

# Antisocial entrepreneurship: Conceptual foundations and a research agenda

Erik Lundmark and Alf Westelius

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**ANTISOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP:  
CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND A RESEARCH AGENDA**

Erik Lundmark, MSc, PhD

Senior Lecturer

Macquarie University

NSW, 2109, Australia

Tel. +61 2 9850 8479

E-mail: erik.lundmark@mq.edu.au

Alf Westelius, PhD

Professor

Linköping University

SE-581 83 Linköping, Sweden

Tel. +46 13 281526

E-mail: alf.westelius@liu.se

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# **ANTISOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS AND A RESEARCH AGENDA**

## **ABSTRACT**

Whereas social entrepreneurship has been extensively studied, its antipode—antisocial entrepreneurship—is all but neglected in the literature. This article identifies and elucidates this glaring conceptual and research gap; it provides a conceptual foundation for making sense of antisocial entrepreneurship, demonstrating how it is distinct from related constructs such as illegal and destructive entrepreneurship; and it suggests an agenda for future research on antisocial entrepreneurship. Through studying antisocial entrepreneurship, a broader spectrum of entrepreneurial intentions, actions and outcomes becomes visible, potentially furthering our understanding, not only of antisocial entrepreneurship, but also of other, more commonly studied, facets of entrepreneurship.

## **INTRODUCTION**

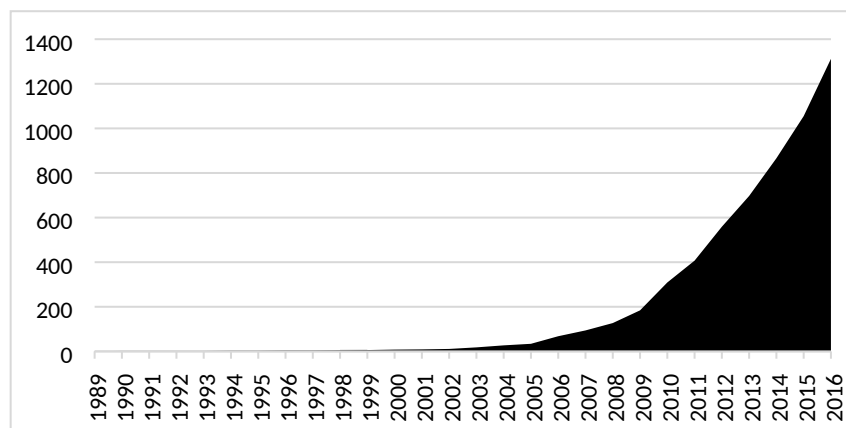
While it is recognized that entrepreneurship can, in principle, destroy value (Baumol, 1996; Lucas and Fuller, 2017), there is an underlying assumption that we can rest assured that the net effect is positive (Corbett, 2016). This assumption should not, however, preclude studies of negative effects of entrepreneurship. For example, even celebrated contemporary “hero enterprises” (Davidsson & Wiklund, 2001), including Apple, Amazon, Facebook, Google, Microsoft and Uber, have allegedly engaged in acts that destroy value, such as polarizing and corrupting our democracies, generating toxic and sexist workplaces, working their employees to collapse rather than improving work conditions, systematically utilizing loopholes in tax regimes to avoid paying taxes and using their dominant position to reduce competition (e.g. Bakshy, Messing & Adamic, 2015; Brehm Christensen & Clancy, 2018; Duhigg, 2018; Isaac, 2017; Kanter, 2013;

Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015a; Scott, 2016). There are also examples of entrepreneurs whose very business ideas could be categorized as antisocial. For example, Shkreli used Turing Pharmaceuticals' monopoly on the drug Daraprim, which is lifesaving for some people, to squeeze the terminally ill out of their life's savings (cf. McMullen, 2017; Plummer and Mitchell, 2017). Other entrepreneurs exploit customer ignorance to peddle substandard products or exploit the weak position of foreign workers (e.g. Fontaine, 2018; Henriques-Gomes 2018; Shover et al. 2003). While some of these practices could be classified as illegal (Webb et al., 2009) and some as destructive in a narrow economic sense (Baumol, 1996), others fit neither of these labels, but would still be deemed to contribute to social problems, to be detrimental to disadvantaged groups, and to be erosive to social cohesion, that is, they contribute to the destruction of social value (Choi & Majumdar, 2014).

