Pronouncement of Embedded Agency in the Field of Social Entrepreneurship[*]

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The paper provides insights into how social entrepreneurship and the institutional theory framework can be combined. The author situates the social entrepreneurship phenomenon here, and embarks on the traditional structure *vs* agency debate from social sciences, sociology of organizations in particular. The concept of embedded agency is referred to and employed to explain the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship. In this paper, the author provides key arguments concerning how the institutional theory framework can be useful in the field of social entrepreneurship research and practice. The author also discusses how the embedded agency concept is more pronounced in the social entrepreneurship context.

Keywords: institutional theory, embedded agency, social entrepreneurship.

Manifestacja sprawczości zakorzenionej w obszarze przedsiębiorczości społecznej

Wykorzystując obszerną analizę kluczowych tekstów w obszarze teorii instytucjonalnej oraz obszaru badawczego przedsiębiorczości, w tym przedsiębiorczości społecznej, autorka umiejscawia zjawisko i obszar badawczy przedsiębiorczości społecznej w ramach tejże teorii. Nawiązując do debaty agencja *vs* struktura, znanej z nauk społecznych, przywołuje ona koncepcję sprawczości zakorzenionej i przenosi ją na grunt badań nad przedsiębiorczością społeczną. W artykule przytoczono argumenty, dlaczego ramy teorii instytucjonalnej są szczególnie użyteczne dla zjawiska i obszaru badawczego przedsiębiorczości społecznej, jak również ukazują, w jaki sposób obszar ten może być bardziej wyjaśniony dzięki perspektywie paradoksu sprawczości zakorzenionej.

Słowa kluczowe: przedsiębiorczość społeczna, teoria instytucjonalna, sprawczość zakorzeniona.

JEL: A13, B52, D91, L26, L30, L33

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1. Introduction

Institutional theory has gained increasing interest in the entrepreneurship field of research (Bruton et al., 2010; Dacin et al., 2010; Starnawska and Brzozowska, 2018), particularly by showing how individual actors or organizations strive for legitimacy in their environment, through conformance to existing institutional rules and norms. But the institutional approach, as a theoretical framework, to the entrepreneurship research agenda also allows for considering important, yet not sufficiently exposed, attributes of the entrepreneurial process such as context and embeddedness (Welter and Gartner, 2016; Granovetter, 1985). It also helps to understand how entrepreneurial ideas are institutionalized by reflective and entrepreneurial actors in the process of economic and social value creation (Karatas-Ozkan and Chell, 2010). This, in turn, adds to the understanding how the entrepreneur and entrepreneurial behaviour shape their context. The concept of institutional entrepreneurs (Di Maggio, 1988) has been introduced, and later developed, to provide insights into how they make efforts leading to institutional change (Batillana and D'Aunno, 2004). In parallel, a new emerging field of social entrepreneurship has been developing for the last 25 years (Nicholls, 2010). As a phenomenon, social entrepreneurship is situated at the crossing of different sectors: third, public, private one, which results in various social enterprise or social venture models across different regions, countries and continents (Kerlin, 2009; Young et. al., 2016). As such, social entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurs seem to be involved in relevant institutional work, where institutions are sources of constraints and opportunities in the institutional arena. Although the research employing the institutional approach has recognized the role of agency in the entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship field, the discussion on social entrepreneurship has overemphasized the dichotomy between structure and agency. Here the traditional institutional approach has gained momentum in most of international research projects emphasizing the role of institutional trajectories for the development of the social enterprise landscape (e.g.: Defourny and Nyssens, 2016), without sufficient consideration of both at a time. In this paper, the author provides arguments concerning how social entrepreneurship can be explained via the lenses of new institutional theory. Against this background, it attempts to provide insights into how the embedded agency perspective is particularly useful and strongly manifested in the social entrepreneurship field.

2. Background for Debate in Institutional Theory

The debate in social sciences has had its roots in two contradictory approaches to the relationship between actors (organizations, individuals) and their environments. On the one hand, the first approach assumes that

