

## Lectiones praecursoriae

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# Mundane social entrepreneurship - A practice perspective on the work of microentrepreneurs

Lectio praecursoria

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### The tour

Let me take you on a tour from rainforests to waste tips, from animal farms to urban streets. Imagine rainforest in front of you. If this is difficult, you can imagine a forest that you know. Imagine machines or people that cut down trees one after another until it is all cut down. They leave nothing growing or living. Biodiversity is diminishing in front of you. Perhaps a species that we did not know existed is now extinct because those hectares were felled. Some plants and species would return quite quickly, if allowed, but now there is no time for that. This land is to be used for growing soybeans, year after year, until the soil is eroded. The grown soybeans are harvested, packed, shipped, sold, and resold. The soybeans end up in front of a pig, a cow or poultry. These animals are farmed to die by billions for humans to eat and use in products.

The tour continues. Think of what you wear, at this very moment. How was that piece of clothing produced? What was required to grow cotton or produce polyester? Who did the work? How did your clothing travel there? Have you thought of what happens to it after you get rid of it? According to the statistics, there is a high probability that it will end up in the dump. One day most of all the energy and work required for that piece of clothing will be rotting away as waste.

Let us continue our tour. Imagine you are travelling from one place to another in a large city, maybe taking your kids to day-care. Maybe you are meeting a friend or a colleague. Perhaps you are using public transportation or a car or maybe you are riding a bike. If you are cycling in the city centre, you might feel unsafe because some places lack cycling routes. Maybe you wish someone would ask *you* how to develop them because you cycle here all the time.

Let us imagine you made it and you are safe in a café or in an office with your friend or a colleague. You debate about vanishing rainforests, increasing clothing waste, and animal rights. You may wonder where one could meet more people like your friend and work with them in order to make the world a better place. How to impact these massive global phenomena as who you are and what you know? Where to start? Could there be - or could we create - a space for people interested in doing something about these matters?

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Our tour has now ended. This tour highlighted the concerns of the microentrepreneurs who I followed for my doctoral dissertation. I call them microentrepreneurs because their companies had less than 10 employees and a modest turnover. They worked in four fields, namely co-working spaces, open data, recycled clothing, and veganism. Or more broadly: project management, urban planning, clothing and textiles, and food.

As a reaction to their concerns, one microentrepreneur set up an online store for vegan products, since veganism reduces the use of animal products and the clearcutting of rainforests. One microentrepreneur used their expertise in dressmaking by using only recycled clothing or textiles, since this advances the reuse of fibres and challenges the way we understand consumption. One microentrepreneur helped cities to consult citizens for better cycling routes, since cycling is far less carbon-intensive than driving cars. A number of microentrepreneurs decided to establish a co-working space that aimed at generating social innovation, i.e. services providing solutions to acute societal problems. All the cases were established in order to do something about matters they thought were unsustainable.

Some of the microentrepreneurs referred to themselves as “social entrepreneurs” while others thought this was not necessary. When I started to follow them, they were not included in the established understanding of Finnish social entrepreneurship. In Finland, social entrepreneurship has traditionally been linked with employing disadvantaged workforce, such as long-term unemployed or people with disabilities (Pättiniemi, 2006b). Another stream of social entrepreneurship has rightly focused on *how* services are produced or *who* owns the business. This stream includes (i) cooperatives owned by customers or workers and (ii) businesses owned by social and welfare sector organisations (Pättiniemi, 2006a). They use the profits to serve their beneficiaries, such as children, disabled people, immigrants or substance-abusing people.

Initially, I had difficulties in positioning the young urban microentrepreneurs who aimed to make a living by addressing contemporary challenges. They could have been defined as “ecological” or “sustainable entrepreneurs” (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). However, since the microentrepreneurs used social entrepreneurship, I decided to use social entrepreneurship as an umbrella concept in my research.

