

“Who am I? Who am I becoming? And why does it matter?”: An overview of social entrepreneurs’ identities and their impact on social venturing

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Abstract

Like all individuals, social entrepreneurs have identities that help them answer the questions “Who am I?”, “Who am I becoming?”, “Who do I want to be?” based on roles and relationships with others, membership to social categories, and personal characteristics. While identities matter for all individuals, they are critical in social entrepreneurship because they influence who engages in the process and how this process unfolds with lasting impact on social ventures. This chapter provides an overview of social entrepreneurs’ identities, how these identities influence the social venturing process, and consequently how the social venturing process shapes social entrepreneurs’ identities. It enriches portrayals of social entrepreneurs from heroic figures to multidimensional individuals belonging to a heterogeneous category whose work changes how they see and define themselves. Overall, this chapter explicates the bidirectional relationship between social entrepreneurs’ identities and their social ventures and offers suggestions for future research that can enrich our understanding of the actors involved in social entrepreneurship and how this process unfolds.

Keywords: Identity, identity work, identity threat, social entrepreneur, social venturing

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INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurs, the individuals who start, lead, and manage organizations that catalyze positive social or environmental change through market mechanisms (Stephan & Drencheva, 2017), are integral to the social entrepreneurship process and how it unfolds. These individuals start every social venture and have a significant influence over major decisions throughout the process, for example from setting the mission of the organization to navigating tensions and trade-offs between profit and purpose. Given their role in social ventures, it is essential to understand who the social entrepreneurs are because that can unearth new insights into who participates in the process and how the process unfolds.

One way to investigate who social entrepreneurs are is through the lens of identity. Identities represent how individuals see and define themselves based on roles and relationships with others (Stryker & Serpe, 1982), membership in social categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), and personal characteristics (Postmes & Jetten, 2006). They help us to answer the questions “Who am I?”, “Who am I becoming?”, “Who do I want to be?” (Ashforth et al., 2008). Social entrepreneurs express their identities through their work (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011) because their personal values are infused into their organizations (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021; Wry & York, 2017).

Identities are consequential in social entrepreneurship. An emerging body of research with rich theoretical underpinnings offers insights on how social entrepreneurs’ identities relate to the process and outcomes of venture creation and the lived experiences of social entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurs’ identities influence key decisions and outcomes, including what type of organizations to start or how to engage with stakeholders (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; York, O’Neil, & Sarasvathy, 2016). Social entrepreneurs’ identities influence behaviors (Drencheva et al., 2021) and responses to tensions between profit and purpose (Wagenschwanz

& Grimes, 2021). Finally, social entrepreneurs' identities color their lived experiences of social entrepreneurship and how they respond to these experiences (Driver, 2017; Lewis, 2016). Thus, through an identity lens we can gain new fine-grained insights about who starts and leads new social ventures, why, how and with what outcomes for the self and the venture.

The time is ripe for an overview of social entrepreneurs' identities to synthesize what we know and do not know on the topic. On the one hand, research interest in social entrepreneurship has grown dramatically (Saebi et al., 2019; Vedula et al., 2022) and there is value in taking stock of specific areas of social entrepreneurship, instead of mapping the entire field. A focus on identity in social entrepreneurship can complement recent reviews of social entrepreneurship that take a broad scope (Saebi et al., 2019; Vedula et al., 2022) and consequently cannot provide rich and nuanced insights on the individual level of the phenomenon. On the other hand, research interest in identity in entrepreneurship is also growing and recent reviews have synthesized what we know about the identities of entrepreneurs broadly (Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Wagenschwanz, 2020). A overview of identity in social entrepreneurship can complement these recent reviews and provide novel insights by recognizing the unique identity challenges social entrepreneurs face and the uniquely salient identity experiences they have given the strong links between social entrepreneurs and their ventures (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021).

In this chapter, I provide an overview of identity in social entrepreneurship. I synthesize what we know and do not know on the topic based on research published across disciplines, such as entrepreneurship (e.g., Drencheva et al., 2021), general management (e.g., Powell & Baker, 2017), organization studies (e.g., Phillips, 2012), marketing (e.g., Mars, 2023), and history (e.g., Schiller-Merkens, 2017). In doing so, I build bridges between different theoretical and methodological perspectives on identity in social entrepreneurship to identify the variation between and within social entrepreneurs. With this chapter, I provide a framework of identity

in social entrepreneurship (see Figure 1) that helps us to understand who becomes a social entrepreneur, how these individuals change as they engage in the social venturing process, and how their identities influence the process. Overall, this chapter provides insights into who the actors in social entrepreneurship are and how the process unfolds (Williams et al., 2023).

Before presenting the overview of social entrepreneurs' identities, I provide theoretical background on core concepts related to social entrepreneurship and identity. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of implications and outline avenues for future research.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I define the core terms used in the chapter and provide a theoretical foundation for understanding identity through different theoretical lenses.

Social Entrepreneurship

For the purposes of this work, I adopt a broad approach to social entrepreneurship as the process of pursuing social or ecological value through market mechanisms (Mair, Battilana & Cárdenas, 2012). This approach reflects the core characteristics of social entrepreneurship as the pursuit of social/ecological and economic value simultaneously (Saebi et al., 2019), while also recognizing that this can be achieved through different legal and organizing forms. This approach also acknowledges that creating ecological value and addressing issues related to the environment and climate breakdown also creates social value for individuals, communities, and societies given the impact of climate-related disasters and environmental degradation on life on the planet.

