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Entrepreneurial Learning: A research on Social Entrepreneurs Learning Methods

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According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report, rate of social entrepreneurial activity is less than commercial entrepreneurship and the amount and quality of social entrepreneurial activity in developed countries is more than Iran. However training social entrepreneurs can increase the social entrepreneurial activity, but learning in social entrepreneurship is not well understood in either the academic study of social entrepreneurship or the practical development of new social entrepreneurs. Since social entrepreneurship initiates with opportunity recognition and it is the starting point for creating social values, this article is an attempt to gain insight about how social entrepreneurs learn and to provide a context for designing a conceptual learning model in the process of social entrepreneurship opportunity recognition, through identifying resources and learning methods in this process. The article includes a brief critical review of the theoretical literature in the areas of social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial learning. Thematic discourse analysis is used to interpret the life story narratives of 10 social entrepreneurs in Tehran. The principal finding is to propose a conceptual framework of entrepreneurial learning as a triadic model, including major learning sources (learning from social interactions, learning from action, learning from training and publications) and a group of 10 related learning methods.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Learning, Social Entrepreneurship, Opportunity Recognition

Introduction

Social entrepreneurship as a new field of research is growing rapidly and attracting increased attention along with corporate and economic entrepreneurship. It has been demonstrated by various studies that social entrepreneurship function as an effective mechanism for creating value in many social, economic, cultural, and environmental sectors (Murphy & Coombes, 2009; Shaw & Carter, 2007). The evidences demonstrate that despite the emergent need for social entrepreneurship, the degree of social entrepreneurship is far less than economic entrepreneurship, moreover the degree and quality of social entrepreneurship is less in Iran compared to other developed countries (Terjesen et al., 2011). Less effective training for growing social entrepreneurs in Iran seems to be a good reason for this lack. Nowadays the importance of entrepreneurial process is well recognized and many recent works have emphasized the role of entrepreneurial learning in the literature, however there is still non-sufficient understanding of how this learning occurs (Deakins, O'Neill, & Mileham, 2000; Rae & Carswell, 2000).

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While earlier research significantly contribute to defining entrepreneurial learning, most of them have just focused on economic entrepreneurship ignoring specific study on how learning occurs in social entrepreneurship. Since social entrepreneurship is a different concept from economic entrepreneurship, finding a true understanding of how social entrepreneurs learn in the real world, as well as designing an appropriate model of social entrepreneurship learning seem necessary.

The Theoretical Framework

Social Entrepreneurship

If social entrepreneurship as a new field of research be institutionalized in the society, it could play a significant role in solving social problems. Today, public and humanitarian efforts cannot efficiently address social problems (Certo & Miller, 2008). Social entrepreneurship has the potential to create a lasting impact in those areas which governments' activities have not been effective (Dees, 2001, 2007) and is identified as an innovative approach to meet social (Mair & Marti, 2006; Zahra et al. 2009), and economic needs (Shaw & Carter, 2007) and to accelerate social change (Alvord, Brown, & Letts, 2004). Social entrepreneurs are the change factors in developed countries who use innovative and economic approaches to address social problems (e.g. poverty, gender discrimination, etc.) and to challenge traditional ways (Zahra et al., 2009). They are known as individuals who are able to fill those

gaps which government and market could not appropriately address them (Mair & Marti, 2006). Nowadays, it has been widely approved that social entrepreneurship is an effective mechanism for creating value in various social, economic, cultural, and environmental forms (Murphy & Coombes, 2009; Shaw & Carter, 2007). Therefore social entrepreneurs contribute to development of the countries through creating value. Although Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) suggests social entrepreneurship as one of the governments' policies to develop entrepreneurship, evidences show that despite the urgent need to enhance social entrepreneurship, the degree of social entrepreneurship is far less than economic entrepreneurship and also the quality of it is higher in developed countries compared to Iran (Terjesen et al. 2011). Social entrepreneurship activities in Iran are mostly in the forms of for profit social enterprise or hybrid social enterprise and unfortunately for profit enterprises and traditional NGOs have no role in social entrepreneurship activities (Terjesen et el. 2011).

Entrepreneurial Learning

Since training leads to social entrepreneurship improvement in the countries, one reason for the mentioned problems in Iran refers to the lack of effective trainings for social entrepreneurs. Moreover the traditional approaches to education and training programs are not significantly successful in addressing the learning needs of entrepreneurs (Sullivan, 2000). Rae and Carswell (2000) suggested that entrepreneurship training programs are more of theoretical value, and there is a large distance between academic education of entrepreneurship theory and entrepreneurial behavior in practice. Moreover the needed skills for entrepreneurial process can be obtained, and there is not enough understanding of how this learning occurs (Deakins et al., 2000; Rae & Carswell, 2000).