### *Social entrepreneurship*

But what is social entrepreneurship? As a phenomenon, social entrepreneurship provides hope. It is promoted in developing and developed countries as one solution to the complex social and environmental problems we face (Dorado & Ventresca, 2013; Mair & Marti, 2009). Instead of waiting for someone else – like governments or large international companies or non-governmental organisations – to do something about any of the things we might find unacceptable, some people act by themselves. They pool up resources, such as workforce, equipment and money, and start doing things without asking for too much permissions. Moreover, they do this so that they can keep themselves somewhat independent from governments or large international organisations (Mort, Weerawardena, & Carnegie, 2003). In short, in order to get by, they need to run a business.

There is a famous quote from Bill Drayton, the founder of Ashoka, a support network for social entrepreneurs. He stated that “*Social entrepreneurs are not content just to give a fish or teach how to fish. They will not rest until they have revolutionized the fishing industry.*” (Goodreads, 2017)

Next, I will unpack Drayton’s words. First, the quote brings an image of an *industry*. Something that has been scaled up, something that is more or less everywhere, and something that is commercial. Second, this industry is to be changed. A *revolution* refers to a change that some may not agree with. Third, *social entrepreneurs* will do this revolutionising. They are the individuals who have the drive and the capacity to do this. Fourth, *they will not rest until*. A very heroic image of social entrepreneurs not taking their eyes off the ball for a minute until things have changed.

This is very exciting indeed! But there is one problem. There seems to be a clash between Bill Drayton’s quote with what I experienced when I followed the microentrepreneurs for my doctoral dissertation.

### *The practice perspective*

As I explained after our tour, the microentrepreneurs I followed shared concerns related to the social and environmental problems. In my research, I examined the work of microentrepreneurs who

addressed these concerns. For that, I adopted a *practice perspective* in an attempt to go beyond social entrepreneurship definitions and taken-for-granted assumptions.

*Practice perspective* in this research refers to the practice turn that took place in organisation studies in 1990s. According to Silvia Gherardi (2011), the word *practice* may refer to (i) a learning method, when something is learned by repetition. Practice may also refer to (ii) a profession, like legal practice or medicine. Finally, practice may refer to (iii) “*the way something is done*” (Gherardi, 2011, p. 48). These ways are context-related and link to how practitioners shape the world around them on a daily basis.

In research, practice perspective manifests certain *worldviews* - or in research language *onto-epistemological commitments* (Schatzki, 2001; Miettinen, Samra-Fredericks, & Yanow, 2009; Corradi, Gherardi, & Verzelloni, 2010; Nicolini & Monteiro, 2016). Any worldview consists of the elements that explain how and why things happen. For example, why I am talking not more than 20 minutes during the public lectio praecursoria, intended to precede the public doctoral dissertation defence, and why people are listening to me instead of giving their own talk. From a practice perspective, a lectio is a practice in itself. We are carriers of any practice by agreeing to stick to our roles (Reckwitz, 2002). In reference to a lectio, someone talks alone and others listen. Also, the choice of the room, the way people are positioned, the way time is treated, the way the presenters are supposed to walk, sit and dress, and the list goes on. Some know this practice very well by having attended several lectiones while for others it is the first time. Yet, we all stick to this *invisible, unspoken* and *embodied* plan (Gherardi, 2011). This plan is partly maintained by circulating written rules but also learned just by attending over and over again.

Previous researchers engaging with practice-based studies have come to a conclusion that analysing practices is difficult because of such embodied nature (Gherardi, 2012; Nicolini, 2012). How do we engage in research when we, also as researchers, take so many things for granted? How can we study something that has been repeated so many times that we do not even realise it is there and requires repetitions? Despite these challenges, research has successfully focused on many mundane activities, such as walking, eating and sleeping (see for example Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, & von Savigny, 2001).

A practice perspective highlights that it matters where, who, how, and why something is done (Räsänen, 2015). Settings are situated, unique, and mundane. And the only way to find out more about situated practices is to examine them, preferably when they take place. This includes observing processes, maybe taking photos or video, interviewing people, and writing down reflections. I used these methods to document the four cases with varying degree, since, in one of the cases, I was only able to examine the situation via interviews and publicly available documents, but in the other three cases I was able to visit more often to examine the practices first hand.