I define social entrepreneurs as the individuals who start, lead, and manage organizations that seek to create social or ecological value by addressing societal challenges, such as environmental degradation, ill-health or social exclusion, through market-based mechanisms. This approach emphasizes social entrepreneurs as founders of new organizations, but also allows for an occupational approach that includes individuals who are self-employed

and work toward social value creation (c.f., Gorgievski & Stephan 2016). Because I include ecological value creation in my definition of social entrepreneurship, my approach also encompasses individuals who may not see themselves as social entrepreneurs, but as eco- or environmental entrepreneurs, as activists, or as individuals who value creating world peace (e.g., York et al., 2016; Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021). Thus, ‘social entrepreneur’ serves as an umbrella category of different sub-categories of individuals who act in socially entrepreneurial ways, even if they do not see themselves as social entrepreneurs. This also relates to my approach to identity, which I describe next.

Identity

Identities are aspects of our self-concept. They are cognitive schemas that serve as a framework for individuals to understand and define themselves (Ramarajan, 2014). Identity is a multifaceted concept with different theoretical foundations (Brown, 2022) that predominantly prioritize how individuals see themselves as members of a social category (i.e., social identity), as actors with a specific role (i.e., role identity), or as a unique individual (i.e., personal identity). I briefly outline these three common perspectives next.

Social identity theory views the self as constituted through identification with social categories (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Social identities represent how individuals view themselves based on belonging to a particular social category and sharing prototypical characteristics with others in the category, while also being distinct from those in other categories. From this perspective, ‘social entrepreneurs’ can be seen as a social category with prototypical characteristics whereby it is a collective of similar individuals all of whom identify with each other (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021).

Identity theory views the core of the self through identification with specific roles and positions in society that the individual occupies (Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). Role identities represent how individuals view themselves based on

internalizing the set of expectations and meanings prescribing behavior that is considered appropriate by others for the specific role(s) the individual occupies. From this perspective, ‘social entrepreneur’ can be seen as a specific role with a set of expectations and meanings of how the role should be enacted that individuals who occupy the role can internalize into the self (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021).

Belonging to a specific social category, such as the collective of social entrepreneurs, or occupying a specific role, such as a founder of a social venture, does not mean that individuals will internalize the meanings associated with this social category or role. Individuals who meet academic definitions of social entrepreneur, may not see themselves as such because they may not internalize the meanings associated with the social category or role into their self-concept. This distinction is important because relying on self-identification as a social entrepreneur can lead to narrow sampling techniques that exclude individuals who would meet the definition of social entrepreneur, even if they not see themselves as such.

Finally, personal identity represents the idiosyncratic personal traits, values, beliefs, and meanings that the individual uses to define themselves (Hitlin, 2003; Postmes & Jetten, 2006). Personal identities transcend situations, groups, roles, and their associated external and pre-defined characteristics and expectations, to refer to one’s general self-understanding as a unique person. From this perspective, an individual who occupies the role of a social entrepreneur may identify themselves as someone who values world peace or wants to create sustainable consumption practices (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021).

For the purposes of this review, I adopt a broad and inclusive definition of identities as collections of subjective attributes, meanings, experiences, and knowledge that contribute to defining the self (adapted from Ramarajan, 2014), which encompasses social, role, and personal identities. I recognize that identities are nested and multi-faceted whereby individuals, including social entrepreneurs, have multiple identities. Individuals’ self-concept, which

represents the structure of our various identities, is best understood as a configuration of multiple social, role, and personal identities (Hogg et al., 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000) that exist as a network with distinct relationships between each other (Ramarajan, 2014). In this network of identities, some identities may become salient in specific situations that prime readiness to act upon the focal identity associated with the situation and some identities may be central whereby the individual places relative importance to a focal identity compared to others across situations (Ramarajan, 2014). For example, a founder of a social venture may see themselves as a parent, a social entrepreneur, a Christian, and a sibling. Parent may be their central identity that is relatively more important to their self-concept across situations in comparison to the other identities, however, when they are pitching their product to a new customer, social entrepreneur is likely to become their salient identity.

Importantly, identities are not static. Individuals are reflexive actors who actively work on our identities because we have multiple, and interacting, identities that are generally fluid, while we also respond to external events and demands that enable or constrain the self (Brown, 2022). This is why we engage in identity work as a process to form, repair, maintain, strengthen, reject or revise identities to ensure coherence and distinctiveness (Brown, 2015; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Identity work can be subtle and ongoing as we engage in the world around us (Rerup et al., 2022) or intense as we respond to challenging and novel circumstances, such as crises or transitions, that make questions about who we are salient (Ibarra, 1999). While identity is how we see ourselves, identity work is the process through which this understanding is formed, maintained, and re-formed.

OVERVIEW OF IDENTITY IN SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

What Are the Identities of Social Entrepreneurs?

Social entrepreneurs' identities can be broadly categorized in five groups: socially-oriented, entrepreneur-oriented, hybrid, venture-related, and other-work-related identities.

These categories of identities demonstrate the diverse ways in which social entrepreneurs see and define themselves and the heterogeneity of social entrepreneurs. I outline these categories of identities next.

First, social entrepreneurs have *socially-oriented identities*. It is not a surprise that social entrepreneurs internalize attributes, meanings, experiences, and knowledge related to belonging to communities and benefiting others. These identities can be social (e.g., Fauchart & Gruber, 2011), role (e.g., Drencheva et al., 2021) or personal (e.g., O'Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016). Critically, these identities may be idiosyncratic and deeply personal based on social entrepreneurs' beliefs and values, aiming for personal authenticity and not necessarily fit with existing labels and roles (e.g., Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021; O'Neil et al., 2022). Yet what they all have in common is the focus on benefiting known and unknown others (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011) as well as the focus on belonging to specific communities, such as local or indigenous communities (Henry, 2017). Thus, I label these identities socially-oriented identities capturing both belonging to a community and benefiting others.

