Young social entrepreneurs – identity and action

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Light (2005) argues that one of the two key questions on social entrepreneurship is how one would recognise a social entrepreneur, a question which has been the subject of relatively few research studies. Many of these have taken a psychological approach, as Simms and Robinson (2009) have done, arguing that the social entrepreneur comprises the activist and the entrepreneur and that it is the balance between the two that informs the organizational structure which the social entrepreneur develops. However, a smaller number of studies are concerned with the sociological construction of identity, exploring answers to the questions of who to be, what to do and how to act (Giddens 1991) and emphasizing the importance of social relations in the creation of the identity of the social entrepreneur (Thompson 1999, Thompson and Bolton 2004, Berglund 2006).

Case studies of five social entrepreneurs who had been under the age of 25 when they initiated an organization or a major project in civil society were carried out in Sydney, Australia in late 2009. These explored their sense of self identity and sought to determine whether they had become more enterprising through social relations which brought them into contact with support processes such as mentoring or the provision of infrastructure. Data were collected through interviews with the young social entrepreneurs and others who had supported them, and through the analysis of websites of the organizations they established in civil society, news reports and other documents. Data were analysed using a grounded theory approach based on constant comparison through the NVIVO software.

The findings suggest that they have a strong sense of themselves as people who have the capacity to motivate others and they have a strong social support network. They also showed a high level of self-awareness, being able to answer questions such as what do I know? and whom do I know? and to use the answers to strengthen their entrepreneurial agenda (Read & Sarasvathy 2005). The findings also indicate that to a greater or lesser extent, they were influenced by someone who acted as an enabler (Thompson and Bolton 2004), mentoring them or providing practical assistance in establishing or maintaining their project. The perspectives and actions of the participants in the study reflect ideas expressed by Giddens (1991) and by Beck (2001). They create their identity in worlds where the social and the personal come together, where the individual and collective overlap and where egoism and altruism are intertwined. They seek situations where they can make choices about the kind of world they want to live in, and where others can make similar choices, in the way that Giddens explains lifestyle politics (1991).

These young people are not representative of other Australians of the same age, but there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that their concerns, interests and experiences in setting up projects or organizations in civil society are similar to those of young people of a similar age living in other countries. Thus, these case studies give cause for optimism that, in spite of the challenges organizations in the third sector may be facing, some young people in Australia are finding ways to formalize their own interests and concerns and through this to engage other young people in social action. The research marks a shift away from a reliance on economic models to explain social entrepreneurship. It demonstrates a concern for the importance of social relations in answering the question of how one can recognise a social entrepreneur. This concern for social relations in turn links the social entrepreneur conceptually to notions of social capital and significantly, it repositions social resources at the heart of social entrepreneurship.
Bibliography