this is the environment that determines actions and behaviours of actors, as these are responses to the circumstances in the environment. In this deterministic approach, the human agency is limited, if existent at all. The resulting focus is the study of the properties of the actors' context, of constraints and stimulants that influence behaviour of individuals or organizations. On the other hand, the previous approach can be juxtaposed with the human agency based approach, called voluntarist one. It assigns a lot of agency, pro-activeness, creative role to actors (Battilana and D'Aunno, 2004). This is also reflected in sharp differences between the approaches in sociological research and neoclassical economics. The former one provides debates between the deterministic *vs* agency perspectives, when analysing the role of human agency, whereas the latter – the rational actor model – implicitly assumes the extreme version of human agency. It ignores the influence that environments have on rational agents' decisions and behaviours, disregards the role of embeddedness of actors in their context, and provides 'undersocialized' view of human action (Granovetter, 1985; Battilana and D'Aunno, 2004). In the recognition of agency, the institutional theory emerged as an old, traditional approach developed between the 1950s and the 1960s, which already partly explained the role of agency in creation and transformation of institutions (Selznick, 1949; Battilana and D'Aunno, 2004). Later, in the 70s and 80s, the neoinstitutional approach became more popular, focusing on the homogeneity of organizational fields and assuming actors' adjustment to isomorphic pressures in their organizational fields (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Here, an actor's agency was passive adaptation to the existing institutions. It viewed institutions as constraints on organizational or human agency (Battilana and D'Aunno, 2004) and therefore agency was not in the centre of attention at all. And only in the 90s did new institutionalism start to focus on institutional change, studying how actors innovate, which in the end brought the human agency back into the institutionalists' discussion. It was DiMaggio (1988), though, who coined the concept of institutional entrepreneurship from Eisenstadt (1980), and introduced it later. This transformation stirred the debate on agency *vs* structure. As early as in 2002, the Academy of Management Journal introduced a special issue on institutional entrepreneurship, in a way returning back to Selznick's (1949) initial arguments on agency. Following that, 'institutional work' was introduced (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006) to encompass the role of actors in institutional change. Institutional entrepreneurship has also been, though not explicitly, analysed by Oliver (1991), who described organizations resisting institutional pressures, actively engaging in changing them.

Institutional entrepreneurship helps to explain how the new practices become institutionalized when entrepreneurs construct them for the first time in new fields. It also helps to explain how organizational leaders or organizations themselves attract new resources, using social constructs such

as legitimacy, reputation, value judgement. Institutional entrepreneurs, individual or collective actors, then, are those who leverage resources to create new institutions, abolish or transform existing ones (Battilana et al., 2009; DiMaggio, 1988; Maguire et al., 2004).

Institutional theory has developed in the realm of sociology of organizations, but later works of Meyer and Rowan (1997) and DiMaggio and Powell (1983) moved it to the field of management and organization studies. However, Suddaby (2011) notes that institutional theory has not sufficiently entered the field of organization and management theory, and 'agency' perspective and the role of agency in entrepreneurship has not been sufficiently researched. As it reflects the assumptions of social constructionism, it not only allows for studying how institutional practices hinder or stimulate actors' activities, but also it is the agency outcomes that add to the understanding of how actors shape the properties of their own contexts, environments. This can have significant implications for the potential entrepreneurship research in management and organization studies.

3. Institutional Entrepreneurship as a Framework for Social Entrepreneurship

The current body of knowledge has already made an attempt to study entrepreneurship through institutional lenses (Karatas-Ozkan et al., 2014; Pache and Chowdury, 2012). The definitional debate on social entrepreneurship as a field of research and novel phenomenon has been very tiring for the research community, and therefore many authors push for moving this discussion further, studying antecedents and outcomes of social entrepreneurship (Nicholls, 2010; Grimes et. al., 2012); therefore, institutional lenses seem to be a useful setting for studying both.

There are a couple of reasons why social entrepreneurship as a phenomenon and as a field of research should be studied through institutional theory lenses. One key issue is that social entrepreneurship is directed to solving social problems which can be defined and constructed contextually. Still, social enterprise and social entrepreneurship practitioners make efforts to recognize existing problems and actors experiencing these problems. Social entrepreneurship provides not only charity solutions, but is aimed at delivering tools that have potential for wide impact and sustainability. Therefore, they inherently change, demolish existing social structures and existing institutions have not provided sufficient solutions to care about the existing social problems. There is also another interesting line of reasoning hidden in the subject of entrepreneurship as a field of research and practice. Even though the dominant approach in the social entrepreneurship field is to answer social challenges, Swedish and Scottish authors (Berglund, Johannisson and Schwartz, 2012; Korsgaard and Anderson, 2011) posit to discuss social entrepreneurship as societal one, as it is naturally embedded in