The category of socially-oriented identities includes diverse labels and meanings related to behavioral standards, expectations, and prototypical characteristics associated with broad or specific social value creation and community belonging. In relation to value creation, this category includes meanings associated with broad social value creation and challenging social systems, structures and norms, such as identities related to activism, environmentalism, care about ethics, social justice and world peace (Gregori et al., 2021; Lewis, 2016; Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021; Schiller-Merkens, 2017). However, this category also includes meanings associated with social value creation in local communities or for specific communities, such as identities related to localized food movements (Mars, 2023) or Māori emancipation (Henry, 2017). This also relates to the communities that social entrepreneurs

belong to and aim to support - they can aim to support known others from their communities or unknown others viewing society as a broad reference group (Fauchart & Gruber 2011).

Second, social entrepreneurs have *entrepreneur-oriented identities*. While social entrepreneurs are usually described in heroic terms and with prosocial motivations to benefit others (Bornstein 2004; Leadbeater 1997), they also internalize attributes, meanings, experiences, and knowledge related to commerce and market participation. This category of identities is usually approached through a role identity perspective and emphasizes social entrepreneurs' internalization of behavioral standards associated with what it means to be a good founder or a good entrepreneur. Thus, I label these identities entrepreneur-oriented identities. While less acknowledged in the literature, there is emerging evidence that, at least some, social entrepreneurs see and define themselves with meanings and attributes related to commercial activity (e.g., Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021; Drencheva et al., 2021). Critically, social entrepreneurs' identities include not just internalized meanings, attributes, experiences, and knowledge but also disidentification and distancing from existing labels and associated meanings. For example, some social entrepreneurs specifically identify as not 'entrepreneurs' and distance themselves from commercial and market labels and meanings (e.g., Gregori et al., 2021; O'Neil et al., 2022). Thus, who social entrepreneurs are is both the labels and meanings they use to define themselves and the labels and meanings they reject and refuse to internalize into their self-concept.

The category of entrepreneur-oriented identities includes meanings related to commercial viability, innovativeness, growth orientation, action, and competitiveness that we usually associate with the role of commercial entrepreneurs (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021; Drencheva et al., 2021). This is not to say that socially-oriented and entrepreneur-oriented identities are mutually exclusive. Individuals can internalize meanings related to either, for example see themselves as entrepreneurs for whom addressing a social issue is a profitable

commercial opportunity (Drencheva et al., 2021; Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021). They can also internalize meanings related to both whereby a socially-/entrepreneur-oriented identity may be more central than the other (York et al., 2016) or salient in specific circumstances.

Third, social entrepreneurs can see and define themselves in relation to socially- and/or entrepreneur-oriented meanings, attributes, experiences and knowledge, however, they can also combine them in new *hybrid identities*. Hybrid identities, usually investigated through a social identity perspective (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Smith & Woodworth, 2012), represent a blend between socially- and entrepreneurs-oriented meanings and attributes that emphasize their complementary nature. For example, blending self-interested and other-oriented entrepreneurial meanings and motives amongst environmental entrepreneurs (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; York et al., 2016) or seeing oneself as a social entrepreneur and thus belonging to a new social category (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021; Yitskahi & Kropp, 2016; Smith & Woodworth, 2012) that is distinct from activists or founders. The meanings associated with the identities in this hybrid category are usually related to social impact, compassion, change and ethics as well as profitability and commercial sustainability (York et al., 2016; Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021).

Hybrid identities representing the blend of socially- and entrepreneur-oriented identities can emerge in two distinct ways. First, individuals, including social entrepreneurs, engage in identity work (Brown, 2015; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) through which they create new meanings. This is to say that we do not simply internalize meanings and attributes, but craft what these labels mean to us. For example, we can create new meanings by bringing together labels, attributes, experiences in novel ways. Second, the emergence of hybrid identities blending socially- and entrepreneur-oriented identities reflects the emergence of social entrepreneurs as a new social category and a new societal role (Chliova et al., 2020).

Fourth, social entrepreneurs *identify with their organizations* in distinct ways. Venture identification is the degree to which social entrepreneurs define themselves in terms of the organizations they start and lead, not in terms of social categories, roles, or personal attributes they have. Social entrepreneurs can have an intrinsic venture identification whereby their personal attributes and values are imbued into the organization as an extension of their identity, and they take on a parental relationship with the organization. In this regard, the organization is an expression of who they are and who they are is represented by the organization. However, social entrepreneurs can also have an instrumental venture identification, which represents an abstract and distant relationship between the organization and the founder's self-concept. Social entrepreneurs with an instrumental venture identification see the social venture as a vehicle, but not the only vehicle, for achieving goals and enacting roles, thus they can detach from the organization and leave given other opportunities to achieve these goals and enact these personally meaningful roles (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021).

Finally, social entrepreneurs can see and define themselves with *other-work-related identities*. For some individuals who pursue social/environmental value through market participation, the creation of a new social venture may be vehicle for enacting other identities when other career pathways are closed. Such social entrepreneurs internalize attributes, meanings, experiences, and knowledge related to roles they enact in society, beyond being a social entrepreneur. Thus, this category of identities is usually approached through a role identity perspective and emphasizes social entrepreneurs' internalization of behavioral standards associated with what it means to perform well in a specific role, such as being a good fashion designer (Schiller-Merkens, 2017) or a good film maker (Henry, 2017). Thus, I label these identities other-work-related identities as they encompass meanings social entrepreneurs develop about themselves based on the roles they occupy in society and in the team, beyond starting and leading new social ventures. Individuals with such identities may be pushed into

social entrepreneurship to express their socially-oriented identities, such as environmentalist or Māori activist, when traditional careers in their fields limit such expression. However, individuals may internalize meanings and roles specific to the team and their responsibilities within the team, such as design expert, strategic planner, government liaison (Powell & Baker, 2017).