Grappling with the multifaceted concept of entrepreneurship, scholars often home in on one facet at a time and entrepreneurship studies have predominantly focused on the facets that reflect flattering or desirable images, leaving the “dark sides” unexplored (Hjorth et al, 2008; Lundmark and Westelius, 2014; Shane, 2008; Weiskopf and Steyaert, 2009; Wright and Zahra, 2011; Zahra and Wright, 2016). As a result, studies of the socialness of entrepreneurship have focused on how entrepreneurship creates social value (Austin et al, 2006). The number of publications on social entrepreneurship has increased exponentially over the last decade (see Figure 1), but its logical antipode—antisocial entrepreneurship—entrepreneurship that destroys or appropriates social value, is virtually unexplored. We currently know too little about the extent to which entrepreneurship destroys social value, the attitudes among entrepreneurs towards practices that do so and the mechanisms by which they are related to entrepreneurial mindsets, methods and experiences.

There are several reasons for studying the opposing facets of entrepreneurship to those regularly investigated. First, by focusing one-sidedly on what is positive, we neglect negative facets that research could elucidate and help remedy (McMullen and Warnick, 2016; Zahra and Wright, 2016). Second, by ignoring the negative, we jeopardize our credibility as a field, risking being perceived as advocates of entrepreneurship rather than researchers (Stevenson and Jarillo, 1990). Third, by studying new facets, we are more likely to make discoveries that have the potential to elucidate also other facets than the one studied (Shepherd and Patzelt, 2017).

This article contributes to the literature by 1) identifying and elucidating a glaring conceptual and research gap; 2) by providing a conceptual foundation for making sense of antisocial entrepreneurship and demonstrating how it is distinct from related constructs such as illegal entrepreneurship and destructive entrepreneurship; and 3) suggesting an agenda for future research on antisocial entrepreneurship.



*Figure 1 Cumulative number of papers that mention "social entrepreneurship" in title, abstract or keywords in SCOPUS (search 2017-06-08).*

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS**

Social entrepreneurship is an essentially contested concept for which consensus on a core definition is unlikely to emerge (Choi and Majumdar, 2014; Schumpeter, 1909). Think for example about how our current social entrepreneurship frameworks would categorize

a not-for-profit abortion clinic focusing on helping women with low income have an abortion, or a venture smuggling refugees into countries where they could get asylum. It would be presumptuous to believe that the antipode of social entrepreneurship could be established as an uncontested concept. However, important aspects of the concept can be identified, contributing to transparent declarations and analyses of the degree of socialness. Antisocial entrepreneurship can function as a conceptual attractor (Steyaert, 2007) around which theory can emerge that helps us make sense of entrepreneurship in general and its already extensively studied aspect of social entrepreneurship.

Social entrepreneurship is often defined by its creation of social value, and it is frequently juxtaposed to for-profit or commercial entrepreneurship (Austin et al, 2006; Dees and Anderson, 2006; Choi and Majumdar, 2014). This is problematic because for-profit ventures can create as well as destroy social value (cf. Lucas and Fuller, 2017; Santos, 2012). Classifications based on the extent of social value creation are problematic too, because social value, like social entrepreneurship, is a contested concept that is difficult to measure (Choi and Majumdar, 2014) and intentions and outcomes can differ substantially (Santos, 2012; Lundmark & Westelius, 2012). Measuring it thus requires interpretations of intentions, behaviors and outcomes and depends on the values applied in making the classification (Nicholls and Cho, 2008; Tonry and Bildsten, 2011). Categorizations become clear and uncontested only when there is broad acceptance of the norms used to make the assessment. However, measurability is not a prerequisite for theorizing. For concepts to be useful to theorizing, “it is not necessary that the pure forms exist in the world, or even that we have high ‘interrater reliability’ in sorting real cases into only two conceptual boxes” (Winter, 2003, p.993). In its broadest terms, social value is the aggregation of utility in society (Santos, 2012), but the entrepreneurship literature has traditionally associated it with value creation for marginalized or disadvantaged

groups (Austin et al, 2006), society-oriented value (Dees and Anderson, 2006), the addressing of social issues and pressing social needs and the promotion of freedom, equality, and tolerance (Choi and Majumdar, 2014). Antisocial entrepreneurship would thus signify the appropriation or destruction of social value, e.g. by taking advantage of the resource-poor, the infirm, the socially unconnected, or by damaging the social fabric.

