



# Social entrepreneurship as an essentially contested concept: Opening a new avenue for systematic future research



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## ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as an active area of practice and research within the last three decades. Nevertheless, in spite of its growing popularity, scholars and practitioners are far from reaching a consensus as to what social entrepreneurship actually means. This has resulted in a number of different definitions and approaches within the field of social entrepreneurship. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the ongoing contestation of social entrepreneurship and to offer a novel conceptual understanding of the concept that can facilitate the development of systematic and structured future research. To this end, we analyze social entrepreneurship on the basis of the theory of essentially contested concepts, which was proposed by Walter Bryce Gallie in 1956. Building upon this theory, this article shows that social entrepreneurship can be regarded as an essentially contested concept and that a universal definition that would be accepted among contestant parties is hardly possible. Responding to this recognition, the article proposes the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept, which can serve as a conceptual tool to help advancing social entrepreneurship as a coherent field of research despite its contested nature.

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## 1. Executive summary

It is generally agreed upon that social entrepreneurship is a contested concept. To date many competing definitions of the concept exist and no unifying conceptual framework of social entrepreneurship has yet emerged. Consequently, even after more than two decades, research on the concept is still considered to be in its infancy with minimal progress in theory development. As some researchers have noted, in the face of the ongoing contestation of social entrepreneurship and the lack of a unifying framework, it will remain difficult to conduct progressive research and to establish its legitimacy as a research field. Several researchers have addressed the disparities between different conceptions of social entrepreneurship and have attempted to map out the different meanings, logics, and schools of thought implicitly assumed in these conceptions. Nevertheless, a solution to the definitional problem which would enable researchers to collectively develop the field of social entrepreneurship is still clearly lacking.

The purpose of this article is to address this gap in the current literature. In order to do so we first establish the essentially contested nature of the concept of social entrepreneurship, and then propose a means, through the idea of the 'cluster concept', to provide a definitional foundation which can help to advance the development of systematic future research.

The theory of essentially contested concepts, which was proposed by Walter Bryce Gallie in 1956, suggests that a group of concepts exists which inevitably leads to endless disputes about the proper meanings of these concepts. These essentially contested concepts share specific characteristics which were specified by Gallie in seven key conditions. The seven key conditions

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are (1) appraisiveness, (2) internal complexity, (3) various desirability, (4) openness, (5) aggressive and defensive uses, (6) original exemplar, and (7) progressive competition. This article analyzes if social entrepreneurship fulfills the seven key conditions. Based on this analysis, it is shown that social entrepreneurship can indeed be regarded as an essentially contested concept, and that a universal definition that would be accepted among different parties is, therefore, hardly possible. Responding to this finding, the article proposes a conceptual understanding of social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept. According to this understanding, social entrepreneurship can be viewed as a conglomerate of several sub-concepts which are identified as (1) social value creation, (2) the social entrepreneur, (3) the social entrepreneurship organization, (4) market orientation and (5) social innovation. These sub-concepts can be regarded as the basic characteristics of social entrepreneurship, and any particular instantiation or conception of social entrepreneurship must, therefore, contain at least some of these sub-concepts. However, except for the sub-concept of social value creation, which is considered to be a precondition for social entrepreneurship, the cluster concept conceptualization of social entrepreneurship does not specify which or how many of the sub-concepts have to exist in actual instantiations. The article proposes that conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept enables researchers to state their specific understanding of the concept, provides a basis for developing social entrepreneurship ideal-types, and can further serve as a broad research agenda for the field.

The contribution of this article is twofold. Firstly, it provides an in-depth explanation of the contested nature of social entrepreneurship and shows that a universally accepted definition of social entrepreneurship is hardly possible. Secondly, it offers a novel conceptual understanding of social entrepreneurship which may open a new avenue for systematic future research despite the contested nature of the concept.

## 2. Introduction

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as an active area of practice and research within the last three decades. Leading foundations in the field like Ashoka, the Skoll Foundation, and the Schwab Foundation actively promote social entrepreneurship by highlighting the achievements of individual social entrepreneurs (Dacin et al., 2011). Also, governments have started supporting social entrepreneurship by establishing new organizational frameworks in order to encourage the formation of new social entrepreneurial initiatives and by providing funding to these initiatives. Within the last decade, an increasing number of social entrepreneurship centers have been set up at universities all over the world, and new scientific journals on social entrepreneurship, social enterprise, and social innovation have been launched. Also, the number of conferences and special issues in scientific journals devoted to the topic has increased significantly.

In spite of these developments, scholars and practitioners are far from reaching a consensus as to what social entrepreneurship actually means. Many scholars have acknowledged that the term 'social entrepreneurship' is inconsistently used and that it lacks a unified definition (for example, Certo and Miller, 2008; Hill et al., 2010; Mair and Martí, 2006; Mort et al., 2003; Short et al., 2009). Many competing definitions and meanings of social entrepreneurship exist to date. For example, for some researchers social entrepreneurship refers to not-for-profit organizations in the search for new funding strategies through business activities (Bosch and McClurg, 2003; Lasprogata and Cotten, 2003). Others view social entrepreneurship as the creation of businesses to serve the poor (Seelos and Mair, 2005), and again another group of researchers views social entrepreneurship as the use of social innovations to solve social problems and to bring about social change, irrespective of whether commercial activities are involved or not (Dees, 1998a; Martin and Osberg, 2007). Nicholls (2010: 611) contends that it has become axiomatic in recent years for scholars to note that there is no consensus as to what social entrepreneurship actually means and that the research agenda for the field is still date not clearly defined. Short et al. (2009: 162) assert that the "lack of a unified definition makes establishing the legitimacy of a field or construct difficult" and that the disparity of terminology "also hinders empirical research seeking to examine the antecedents and consequences of social entrepreneurship". Also, Dacin et al. (2010: 38) conclude that the current state of conceptual confusion impedes theory-based advances in the field of social entrepreneurship. Not surprisingly, Short et al. (2009: 168) further assess that research in social entrepreneurship is consequently characterized by minimal progress in theory development despite more than two decades of research. This, however, is an unfortunate development since social entrepreneurship has proven to be a promising and important global phenomenon which certainly deserves rigorous academic attention.

Several researchers have addressed the existing disparities between the different social entrepreneurship conceptions and have mapped out the different meanings found in literature (Hill et al., 2010), identified different schools of thought and practice (Dees and Anderson, 2006; Defourny and Nyssens, 2010; Hoogendoorn et al., 2010), and different discourses and narrative logics of social entrepreneurship (Nicholls, 2010). However, a solution to the definitional problem, which would enable researchers to collectively develop the field of social entrepreneurship, is still lacking.

The purpose of this article is to close this gap in current literature by addressing the following questions: Why is it so difficult to define social entrepreneurship? Is a universal definition of social entrepreneurship that would be accepted among researchers and practitioners possible at all? And, if not, is there a way out of this definitional problem? The consequences of the definitional problem are obvious: It impedes both future research on social entrepreneurship, and the establishment of social entrepreneurship as a coherent field of research (Certo and Miller, 2008; Short et al., 2009). Thus, in order to answer these questions, we analyze social entrepreneurship on the basis of the theory of essentially contested concepts and, based on this analysis, propose the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept in order to pave the way for systematic future research.