Overall, social entrepreneurs see and define themselves in a multitude of distinct ways, including not seeing themselves as social entrepreneurs or identifying with their ventures only in instrumental ways. They have multiple identities, instead of a single identity, and these identities represent not just heroic figures trying to change the world, but also individuals who define themselves as entrepreneurs and see their social ventures as a mechanism to express their identities and pursue economic opportunities.

How Do Social Entrepreneurs' Identities Change?

Importantly, social entrepreneurs' identities are not static. They may start their venturing efforts with a set of socially-oriented, entrepreneur-oriented, hybrid, venture-related, and other-work-related identities. However, the social venturing process also prompts changes to social entrepreneurs' identities as they face identity-implicating experiences and engage in identity work. In this section, I outline the types of identity-implicating experiences social entrepreneurs face, the reasons for these experiences, and how social entrepreneurs navigate these experiences through identity work.

Identity-implicating experiences

As social entrepreneurs engage in the venturing process, face external events, crises, challenges, new demands and roles, their identities are destabilized and they come to contemplate and question who they are. For example, experiences such as external audience expectations (O'Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016) or not having access to feedback (Drencheva et al., 2021) can lead social entrepreneurs to ask, "Who am I now?" after they have started the

venturing process. These are the identity-implicating experiences that prompt questions about our identities. These identity-implicating experiences include identity opportunity, threat, and conflict.

First, social entrepreneurs experience *identity opportunity*. Identity opportunity is an experience that social entrepreneurs appraise as potential for growth in the enactment, value or meaning of an identity (Bataille & Vough, 2022). Social entrepreneurship allows individuals to enact their socially-oriented, entrepreneur-oriented, or other-work-related identities. These identities enable individuals to identify entrepreneurial opportunities, for example because of their unique knowledge of a community or due to personal trauma as well as to act on these entrepreneurial opportunities through the resources accessed via existing identities with their associated knowledge and networks (Drencheva et al., 2021; Wry & York, 2017). For some individuals, starting a social venture may be the only way to express their socially-oriented identities because of institutional barriers or prioritization of profits in traditional commercial organizations (Henry, 2017; Schiller-Merkens, 2017). Thus, by taking on the social entrepreneur role, individuals have an opportunity for growth in the enactment and expression of existing identities. During the social venturing process, social entrepreneurs may also see potential for growth in the value and meaning ascribed to specific identities, particularly entrepreneur-oriented identities. While some social entrepreneurs reject and distance themselves from the label ‘entrepreneur’ and do not internalize its meanings and attributes at the beginning of the process (e.g., Gregori et al., 2021; O’Neil et al., 2022), over time they may start to accept the label to define themselves and internalize its meanings. For example, they may receive audience feedback and recognition from stakeholders that they are authentic founders (O’Neil et al., 2022). Overall, the social venturing process can enable individuals to enact their identities and to internalize new attributes, meanings, knowledge, and experiences.

Second, as they engage in the social venturing process, which encompasses challenges, learning, and engaging in new roles, social entrepreneurs may also experience *identity threat*. Identity threat refers to “potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of an identity” (Petriglieri, 2011: 644). Social entrepreneurs face potential harm to the enactment of their multiple identities when the external environment forces them to act in ways inconsistent with who they are. This can include inconsistency with any of their identities, whether they are socially-oriented, entrepreneur-oriented, hybrid, or other-work related identities. As the external environment does not enable social entrepreneurs to express (some of) their identities, they may experience dissonance and inauthenticity (Gregori et al., 2021; O’Neil et al., 2022; O’Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016) and question who they are.

Social entrepreneurs may experience identity threat related to the enactment of an identity when they face audience expectations and external demands, such as investor pressure, to act in ways and to pursue goals inconsistent with their identities (O’Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016; Fauchart & Gruber, 2016). Such demands can be external to the venture, but also internal stemming from interactions with team members and their expectations that can also limit social entrepreneurs’ expression of their identities and the need to adjust and shift an individual’s identities to develop a collective identity for the team (Powell & Baker, 2017). Importantly, because social ventures are hybrid organizations (Battilana & Lee, 2014), the tensions between social and economic value that they pose may also prompt questions about social entrepreneurs’ authenticity and sense of self (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021).

Social entrepreneurs may also face identity threat related to the value and meaning of their identities. Because of institutional contradictions (Gregori et al., 2021), the emergence of social entrepreneurship as a new category with ambiguous boundaries (Chliova et al., 2020), and engagement in new roles without previous experience, social entrepreneurs may question what it means to be a ‘good founder’ or a ‘good entrepreneur’ with social or environmental

goals (Gregori et al., 2021; Drencheva et al., 2021). For example, social entrepreneurs may face audience skepticism of their social or environmental goals because commercial organizations adopt greenwashing and other co-opting practices that create contradiction and ambiguity that raise the expectations of audiences for social entrepreneurs to demonstrate authenticity (O'Neil et al., 2022). Overall, the social venturing process can hinder individuals' expression of their identities and raise questions about the value and meaning of specific identities.

Third, social entrepreneurs may experience *identity conflict*, which has been largely neglected in social entrepreneurship research (for an exception, see Phillips, 2012). Identity conflict refers to the tensions of expressing one identity that may contradict the expression of another identity (Bataille & Vough, 2022). While identity threat stems from external factors that can pose potential harm to the expression, meaning or value of an identity, identity conflict stems from the internalization of multiple meanings, attributes, and experiences that contradict each other. As previously discussed, social entrepreneurs have multiple identities, which is less acknowledged in social entrepreneurship research, but an important insight that is consistent with the broader identity literature. Because social entrepreneurs' multiple identities have received limited research attention, there is also limited attention on identity conflict. However, given that social entrepreneurship embeds social value creation through market mechanisms with conflict between social/environmental and economic goals (Mair et al., 2012; Battilana & Lee, 2014), identity conflict is also a likely and salient experience for social entrepreneurs.

