the key works (323 publications) published in management and entrepreneurship literature (for the period 2005–2011), the review indicates that research in the SE field has been mainly positioned in functionalist and interpretivist paradigms (45% and 50% respectively) and yet there have been very few works employing a radical change approach. This can serve as a contrary argument to complaints about the lack of SE research field development. Being established in certain paradigms can secure the consistency in terms of ontology, epistemology and methodology. But these efforts have been relatively unproductive in pushing the theory ahead, as is proposed in the paper. Also, there is scarce appreciation of more radical approaches towards the study of the SE phenomenon, which can partly limit the field development as well.

#### **4. Suggestions and Directions for Social Entrepreneurship Research Field**

For the SE field development, a number of suggestions are made and can be made. In the scholarly world and practice, there needs to be an ongoing, extant awareness of the diversity and complexity of the SE phenomenon and past and present institutional processes around. At the same time, more effort needs to be made towards researching SE in the multidisciplinary context. As this has been the natural direction for entrepreneurship development, it is even more so in the case of SE. This may mean the need for employment of research methods dominant in other disciplines. For the emergence of a *de novo* theory, a natural step would be to incorporate inductive research approaches employing the grounded theory method, for example, which in longer term could be theoretically tested in other contexts, and in long term tested on larger populations. As regards SE theory development through testing the existing entrepreneurship and management theory, researchers need to be sensitized as regards the validity of some theoretical concepts or abstracts borrowed from other disciplines. It

is, for example, arguable whether and how management related concepts such as success factors (Wronka, 2014), competitive advantage (Żur, 2014) profitable industries capturing value in business model (Santos, 2012) can be employed. Such concepts should be revised (see for example: Buła et al., 2014). So again, researchers should be open to other disciplines like sociology, anthropology, political science to encompass the complexity and societal nature of SE. Employment of the existing theory or its re-contextualization for SE generates a natural path towards deductive approaches. The author is convinced that both positions (*de novo*, testing and contextualizing the existing theory) in research efforts are natural, unavoidable and enriching for the theory.

Another proposed suggestion for SE research field development for researchers is to employ and move towards a broader view of the SE phenomenon in existing and forthcoming conceptual and empirical efforts, where the contextual nature of the phenomenon is considered. This repeats the call for multi-disciplinarity in the studies and can be backed up by a number of arguments. First of all, management and entrepreneurship discourse has focused too much on the for-profit enterprise and rationality as contexts for theory development. Various authors, having referred to Schumpeter and his significant contribution to the entrepreneurship phenomenon, omitted his claim that entrepreneurship has not only economic but also non-economic outcomes (Swedberg, 2006) as a ‘form of dynamic behavior in one of the non-economic areas of the society’ which referred to changes in society. Swedberg (2006) has made several attempts to revise and trigger academia to critically reflect on the entrepreneurship field in this matter. The roots of SE are found in the community efforts (Johannisson, 1990) but somehow management and entrepreneurship research effort on the Polish research and practice agenda seems to disregard issues of embeddedness and social capital. The entrepreneurship phenomenon (and even more SE) is often embedded in the environment and at the same time enacts upon it in a variety of ways. There is a growing recognition among entrepreneurship scholars (Korsgaard and Anderson, 2011; Johannisson, 1990; Gawell, 2011) to use the societal entrepreneurship term, meaning the non-economic as society related, to encompass the social impact as going beyond the needs and problems of the marginalized populations towards the society in all its dimensions and areas on the economic, social, and environmental levels. This also gets closer to arguments about using conceptual frameworks and research instruments from other disciplines like sociology and anthropology. Somehow this paper can be another call to put more scholarly effort in revising the entrepreneurship field, considering its social dimension. It is similar to other authors’ claims (Mair, 2006; Friedman, 1970) that all successful enterprises lead to social value, considering multiple bottom lines (economic, social, environmental) (Nicolopolou, 2014; Leadbeater, 2008). Therefore, a useful direction for SE research field development would be

to explore how existing theories might work in the context of social mission oriented organizations and move away from the claimed dichotomy between ‘social’ and ‘economic’ towards more converging approach appreciating societal and humanistic aspects in business (Pirson and Lawrence, 2010). Among Polish scholars, it is strongly emphasized by humanistic management scholars (Kostera et al., 2015; Batko and Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2015) who have initiated a wider discussion on social economy organizations and cooperatives. The aim of SE and its impact on the society may also mean to work as a change agent on different levels, impacting: society, economy and environment. Therefore, it is capable of acknowledging and appreciating the environmental needs and perhaps there is a need to redefine the social (societal) entrepreneurship field and discuss the social role of entrepreneurship (Zahra and Wright, 2015).