### 3. Essentially contested concepts

Walter Bryce Gallie, a social and political theorist, proposed the theory of essentially contested concepts in a lecture given to the Aristotelian Society in 1956. He begins his lecture on essentially contested concepts with an example of ‘art’ as a contested concept. The statement “this picture is a work of art” is liable to be contested, since there is no agreement on what constitutes a “work of art” (Gallie, 1956a: 167). In other words, there is no agreement with regard to the proper use of the concept of ‘art’.

Gallie (1956a) proposes a method to elucidate the definitional and conceptual problem of contested concepts such as art, wherein this elucidation does not suggest any best meaning, but explains, in the case of a special group of concepts, the reasons and the root causes for the conceptual problem and implicates that disputes about these concepts’ proper meanings can never really be settled. Gallie (1956a: 168) states that he seeks to show “in the case of an important group of concepts, how acceptance of a single method of approach—of a single explanatory hypothesis calling for some fairly rigid schematisation—*can* give us enlightenment of a much needed kind” (emphasis in the original). The “important group of concepts” which Gallie (1956a) refers to is the group of essentially contested concepts, whereas the “single explanatory hypothesis calling for some fairly rigid schematisation is Gallie’s proposed analytical framework of essentially contested concepts which builds on seven key criteria. Essentially contested concepts are, in short, concepts whose use “inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users” (Gallie, 1956a: 169). The essentially contested concept framework helps to identify, understand, and reason about such concepts (Collier et al., 2006: 212). The seven key criteria of essentially contested concepts are:

1. *Appraisiveness*. An essentially contested concept is “appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement” (Gallie, 1956a: 171). The first condition of essentially contested concepts states that the perception of the concept is intertwined with valence. Collier et al. (2006: 216) assess that it is only plausible that appraisive concepts lead to value laden debates about their meanings.
2. *Internal complexity*. Gallie (1956a: 171–172) states that the “achievement must be of an internally complex character, for all that its worth is attributed to it as a whole”. He gives the example of democracy as an essentially contested concept. Democracy is internally complex, since its valued achievement comprises different aspects such as the power of the majority of citizens to choose governments, equality of all citizens, as well as the continuous active participation of citizens in political life (Gallie, 1956a: 184–186). Internal complexity is likely to lead to contestability, since it makes the concept variously describable, which forms the next criterion of essentially contested concepts.
3. *Various descriptability*. In regard to the third criterion, Gallie (1956a: 172) states that “any explanation of its worth must therefore include reference to the respective contributions of its various parts or features”, and that “the accredited achievement is initially variously describable”. Depending on how different groups of users of an essentially contested concept weigh the different aspects which constitute the internal complexity, the essentially contested concept becomes variously describable and leads therefore to contestability. One group of users may emphasize one aspect of the concept over all other aspects and therefore may be likely to dispute with other users about the meaning of the concept.
4. *Openness*. The fourth characteristic states that an essentially contested concept is open in character. That means that the “accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances” (Gallie, 1956a: 172). Put in other words, the forms in which the valued achievement occurs must be relatively variable and open to modification in unpredictable ways (Gray, 1978: 390). *Openness* implies that new considerations on the part of users may emerge over time due to changing circumstances. As Gallie (1956a: 186) states in his example of democracy as an essentially contested concept, “democratic targets will be raised or lowered as circumstances alter, and democratic achievements are always judged in the light of such alterations”. Thus, essentially contested concepts and their meanings can never once and for all be determined, but are open in character, which makes these concepts changeable and vague and, therefore, prone to contestation.
5. *Aggressive and defensive uses*. The fifth criterion describes the behavior on the part of the contesting users of an essentially contested concept. Gallie (1956a: 172) states that “each party must have at least some appreciation of the different criteria in the light of which the other parties claim to be applying the concept in question”, and that “to use an essentially contested concept means to use it both aggressively and defensively”. Collier et al. (2006) call the fifth condition ‘reciprocal recognition’ since it states that the different contesting parties reciprocally recognize each others’ different contested uses of a concept.
6. *Original exemplar*. The sixth condition states that an essentially contested concept is derived from an original exemplar, “whose authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept” (Gallie, 1956a: 180). Gallie (1956a) provides two different understandings of the sixth condition, namely, a narrower and a broader understanding (Collier et al., 2006). The narrower understanding views the original exemplar as a factually single exemplar to which the contestant users refer. The broader understanding, on the other hand, views the exemplar as consisting of “a number of historically independent but sufficiently similar traditions” (Gallie, 1956a: 186).
7. *Progressive competition*. Gallie (1956a: 180) states that the “continuous competition for acknowledgment as between the contestant users of the concept, enables the original exemplar’s achievement to be sustained and/or developed in optimum fashion”. Collier et al. (2006) suggest two different understandings of progressive competition. The narrower understanding views that the competition of contestant uses lead to a more complete agreement about the original exemplar (Collier et al., 2006: 220). The broader sense of the seventh condition, on the other hand, implies that the rationality of a given use is progressively better explained through the competition of contestant users (Collier et al., 2006: 220) or, as Gallie (1956a: 193) puts it, might lead to a “marked raising of the level of quality of arguments in the disputes of the contestant parties”.

For Gallie (1956a: 172), the first four criteria are the “most important necessary conditions to which any essentially contested concept must comply”. Thus, the first four criteria are an account of the specific characteristics (appraisiveness, internal complexity, various descriptability, openness) which form the foundation for essential contestedness and which make a concept essentially *contestable*. But whether a concept is in fact being *contested* by different parties is determined by the fifth criterion, i.e., if it is actually being aggressively and defensively used.

Gallie (1956a: 180) states that although the first five criteria “give us the formally defining conditions of essential contestedness”, they still fail to distinguish essentially contested concepts from radically confused concepts. A radically confused concept is the confused use of two or more different concepts which are as such not contested at all, but which just need to be properly applied. To verify that a concept is in fact essentially contested and not just radically confused, Gallie (1956a) provides the sixth (original exemplar) and the seventh (progressive competition) condition of essential contestedness. The rationale behind this is that the existence of an original exemplar which is acknowledged by all contesting parties, ensures that the contesting parties actually try to explain the same complex phenomenon and not different things. The condition of progressive competition further rules out the possibility of radical confusion since the continuous competition for acknowledgment would lead, in the case of a radically confused concept, to the exposure of the confusion and the terminated use of the concept given that the disputes are rational and genuine, whereas it would lead to a sustained use of the concept in the case of an essentially contested concept.