Identity conflict means that sometimes social entrepreneurs may struggle to express multiple salient identities because expressing one identity may contradict the expression of another identity. This can occur for two main reasons. On the one hand, meanings, values, and expectations associated with one identity may contradict meanings, values, and expectations associated with another identity. Thus, what is considered a 'good environmentalist' may

contradict what is considered a ‘good entrepreneur’. In such situations, expressing one identity limits the expression of another identity and this creates conflict and tension whereby social entrepreneurs walk a tightrope of not entirely living up to the expectations of either identity nor belonging to the communities associated with these identities (Phillips, 2012). On the other hand, social entrepreneurs may experience identity conflict because of limited resources whereby they do not have the energy or time to express and invest in their multiple identities, usually across multiple domains such as work and home. These identities do not embed contradictory and incompatible meanings and values, but social entrepreneurs may struggle to be a ‘good entrepreneur’ and a ‘good father’ because of limited resources. Theoretically, given enough resources it is possible to express and invest in both identities. This source of identity conflict is neglected in social entrepreneurship research because social entrepreneurs’ non-work identities, such as parent, have received no attention. Overall, the social venturing process can create identity tensions and contradictions for social entrepreneurs whose identities may be contradictory, or they may have limited resources to express multiple identities.

In summary, social entrepreneurs face multiple external and internal experiences that raise questions about who they are and what it means to meet the expectations associated with their identities.

Identity work

In response to the identity-implicating experiences they face, including identity opportunity, threat and conflict, social entrepreneurs engage in the process of identity work to form, repair, maintain, strengthen, reject, or revise identities to ensure coherence and distinctiveness (Brown, 2015; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). There are two ways to examine the process of identity work. First, examining the outcome of identity work in relation to the content of social entrepreneurs’ identities, that is the identities

are formed, revised, and maintained. Second, examining the process of identity work to explicate how identities are formed, revised, and maintained. I outline both next.

In relation to the changing content of social entrepreneurs' identities throughout the social venturing process, the emerging research suggests that identity work can result in new, rejected, maintained, strengthened, and modified identities. Social entrepreneurs seem to internalize new meanings associated with their work and thus form new entrepreneur-oriented identities (Drencheva et al., 2021; Schiller-Merkens, 2017) or hybrid identities (Smith & Woodworth, 2012) that were previously not a part of their self-concept. However, they also seem to actively reject entrepreneur-oriented labels and base their definition on who and what they are not (O'Neil et al., 2022; Gregori et al., 2021). They seem to maintain and strengthen existing socially-oriented identities that were expressed through social entrepreneurship, such as community member (Drencheva et al. 2021; Mars, 2023; Gregori et al., 2021). Finally, social entrepreneurs seem to modify entrepreneur-oriented identities through qualifiers and merged and changed meanings (O'Neil et al., 2022; Gregori et al., 2021).

In relation to identity work as a process, the emerging research suggests that social entrepreneurs' identities are developed and crafted over time through accumulation of events, unfolding understanding (Yitshaki & Kropp, 2016), and engagement with existing discourses and audience expectations (e.g., Gregori et al., 2021; Phillips, 2012; O'Neil et al., 2022; Jones et al., 2008). This is a process that does not necessarily start with the decision to engage in social entrepreneurship, but engagement in social entrepreneurship is a continuation of social entrepreneurs' identity work following other personal and work-related experiences. However, during the social venturing process, social entrepreneurs face highly salient identity-implicating experiences that prompt intensive identity work to make sense of who they are in coherent, yet distinctive ways.

The research suggests that social entrepreneurs' identity work tactics exist on a continuum, and they enact multiple tactics along this continuum over time. These tactics build on creative management of meanings, boundaries, and networks to reproduce, manage, scaffold, and transform identities and discourses. At one end of the identity work continuum are tactics of internalization of discourses and social expectations related to specific roles and social groups, such as being a founder (e.g., Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021). At the other end of the identity work continuum are tactics of rejecting, challenging, and transforming discourses associated with certain roles or social groups through opposition (e.g., Jones et al., 2008; O'Neil et al., 2022).

While the insights on social entrepreneurs' identity work are somewhat fragmented due to different theoretical perspectives, they point to an overall process of identity work whereby identities are crafted by merging personal meanings and discourses over time. In this process, social entrepreneurs start their venturing efforts with existing identities that embed personal and idiosyncratic values and meanings as well as internalization of existing discourses, attributes, prototypical characteristics, and expectations. During the process, they occupy the role of a social entrepreneur, and they face identity-implicating experiences that raise questions about who they are and who they are becoming, prompting reflection and engagement with dominant discourses. To these early identity-implicating experiences, social entrepreneurs may respond with resistance of external demands and pressures and rejection of (or at least distancing from) imposed meanings associated with either social/environmental and commercial labels and discourses to remain authentic to their values (e.g., O'Neil et al., 2022; Gregori et al., 2021; Phillips, 2012). For example, they may focus on maintaining their existing identities by adhering to rigid expectations and agendas associated with these identities (Mars, 2023). However, in this process, and over time, social entrepreneurs start to use existing discourses as scaffolding for refining and stabilizing their identities (Phillips, 2012; Jones et

al., 2008). For example, they may seek to distance and differentiate themselves from existing discourses, internalize them drawing on similarities with personally important values and meanings, merge conflicting discourses into new identities and labels, and modify their meaning by attaching personal meanings and values to them (O'Neil et al., 2022; Phillips, 2012; Jones et al., 2008; Gregori et al., 2021). In this regard, existing discourses serve as scaffolding for identity and identity work that is completed with modification and addition of highly personal characteristics, values, and meanings (Driver, 2017), instead of being completely internalized. Through this process, social entrepreneurs may seek authentication and legitimation to remain true to their values, while also meeting external expectations to be seen as credible (O'Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016; O'Neil et al., 2022). This means that their identities may be modified over time, for example from rejecting the label 'founder' initially to defining oneself as a 'founder, but of a distinctive type' (O'Neil et al., 2022), or they may adopt new identities, for example from seeing oneself as an activist to, over time, internalize business-related values and eventually seeing oneself as an entrepreneur (Schiller-Merkens, 2017).