Today the importance of learning in entrepreneurial process is well recognized and many studies have been performed in this area. Entrepreneurship is a learning process and learning also constitutes the basic part of entrepreneurial process. An entrepreneurial theory needs learning theory. Entrepreneurs must learn in order to gain the essential resources, and acquire managing skills. Entrepreneurial learning is defined as an ongoing process which provides the knowledge needed to start and run a business, and also manage the unexpected events (Larsson et al. 2003). In another definition, entrepreneurial learning is known as the continual and orderly process which on the one hand result in effective recognizing and exploiting of all internal and external organizational resources, and on the other hand facilitates using of new learning opportunities)Rae & Carswell, 2001). Learning has changed to an important and critical part in the entrepreneurial process to the extent that learning activities should happen before the entrepreneurship activities (Kiechel, 1990). Entrepreneurs are considered practical persons who search for new opportunities and always learn from their experiences to become creative and innovative (Holmqvist, 2000).

Entrepreneurial Learning Sources

Using qualitative methods, entrepreneurship researchers generally attempt to identify learning sources. The literature generally demonstrates communication with other people (Duffy, 2007; Ho, 2003; Mumford, 1988; Rae, 2005), learning from social networks (Taylor & Thorpe, 2004; Warren, 2004), learning from experiences (Akola & Heinonen, 2006; Man, 2006; Mumford, 1988; Politis, 2008), learning from working (Duffy, 2007; Mumford, 1988; Rae, 2004; Raelin, 1997), and learning from training and publications (Kuratko, 2005; Man, 2006; Mumford, 1988) as the basic source of learning.

Entrepreneurial Learning Methods

Up to now various learning methods have been introduced for the entrepreneurs in the literature. Most common learning methods include: Mentoring approach (Sullivan 2000; Warren, 2004), university courses (Edwards & Muir, 2005; Rae, 2005), observation (Deakins et al.,2000), using an advisor (Mumford 1988; Rae, 2005), starting a business (Rae, 2005), group work (Akola & Heinonen, 2006), lecture (Mumford, 1988; Wood, 2004), using a trainer (Mumford, 1988; Rae, 2005; Wood, 2004), showing of how to do the work, discussion group, practicing the projects (Mumford 1988; Wood, 2004), video films (Wood, 2004), books (Mumford 1988; Wood, 2004), case study, modeling, Programmed learning, advising, role-playing, missions of exploring the cognitive tools, discussion, questioning techniques, nominal group technique, critical thinking techniques (Mumford 1988).

Formulation of Research question

While earlier research has a great contribution to entrepreneurial learning, it is just confined to economic entrepreneurship, and little practical studies could be found in the literature to examine social entrepreneurship learning process and to

obtain a true understanding of social entrepreneurship.

Similar to economic entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship initiates with opportunity recognition and it is the starting point for creating social values (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006; Corner & Ho, 2010; Murphy & Coombes, 2009; Seelos & Mair, 2005; Thompson, 2002). The literature in entrepreneurship training also emphasizes that opportunity recognition could and must be taught (Saks & Gaglio, 2002). Through identifying the entrepreneurs' sources and learning methods in the opportunity recognition process, this study seeks to gain an insight towards how social entrepreneurs learn in the real world and provide a context for designing a model of social entrepreneurs' learning in opportunity recognition process. This model could be used practically for growing social entrepreneurs. Therefore this objective is expressed in the form of the following research question:

Which sources and learning methods entrepreneurs use in the process of social entrepreneurship opportunity recognition process for growing their entrepreneurial competencies?

Methodology

As the narrative approach has been recognized as a valid method in the study of entrepreneurship (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004), the present study employs narrative methodology (Polkinghorne, 1988) to collect and analyze the data. The researcher makes a close relationship with the individuals and encourages them to tell stories about their lives. Then the researcher retells the stories into a narrative chronology. In the end, views from the participant's life with those of the researcher's life are combined together by the narrative (Creswell, 2002). Researcher contributes in creating meaning from narratives in the interview process and afterwards.

Semi-structured and in-depth interviews in the form of two-way interactions along with asking questions and recording the results were used to collect the data in this research. The interview questions were designed based on a combination of the two frameworks of interviews STAR (Kessler, 2006) and 5W1H (Ikeda et al. 1998). In the next step the designed questions were reviewed according to the above-mentioned frameworks and the overlaps were eliminated out of the questions. The questions in the first interview were also reviewed and tested. The individuals were asked to explain their past activities during the process of opportunity recognition in social entrepreneurship. At the end interview questions were used as a guidance framework to ensure that all aspects and criteria have been fully considered. All the social entrepreneurs in Tehran who have identified a social problem and exploited an opportunity through starting a new business to create a social value form the population of this study based on Peredo and Mclean's (2006) definition. A group of social entrepreneurs were selected based on the experts' suggestions and social networks and relations and were invited to participate in the interviews. Sampling was objective-oriented and the interviews were continued to the point of theoretical saturation.