the social context, and it derives from the social context. For them, it seems to be a kind of tautology to talk separately of soci(et)al entrepreneurship as institutional entrepreneurship. Another reason for the interest in institutional theory is that social entrepreneurship as a phenomenon is situated at the crossing of different sectors: third, public and private one, each with its own context, related logics and rationalities. It is within the boundaries of these sectors that logics and rationalities are mixed, borrowed, leading to the development of hybrid organizational forms. What is more, social entrepreneurship development institutional trajectories are highly contextual. For instance, depending on the social and institutional context, social enterprise is more settled in non-government organizations (e.g. Poland), or between non-profit and private sector with investment measures (e.g. the USA), or in the public sector (e.g. Germany, Finland) (Defourny and Nyssens, 2016). This results in various social enterprise models across different world regions, countries (Kerlin, 2009; Young et. al., 2016). While adjusting to seemingly contradictory logics: market and welfare ones, for-profit and not-for-profit ones, these trigger new institutional practices, organizational or individual behaviours, which in the end lead to identity loss (Batko and Bogacz-Wojtanowska, 2015). Social enterprises and social entrepreneurship, in practice and research in many countries, have yet not been sufficiently recognized and legitimized (Starnawska and Brzozowska, 2018) because of these contradictions and associated novelty of the phenomenon. There is no universal model that can be applied to all contexts.

This discussion has also implications for the field of research and practice as well as the ongoing efforts of strong institutional actors (both in the academic and practitioners' world) to construct their own discourses, rhetorics of what social entrepreneurship is (Nicholls, 2010). There has been only one, cautious attempt at measuring social entrepreneurial intentions of individuals in the GEM project, but not social enterprise organizations as such (see more: Zbierowski, 2015; Starnawska, 2015, 2016b). Also social entrepreneurship as a field of research itself has strived for its own legitimacy, which was reflected in the debate on whether it stands for a separate paradigm with its own field of research or as a subfield of entrepreneurship research (see more: Nicholls, 2010; Dacin et al., 2010). At the academic level, this process is slow as new research centres, journals, reference publications, conferences bringing together researchers from a variety of disciplines are introduced into the scholarly agenda (Starnawska, 2016a) of entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship, as well as other fields. At the practical level, the social enterprise landscape is such a heterogenous zoo (Young and Brewer, 2016) that it is still methodologically challenging to propose universal solutions. Taking the above into consideration, significant institutional work has been and needs to be done. Therefore, oscillating between the paradoxes of market, welfare and charity, social entrepreneurship requires substantial institutional efforts in practice as being exposed

to heterogeneity. At the same time, social entrepreneurship as a field of research itself is moving through a process of ongoing institutionalization.

4. Embedded Agency in Social Entrepreneurship

The notion of social entrepreneur as embedded agency was mentioned for the first time when Grimes and others (2013) referred to it while responding to the previous critique by Arend (2013) of their original paper (Miller et al., 2012). They did so to signify the role of motivation (prosocial motivation in particular) in encouraging social entrepreneurship, and not to focus solely on social forces shaping the entrepreneur's roles.

In the field of research and practice of social entrepreneurship, the tension between structure and agency is inevitable. Between deterministic and agency based approach (Berger and Luckman, 1967; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991) there is a paradox of how actors embedded in their institutional fields conform to the existing institutional regulations, norms, values which are often self-enforcing and how the same actors motivate themselves, why they are able to create new norms, new practices, how it is possible for them to encourage others to establish new institutions. The debate is based on the fundamental question if human actions are guided by internal: instrumental, emotional calculations or by the structure of economic, political and cultural forces (McMullen et al., 2007), and creates a closed set of alternatives, in a kind of a false, non-existing choice. The embedded agency approach (Holm, 1995) explains that it is possible to introduce institutional change, while at the same time being embedded in certain institutional configurations. Maguire et al. (2004) offer a number of explanations for the embedded agency paradox. First of all, if the existing organizational field is a young one, it is relatively much easier to introduce changes when compared with mature organizational fields. An emerging organizational field is a space of slow institutionalization of practices, behaviours and organizational forms. Here, actors do not need to escape their 'iron cages' to build new institutions. In a mature field, it is more likely for actors situated in more peripheral positions to embark on institutional change, as they experience higher motivations to do so in their less privileged positions. Secondly, new ideas are more likely to emerge in less mature fields where actors have not got used to copying and conforming to dominant institutions. One of the mechanisms referring to where and how new opportunities in institutional space can emerge is the translation of certain practices from one field into another in the spaces of contradictions in institutions. It is likely that institutional change is initiated by actors who evade or resist to existing institutions, and they are less likely to be embedded in their fields. Studies suggest that actors at the margins of one field or at the intersection of different organizational fields are more likely to be engaged in strong agency (Reay et al., 2006). Furthermore, actors from one organizational