Overall, through the process of identity work, social entrepreneurs strive for self-expression, authenticity, and self-actualization, including experiencing work as meaningful (Gregori et al., 2021; O'Neil et al., 2022).

How Do Social Entrepreneurs' Identities Influence Social Venturing?

Social entrepreneurs' identities are consequential. In this section I consider the empirical and theoretical research relating to the consequences of social entrepreneurs' identities for their ventures. Social entrepreneurs' identities provide resources, such as ideas, information, templates, toolkits, and networks, that social entrepreneurs leverage in their venturing efforts (Lewis, 2016), thus influencing the venture creation process from initial

opportunity recognition and venture emergence to who is involved in the venturing efforts and how tensions between social and economic value are managed.

Social entrepreneurs' identities play a part in initiating the venture emergence process because they strive to create social ventures consistent with their identities. On the one hand, identity seems to be a source of entrepreneurial motivation because individuals start new social ventures to express their socially-oriented, entrepreneur-oriented or other-work-related identities (e.g., Henry, 2017; O'Neil et al., 2022; Drencheva et al., 2021). On the other hand, social entrepreneurs' identities are associated with information, competencies, and relationships that arguably enable them to recognize, develop, and exploit opportunities (Wry & York, 2017). For example, their socially-oriented identities that are related to personally traumatic experiences, such as medical conditions, enable social entrepreneurs to identify potentially new and better solutions that can benefit others who face similar issues (e.g., Drencheva et al., 2021). While social entrepreneurs' identities can enable opportunity recognition and pursuit, they can also pose limitations to the opportunities pursued if these opportunities are not consistent with social entrepreneurs' identities. For example, social entrepreneurs who identify with local food movements may forgo opportunities to scale and expand to other markets to maintain their identification with the local community (Mars, 2023). Ultimately, social entrepreneurs' identities shape the social ventures created in relation to market segments, types of customers, capabilities, and resources deployed (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Sieger et al., 2016).

Social entrepreneurs' identities and identity work also influence who is involved in the venturing process and how. In relation to who is involved in the venture team, the empirical research suggests that how social entrepreneurs' identity work unfolds in relation to the emerging collective identity shapes whether they remain involved or exit. How social entrepreneurs respond to the question "Who am I?" influences how venture teams respond to

the question “Who are we?”. Social entrepreneurs’ identities imprint on the collective identity of their organization. These collective identities are then enacted and adjusted to help the venture team and organizational members define who they are as an organization. Social entrepreneurs and organizational members also re-evaluate and adjust their individual identities in response to the emergent collective identity. However, when social entrepreneurs’ and organizational members’ identity work does not lead to alignment with the collective identity, they are likely to leave the organization (Powell & Baker, 2017). In relation to involving those outside the social venture, the empirical and theoretical research suggests that social entrepreneurs seek and receive feedback from individuals who are associated with their identities (Drencheva et al., 2021; Wry & York, 2017). For example, social entrepreneurs who see themselves as community members and start social ventures to support the community predominantly seek feedback from other community members, while those with emergent entrepreneur-oriented identities predominantly seek feedback from individuals with entrepreneurial and business experience (Drencheva et al., 2021). In relation to broader stakeholder engagement, similar patterns emerge whereby social entrepreneurs’ identities influence whether they include stakeholders with various identities, exclude those with identities that are not aligned to their own, or let stakeholders self-select into the venture creation process. For example, when social entrepreneurs have salient hybrid identities that strongly blend ecological and commercial values, they let stakeholders decide whether to be involved, while when social entrepreneurs have a dominant identity related to ecological values, they exclude stakeholders who are not aligned with those values (York et al., 2016).

Social entrepreneurs’ identities and identity work also influence the goals and management of social ventures. Social entrepreneurs establish venture goals, internal policies, and ways of working that are consistent with their salient identities (O’Neil et al., 2022; York et al., 2016). For example, when social entrepreneurs have salient hybrid identities that strongly

blend ecological and commercial values, they set goals based on hybrid rationality pursuing both financial performance and addressing ecological issues simultaneously, while when social entrepreneurs have a dominant identity related to commercial values, they prioritize financial performance over ecological change (York et al., 2016). Relatedly, the way social entrepreneurs see themselves influences how they manage tensions between social and commercial demands to remain authentic. Social entrepreneurs whose entrepreneur-oriented or hybrid identities are associated with social conformity and meeting behavioral expectations related to being a founder or a social entrepreneur manage hybridity tensions by relying upon traditional management analytical tools and processes to evaluate strategic options in ways that do not allow for emotional engagement or temper negative emotional expression. However, social entrepreneurs with socially-oriented identities based on personally relevant and idiosyncratic values and meanings, such as creating world peace, try to maintain authenticity by managing tensions based on personal beliefs, preferences, gut feelings, and expression of a wide range of emotions, thus forgoing organizational and emotional guardrails (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021).