The societal and broader view of entrepreneurship indicates the relevance of context in entrepreneurship research. But it should be also complemented by more processual approaches to the study of the SE phenomenon. This can help to show that SE as a processual phenomenon is socially constructed, via ongoing interactions between entrepreneurs and their environments (Anderson et al., 2010) – including constituents, beneficiaries, clients, communities where they are embedded and which they respond to, as a liminal phenomenon. Following this approach, Diochon et al. (2011) argue that to better learn about SE, the focus should move away from “*who social entrepreneur is*” to “*how SE occurs*”. Naturally, the processual approach emphasizes the importance of the context, and thus there is a need to research SE through an idiographic description and worlds constructed by actors, which calls for an interpretivist approach in researching the phenomenon. But another important suggestion here is a need to move towards more radical approaches in research (structuralist or humanist). If one thinks of the social impact, there is a space for giving the voice, empowerment and freedom to a variety of groups. Thus, radical change, not regulation, is in the nature of society, not the order (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The assumption that individuals, groups, societies struggle in a constant conflict because of differences, divisions, power struggles can work as a useful explanatory antecedent for the SE phenomenon. Curtis (2008) referred to by Nicolopolou (2014) provides arguments to the radical humanist approach and talks about hegemony, emancipation, equality, democracy. Although Burrell and Morgan’s typology assumes exclusivity of paradigms, the dichotomous nature of SE – where both social and economic aims are at stake – provides an argument for paradigm interplay (Nicolopolou, 2014; Starnawska, 2016) to broaden the theory as previously proposed by Schutz and Hatch (1996) in the ‘transition zones’. In this vein, there is a need for trans-paradigmatic or inter-paradigmatic approaches in the study of the phenomenon, which has been limited to one empirical paper in the field (Diochon et al., 2011).

For the development of research infrastructure, a number of suggestions are made. In the face of lack of databases on social enterprises, Batillana and Lee (2013) suggest using databases created by network organizations, publicly available data of certified social enterprises (B-Corporation label) or, if available, databases of legally defined social enterprises in particular countries (such as: CICs, L3Cs, Benefit Corporations). In Poland, there is a publicly available dataset of non-government organizations (bazy.ngo.pl); also social co-operative network associations (OZRSS, KRS<sup>7</sup>) run their own member databases. Still, these databases usually cover one particular model of a social enterprise organization. For the proposed SE indicators and variables, scholars (Crook et. al., 2010; Harding 2004; Korosec and Berman 2006) propose and emphasize the need to create unified and universal measurements for social and economic value, such as social impact (on organizational outcome level, organizational policy level, environmental level, organizational policy level), success or achievements of social enterprises and the mission drift. There should be a more focused effort among researchers to employ approaches from SE affiliated disciplines like CSR and sustainability to measure social impact on the micro level – regarding organizational politics or output, not going deep into higher level order impact measurements (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2010; Batillana and Lee, 2013). Batillana and Lee (2013) put forward an example of organizational reporting standards like GIIRS (Global Impact Investing Ratings System), which helps to evaluate the alignment of organizational policies with social outcomes.

The proposed suggestions, based on the existing literature and the authors' own reflections, indicate that there are a number of options that are not mutually exclusive to test the existing theory of entrepreneurship and management in the context of SE further and at the same time embark on a *de novo theory building*. In the case of the former, a stronger research infrastructure is needed with universal indicators and measurements, as well as unified definitions. In the case of the latter, inductive approaches encompassing complexity, liminality and processuality of SE are needed to generate local theories that could potentially be tested in other contexts and disciplines.