Therefore the individuals were selected based on the criteria of their participation in a social enterprise and their experience in social activities. Firstly the full text of each interview was coded by discourse analysis method (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). In the next step the full text and also the coding of any interview was reviewed and revalued with the presence of that participant to confirm the true understanding of the participants' narrations and sayings in the interview in order to develop a model of social entrepreneurship learning process.

Findings

Learning narrations of social entrepreneurs and the literature of entrepreneurial learning were reviewed in this study. Three main and fundamental sources for learning in the process of social entrepreneurship opportunity recognition were identified. These sources include: learning from social interactions, learning from action, and learning from publication training. All mechanisms and methods used by entrepreneurs for exploiting the three categories of learning sources in opportunity recognition process were examined and presented in a model in picture 1. The paper continues with a description of the triple sources and learning methods as well as abstracts from the narrations given by the social entrepreneurs.

Learning from social interactions

Learning from interaction with other people (Duffy, 2007; Ho, 2003; Mumford, 1988; Rae, 2005) and learning from social networks (Taylor & Thorpe, 2004; Warren, 2004) have been clearly argued in the literature. There are some overlaps between these two kinds of learning because learning from social networks is formed through interactions with other members of a network. Therefore, learning from "social interactions" is introduced as the basic source of learning. Some learning methods such as

mentoring (Sullivan, 2000; Warren, 2004), observation (Kuratko, 2005; Deakins et al., 2000), using an advisor (Mumford, 1988; Rae, 2005), group work (Akola & Heinonen, 2006), and questioning (Smith, 1997) correspond with learning from social interactions. However the findings of this study just confirm two methods of observation and using an advisor. Moreover, learning from interactions and discussion, as well as learning from visiting the specialized centers were identified in this study. The samples of these two learning methods are presented below:

Sample 1.

I remember I was contacted on April 10 and told that Mrs. X had gone to a very miserable orphanage with a number of people ... I went there, it was a building with several floors which was filled with two-three hundred poor girls. They were spending a difficult life there. Their clothes, talks, studies, all were awful ..., for example an 18-year-old girl went out in the evening and came back in the morning or a 15-year-old girl beat a 7-year-old to take her stuff ... we tried to communicate with them and gain their trust,...

Sample 2.

We were told to go to a center like hospital or welfare and write or role-play sad or happy events we see there, for example about the sadness of someone who has lost a child, or someone who is alone in a rehabilitation center for a long time. I went to a hospital of children suffering from cancer. I saw a girl whom I was really attracted. I forgot what I wanted to do about the writing and my class because I decided to go there or other welfare centers,...

Sample 3.

This child was going to be treated by dialysis. The little 5 years old kid had just been brought to hospital. He was alone with no one to support him. We agreed to go and stay with him in turn. The welfare center had no one to send and stay with the boy as the patient advocate. He had no supporter unlike the other children,...

As it is clear from the narrations above, visiting the hospitals, orphanages, welfare centers, and support centers from the children made the entrepreneurs observe the poor and lower class people closely. After observing the places, entrepreneurs felt the pain and gained a true and deep understanding of these people and felt responsible to help them. Therefore, learning from social interactions includes visiting the specialized centers (e.g. hospital, orphanage, etc.), discussion and interaction with poor and socially disadvantaged person, consulting with experts and observation.

Learning from action

Learning from experiences (Akola & Heinonen, 2006, Man, 2006; Mumford, 1988; Politis, 2008) and learning from working (Duffy, 2007; Mumford, 1988; Rae, 2004; Raelin, 1997) consist the main sources of learning which have been examined by many researchers. Since working and gaining experience are the outcomes of action and doing in practice, leaning from action in this study is introduced as a source of learning which is comprehensive and also includes two sources of experience and work. Mumford (1988) examined the most important and effective methods and experiences in promotion of managers to higher organizational levels. He identified "operating within unfamiliar circumstances" as one of the managers' learning methods and argued it as one of the subsets of learning from work. However there is no reference to it as a source of learning in the entrepreneurs' narrations of this study. Analyses on the narrations and the results of coding demonstrate that learning from action include voluntarily social activity experience, feedback from work tasks, and business problem solving. The samples are presented below:

Sample 1.