The microentrepreneurs I followed shared some common features related to how they managed their everyday work. For example, the microentrepreneurs struggled with income since not everyone paid themselves regularly (Houtbeckers, 2016). For one this was a choice even though the company was economically viable and for other two cases it was a matter of saving the company from bankruptcy. Another common feature was how they changed their short or mid-term plans. Although their grand goal did not change, their ways of addressing it did.

While I and many others might find that scarce income and changed plans are quite common in any human activity, bringing them up in academic literature concerning entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship is not that common. Instead, analyses have shown that many previous studies promote a heroic image of social entrepreneurs (Cho, 2006; Dempsey & Sanders, 2010; Nicholls, 2010). It does not mean that previous researchers are completely blind to the uniqueness or mundaneness of sites or that they would not have examined such aspects at all. However, the conventions, i.e. practices, in entrepreneurship studies have not supported reporting such situated findings (Jennings, Perren, & Carter, 2005). The end result has been that situated practices are either overlooked or hidden in writing.

In addition to respecting situatedness and uniqueness, a practice perspective allows theorising from specific settings and looking at how something is practiced, repeated over and over again (Gherardi, 2010). During my research, I learned that some positions or certain ways of acting persist. For example, there exists a practice of prefixing entrepreneurship. Prefixing means attaching a qualifier in front of the word “entrepreneurship”, like social, sustainable, institutional, political and so on. The alleged meanings of entrepreneurship are now attached to other alleged meanings. In my case, “social” - that could refer to something “commonly shared” or “for the common” - and “entrepreneurship” - that could refer to something “innovative” or “resource-wise”. This has a rational explanation: people want

to highlight the various degrees of human activities - or more cynically - they want to establish a new field of research so that they can claim to be the first experts to be cited.

In fact, social entrepreneurship has been developed as a reaction to “conventional” entrepreneurship, which is connected with maximising profits and taking risks. Yet, previous critical research has commented that entrepreneurship is an empty signifier (Jones & Spicer, 2009). There is no such thing as “conventional” entrepreneurship. Leaving now aside the analysis that entrepreneurship is “undefinable”, the image of profit-maximising “conventional entrepreneurship” seems rather bleak. After all, many know those who work as entrepreneurs and are not working only to maximise profits. They do it because of a variety of other reasons. For example, a need to employ oneself in a sector where it is customary, like hairdressing or carpentry.

Therefore, any reference to social entrepreneurship creates an implicit juxtaposition between social and conventional entrepreneurship (Berglund & Skoglund, 2016; Steyaert & Hjorth, 2006), whether we want this or not. This is the main reason I have refrained from using “social entrepreneurs” in my study but use “microentrepreneurs” instead. Of course, the word entrepreneurship is similarly loaded with meanings - a matter which I also address in my dissertation.

As a result, I stand here in front of you and I have no good definition for social entrepreneurship. Instead of asking “What is social entrepreneurship?”, more interesting questions seem to be “Who uses the notion of social entrepreneurship?”, “What do they intend to do with it?”, and of course the classical why; “Why do they use social entrepreneurship?” Those questions were the reasons why I adopted the practice perspective elaborated above.

### *Mundane work creates hope*

Based on our tour, I am asking you to consider that it is important to challenge the taken-for-granted ways of doing things. But this is not always possible, because practices are difficult to change. Nonetheless, people try. Thus, mundaneness is essential for understanding the phenomenon we refer to as “social entrepreneurship”. But mundane work is not heroic in the manner portrayed in some social entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship literature. Quite the contrary, if there is something heroic in social entrepreneurship, it is the mundaneness of the work.

Despite the contradictions I have discussed, I argue that social entrepreneurship as a popular concept could act - and seems to have already acted - as a façade for developing radical aims for societal change. In this way, social entrepreneurship could be understood as everyday, mundane activism.

Dissertation available online at: <https://aaltodoc.aalto.fi/handle/123456789/24394>

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