

WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT COMMUNITY?

COMMENTARY ON "It Takes a Village to Sustain a Village: A Social Identity Perspective on Successful Community-Based Enterprise Creation" By Christina Hertel, Sophie Bacq, and Frank-Martin Belz

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Research on community-based enterprises (CBE) has produced an impressive range of insights (e.g. Farny, Kibler, Hai & Landoni, 2019; Daskalaki, Hjorth, & Mair, 2015; Haugh, 2007; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006), and the recently published article by Christina Hertel, Sophie Bacq, and Frank-Martin Belz gives further testament to this continuing interest. We are certain their work will make a valuable contribution to our understanding of how community efforts, clustered around a common identity, may enable alternative forms of business venturing. As scholars with a strong interest in researching enterprise-in-community, we would like to offer a constructive critique, grounded first in entrepreneurship fixation and counterbalanced later by critical sociology and theory of community.

As we look into the past, we can observe hundreds of towns and villages across Europe characterized by having strong identities and a tradition of collective action (Anderson, 2000; Kalantaridi & Bika, 2006; Grayson, 2018). They have been the birthplace of mutual support organizations, cooperatives, unions, provincial societies and many other organizational forms that belong to a wide, diverse and still vivid social economy (Moulaert & Ailenei, 2005). These efforts have been traditionally driven by the need of counteracting periods of crisis (Smith, 2012) and a desire to combine forces and foster social and economic development at the local level (Grayson, 2018). Though intermittently, they have been supported by large welfare states and, in the last three decades, by generous regional development funds and similar economic development grants (Anderson, 1990; Schrader, 1994; Whittaker, Warren, Turner & Hutchcroft, 2004). This is specially so in rural communities (Esparcia, 2014), where EU integrated rural development policies (Thomson & Psaltopoulos, 2004) have enabled the development of a wide range of collective businesses, from agricultural farms (Ward & McNicholas, 1998) to wind farms (Munday et al., 2011) to community pubs (Plunkett Foundation, 2019). We can also observe, over and over, small groups of individuals

leveraging development funds, donations (large and small) and subsidies to redevelop businesses that are deemed relevant, culturally and economically (CLES, 2019), under the conviction that these are central to revitalizing local economies (CRESR, 2019). As match funding is normally requested (to demonstrate local commitment) and the willingness to donate is present, local communities normally provide some of the funding required, which is collected using a range of equity and non-equity formulas, from raffles to community shares (Locality/Co-ops UK, 2015; Davis & Braunholtz-Speight, 2016). The parallels with Hertel et al.'s cases are unavoidable.

Organizations do emerge, yet probably not as we, as entrepreneurship scholars, insist or hope to see. We (the authors) remain confident and believing in the power of communities and entrepreneurship alike, particularly when it comes to overcoming adverse circumstances (Muñoz, Kimmitt, Kibler & Farny 2019). Yet, we are left wondering how far can we extend the notion of community entrepreneurship, or how many phenomena involving collective human endeavors and trading can be labelled as community entrepreneurship. Echoing Gaddefors and Anderson (2018) and Hunt et al. (2019), we pose that over-stretching and romancing the phenomenon may have detrimental effects in our discoveries and theorizing.

There are hidden opportunities in our criticism. Just like *Love* in Carver's (1981) classic collection of stories, *Community* is also a tricky concept. Thus, we feel compelled to explore *what we talk about when we talk about community*. We believe that our collective contribution to the practice and theory of community enterprising could be further strengthened if three interrelated issues were taken into consideration: the nature of CBE, the notion of collective agency and the nexus of CBE and community development. We argue that by engaging with these issues more consistently we can help advance research on community enterprises and help raise its relevance for theory development across the social sciences, where entrepreneurship can and will have something meaningful to say.