Gallie himself applied the essentially contested concept framework to concepts like democracy, art, and Christian life (Gallie, 1956a, 1956b). Other authors have applied the framework to concepts like security, freedom, power (see Waldron, 2002: 149 for an overview), and more recently to the ‘rule of law’ (Waldron, 2002), sustainable development (Connelly, 2007), corporate social responsibility (Okoye, 2009), and the stakeholder concept (Miles, 2012). Considering that the application of the essentially contested concept framework has “run wild” (Waldron, 2002: 149) on the one hand, and, on the other hand, has been viewed as being applicable to only very few concepts, Collier et al. (2006: 215) choose a middle path by suggesting that the application of the essentially contested concept framework should be governed by whether it yields useful insight into the concept at hand.

#### 4. Is social entrepreneurship an essentially contested concept?

Considering the multiplicity of competing definitions and the general proliferation of social entrepreneurship definitions to date, it may be suspected that social entrepreneurship is an essentially contested concept. If it is indeed essentially contested, then it should comply with the seven key criteria of essentially contested concepts. In this section, we examine if social entrepreneurship fulfills each of the conditions of essential contestedness. We base our analysis mainly on evidences in the extant social entrepreneurship literature. A condition is considered as fulfilled when overwhelming evidences found in the literature unanimously confirm the condition.

##### 4.1. Appraisiveness

Gallie's (1956a: 171) first condition of essential contestedness is that the concept “must be appraisive in the sense that it signifies or accredits some kind of valued achievement”. In the case of ‘art’ as an essentially contested concept, Gallie (1956b: 111) states that the term ‘art’ is not mainly used in a descriptive way indicating specific properties, but in an appraisive way accrediting a certain kind of achievement. Also, democracy is a highly appraisive concept and “the primary question on any major policy-decision has come to be: Is it democratic?” (Gallie, 1956a: 184). This example shows that being democratic signifies a valued achievement. However, other authors have suggested that appraisiveness does not necessarily mean only positive valuation but can also mean negative valuation (Freeden, 1998: 55–56). Abbey (2005), for example, contends that fascism could be theorized as an essentially contested concept as well. Freeden (1998: 56) further criticizes Gallie's idea of appraisiveness by stating that essentially contested concepts are not exclusively appraisive, but also have non-appraisive, descriptive aspects which simply refer to “brute facts”. For him, essentially contested concepts have most importantly empirically describable and observable properties and may only in addition be perceived as desirable (Freeden, 1998: 56). Another extension of appraisiveness is that the normative valence of a concept may be unclear, but may stem from the context in which the concept is applied or from its theoretical framework (Collier et al., 2006; Miles, 2012).

In the case of social entrepreneurship, it can be assessed that it is an appraisive concept. Similar to the concept of ‘art’ and ‘democracy’, social entrepreneurship signifies a valued achievement. Dey (2006: 121), for example, argues that the proliferation of social entrepreneurship narratives “represents one of the very latest fashion trends” in academic, political, and media discourses, in which a unanimously positive image is attributed to social entrepreneurship. Light (2009: 21) views social entrepreneurship as one of the “most alluring terms on the problem-solving landscape today”. Thus, calling something as ‘social entrepreneurship’ does not only attribute in a descriptive way specific properties to it but accredits a valued achievement.

The concept of social entrepreneurship helps to distinguish between ‘praiseworthy’ and ‘less praiseworthy’ activities, i.e., exceptionally good activities and more ordinary activities by social ventures. Social entrepreneurship stands out and is different from mere social service provision and social activism (Martin and Osberg, 2007), and from mere socially responsible business. Also, Roberts and Woods (2005) state that social entrepreneurship is neither charity nor benevolence. Social entrepreneurship is appraisive in the sense that it signifies a specific valued achievement. What constitutes the valued achievement is explained in the next section in terms of the different aspects contributing to the internal complexity of social entrepreneurship.



## 4.2. Internal complexity

The second condition of essential contestedness states that an essentially contested concept is internally complex since it consists of different “parts or features” which together constitute the concept’s valued achievement. (Gallie, 1956a: 172).

The internally complex character of social entrepreneurship has been acknowledged by several authors who described it as a complex, multi-dimensional concept (e.g. Nicholls, 2008; Weerawardena and Mort, 2006) and a multi-faceted phenomenon (Bacq and Janssen, 2011). To grasp the internally complex character of social entrepreneurship, researchers have tried to point out the multiple internal components. Nicholls and Cho (2008), for example, discussed these components as key dimensions of social entrepreneurship which are, according to the authors, the dimensions of sociality, innovation and market orientation. Building on Gartner’s (1985) framework for describing venture creation, Bacq and Janssen (2011) also describe the concept of social entrepreneurship by compartmentalizing it into sub-categories such as the social entrepreneur, the social entrepreneurship organization, and the process of social entrepreneurship.

We suggest that the concept of social entrepreneurship consists of five major components which contribute to the internal complexity of the concept. These five components are: social value creation, the social entrepreneur, the social entrepreneurship (SE) organization, market orientation, and social innovation. These five components are identified on the basis of how far they constitute the basic characteristics of social entrepreneurship which not only represent the key organizing principles of the field (Nicholls and Cho, 2008: 100), but also which are most likely to serve as foundations for different competing conceptions, and thereby making the concept variously describable (Gallie, 1956a: 172). Since the five identified components are concepts themselves, we term them as ‘sub-concepts’ of social entrepreneurship in the remainder of this article. In the following discussion on the sub-concepts of social entrepreneurship, it will be shown that each sub-concept not only represents an integral part of social entrepreneurship, but also contributes to the internally complex nature of the concept.

### 4.2.1. Social value creation

A highly valued aspect of social entrepreneurship, which is certainly considered to be a prerequisite for social entrepreneurship, is the creation of social value (e.g. Austin et al., 2006; Dees, 1998a; Peredo and McLean, 2006; Perrini and Vurro, 2006; Sharir and Lerner, 2006). This aspect has further been addressed in descriptions of social entrepreneurship as social entrepreneurship having primarily a social mission (Dees, 1998a; Lasprogata and Cotten, 2003; Mort et al., 2003; Nicholls, 2008: 13; Seelos and Mair, 2005), as creating social wealth (Zahra et al., 2009), as addressing social issues and problems (Alvord et al., 2004; Bornstein, 2004; Light, 2006), and pressing social needs (Mair and Martí, 2006; Seelos and Mair, 2005). The concept of social value creation is a value laden concept and involves “virtuous behaviour” (Mort et al., 2003: 82), altruistic objectives (Tan et al., 2005), and the promotion of a social purpose, which further implies values like freedom, equality, and tolerance (Murphy and Coombes, 2009: 326).

Nicholls and Cho (2008) note that the ‘social’ itself is a highly complex, ambiguous and contested concept. They further state that not “acknowledging the deeply contested nature of social objectives presupposes an unrealistic homogeneity of social interests” (Nicholls and Cho, 2008: 105). Consequently, it is difficult to assess what social value actually entails and which activities and projects can be considered as creating social value. Moreover, the inherent difficulty in measuring social value (Dees, 1998a: 3) further adds to the ambiguity of the concept of social value creation. We conclude that not only the creation of social value is an integral aspect of social entrepreneurship, but also that the concept of social value itself is a complex and ambiguous one, and is therefore one of the factors contributing to the internally complex character of social entrepreneurship.

