

Guest Editorial
**Understanding Social Entrepreneurship:
Let's Take a Closer Look at the Man
Looking in the Mirror**

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The late pop star Michael Jackson made popular a song titled "Man in the Mirror." This song describes an individual becoming aware of societal problems and, after looking at himself in the mirror, he makes a commitment to make the world a better place. This song reminds me of many social entrepreneurs. Social entrepreneurship (i.e., innovative social value creating activity) does not happen without entrepreneurs (i.e., individuals or groups of individuals). In this editorial, I hope to draw your attention to the role of individuals in social entrepreneurship and the need to empirically and theoretically examine the individuals at the heart of social entrepreneurship.

Social entrepreneurship is growing more prevalent in society. Further, as evidenced by this special issue and other published research, attention being paid to social entrepreneurship is also increasing. However, there still appears to be much we can learn about social entrepreneurship. Austin, Stevenson and Wei-Skillern (2006) identified the key distinctions between social and commercial entrepreneurship as: 1) differing views of market failure; 2) fundamental differences in organization mission; 3) different abilities to mobilize resources and 4) differing ways of measuring performance. At the heart of these distinctions are individuals. If we take a closer look at the individuals or groups of individuals, we should gain a better understanding of social entrepreneurship.

Previous research on the role of the individual entrepreneurial processes identified the psychological characteristics, individual characteristics, and cognitions of individuals as influences (Shook, Priem and McGee, 2003). As we look at the key distinctions of social entrepreneurship vis-à-vis commercial entrepreneurship from the viewpoint of the individual, it seems that building on the past research that identified these aspects of the individuals in commercial entrepreneurship might be a good place to start the investigation of the roles individuals play in social entrepreneurship.

The first two distinctions (i.e., differing views of market failure and fundamental difference in organization mission) noted by Austin et al. (2006) may be the most directly related to existing entrepreneurship research on the role of the individual. With regard to differing views of market failure, why do some individuals see market failure as a threat for commercial entrepreneurship but an opportunity for social entrepreneurship? With regard to differing missions, why do some individuals find it worthwhile to create value for the public good, while others find it worthwhile to only create private gain? Are there psychological characteristics such as personality types, belief and value structures, or differing needs that would help us understand the individuals' role in opportunity identification and/or mission formulation? How might an individual's past experiences play a role? Do gender, age or education influence the individual's view point? How does an individual's decision making biases and heuristics influence the differing views of market failures or meaningful organizational mission?

The last two distinctions appear to be less affected by the individual, yet still have research questions that could be informed by individual- or group-level investigation. With regard to resource mobilization, do social and commercial entrepreneurs view compensation differently? If so, what about social entrepreneurs would make this true? With regard to performance measurement for the organization, how does the social entrepreneurs' psychological and individual characteristics and cognitions affect their assessment of social, non-financial performance?

In the preceding paragraphs, I have briefly laid out some research ideas concerning the role of individuals and groups of individuals in social entrepreneurship. I hope that these ideas will spur further, more well-developed research questions and research projects. On a more personal note, as researchers is it time for us to look in the mirror? By researching social entrepreneurship, not only the individual's role but also other aspects such as the sociocultural, regulatory, demographic, and political contexts, we might help social entrepreneurs in their quest to successfully alleviate societal problems not addressed by markets, and, accordingly, make the world a better place.

References

- Austin, J., Stevenson, H. and Wei-Skillern J. (2006), "Social and commercial entrepreneurship: Same, different, or both?", *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 1-22.
- Shook, C.L., Priem, R.L. and McGee, J.M. (2003), "Venture creation and the enterprising individual: A review and synthesis", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 29, No. 3, pp. 379-399.