Community: a beneficiary or an agent? In our reading, Hertel et al. portray the local community as a rather passive ‘regional container’ for entrepreneurship (Kibler, Kautonen & Fink, 2014), within which a small group of people was able to re-develop and sustain a financially-viable local pub, partly through selling shares, fundraising and receiving governmental support. Inevitably, we wonder why such a (rather neo-liberal) form of private business venturing reflects, or should reflect, CBE? We argue for a community to be an agent of its own development, not a beneficiary, a CBE should convey collective community action and be unequivocally entwined with the local community life (Dacin & Dacin, 2019). Our collective work can improve in terms of conceptual clarity and empirical transparency if we embrace CBE as a more locally embedded, collective entrepreneuring process, one that is enabled by a/the large share of people of living in the local community (Heap et al. 2019). Normatively, if the aim is to enhance a socially inclusive CBE perspective, our investigative focus should be more on entrepreneurship as collective community practice (Gaddefors, Korsgaard & Ingstrup, 2019; Montgomery, Dacin & Dacin, 2012), explaining how ‘the community’ becomes an entrepreneur or enterprise and not (merely) how individual entrepreneurial actors are doing ‘good’ for/in a community (Kibler, Lang, Fink & Muñoz, 2015). In this sense, we argue CBE should be seen as a dynamic actor-context entity where a large share of community members and their living place shape and are shaped by CBE and so fostering a form of local development that is more inclusive. Inclusiveness, both in terms of the proportion of community members involved and how such involvement materializes.

Collective agency. We applaud Hertel et al. for bringing the notion of collective agency to the fore and reflecting on the conditions and mechanisms involved in the formation of collective identity. These two resonate with well-established explanations of the evolution of the social economy (Moulaert & Ailenei 2005; Muñoz, Kimmitt & Dimov, 2019). This opens up a wide array of opportunities for our community to further observe and theorize on the

particular role of collective agency underpinning CBE action. However, advancing CBE research more substantially through the notion of collective agency requires a deeper engagement with the social ontology of collective agency, and its pre-requisites, underpinning mechanisms and its potential consequences over time, as for instance shown in a recent study on the role of collective emotions in community recovery practices (Farny, Kibler & Down, 2019). We argue that CBE research could be enriched by embracing established theories from broader social sciences, such as critical sociology, dedicated to deeply understand the meaning of collective agency (e.g. Tuomela's work on the social ontology of collective agency [2013]) and community (e.g. Selznick's work on communitarian morality [1987]). Thus, we suggest that a deeper commitment to the meaning(s) of collective agency and community in CBE, empirically and theoretically, scholars can more fruitfully leverage the work by Hertel et al. Likewise, this gives the chance to enrich our repertoire to examine CBE as an "interactively enacted shared reality" (Johanisson, 2011: 142) by a large group of community members who actively engage in entrepreneuring as collective community practice.

CBE and local community development. Finally, inspired by Hertel et al.'s work we would like to offer an avenue to further strengthen the nexus of CBE and local community development, which we think it reflects a more general lacuna in CBE research. If only limited evidence is captured as to why and how CBE becomes a vehicle for the development of a socially inclusive, environment-friendly and/or economically prosperous local community, our inferences are under threat. Beyond the debatable existence of a CBE and leaving the romancing issue aside, we believe these inferences can be made with caution. We need to take a critical stance as to whether and to what extent a CBE can generate impact on community development. To do so, we need to firmly embrace the reality of causal attribution within local social complexity (Munõz & Kibler, 2016), where the impact of

action can never be solely attributed to the action itself (Davidson-Knight et al., 2017). With this in mind, we call for further research that helps delineate, and enhance our understanding of, what we refer to as ‘community-development-entrepreneurship’ (CDE). While CBE’s dominant investigative focus is on understanding the development and sustenance of community enterprises, CDE we argue would shift the focus more explicitly to understanding communities’ social transformation and development (Daskalaki et al., 2015) through a locally embedded and strongly collective entrepreneuring process. Here, we suggest that developing a CDE perspective also requires the incorporation of ‘community’ theories if we aim to ‘take the community more seriously’ as an active, locally dynamic ingredient (Fine, 2010) in the research on, and theorizing from, community entrepreneurship. As one example, Selznick’s (1994) community theory and elaboration of the – interplay of – key community attributes to understand community change and development (e.g. historicity, integration, plurality, autonomy, identity, mutuality and participation) could be useful to articulate a dynamic and integrative framework of CDE. One that complements a locally situated understanding of the entrepreneurial activities that result in community entrepreneuring to the level of the wider social and cultural transformation that takes place in the hosting community over time.

For those of us who enjoy seeing communities taking action, it is always exciting to read research examining aspects thereof. In light of Hertel et al.’s contribution, our intention was to offer a constructive critique and reflect on three opportunities to continue expanding the frontiers in our limited understanding of community enterprising as collective community practice. Unpacking *what we talk about when we talk about community* is important as we move our investigative focus from community-based entrepreneurship (CBE) to what we refer to as community-development entrepreneurship (CDE).

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