### 4.2.2. The social entrepreneur

Another integral aspect of social entrepreneurship is the individual social entrepreneur. The social entrepreneur has been viewed as central in social entrepreneurship by many authors (e.g. Bornstein, 2004; Dees, 1998a; Leadbeater, 1997; Light, 2008: 6–19; Roper and Cheney, 2005; Thompson, 2002; Thompson and Doherty, 2006; Waddock and Post, 1991). He or she is viewed as the initiator of a social entrepreneurial endeavor and as the innovator who imagines and pushes through social innovations and processes of social change (Swedberg, 2009; Ziegler, 2010). And indeed, in many recognized cases of social entrepreneurship, the individual social entrepreneur has proven to be crucial in initiating and carrying out social entrepreneurial activities. Nevertheless, some researchers have also noted that a collective of social entrepreneurs may exist in some cases (Bacq and Janssen, 2011).

Here we may remark that the concept of the social entrepreneur is itself not free from ambiguity. A question that is not easy to answer is, for example, who counts as a social entrepreneur. Some people view the social entrepreneur simply as someone who initiates and operates a social purpose organization. Others, however, view the social entrepreneur as a visionary, innovative, and risk-taking change-maker (Bacq and Janssen, 2011). But even if one agrees with the understanding of the social entrepreneur as a change-maker, as many researchers do, it is still not clear how visionary, risk-taking, innovative or even successful one has to be to be counted as a social entrepreneur.

In view of all this, we suggest that the concept of the social entrepreneur contributes to the internally complex character of social entrepreneurship, while at the same time forms one integral part of the concept.

### 4.2.3. The social entrepreneurship organization

Usually, social entrepreneurial activities are organized over time within an organizational framework. According to Mair and Martí (2006: 37), it is especially this organizational context in which social entrepreneurship occurs, which “sets it apart from other more loosely structured initiatives aimed at social change, such as activist movements”. As it has been acknowledged that

social entrepreneurship can happen within and across the third, public, and private sector (Austin et al., 2006; Chell et al., 2010; Nicholls, 2008), the SE organization can be located within different sectors as well. Further, the SE organization can also adopt diverse organizational forms such as non-profit, for-profit, and hybrid organizational forms (Dorado, 2006; Elkington and Hartigan, 2008; Murphy and Coombes, 2009). In addition to these, different legal forms (e.g., the Community Interest Company in the UK) have been established in different countries (Bacq and Janssen, 2011: 386–387) to support social entrepreneurial initiatives.

Considering the important role played by the organization in promoting social entrepreneurial activities, and the variety of different possible organizational and legal forms, we conclude that the SE organization forms an integral part of social entrepreneurship, adding to its internally complex character.

#### 4.2.4. Market orientation

Another integral aspect of social entrepreneurship, identified by Nicholls and Cho (2008), is the aspect of *market orientation*. The market orientation aspect of social entrepreneurship is often associated with the idea of heightened efficiency and effectiveness through commercial activities (Nicholls, 2010), and the financial sustainability and self-sufficiency (Boschee and McClurg, 2003; Harding, 2004; Haugh, 2005) on the part of the SE organization. A key aspect of what sets social entrepreneurship apart from traditional not-for-profit social service provision is its implicit focus on efficiency and the effective use of resources (Nicholls and Cho, 2008). It is this market orientation aspect of social entrepreneurship which is positively valued about social entrepreneurship and which gives social entrepreneurship an “image of business-like discipline, innovation, and determination” (Dees, 1998a: 1).

Given its importance, we suggest that market orientation is an integral aspect of social entrepreneurship. However, we also note that market orientation can manifest itself in different ways and is, therefore, complex as well. Market orientation can be expressed in terms of commercial activities, which generate earned-income to ensure the sustainability of social entrepreneurial activities and self-sufficiency of the organization. In another shade of the idea, market orientation can imply the employment of commercial activities directly linked to the social mission to ensure the most effective and efficient distribution of social services and products.

Thus, we conclude that market orientation is an integral part of social entrepreneurship that can assume different forms depending on the context, and thereby contributes to the internally complex character of social entrepreneurship.

#### 4.2.5. Social innovation

Social innovation forms the fifth integral aspect of social entrepreneurship. Nicholls and Cho (2008) assert that it is the non-traditional, disruptive approach of social entrepreneurship which sets it apart from traditional social service provision. Many authors have identified it as a key aspect of social entrepreneurship. For example, Dees (1998a: 4) states that social entrepreneurs engage “in a process of continuous innovation”, while Peredo and McLean (2006: 64) view that social entrepreneurship involves the employment of innovation. Other authors emphasize that social entrepreneurship is an “innovative, social value creating activity” (Austin et al., 2006: 1), that it “creates new models” (Seelos and Mair, 2005: 49), and that an “innovative approach” to achieve the mission is a constituent element (Nicholls, 2008: 13). Closely related to the idea of innovation is the idea of change. As Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter states, “entrepreneurship consists of making innovations” (Swedberg, 2000: 15) and entrepreneurs are the innovators who set off all truly important changes in the economy (Swedberg, 2000: 14). Similarly, social entrepreneurs are considered as innovators in the social sphere who drive important social change (Mair and Martí, 2006; Mair et al., 2012; Prabhu, 1999), sustainable social transformation (Alvord et al., 2004), and pattern-breaking change (Martin and Osberg, 2007). In this spirit, social entrepreneurs are also referred to as “change agents” (Dearlove, 2004; Dees, 1998a; Sharir and Lerner, 2006). The role of social innovations as inducing social change has thus been strongly emphasized in the literature. These observations lead us to conclude that social innovation is an integral aspect of social entrepreneurship that is positively valued, on the one hand, and that contributes to the internally complex character of the concept, on the other hand.

We suggest that the five proposed components taken together describe to a good extent the valued achievement that social entrepreneurship signifies. The internally complex nature of social entrepreneurship arises from the involvement of these five sub-concepts which are, further, by themselves often complex and contested. Interrelations between the sub-concepts further add to the complex character of social entrepreneurship. For example, the individual social entrepreneur is often viewed in close relationship with social innovation (Bacq and Janssen, 2011: 380; Hoogendoorn et al., 2010). And indeed, it is often the social entrepreneur who envisions change, innovates strategies and pushes through social innovations. Also, the aspect of the SE organization and the aspect of market orientation are interrelated since the legal form of an organization often corresponds to commercial activities carried out by the organization. Interrelations also exist between the aspects of market orientation and social innovation, since many social innovations involve commercial activities (e.g., fair-trade or microfinance).

These observations lead us to conclude that social entrepreneurship fulfills the second condition of essential contestedness—that of internal complexity.