Without acknowledging the existence of antisocial entrepreneurship, we would tend to study such instances under our unqualified, “regular”, entrepreneurship label. For example, in his oft-cited article, Baumol (1996, p. 6) suggested that entrepreneurs are those “who are ingenious and creative in finding ways that add to their own wealth, power, and prestige” and he suggested that at least a subsample of the entrepreneurs have little regard for how their gain affects the rest of us, thus the outcome may include no net change in value at all, value creation or value destruction. His definition leaves little room for entrepreneurs that are driven by a social mission insofar it would decrease their own value capture in favor of the creation of social value, as it is assumed that entrepreneurship is driven by the desire to enrich oneself. A fair critique of Baumol (1996) is thus that he neglected social entrepreneurs, and a critique of the entrepreneurship field is that it neglects the existence of entrepreneurs that care primarily about themselves and show little regard for social value and who are prepared to destroy or appropriate social value for their own gain.

We suggest that socialness is a scale that ranges from the antisocial, via the neutral to the social. We also suggest that socialness is not determined by whether a firm is for or not-for profit, nor by whether it is legal or illegal. For example, Turing Pharmaceuticals did not break the law when obtaining a monopoly on a drug that some people need to survive and then raising the price to appropriate as much value as possible from this vulnerable group (cf. McMullen, 2017; Plummer and Mitchell, 2017). Furthermore,

illegal entrepreneurship is not necessarily antisocial. For example, street musicians who enrich the city atmosphere and hawkers that peddle products in breach of laws and regulations may not be appropriating or destroying social value, but they are illegal in some institutional settings. Baker and Nelson (2005) provided further examples of entrepreneurs who are breaking laws in the course of their mundane business practices.

Antisocial entrepreneurship is also distinct from destructive entrepreneurship; for example, a regular business can destroy value through mismanagement or failed strategic bets without destroying social value (cf. Lucas and Fuller, 2017). Antisocial ventures can also be productive; for example, arguably The Pirate Bay (TPB – a website allowing users to share files quickly and efficiently, later found guilty of facilitating copyright infringement) was antisocial because it displayed an open disregard for social norms and lawful copyright holders. Many who got access to the material through TPB could otherwise not have afforded it, thus creating net positive value. From a dynamic perspective on value creation, some may argue that TPB would have destroyed the incentives to create new art (as appropriation of value creation would be more difficult) had they been allowed to legally continue; others may argue that TPB spurred innovation by triggering ventures like Spotify, which aims to provide a similar supply of music, using similar technology, but respecting copyright. Thus, ventures enabling file sharing of copyrighted material, like TPB, may well have sped up the kind of innovativeness generally lauded. Not surprisingly, TPB has been described both as an example of Schumpeterian creative destruction and of selfish exploitation of what was created by others (cf. Lundmark and Westelius, 2012).

Because social entrepreneurship is generally lauded and antisocial entrepreneurship stigmatized, it is easier to identify instances of social entrepreneurship than instances of antisocial entrepreneurship. A reason is that entrepreneurs engaging in



antisocial entrepreneurship are likely to deny that their activities are antisocial, thus disputing the categorization, whereas the social entrepreneurship label is more likely to be accepted by entrepreneurs. For example, while some categorize TPB as a clear example of antisocial entrepreneurship encouraging unethical behavior, the instigators claimed that TPB was a means of creating positive change in society, such as changing copyright laws and promoting knowledge sharing. Likewise, claims about antisocial outcomes of venture activities are more likely to be contested by these ventures than claims about their social value creation. Therefore, scholars aiming to study antisocial entrepreneurship need to go beyond research subject self-categorization.

While consensus on any one value foundation upon which to evaluate the level of socialness of a venture is unlikely to emerge, we must expect and allow each scholar to state and apply their specific rationale. Considering the full spectrum, from antisocial to social entrepreneurship, opens a part of the spectrum previously disregarded or conflated with a Baumolian “regular” entrepreneur. To date, the entrepreneurship field has produced thousands of papers on entrepreneurship driven mainly by a concern for others, and juxtaposed this to those who engage in entrepreneurship for their own gain. We argue that also among those who engage in entrepreneurship for their own gain, the extent to which they regard their impact on social value is a relevant dimension that requires attention for us to better understand entrepreneurial behavior. To be clear, this article does not suggest that entrepreneurship is generally bad, detrimental or destructive; it does suggest that the field has neglected important questions such as (1) why, when, and how entrepreneurship leads to the appropriation or destruction of social value; (2) why, when, and how some people and not others engage in such entrepreneurship and (3) why, when, and how different modes of entrepreneurial action are used to appropriate social value and with what consequences (cf. Shane & Venkataraman, 2000).