...Some of my friends called me and said they had some confidential dossiers in municipality. I was requested to go there and read the dossiers to see what actions had already been taken. I was unintentionally attracted to that way. I didn't intend to do something but I just went there as a volunteer. The person who had introduced me told that I was a trustable and religious person...

Sample 2.

...I remember when I was a teenager, my classmates used to buy expensive cards. I persuaded them to collect their money and give it to our school janitor. I could do that and I continued to do similar things later on, for example I was eighteen and I bought all the necessary stuff for a kid room and I gave them to a poor family for free...

Sample 3.

...After a while we saw a change in their mood of talking. They knew nothing at first, for example I told them not to do something because it caused them bad reputation. "What is reputation!" they said. So we decided to register their names in school. We divided them into several groups of 4 or 5

persons in order to prevent them from going together to school like a herd and avoid mess. Step by step they began to change their behavior. After a while they could grasp the meaning of reputation. We understood how impressible the children were. We taught them to communicate not with everyone, and behave in the right way. After two years we glad to see how much those bad boys have changed to be good. It was unpredictable for us…

Sample 4.

…One of the biggest problems in poor families is cultural poverty and ideology. Once I knew a father of a poor family who was suffering from cancer. We gave the family some money to help them in treatment costs of the father's cancer but that family had a lot of other difficulties and their father's cancer was not the first priority. They were in rent arrears and paid the rent by that money. We had these kinds of problems at first, Later we found out this was a diversion and sometimes the recognition of these diversions were so misleading and difficult for us…

Sample 5

…Some people used to come to our office. It seemed they wanted to destroy everything we had. For example, some university students came and said that place should be allocated to political activities. On that time our office had not been registered and therefore, we couldn't face them legally...

Social activity experiences in all periods of entrepreneurs' lives from school years to the time of starting a business play a great role in recognizing the social opportunities. It seems these activities have improved entrepreneurial alertness (Kirzner, 1979) in the process of opportunity recognition. As it is obvious in sample 3, social entrepreneurs have usually worked in welfare centers temporarily and for pilot period. Feedback from their actions helped them to assess the current situation. Therefore, facing the challenges, solving the problems and coping with the difficulties are of learning methods social entrepreneurs use. Although literature has not discussed about problem solving, it is one of the learning methods among experts in various fields such as economics, psychology, sociology, and educational psychology (Moust et al. 2005). Generally speaking, the learning sources are not just originated from social interactions and communications, but they also come from the experiences of acting and doing in various work, communicative, and training situations.

Learning from publications training

Kuratko (2005) introduced three important sources for comprehending the entrepreneurship process. Publication as the first source consist of special university journals, books related to entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs' biography, collections including the introduction of entrepreneurs, periodical news, newspapers and conferences. Man (2006) also examined learning from training and publications in a study. Moreover, other sources and methods of learning argued in the literature include free studies, seminars, conferences (Mumford, 1998) and academic courses (Warren, 2004). Social entrepreneurs interviewed in this research have used some methods for learning which all of them are sub-category of learning from training and publications. These methods include: studding the documents, written information and statistics, participating in training courses inside and outside the business, search and exploring through the internet.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates a model of entrepreneurial learning in the process of social opportunity recognition which not only has a may be little contribution in filling the gap of social entrepreneurial literature, but also is useful in practical view. Identifying sources and entrepreneurial methods in the process of learning to social entrepreneurship opportunity recognition helps university students to draw a comprehensive map of learning for them. In addition, through comparing the current situation with the results obtained in this study, they can identify their learning potentials which they were ignorant of them.

Training implications

The present study shows a need to assess the content of training courses and develop the students' skills. Currently the entrepreneurship trainings in Iranian entrepreneurship schools are just theoretical. The practical aspects of learning for example learning from social interactions and learning from action as main sources of learning are not taken as important as theories. Therefore, the following suggestions are presented for entrepreneurship schools and institutes.

- Designing a course called sources and methods of social entrepreneurship learning in universities.
- University professors use teaching techniques

in accordance with the content of the above-mentioned course.

6.2 Research implications

- The population of this research included all social entrepreneurs. It is suggested that a similar study examine established social entrepreneurs and over different periods in life cycle of social entrepreneurship. This study maybe would be more comprehensive for drawing the model of learning methods of social entrepreneurship.
- It is proposed that a similar research study learning methods of social entrepreneur in different sections of social problems (e.g. education, health and treatment, children, hurt women, etc.) separately.
- It is better to draw the model of assessing the synergy of social entrepreneurs and specify how social entrepreneurs can benefit from the synergy among different dimensions of learning sources and methods in the model.
- Designing operational tools and scales for quantitative measurement is proposed.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Triadic model of social entrepreneurial learning sources and methods