#### 4.3. Various desirability

The condition of *internal complexity* is closely related to the third condition of *various desirability*. As Gallie (1956a: 185) notes for the case of democracy, the different aspects that constitute the valued achievement of an essentially contested concept can exist in

greater or lesser degrees in actual instances of the concept. Therefore, internal complexity leads to the possibility of a variety of descriptions of the concept in which “its different aspects are graded in different orders of importance” (Gallie, 1956a: 184).

For the case of social entrepreneurship, Bacq and Janssen (2011: 388) describe the problem of internal complexity and various descriptibility by stating that “since social entrepreneurship has proven to be a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, there is no standardised, universally accepted definition to define the scope of the concept”.

Collier et al. (2006: 217) distinguish between two different forms of varying descriptions. Firstly, various descriptibility can occur in the form of an “exclusive emphasis on one or another facet of the concept”; secondly, it can involve different facets that are “emphasized to varying degrees, involving contrasting relative importance”. Both forms of various descriptibility are apparent in descriptions of social entrepreneurship. One example for the exclusive emphasis on one aspect is Dees' (1998a) definition of social entrepreneurship. Dees (1998a) defines the concept in his article “The meaning of social entrepreneurship” on the basis of the individual social entrepreneur, which clearly shows that he values the aspect of the social entrepreneur as most central to the concept. However, the aspect of social innovation is also prominent in his definition, which is due to the above-mentioned intertwined relationship between the two aspects. Another description of social entrepreneurship is provided by Mair and Martí (2006: 37) who define it “as a process involving the *innovative* use and combination of resources to pursue opportunities to catalyse *social change* and/or address social needs” (emphasis added). Their description of social entrepreneurship clearly emphasizes the aspect and process of social innovation. Lasprogata and Cotten (2003: 69), on the other hand, state that “social entrepreneurship means nonprofit organizations that apply entrepreneurial strategies to *sustain themselves financially* while having a greater impact on their social mission”. Their description of social entrepreneurship shows that they view the organizational aspect as central, while also emphasizing the aspect of market orientation.

In regard to the second form of various descriptibility in which different aspects are graded in different orders of relative importance, we want to point out to Hoogendoorn et al. (2010: 9) and Bacq and Janssen (2011: 390), who provide an overview about different schools of thought within the social entrepreneurship literature and their varying orders of importance assigned to the sub-concepts of social entrepreneurship. For example, the ‘social Innovation school’ of social entrepreneurship emphasizes the importance of innovation (Hoogendoorn et al., 2010: 9) and the importance of the individual social entrepreneur (Bacq and Janssen, 2011: 390; Hoogendoorn et al., 2010: 9), whereas market orientation and the organization is less emphasized. The ‘social enterprise school’, in contrast, emphasizes the importance of the organization and market orientation rather than innovation or the individual social entrepreneur (Bacq and Janssen, 2011: 390; Hoogendoorn et al., 2010: 9).

Since both forms of various descriptibility exist in descriptions of social entrepreneurship, it can be assessed that the concept of social entrepreneurship is variously descriptible.

#### 4.4. Openness

The fourth condition states that essentially contested concepts are open in character. Gallie (1956a: 172) says in this regard that “the accredited achievement must be of a kind that admits of considerable modification in the light of changing circumstances; and such modification cannot be prescribed or predicted in advance”. Gray (1978: 390) explains the condition of openness by stating that “the forms in which it [valued achievement] occurs must be relatively variable and open to modification in unpredictable ways”. Art, for example, is open in character since, “at any one stage in its history, no one can predict or prescribe what new development of current art forms may come to be regarded as of properly artistic worth” (Gallie, 1956a: 182). Hence, openness implies that a concept cannot be determined once and for all.

The open character of a concept can be well observed if the concept and its modifications are examined from a historical perspective. A historical examination of art, for example, clearly shows how the concept has changed over time. In the same vein, the open character of democracy can be assessed while comparing historical and current instantiations of the concept (Collier et al., 2006: 224). The problem in examining the open character of social entrepreneurship is that the term ‘social entrepreneurship’ is being used only since the last three decades (Bacq and Janssen, 2011). A historical perspective on social entrepreneurship in order to observe the open character of the concept by examining changes due to changing circumstances is therefore rather limited. Nevertheless, although social entrepreneurship as a concept has been used only since the last few decades, some researchers argue that the practice of social entrepreneurship as such is not new and that social entrepreneurs have always existed (Bornstein and Davis, 2010: 2; Roberts and Woods, 2005). Sen (2007: 535) puts it aptly by stating that “[t]he language of social entrepreneurship may be new, but the phenomenon is not”. An example of historical social entrepreneurship is Florence Nightingale (Ashoka, 2012; Bornstein, 2004; Roberts and Woods, 2005) and her achievements in pioneering modern nursing. Another example of historical social entrepreneurship is Vinoba Bhave (Ashoka, 2012) and his accomplishments in the Land Gift Movement in India. If historical cases of social entrepreneurship are compared with contemporary instantiations of the concept, several changes of the concept due to changing circumstances can be identified.

It can be observed that the organizational aspect of social entrepreneurship is nearly non-existent in historical examples of social entrepreneurship. When researchers discuss historical examples of social entrepreneurship, the focus is on the individual social entrepreneur (e.g. Bornstein and Davis, 2010: 2). This, however, indeed makes sense, because it is only since approximately the last fifty years that a global upsurge of organized voluntary activity and creation of citizen organizations has taken place (Bornstein and Davis, 2010: 8; Salamon, 1994). Salamon (1994) identified several factors within the political, social, and economic backgrounds which led to the flourishing of citizen organizations. Thus, the organizational aspect of social entrepreneurship (see Section 4.2.3) can be considered to be a change of the concept which emerged due to changing circumstances.

Another change that can be identified when comparing historical examples with contemporary examples of social entrepreneurship is the current focus on market-based strategies for solving social problems (see Section 4.2.4). This change can also be traced back to changes in the socio-economic context. The increasing positive valuation of business and the free market and the rise of modern capitalism in Western societies can be viewed as influencing factors which promoted, from a historical perspective, the contemporary focus on market orientation in social entrepreneurship.

Thus, it can be argued that even though the term 'social entrepreneurship' is formally being used only since the last few decades, the practice of social entrepreneurship is not new and has, moreover, changed over the ages in response to changing socio-economic circumstances. Seen from this perspective, social entrepreneurship is open in character.

#### 4.5. Aggressive and defensive uses

The fifth condition states that the different groups of users of an essentially contested concept recognize that their own use is contested by other groups and that their own use of it has to be maintained against these other uses (Gallie, 1956a: 172). Therefore, Collier et al. (2006: 219) contend that the fifth condition "presumes that contending parties acknowledge the concept's contested character", and therefore call it 'reciprocal recognition'.