## 5. Conclusions

It is unquestionable that a variety of organizations and organizational models fall into the 'large tent' of the SE phenomenon. This has roots in a variety of institutional, historical, social contexts in different regions of the world. The practice of SE is ahead of the research, and has been subjected to influence of strong institutional actors in the field. There is no doubt that one cannot look at and analyse the SE phenomenon solely on the level of individuals or organizations. SE is a complex, contextual phenomenon involving and responding to a variety of actors and organizations in the environment. Moreover, there is an ongoing process of communication and

interpretation between the two parties. SE is also set in different, often conflicting institutional logics from different sectors, combining dimensions of 'economic' and 'social'. This leads to a hybrid nature of social enterprise organizations and creates additional challenges regarding what should be researched and how. A broader approach, going beyond the dichotomy, can be a solution showing the research and practice focus on societal entrepreneurship as a phenomenon impacting society in a variety of ways and on different levels – SE as embedded in the local environment.

The undertaken discussion displays some limitations. The literature review is not systematic, as it focuses on the reflection on key works in the SE area, set particularly in the entrepreneurship and management theory. The author has deliberately omitted the vast ongoing discussion in the literature on social innovation, which is an important issue for research consideration<sup>8</sup>. Future research should contribute to reviewing work in the field in other, affiliated disciplines, lastly on a more interdisciplinary level.

The future research in the SE field will inherently move towards two directions, and there is no universal research approach. There needs to be a growing effort to build a new theory of SE and, at the same time, academia need to make efforts to contextualize and verify the existing theory of SE. In the latter case, it is necessary to revisit many of the concepts from the theory of entrepreneurship, and management in particular. As a result, there is a need for multidisciplinary approaches, for the employment of qualitative and quantitative research methods, and moving beyond the functionalist paradigm. At the same time, there are a lot of challenges ahead in developing research infrastructure, particularly in developing universal measurement tools feeding on different disciplines and fields for the purpose of sound large datasets on SE. In this respect, there is a need to keep revising the entrepreneurship paradigm. SE research as an agency is an embedded agency (Garud et al., 2007). In the context of key and strong actors shaping the phenomenon (Nicholls, 2010), it is also the role of the scholars to make a contribution to the field through research, taking an advocacy role, recognizing the marginalized research fields, individuals and groups, and others. Therefore, SE scholarly work has an opportunity and obligation to serve as an institutional agent in the SE field of research in the academia and in the economy and society.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The project was co-financed from the National Science Centre's funds granted under decision no. DEC-2011/03/D/HS4/04326.
- <sup>2</sup> For convenience, the author uses 'SE' acronym for 'social entrepreneurship' throughout the paper.
- <sup>3</sup> Batillana and Lee (2014), for the period 1991–2013, identified 216 in top management and organizational, and SE and social enterprise related journals. The provided

estimate of growth is not fully correct, as the two papers cover slightly different samples of top management and entrepreneurship journals.

- 4 EMES is an international network of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship scholars and research units, established in 2006.
- 5 One of the important efforts in the scholarly area is International Comparative Social Enterprise Models project run by the EMES network (network for researchers and universities involved in SE research). More than 200 researchers from more than 50 countries have proposed social enterprise models for individual countries. See more: <http://www.iap-socent.be/icsem-project>.
- 6 In the UK, there is a designated government Social Enterprise Unit (later Office for the Third Sector) under DTI and Office for the Civil Society. In the USA, Social Innovation Cabinet and the one on Civic Society have been established. In Poland, on the ministerial level, under the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, there is the Department for Social Economy and Public Benefit (in August 2016, this name replaced the Department of Public Benefit name). On the regional level, there are designated departments on social policy and support, but none of the public administration units clearly refers to social entrepreneurship in the nominal names within their units and structures.
- 7 The two network organizations playing an advocacy role for social co-operatives in Poland: OZRSS – Ogólnopolski Związek Rewizyjny Spółdzielni Socjalnych, KRS – Krajowa Rada Spółdzielcza.
- 8 However, having reviewed existing work in the area, the author acknowledges that discussion in this area goes far beyond the publication capacity of this paper.

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