Finally, emerging theoretical and empirical research suggests that social entrepreneurs' identities may influence consequences for industries and local communities beyond the venture. Social entrepreneurs can arguably develop not only new social ventures but entirely new business models and industries to support communities and social issues that they identify with (e.g., Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Wry & Taylor, 2017). For example, social entrepreneurs with balanced socially-oriented and entrepreneur-oriented identities are theorized to develop innovative models for social ventures that can be replicated by others, thus changing industries and sectors (Wry & York, 2017). Social entrepreneurs with socially-oriented identities based on community belonging can support their communities not only with the types of organizations they create, but also with their recruitment decisions. For example, social

entrepreneurs with salient indigenous identities can start new social ventures to produce offerings that revitalize, enact, and share values and traditions aligned with their communities, such as starting Māori-centric media companies or employ individuals from co-ethnic backgrounds to support the community (Henry, 2017).

Overall, how social entrepreneurs see and define themselves influences how the social venturing process unfolds because they attempt to act in ways consistent with their identities and use the resources associated with these identities to make decisions and meet identity-related expectations.

DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I explore the bidirectional relationship between social entrepreneurs' identities and their social ventures that exists in cyclical fashion (see Figure 1). In doing so, I explicate how social entrepreneurs' multiple socially-oriented, entrepreneur-oriented, hybrid, venture-related, and other-work-related identities influence social venturing in two distinct ways. On the one hand, social entrepreneurs' identities motivate social venturing because starting and leading a new social venture can be a form of identity expression for individuals who start new organizations consistent with who they are. On the other hand, social entrepreneurs' identities also provide resources, such as information, knowledge, templates, toolkits, relationships, that enable opportunity recognition and venture development. However, social entrepreneurs' identities are not static and indeed they are influenced by the social venturing process. As social entrepreneurs start, lead, and manage their new organizations, they take on new roles, face challenges, navigate external demands and pressures that prompt them to reflect on who they are and who they are becoming. That means that through the social venturing process social entrepreneurs face identity-implicating experiences that destabilize their understanding of who they are. In response to these identity-implicating experiences, social entrepreneurs engage in identity work to stabilize their understanding of who they are

through forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, rejecting or revising identities. As social entrepreneurs' identities change, how they engage in the social venturing process also changes because they gain new identity-based resources and new understanding of what it means to be authentic in ways that influence their decisions and actions. Thus, this chapter responds to recent calls to take identity and identity processes as catalysts for the venture creation process and its outcomes seriously (Gruber & MacMillan, 2017; Leitch & Harrison, 2016) by focusing specifically on the context of social entrepreneurship. It provides insights into who the actors engaging in social entrepreneurship process are and how this process unfolds (Williams et al., 2023).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

This overview of social entrepreneurs' identities has three implications for research in social entrepreneurship that provide a fruitful foundation for future empirical work related to 1) heterogeneity amongst and multidimensionality of social entrepreneurs; 2) the consequences of identity along the venturing process; and 3) identity changes along the venturing process.

First, the overview of social entrepreneurs' identities highlights the heterogeneity amongst and multidimensionality of social entrepreneurs, thus challenging the taken-for-granted portrayal of social entrepreneurs as socially-driven heroes (Bornstein 2004; Leadbeater 1997) and helping us to gain a better understanding of the actors involved in social entrepreneurship as a process (Williams et al., 2023). The overview demonstrates that individuals who engage in social venturing may not necessarily see themselves as social entrepreneurs. They can have identities that are not only socially-oriented but also related to entrepreneurship with associated meanings and values that prioritize profit and competitiveness (e.g., Drencheva et al., 2021; Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021). Additionally, social entrepreneurs also have identities related to other work and distinct professions, such as being a designer or a filmmaker that they express through social entrepreneurship (e.g., Henry, 2017;

Schiller-Merkens, 2017). Critically, social entrepreneurs are multi-dimensional individuals who have multiple identities that can be salient to their venturing efforts, instead of a single salient identity.

The heterogeneity amongst and multidimensionality of social entrepreneurs is important for understanding the actors who engage in social entrepreneurship and their experiences of as individuals, thus offering exciting opportunity for future research. Social entrepreneurs' non-work identities, such as parent, partner, carer, are missing from the literature, while their other-work-related identities, such as engineer, research, marketer, have received very little attention. Indeed, while social entrepreneurs, like all individuals, have multiple identities, social entrepreneurship research so far has focused on a single identity at a time, neglecting their multidimensionality. Thus, future research that investigates social entrepreneurs' multiple identities and acknowledges the differences between social entrepreneurs, instead of between social and commercial entrepreneurs or other actors (Stephan & Drencheva, 2017), would be greatly beneficial. On the one hand, acknowledging and investigating the heterogeneity amongst and multidimensionality of social entrepreneurs can help us to understand diverse motivations to start social ventures and distinct decision-making logics and behaviors that are associated with different identities. By explicating the multiple identities that social entrepreneurs have and the relationships between these identities, we can examine how social entrepreneurs navigate tensions and synergies between social and economic value through a new lens, beyond institutional logics (e.g., Pache & Santos, 2013). Finally, by explicating the multiple identities of social entrepreneurs we can gain novel insights into the wellbeing (Drencheva, 2019) of social entrepreneurs, which is a topic of emerging research interest (Brieger et al., 2021; Kibler et al., 2019) and of high practical relevance because it can influence the sustainability of social ventures and the inclusiveness of social entrepreneurship as a field. Simply put, if social entrepreneurs' wellbeing is not protected and

enhanced, their social ventures will suffer, and they may leave the social entrepreneurship field. This line of research can investigate how social entrepreneurs navigate identity conflict across domains and with what impact on their wellbeing. For example, how do they navigate conflict between the identities of ‘father’ and ‘founder’ when they compete for resources and the dominant social entrepreneurship discourse prioritizes the venture over everything else at great personal sacrifices (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010).