Reciprocal recognition exists among the users of the social entrepreneurship concept. For instance, Boschee and McClurg (2003: 2), who view the generation of earned revenue as essential to social entrepreneurship, directly criticize Dees' (1998a) definition of social entrepreneurship by stating "we think that it is not only conceptually flawed, but also psychologically crippling". Dees (2003), on the other hand, defends his position by stating that "despite efforts to spread an innovation-based definition, far too many people still think of social entrepreneurship in terms of nonprofits generating earned income. This is a dangerously narrow view". He argues that social entrepreneurship is about social impact and social entrepreneurs have only one ultimate bottom line, which is the social impact they create (Dees, 2003). Similarly, Martin and Osberg (2007) defend their use of social entrepreneurship and disapprove of other uses. For them, "social entrepreneurship has become so inclusive that it now has an immense tent into which all manner of socially beneficial activities fit" (Martin and Osberg, 2007: 30). Also, the conception of social entrepreneurship which emphasizes the role of the social entrepreneur as a "romantic hero" has been critically evaluated by Nicholls and Cho (2006). Dacin et al. (2011: 1205) critically observe that "there tends to be an underlying assumption that these heroic social entrepreneurs will somehow save the world". Also Dey and Steyaert (2010: 85) view the narrative of social entrepreneurship as a "messianistic script of harmonious social change" to be problematic, since it is overly optimistic and less realistic.

The examples above show that users of the social entrepreneurship concept acknowledge the concept's contested character and each other's contesting uses. Hence, the concept of social entrepreneurship is aggressively and defensively used by the contesting parties.

#### 4.6. Original exemplar

The sixth condition states that an essentially contested concept is derived from an original exemplar whose "authority is acknowledged by all the contestant users of the concept" (Gallie, 1956a: 180). The narrower understanding of this condition views the original exemplar as a factually single exemplar. This has been criticized by Gray (1978: 390) who, taking the example of democracy, states that "certainly there is no exemplary democratic state or just society which all users of these concepts would acknowledge as such". The broader understanding therefore views that the original exemplar can also consist of "a number of historically independent but sufficiently similar traditions" (Gallie, 1956a: 186). As Collier et al. (2006: 220) citing Lukes (1977) state, "the common core is centred on multiple paradigmatic examples that do, in fact, anchor the concept".

In the case of social entrepreneurship, it is apparent that authors often base their studies on anecdotal evidence and case studies (Dey and Steyaert, 2010: 98; Mair and Martí, 2006: 36). Probably the most referred example of social entrepreneurship is that of the Grameen Bank created by the famous social entrepreneur Muhammad Yunus, which has gained worldwide recognition with the awarding of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize. Authors who refer to Yunus and the Grameen Bank are, amongst others, Hamby et al. (2010), Light (2006), Mair and Martí (2006), Schieffer and Lessem (2009), Seelos and Mair (2005), Swedberg (2009), and Yujico (2008). We suggest that the case of Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank is widely accepted in academia and practice as an exemplar of social entrepreneurship.

It can be further shown that the example of Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank exhibits each of the five aspects mentioned earlier that constitute the internally complex character of social entrepreneurship: The Grameen Bank has undoubtedly created social value, especially through poverty alleviation. Muhammad Yunus can be regarded as an exceptional individual, as the social entrepreneur *per se*, whose personality and skills were crucial for the success of the venture. The micro-lending activities initiated by Yunus were organized within an organizational framework by the setting up of the Grameen Bank. The Grameen Bank exhibits market orientation by employing commercial activities to fulfill and support its social mission. And lastly, the introduction of microfinance in Bangladesh, combined with the practice of lending loans only to women in small groups, is a social innovation which led to large-scale systemic change among the poor in Bangladesh.

#### 4.7. Progressive competition

The seventh condition states that the continuous competition for acknowledgment in the case of an essentially contested concept "enables the original exemplar's achievement to be sustained and/or developed in optimum fashion" (Gallie, 1956a: 180). Several authors have questioned the validity of the seventh condition. Gray (1978: 392), for example, argues that the



appraisive character of essentially contested concepts, which involves normative value judgments on the part of the users, makes a rational settlement of the disputes about the concept impossible. The broader meaning of the seventh condition, on the other hand, states that the continuous competition might lead to a “marked raising of the level of quality of arguments in the disputes of the contestant parties” (Gallie, 1956a: 193). Hence, progressive competition implies the progressive clarification of the concept (Collier et al., 2006: 221). Referring to Freeden (1998), Collier et al. (2006: 221) note that the possibility of regressive competition may exist as well, a situation in which the conceptual debates may be simply of poor quality and not enrich the contested concept. The authors (Collier et al., 2006) therefore suggest that progressive competition may or may not apply to essentially contested concepts and that this has to be examined on a case-specific basis. Acknowledging that the condition of progressive competition has been met with substantial skepticism, Collier et al. (2006: 226) propose progressive *cooperation* as a, probably more plausible, variant of progressive competition. Progressive cooperation is “in effect a case of cooperation among successive scholars—of a kind commonly interpreted as reflecting progress in scholarship” (Collier et al., 2006: 226).

In the case of social entrepreneurship, it can be assessed that the continuous competition for acknowledgment has resulted in progressive clarification of the concept in the form of a body of literature which reflects upon the contested nature of social entrepreneurship and its various meanings and approaches. For instance, Dacin et al. (2010) list different definitions of social entrepreneurship and explain similarities and dissimilarities between the different conceptualizations of the concept. Nicholls (2010) addresses the contested nature of social entrepreneurship in the context of reflexive isomorphism in the pre-paradigmatic field of social entrepreneurship. The author identifies different discourses of social entrepreneurship which are promoted by the different dominant key actors in the field of social entrepreneurship (Nicholls, 2010). Similarly, Dey and Steyaert (2010) identify three groups of narratives of social entrepreneurship: a grand narrative which incorporates a messianistic script of harmonious social change, counter-narratives to the grand narrative, and little narratives which investigate the ambivalences of ‘the social’. In addition, Hill et al. (2010) reflect upon the different meanings of social entrepreneurship by evaluating the existent literature on social entrepreneurship in order to identify different patterns of meaning within the concept. Hence, the continuous competition about the proper use of social entrepreneurship has resulted in progressive clarification through high quality examinations of the various meanings of social entrepreneurship.

Also, the case of progressive cooperation, i.e., the cooperation among successive scholars who build on each others' work to clarify the concept, can be found in social entrepreneurship literature. In this regard, the work of a group of researchers, which suggests that the existence of different schools of thought and practice in social entrepreneurship is responsible for the inconsistent use of social entrepreneurship, shall be mentioned here. Dees and Anderson (2006) identify two major schools of social entrepreneurship: the ‘social enterprise school’ and the ‘social innovation school’. According to the authors, the social enterprise school views social entrepreneurship as the commercial activity of non-for-profit organizations in order to earn income to support the organization's social mission. The social innovation school, on the other hand, views social entrepreneurship as the implementation of innovative, systems changing solutions to social problems which can, but must not necessarily, entail commercial activities. Dees and Anderson (2006) recognize that the argument about earned-income versus social innovation is rooted in different understandings about the meaning of entrepreneurship. The social enterprise school views entrepreneurship as the setting up of new businesses, while the social innovation school understands entrepreneurship in a Schumpeterian sense as an innovative process entailing the creation of new combinations that reform or revolutionize the existing patterns of production (Dees and Anderson, 2006). Building on the work of Dees and Anderson (2006), Defourny and Nyssens (2010) suggest three different schools of social entrepreneurship: the social enterprise school, which the authors prefer to call the ‘earned income school’, the social innovation school, and the so-called Emergence of Social Enterprise in Europe (EMES) approach. The EMES is a European research network, funded by the European Union to advance knowledge about social enterprise and the third sector in general. According to the EMES approach, social enterprises are initiated by groups of citizens in order to produce goods and services for the benefit of the community. Thus, the EMES approach focuses on the provision of goods and services for the public by social enterprises, which are located in the third sector. The EMES approach does not emphasize innovation or earned-income as critical aspects of social entrepreneurship.