## **ANTISOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: A RESEARCH AGENDA**

Considering that motives and intentions are important (but not unproblematic) as a basis for how people judge pro- and antisocial behavior (cf. Lundmark and Westelius, 2012), they seem like a reasonable starting point. It seems probable that entrepreneurs, like the rest of us, are driven partly by selfish motives and that these may, at least sometimes, come to the fore at the expense of others. Such claims are supported by foundational entrepreneurship scholarship. Schumpeter (1934, p. 93) suggested that among the drivers for entrepreneurship one finds “the will to conquer: the impulse to fight, to prove oneself superior to others”. Similar claims are found outside of academic circles. For example, Anderson et al. (2009), who studied images of entrepreneurs in Europe, found that while there are many positive views of entrepreneurs, they are also perceived to have predatory potential and to be potential aggressors. Most importantly, domination, control and competitiveness feature frequently among the narratives of antisocial entrepreneurs themselves. For example, interviewing convicted telemarketing entrepreneurs, managers and sales agents, Shover et al. (2003), reported frequent mentions of motivators such as making money, the ability to manipulate and control people, and the respectable image of being a business owner, thus providing clear evidence of the Baumolian entrepreneur.

Therefore, similarly to how research on social entrepreneurs has focused on the pro-social drivers of social entrepreneurship (Shepherd, 2015; Miller et al., 2012), there is reason to investigate how motives relate to antisocial entrepreneurship. However, while pro-social motives are generally lauded, antisocial motives are generally frowned upon and thus rarely flaunted in public. This makes them difficult to identify and scrutinize (sometimes even for the person harboring such motives). Therefore, asking respondents for their underlying motives, risks providing severely biased accounts. In this regard, studying convicted criminals may make accounts more open and honest, as their fear of

legal implications and reputational loss is lower than for people who fear future court action and social stigma (as argued by Shover, 1973, and as the accounts found in Shover et al., 2003 indicate). However, in order to compare those engaging in antisocial entrepreneurship with those who do not, we need to identify a suitable comparison group where such motives can be reliably identified. A taste for wealth, power and prestige does not necessarily lead to antisocial entrepreneurship (cf. Baumol, 1996). Finding ways of validly and reliably identifying also socially undesirable motivators is an important issue for future research that could shed light on a range of entrepreneurial behaviors.

Linked to motivators are the barriers preventing people from engaging in antisocial entrepreneurship. For example, empathy has been found to increase opportunity recognition (Khalid and Sekiguchi, 2018), but it is also likely to lead to sympathy, which inhibits acts that harm others (Smith, 1759) and thus to inhibit antisocial entrepreneurship. Antisocial entrepreneurship may therefore require rationalization of some actions to minimize sympathy or downplay harm. For example, Shover et al. (2003, p. 500) reported that convicted telemarketing criminals typically justified their actions based on the notion that their customers agreed to the transactions voluntarily, thus their respondents maintain “that they were not victimizing their customers but engaging in a routine sales transaction, no different than a retail establishment selling a shirt that is marked up 1,000 per cent.” The processes by which mental barriers to antisocial entrepreneurship are overcome are thus likely to play an important role in enabling continued engagement in antisocial entrepreneurship. Promising research in entrepreneurship has identified behaviors that entrepreneurs engage in to manage resource constraints, such as bricolage, which enables entrepreneurs to creatively exploit physical, social, or institutional inputs that others reject or ignore (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Building on such work, is it possible that antisocial entrepreneurs engage in

normative bricolage to overcome barriers to antisocial opportunities, and if so, is such bricolage proactive or reactive, that is, do entrepreneurs act first and justify the actions later or vice versa (cf. Lerner et al., 2018)?