Second, this overview demonstrates how social entrepreneurs’ identities are consequential for social venturing, thus helping us to gain more nuanced insights of the process of social entrepreneurship (Williams et al., 2023). The influence of social entrepreneurs’ identities on their venturing efforts is evident in the early stages whereby identities shape motivation and provide resources to engage in social entrepreneurship (Yitskahi & Kropp, 2016; Lewis, 2016). The empirical evidence also shows that social entrepreneurs’ identities can play a role along the entire process beyond the early stages. For example, in how social entrepreneurs navigate hybridity tensions (Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021), seek feedback (Drencheva et al., 2021), and engage with stakeholders (York et al., 2016), which are important aspects not only of starting new social ventures, but also leading, managing, and scaling established social ventures.

Despite the role of social entrepreneurs’ identities along the social entrepreneurship process, most empirical insights relate to the start-up phase, and we know little about how identities shape the later stages of the process. For example, we lack insights about how social entrepreneurs’ identities can influence critical turning points and phases, such as decisions to scale up social ventures or to exit or approaches to navigate mission drift. Yet, these challenges and decisions are important for social entrepreneurs and whether their organizations survive, thrive, and catalyze positive social impact. Thus, investigating the influence of social entrepreneurs’ identities on the later stages of social venturing, beyond emergence, would be

beneficial for both theory and practice. Building on the insights of how social entrepreneurs' identities influence who is involved in social venturing (Drencheva et al., 2021; York et al., 2016; Powell & Baker, 2017), future research on team formation and employee selection and retention along different stages of the social entrepreneurship process through an identity lens would be highly valuable. Research in this stream can investigate the long-lasting and lingering effects of social entrepreneurs' identities on their social ventures even after the founders leave. Because social entrepreneurs arguably shape the mission, identity, and culture of their ventures (Mmbaga et al., 2020), it is likely that their identities have imprinting effects on the organization, yet we do not have empirical insights on this relationship yet. Finally, research in this stream can extend the emerging insights that social entrepreneurs' identities influence venture outcomes and investigate their influence beyond the organization, examining effects on communities, beneficiaries, and sectors. For example, how might the identities of social entrepreneurs influence approaches toward impact and beneficiary selection?

Third, this overview of social entrepreneurs' identity demonstrates how the social entrepreneurship process shapes and changes social entrepreneurs, thus helping us gain more nuanced insights into the actors involved in social entrepreneurship (Williams et al., 2023) from a dynamic, instead of a static perspective. As individuals engage in social entrepreneurship, they take on new roles, engage with new social groups, receive feedback, face challenges, and achieve goals (Smith & Woodworth, 2012; O'Neil & Ucbasaran, 2016; O'Neil et al., 2022; Wagenschanz & Grimes, 2021), all of which can lead to the emergence of new identities, the dis-identification with previous roles, social groups, and attributes, and the strengthening or revision of existing identities. Thus, the social entrepreneurship process changes the individuals who engage in it and to remain authentic they also internalize new meanings, values, attributes, and knowledge.

While we have some insights that social entrepreneurs change during their social venturing efforts, future research is required to examine the nuances of how social entrepreneurs change and with what impact for their organizations. On the one hand, the field of social entrepreneurship can benefit from examining the nuances of identity work through the modes that social entrepreneurs use when forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, rejecting or revising identities. Broader identity research shows that individuals engage in four modes of identity work: cognitive, discursive, physical, and behavioral (Caza et al., 2018). Cognitive identity work includes mental efforts to interpret, understand, or evaluate an identity. Discursive identity work includes the use of narratives, stories, and conversations to work on an identity. Physical identity work includes the use of symbols, materials, or objects on the self or in the physical environment to work on an identity. Finally, behavioral identity work is the acts that individuals engage in to work on identity. Future research would benefit from examining these modes specifically amongst social entrepreneurs to explicate what they look like in an emerging domain with ambiguous categorical boundaries and multiple stakeholders (Chliova et al., 2020; Mair, Mayer, & Lutz, 2015). For example, what are the identity work modes used most often by social entrepreneurs and how do these modes vary across contexts and audiences? This stream of research would also benefit from examining how social entrepreneurs abandon and repair identities, which is currently missing in the extant literature where identity formation, revision, and maintenance are prioritized (Drencheva et al., 2021; Mars, 2023; O'Neil et al., 2022). Yet, identity abandonment and repair are also likely salient experiences for social entrepreneurs. For example, when they transition from seeing themselves as activists to seeing themselves as social entrepreneurs (Jones et al., 2008; Schiller-Merkens, 2017) or when they hold identities that may be stigmatized.

On the other hand, the field of social entrepreneurship would benefit from examining how identity work as a dynamic process influences social venturing. The extant research so far

has predominantly examined how current identities as static influences venturing outcomes, such as goals or management of tensions (York et al., 2016; Wagenschwanz & Grimes, 2021). However, more nuanced, rich, and reflective of the experiences of social entrepreneurs insights can be unearthed when acknowledging that social entrepreneurs' identities change and they engage in identity work. From this perspective, future research that examines how social entrepreneurs' identity work influences decisions, goals, ways of working, practices, and venture outcomes would be highly beneficial. For example, how might the transition from seeing oneself as an activist to seeing oneself as a social entrepreneur change goals, approaches to hybridity tensions, recruitment, and communication with external and internal stakeholders?

CONCLUSION

This chapter provides an overview of social entrepreneurs' multiple identities, how and why these identities change during the social entrepreneurship process, and the impact of social entrepreneurs' identities on this process from initial opportunity recognition and venture emergence to who is involved in the venturing efforts and how tensions between social and economic value are managed. Building on the strengths of the emergent literature and the insights generated so far, fruitful directions for future research are developed to advance our understanding of the actors involved in social entrepreneurship as multidimensional and diverse individuals who change as they engage in social entrepreneurship as well as of the process of social entrepreneurship as dynamic and distinct between individuals and across contexts.

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Figure 1
Model of Identity in Social Venturing