Building on the work of Dees and Anderson (2006), Hoogendoorn et al. (2010) suggest the existence of four schools of social entrepreneurship. Of these, the first three schools are in accordance with the schools suggested by Defourny and Nyssens (2010), while the fourth school, according to Hoogendoorn et al. (2010), is based upon the approach to social entrepreneurship which emerged in the UK. Despite certain similarities with the social enterprise school and the EMES approach, the authors view the UK approach as a distinct approach to social entrepreneurship. The UK approach took root when the Labour Party came into power in the late 1990s in the UK. Following the Third Way ideology, it tried to stimulate partnerships between the private, public and third sector (Hoogendoorn et al., 2010). A new legal form for social enterprise was created in 2004 with the setting up of the Community Interest Company. According to Hoogendoorn et al. (2010), the difference between the EMES approach and the UK approach is that the services and goods provided by the social enterprise must not necessarily be related to the venture's mission, as it is in the case of the EMES approach.

Thus, we conclude that progressive competition exists in the case of social entrepreneurship, on the one hand, in form of literature that reflects upon the contested nature of the concept and, on the other hand, in form of literature that progressively builds on each other in clarifying the concept.

## 5. Discussion

Although Gallie's (1956a) theory of essentially contested concepts has found a large resonance within the academic literature, it has faced criticism as well. Gray (1977: 341), for example, argues that the idea of essential contestedness subscribes “to an

ambitious thesis of conceptual relativism". Also, Clarke (1979: 126) critically remarks that essential contestedness inevitably leads to "radical relativism". Collier et al. (2006) counter the concern expressed by Clarke (1979) by pointing out that radical relativism is only problematic if the goal of concept analysis lies in the establishment of unambiguous meanings. But if the goal of concept analysis is to describe and explain complex concepts, their patterns, and patterns of change, then "Gallie's framework remains a benchmark in the development of alternative approaches to analyzing concepts" (Collier et al., 2006: 214).

Applying the theory of essentially contested concepts to social entrepreneurship, it was demonstrated that social entrepreneurship can be regarded as an essentially contested concept. Recognizing social entrepreneurship as an essentially contested concept explains as to why it is so difficult to find a universal definition of social entrepreneurship and why it prompts different meanings among different parties. In this regard, it was shown that social entrepreneurship is an appraisive concept leading to value laden debates about its proper meaning. It was further demonstrated that the valued achievement that social entrepreneurship signifies consists of different components that make the concept internally complex. Based on how different users weigh the importance of the different sub-concepts, social entrepreneurship is variously describable. Moreover, it was shown that social entrepreneurship is open in character, and therefore subject to modification in the face of new situations and changing circumstances, which, in turn, further contributes to its contested character. Applying the theory of essentially contested concepts further showed that social entrepreneurship is not just what Gallie (1956a) called a "radically confused concept", which is the confused use of two or more consistent concepts. The acknowledgment of one original exemplar and the existence of progressive competition rule out the possibility of social entrepreneurship being a radically confused concept.

### 5.1. Implications for future research

Recognizing social entrepreneurship as an essentially contested concept substantiates the view that a universal definition, which would be accepted among the different users, is hardly ever possible. As Gray (1977: 344) states, definitional disputes over essentially contested concepts are disputes which "cannot be settled by appeal to empirical evidence, linguistic usage, or the canons of logic alone". Hence, "arguments can be perfected, but never resolved" (Okoye, 2009: 623).

Acknowledging social entrepreneurship as an essentially contested concept may therefore, as Garver (1990: 264) states, "promote a more sophisticated, more intellectually and morally advanced understanding of one's arguments and opponents". But if, on the other hand, researchers neglect the essentially contested nature of social entrepreneurship and continue using the concept without explicitly stating their specific understanding or considering contestant uses of the concept, then it will remain difficult for researchers to build on each other's work and establish social entrepreneurship as a coherent field of research. Readers, and especially unacquainted readers of social entrepreneurship literature, will continue to have difficulties in understanding the idea of social entrepreneurship and will be invariably led into utter confusion about the concept. Hence, we agree with Okoye (2009) and Miles (2012) who argue that recognizing a concept as an essentially contested concept does not entirely close the definitional debate. On the contrary, if the community of researchers wishes to establish social entrepreneurship as a coherent field of research, which seems in the face of its practical relevance for today's world only desirable, then it is necessary to mitigate the complexity of the concept and facilitate its utility by identifying and defining its "central core" (Miles, 2012: 296; Okoye, 2009). To this end, we propose a conceptual understanding of social entrepreneurship in terms of a cluster concept, as explained in the next subsection.

### 5.2. Conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept

It was argued in Section 4.2 that the internally complex character of social entrepreneurship stems from the involvement of multiple sub-concepts which were identified as (1) social value creation, (2) the social entrepreneur, (3) the SE organization, (4) market orientation, and (5) social innovation. Based on this comprehension of social entrepreneurship, we propose the conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept. A cluster concept is a conglomerate of certain concepts, which we prefer to call in this case as sub-concepts, which represent the defining properties of the cluster concept (Gaut, 2000), and which can occur in varying degrees and various combinations in different instantiations of the concept. The particularity of a cluster concept is that even if an object exhibits fewer than all the properties, it is sufficient for the object to be regarded as an instance of the concept (Gaut, 2000: 27).

Accordingly, conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept implies that social entrepreneurship is a representation of the combined quality of certain sub-concepts, i.e., social value creation, the social entrepreneur, the SE organization, market orientation, and social innovation.

The idea of social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept is schematically illustrated in Fig. 1. Four small circles (the social entrepreneur, the SE organization, market orientation, social innovation) and one large circle (social value creation) depict the five sub-concepts which together constitute the concept of social entrepreneurship. Since the creation of social value is considered to be a prerequisite of social entrepreneurship (see Section 4.2.1), it can be regarded as a necessary condition of social entrepreneurship and is, therefore, represented by the large circle encompassing the other four sub-concepts. The creation of social value, however, is not a sufficient condition for social entrepreneurship: it is the combination of social value creation along with the other four properties (the social entrepreneur, the SE organization, market orientation, social innovation) which qualifies something to be identified as social entrepreneurship. Further, the sub-concepts of the social entrepreneur, the SE organization, market orientation, and social innovation are not by themselves necessary conditions of social entrepreneurship and can, therefore, exist in greater or lesser degrees (Gallie, 1956a: 185) and even in different combinations (Gaut, 2000: 27) in

actual instantiations of the concept. Thus, something can be regarded as social entrepreneurship even if it exhibits less than the five sub-concepts, presupposed that the creation of social value is given.

