



Boundary conceptions, knowledge brokering and enabling processes : A study of organizational learning in social enterprises

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In the last two decades, social entrepreneurship has gained global prominence as an innovative and sustainable approach for social value creation. Academic research in the field has been 'social entrepreneur' centric. However, there is increasing recognition that social entrepreneurship is a collective process enacted through people, the examination of which has the potential to provide novel theoretical and practitioner insights.

This research examines a central collective process in social enterprises – of organizational learning – a phenomenon extensively studied from the perspective of commercial enterprises, and the significance of which in enabling social enterprises to develop effective context-specific solutions is being acknowledged but is yet to get adequate research attention. Since recognizable differences exist between social and commercial enterprises, utilizing existing literature could be limiting, owing to the neglect of the intricacies of social enterprise, thus necessitating an in-depth exploration of the processes involved therein.

Employing qualitative research methodology to explore the processes, data was collected from four Indian social enterprises using semi-structured interviews, group discussions, field observations, internal documents (such as annual reports, performance data, in-house publications), and publically available secondary data. Data collection and analysis were iterative in nature and followed the coding methods propounded by grounded theory to systematically develop themes and to facilitate the transition from raw data to theoretical abstraction. In order to establish the trustworthiness of emerging themes and the coding method, expert checks and inter-rater agreement method were employed.

Anchoring in the interpretive paradigm of learning, analysis revealed four themes: *implicit boundaries and their dynamics, knowledge brokering and immersion, boundary objects and learning routines*. Three implicit boundaries – *competence, social and power* – were identified which in isolation and through mutual interactions impacted learning. Dynamic stakeholder interaction configurations, learning mechanisms and critical agents were identified for each boundary. Learning involved interactions between competence and social boundaries, with middle managers playing a critical integration role in the process. Within the enterprise, horizontal overlaps between competence boundaries at the middle management level (through specific integration mechanisms) supported learning. Bottom-up and top-down potential power boundaries due to knowledge differences were inferred. Contrary to the notion of negative impact of power on learning, the prevailing learning modes, supported by socialized use of legitimate power, acted as influence mechanisms to facilitate learning. Knowledge brokering across boundaries was identified as a two-stage process of *boundary spanning and translation* which could be taken up by single or multiple agents located at different levels in the social enterprise. This role adoption was impacted by varying levels of *immersion* in the social enterprise and the target community context. The critical role of middle managers as *brokers* and *integrators* of knowledge was highlighted.

The service proposition or its key component emerged as the central *boundary object* in enabling learning interactions within the enterprise and with the target community. This object was identified to be intertwined with supporting boundary objects to develop a boundary infrastructure which enabled learning and alignment of the different stakeholders around the organization's objectives. Finally, implicit *learning routines* were found to be integrated with operational routines thus enabling a continuous learning process in the social enterprises.

This study contributes to and extends the literature on situated learning. It highlights the presence of multiple implicit boundaries in organizations and their impact on learning. It describes the micro-processes of learning across implicit boundaries. It contributes to social entrepreneurship literature by extending learning literature to the social enterprise context and engaging intensively in this emerging discussion.

The findings of this study present significant implications for managers in the social sector. It makes them sensitive to the presence of implicit boundaries and points towards the critical knowledge resources (individuals or groups), enabling processes, mechanisms and boundary configurations which enable organizational learning. Inferences from this study can assist managers to analyze their organizations and develop processes and mechanisms through which learning can be promoted and captured.