Poaching emancipatory entrepreneuring: The language of small business owner-managers with social entrepreneurship identity

The dominant entrepreneurship discourses leave little space for alternative interpretations of entrepreneurship (da Costa & Saraiva, 2012; Williams & Nadin, 2013). Thus, social entrepreneurship is used to highlight a focus on social change (Mair & Martí, 2006).

However, entrepreneurship concerns practices beyond wealth-creation (Verduijn et al. 2014). This study aims to add to the critical social entrepreneurship research on the political nature (Dey & Steyaert, 2010), discourse (Hervieux, Gedajlovic, & Turcotte, 2010; Hulgård, 2010; Levander, 2010; Teasdale, 2011), rhetorical strategies (Grenier, 2009; Ruebottom, 2013), and language use (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008) of social entrepreneurship. Additionally, the aim is to examine the declarative aspects in emancipatory entrepreneuring, which refers to the discursive and rhetorical acts for mobilising support and positioning the project to certain audiences (Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009).

Traditionally, social entrepreneurship in Finland relates to employing people with unprivileged job market position (Pättiniemi, 2006). Although registered work-integration social enterprises gain slightly better benefits, their adoption has been marginal. In 2010’s focus moved from work-integration to solving societal problems with entrepreneurship. These developments link social entrepreneurship to self-employment (Busenitz, Sharfman, Townsend, & Harkins, 2015). Although self-employment for social change is not institutionally recognised as SE in Finland, some small business owner-managers refer to themselves as “social entrepreneurship” despite any concrete benefits (Houtbeckers, 2014).

The interest here is when and why self-employment aiming for social change started to be called "social entrepreneurship". More specifically, how small business owner-managers with social entrepreneurship identity talk about their work. The data includes four owner-managers with social entrepreneurship identity. Analysis covers 13 interviews and 37 observation visits that took place during 2009-2014.

This study finds that owner-managers’ rhetorical moves include comparison between categories ("social entrepreneurship/entrepreneurship", “small/large business”), a sense of an emerging community (social entrepreneurship occupation), claiming individual agency over structures, fatalism ("system will collapse"), and distancing oneself from categories. I argue that due to the Finnish context, the owner-managers use the label “social entrepreneurship” for their social change activities although they engage in emancipatory entrepreneuring. They need to poach (de Certeau, 1984) their practice for social change due to the general understanding of entrepreneurship as merely wealth-creation and economic growth. Although they suggest their everyday practices do not match SE discourse, they still use it for declaring their mission.
References


Williams, C. C., & Nadin, S. 2013. Beyond the entrepreneur as a heroic figure head of capitalism: representing the lived practices of entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship & Regional Development 25 (7–8).