Since the cluster account of social entrepreneurship does not specify how many or which of the characteristics have to be met for something to fall under the concept, it can be assessed that it “allows a great deal of indeterminacy” (Gaut, 2000: 27). However, it is exactly this indeterminacy which is, as we argue, the strength of conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept, since it does justice to the essentially contested and complex nature of the concept. The cluster concept understanding of social entrepreneurship is very inclusive in the sense that it allows for the existence of contesting uses and various forms of social entrepreneurship and, therefore, accommodates the differing conceptions of the different schools of social entrepreneurship (see Section 4.7). Further, it also draws attention to the different configurations of social entrepreneurship based on differing assumptions about which of the sub-concepts are involved. Thus, conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept does not ignore the diversity within the field of social entrepreneurship but serves as a conceptual tool which allows to systematically delve deeper into its various possible meanings and forms.

We suggest that conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept can help to advance future research on social entrepreneurship and its establishment as a coherent field of research in two ways.

Firstly, an understanding of social entrepreneurship in terms of the cluster concept would compel researchers to explicitly state which of the sub-concepts they emphasize in their understanding of the concept. This would make it easier for the community of researchers to build on each others' work since they would be able to more easily identify the relevant literature for their research. Especially, in this regard, the development of social entrepreneurship ‘ideal-types’ could be a worthwhile avenue for advancing coherent future research. Several ideal-types could be created for representing prevalent configurations of social entrepreneurship. For example, one ideal-type of social entrepreneurship could represent the configuration of sub-concepts that are present in the case of the Grameen Bank. This ideal-type would involve each of the five sub-concepts, as it was demonstrated in Section 4.6. Another ideal-type of a prevalent form of social entrepreneurship could be the configuration of the sub-concepts of (1) social value creation, (2) the social entrepreneur, (3) the SE organization, and (5) social innovation. An exemplar of social entrepreneurship that could be described by this ideal-type is the Khan Academy. The Khan academy is an educational organization (SE organization) founded by Salman Khan (social entrepreneur), which offers innovative online tutorials free of cost (social innovation) that have reportedly benefitted a large number of students worldwide (social value creation). The Khan Academy does not pursue earned-income strategies or other commercial activities but is fully funded by donations. It would be a worthwhile avenue for future research to identify other ideal-types based on different configurations of the sub-concepts.

Secondly, conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept could serve as a broad research agenda for the field of social entrepreneurship and, at the same time, help to organize and locate existing work within the field. Acknowledging that social entrepreneurship involves several sub-concepts calls for an in-depth investigation of each of the sub-concepts within the cluster concept framework. Research on the sub-concept of (1) social value creation could investigate the nature and the measurement of social value creation in the context of social entrepreneurship. Research on the sub-concept of (2) the social

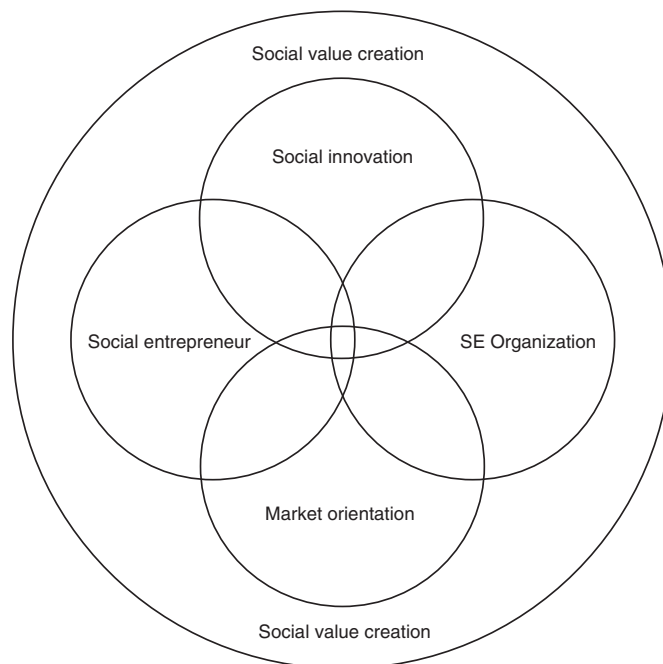


Fig. 1. Social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept.

entrepreneur could investigate the traits, skills, behavior, and motivations of social entrepreneurs. Research on the sub-concept of (3) the SE organization would involve a wide range of topics such as funding issues, cross-sector collaborations, different legal forms in different countries, and governance structures. Research on the sub-concept of (4) market orientation would involve topics such as earned-income strategies, social business, and bottom-of-the-pyramid businesses. And lastly, research on the sub-concept of (5) social innovation could investigate the nature of social innovations, the different types of social innovations, and the methods for developing social innovations.

As expected, there already exists a considerable amount of research on the five sub-concepts mentioned above. For instance, Yujico (2008) and Ziegler (2010) probed into the concept of (1) social value creation within the context of social entrepreneurship by applying the capability approach as an evaluative framework. Nga and Shamuganathan (2010) have conducted research on the (2) social entrepreneur by examining the connection of personality traits and start-up intentions and Miller et al. (2012) examined the role of compassion in encouraging social entrepreneurial activities. Authors such as Defourny and Nyssens (2008), Bacq and Janssen (2011), and Smith et al. (2012) investigated (3) organizational aspects of social entrepreneurship. Dees (1998b), Yunus (2007), and Olsen and Boxenbaum (2009) investigated the (4) market orientation aspect of social entrepreneurship. And authors such as Swedberg (2009), Ziegler (2010), and Mulgan (2007) investigated (5) social innovation within the context of social entrepreneurship. Conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as a cluster concept would help in integrating these seemingly fragmented literatures and relating them to the wider field of social entrepreneurship.

However, a limitation in the applicability of the cluster concept understanding may exist with regard to the complex and contested nature of the sub-concepts themselves. Especially, the sub-concepts of social value creation, the social entrepreneur and social innovation may be considered as contested concepts (Section 4.2) and possibly, even as essentially contested concepts. Consequently, this may complicate the application of the cluster concept conceptualization in stating one's understanding of social entrepreneurship and in developing ideal-types, since different researchers may apply different standards to what constitutes, for example, a social innovation or social value creation. Nevertheless, we believe that the cluster concept understanding of social entrepreneurship can still be a useful conceptual tool in furthering future research since it significantly reduces the complexity of the concept.

### 5.3. Concluding remarks

In this article we have set out to shed light on the ongoing contestation of social entrepreneurship and offer a solution to the definitional problem by proposing a cluster concept understanding. We hope that our article contributes to a better understanding of social entrepreneurship and inspires researchers to develop social entrepreneurship as a coherent field of research.

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