Theorizing on normative bricolage implies a link between entrepreneurship and rule breaking, which in turn implies a link between entrepreneurship and different types of misbehavior (Lundmark and Westelius, 2012). While such links have been suggested at the individual level (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Kets de Vries, 1985, cf. Obschonka et al. 2013 and Unger et al., 2015), the entrepreneur is not the entire organization and rule-breaking not likely to be universal; for any organized activity – even organized crime (Shover, 1973; Hobbs, 1997; Beauchez, 2017) – there needs to be some stability and some norms and rules that apply. It is therefore important to span levels of analysis and also study what factors are related to antisocial activities in entrepreneurial ventures. Studies indicate that entrepreneurs as role models and imprinters may influence organizational culture (Schein, 1990; Stinchcombe, 1965), which in turn can steer organizations towards or away from antisocial activities (Shover and Scroggins, 2009).

Certain characteristics of entrepreneurial organizations may also be related to antisocial activities such as a focus on rule breaking and aggressive competition (Beauchez, 2017; Covin and Slevin, 1991; Lundmark and Westelius, 2012). There are at least anecdotal indications that contemporary salient entrepreneurial ventures have encouraged entrepreneurial actions that have also been linked to antisocial behaviors. For example, the former Uber CEO is claimed to have promoted activities challenging laws and disrespecting laws that were not enforced, if they restricted business opportunities (Newcomer, 2017). However, like Elert and Henrekson (2016) see positive potential in evasive entrepreneurship, a greater goal of Uber was to make transportation more efficient and reduce the environmental footprint of transportation. Achieving changes in

rules hindering efficient transportation would be part of furthering this goal. This indicates that it is promising to study the intersection of triggers of entrepreneurial and antisocial actions and potential ways of harnessing the positive aspects of such triggers while neutralizing the risk that they induce harmful antisocial activities. It is also important to study how antisocial entrepreneurship can function as a catalyst for institutional change and the relationship between antisocial and Schumpeterian entrepreneurship (as illustrated by the examples of TPB and Uber); and how institutions are related to antisocial entrepreneurship (cf. Collins et al., 2016; Lucas & Fuller, 2017; Sloan et al., 2016). For example, if exploiting the vulnerability of foreign workers is widespread, can a focal new venture stay competitive if it does not (cf., Fontaine, 2018; Lucas & Fuller, 2017)?

Furthermore, entrepreneurial ventures can exhibit a mix of behaviors on the social—antisocial spectrum. For example, Uber has instigated Schumpeterian creative destruction in the taxi industry, it has challenged and disrespected laws, developed work conditions that many employees describe as toxic (Griffith, 2017; Isaac, 2017), and it has engaged in charitable activities (Cision, 2016). Entrepreneurs and their ventures are thus complex and paradoxical. While scholars may want to categorize ventures as overall social, neutral or antisocial for some purposes, for others, it may be more fruitful to analyze particular actions of a venture and to recognize that a focal venture may exhibit both social and antisocial aspects simultaneously. Social aspects of a venture may even spark antisocial aspects through moral licensing or feelings of entitlement (cf., Klotz & Bolino, 2013; McMullen & Bergman, 2017). The grey zones and/or the combination of antisocial and social entrepreneurship are promising, yet scarcely studied, areas for future research. Such grey zones and mixed actions are likely to be contested. For example, high-profile entrepreneurial ventures, like Amazon, face recurring claims of inhumane

working conditions, evading taxes, and exploiting the lack of bargaining power of the weak in society (Cadwalladr, 2013; Selby, 2017; Kantor and Streitfeld, 2015a), yet the founding entrepreneurs may contest or rationalize such accounts (Kantor and Streitfeld, 2015b). Conflicting views are fertile ground for further research and theorizing.

## **CONCLUSION**

This article has identified a glaring conceptual and research gap, provided a conceptual foundation for making sense of antisocial entrepreneurship, and suggested a research agenda for exploring the antisocial aspects of entrepreneurship. We have suggested that the field has neglected important questions such as: (1) why, when, and how entrepreneurship leads to the appropriation or destruction of social value; (2) why, when, and how some people and not others engage in such entrepreneurship and (3) why, when, and how different modes of entrepreneurial action are used to appropriate social value and with what consequences. We have argued that social entrepreneurship should be complemented by the conceptual attractor of antisocial entrepreneurship. While scholars may want to categorize ventures as overall social, neutral or antisocial for some purposes, for others, it may be more useful to analyze particular actions of a venture and to recognize that ventures may exhibit both social and antisocial aspects simultaneously. By acknowledging the existence of antisocial entrepreneurship, not only does a broader spectrum of entrepreneurial intentions, actions and outcomes become visible, but doing so also bears the promise to deliver results that will elucidate other facets of entrepreneurship, its antecedents and consequences.

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