field, entering a new one, can display strong proactiveness and motivation in introducing changes. The next explanation for the paradox shows that the space for emergence of institutional entrepreneurial opportunities lies in contradictions in logics and rationalities between the fields. The ensuing frictions make actors more reflective, increase their awareness and lead to attempts to solve existing contradictions. As this paper provides additional insights into how embedded agency is manifested in social entrepreneurship field, the social movement framework explains social entrepreneurship from the supply perspective, and shows how institutional change emerges. It is a slow process requiring not only relevant resources but also efforts and relevant rhetoric in solving certain societal challenges and problems, through political actions, for example. Institutional change and bottom up social movements arise in the fields where there are little or no existing institutionalized practices. Also, there are two important actor dimensions where institutional entrepreneurship can emerge. These are either newly set-up ventures, initiatives or established ones. But because social entrepreneurship initiatives and social enterprise organizations have a relatively short history across cultures and contexts (Starnawska, 2016b), the natural setting for the emergence is provided by new organizational fields and their crossings. Young and Brewer (2016) use the metaphor of a social enterprise zoo to emphasize the diversity of breeds and species in this institutional landscape. The field of research and practice is still immature, and yet it is not only the role of social entrepreneurs to shape the landscape, but there is a significant role for the research community also to put forward normative suggestions for the nature of social enterprise that best answers soci(et)al challenges and issues. The heterogeneity of the field in practice, its struggle for legitimacy and more for institutionalization, shows that social entrepreneurship as a phenomenon is subject of ongoing institutional effort. Here, actors are embedded in multiple organizational fields, have contacts with different actors in other organizational fields, which makes them more likely to become institutional entrepreneurs (Batillana, 2004).

In the case of social entrepreneurship, agency is both social and economic (Emirbrayer and Mische, 1998) and that is why it is more strongly socially embedded than in non-social entrepreneurship, as Granovetter (1985) discusses the embeddedness of economic actions in the social context. Batillana and D'Aunno (2003) point out that institutional theory has never recognized the role of an individual as human agency, focusing on organizational and field levels of analysis. Embedded agency draws attention to the micro-processes happening at this individual level to construct theories of individual behaviour. In this area, research on social entrepreneur behaviours has been limited as well (Stephen and Drencheva, 2017). This approach can provide starting ground for the role of social entrepreneurs, social innovators, leaders and their institutional work, not only focusing on organizations and their fields. Altogether, this multilevel approach can

provide promising research projects within the realms of institutional theory. Embedded agency helps to respond to the most recent calls regarding the progress of social entrepreneurship as a field of research and practice. The structure is closely linked to the structure, whereas the agency to the outcomes. The employment of structure-agency duality and association of embedded agency offers potential to move the social entrepreneurship field further. Yet, structures as forces not only shape the action of an agent but also determine the socially perceived, constructed role of social entrepreneurship. At the same time, the assumption of agency calls for increased interest in the outcomes of this agency which involve not only a social and economic value but, again, in socially constructed expectations of social entrepreneurship regarding these outcomes.

5. Conclusions

Responding to the recent call by Dacin et al. (2010) to include the institutional theory framework in the study of social entrepreneurship, this paper aims at providing insights into how social entrepreneurship can be explained via the framework of institutional theory, and embedded agency in particular. Some significant changes and developments can be expected in the future, as social entrepreneurship as a field of research and a field of practice is still relatively young. This field also holds the potential of being shaped by reflective practitioners and academics, yet a common analytical framework needs to be established. Responding to the need of moving away from the traditional debate on agency *vs* structure that has permeated social sciences, and also pushing the social entrepreneurship field further, the author employs the perspective of embedded agency (Batillana, 2004; Holm, 2005; Seo and Creed, 2002) to outline and explain the phenomenon. As the agency in social entrepreneurship is a socio-economic one, the embeddedness of social enterprise is even more pronounced when compared with commercial enterprise. In parallel, as social entrepreneurship aims at soci(et)al changes by the very nature, it serves as agency in the institutional setting, aiming to change, challenge existing institutions by responding to soci(et)al challenges, through deep understanding and construction of the context.

Social entrepreneurship as agency, as a new field has a strong development potential. Although entrepreneurship research has been mainly practice driven, there is a significant role for educators and researchers to push the boundaries further, at the same time feeding on the existing entrepreneurship theory and leveraging from various disciplinary concepts and frameworks. The following empirical questions emerge from the discussion in this conceptual paper: How has the social entrepreneurship field of practice and theory been institutionalized and how have actors in this field shaped this field, what kind of interplays and dynamics operate

between the structure and agency as well as agency and structure in the practice and research agenda? The future research can make attempts to show how actors (be it individuals, organizations or fields) shape structure and are determined by structure, using the perspective of different (often contradictory) institutional logics. This may involve employment of studies on discourses and narratives in cultural texts and show the existing tensions and interplays of various actors in the field (Nicholls, 2010).

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