

Insights from a systematic review of literature on social enterprise and networks

Where, how and what next?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to contribute to better understanding of where and how network concepts, theories and perspectives, organisational networks, and networking practices, are being studied and deployed in social enterprise research. This is done through a systematic review of social enterprise and networks literature in business and management journals. Key trends and developments in this literature, and gaps and limitations, are identified, culminating in discussion of what next for social enterprise and networks research. The papers in this special issue on “Social Enterprise and Networks” are introduced.

Design/methodology/approach – A systematic review was undertaken of social enterprise and networks literature in business and management journals. Journals sampled included all those in the Entrepreneurship and Small Business subject area of the Association of Business Schools (ABS) Academic Journal Guide 2018, the journals in the *Financial Times* 50 research ranking, and selected wider business and society, non-profit management and public administration journals.

Findings – Analysis of publishing patterns of social enterprise and networks research finds that such research is growing, and that varied network perspectives, concepts and theories are being deployed. Social enterprise and networks are also being studied globally, using different methodologies. Nevertheless, there remains scope for deeper theoretical engagement, and for a wider range of network theories to be used. More even geographic coverage is also needed, and further insights can be gained through use of alternative methodologies.

Research limitations/implications – Discussions in this paper have implications for research through outlining systematically the state of current scholarship on social enterprise and networks. In so doing, insight is provided on what is known about social enterprise and networks. But also on what is not known and where further enquiry is needed. Direction is thus provided for future social enterprise and networks scholarship.

Practical implications – In this paper, how, and the extent to which, social enterprise and networks scholarship offers implications for practice and policy is considered.

Originality/value – This paper makes a valuable contribution to social enterprise scholarship. It outlines the state of current knowledge and research on social enterprise and networks, identifying where and how relationships between social enterprise and networks have been studied, whilst also providing insights for what next in future social enterprise and networks research.

Keywords Social entrepreneurship, Social innovation, Embeddedness, Social capital, Networks, Actor-network theory, Social enterprise, Social entrepreneur

Paper type Editorial



Introduction

This paper, and the wider special issue it introduces, addresses the subject of social enterprise and networks. As will be shown in this paper, through a systematic literature review, this is a burgeoning area of scholarship, but also one in which there remains significant scope for further enquiry.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a network as “*a group or system of interconnected people or things*” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018). However, the term network can also be used to describe an activity of connecting or linking with others. Indeed, when used in this way network may be extended to networking. Individuals and organisations may furthermore be strongly networked, with such a status widely considered to be beneficial in an entrepreneurial context (Birley, 1985; Bruderl and Preisendo, 1998; Chell and Baines, 2000; Witt, 2004; Leyden *et al.*, 2014). The role of networks in entrepreneurship has been the subject of substantial academic study. For reviews of the state of the field in entrepreneurship and networks research, see O'Donnell *et al.* (2001), Hoang and Bostjan (2003) and Slotte-Kock and Coviello (2010) among others. Scholars have examined the compositions of entrepreneurs' networks (Baum *et al.*, 2000), explored the role networks play in entrepreneurial start-up (Butler and Hansen, 1991; Witt, 2004), in growth (Ostgaard and Birley, 1996; Hite and Hesterly, 2001), in resource acquisition (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003; Witt *et al.*, 2008) and for venture performance and survival (Littunen, 2000; Witt, 2004). A range of network approaches and theories have also been deployed, including social network approaches (Greve and Salaff, 2003), often drawing upon related concepts of strong and weak ties (Jack, 2005), social capital (Casson and Della Giusta, 2007) and embeddedness (Jack and Anderson, 2002), as well as Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Korsgaard, 2011) and network perspectives in institutional theory (Aidis *et al.*, 2008), amongst others.

Over (at least) the past 20 years, the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship has risen to prominence, both in practice and as an evolving subject of academic enquiry. Social entrepreneurship can be understood as a process involving the “*innovative use and combination of resources to pursue opportunities to catalyse social change and/or address social needs*” (Mair and Marti, 2006, p. 37). In social entrepreneurship, profit is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. Profits, or “surpluses”, are used for the creation of social value, and for the addressing of a social need. Social entrepreneurs, are individuals (or groups of individuals) who identify, evaluate and exploit opportunities for social value creation through commercial activity, and using a range of resources at their disposal (Bacq and Janssen, 2011). Finally, social enterprises are the ventures established by social entrepreneurs and which act as vehicles for addressing social and/or environmental needs (Littlewood and Holt, 2018). Amongst scholars and in practice there remains a lack of consensus about precisely what constitutes a social enterprise. Nevertheless, key characteristics often noted, include: the centrality of a social or ethical mission, with primacy given to social over economic value creation (Dees, 2003; Defourny and Nyssens, 2006a); income generation through commercial activity (Langdon and Burkett, 2004; Smallbone *et al.*, 2001); stakeholder participation in governance (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006; Thompson and Doherty, 2006); limited profit distribution (Langdon and Burkett, 2004); and innovation in addressing social problems (Dees, 2003). However, in some extant literature, the term social enterprise is also deployed more conceptually, and given a broader meaning. It is used as an overarching label for social entrepreneurial/social enterprise activity (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006). In this paper, we embrace this wider notion of social enterprise as not just an organisation but also as an activity.

Networks were identified as an area of promise for future social enterprise scholarship by Dacin *et al.* (2011, p. 1207). They called for a “*greater focus on networks and social entrepreneurship*” (Dacin *et al.* (2011, p. 1207), as part of a wider critique of existing social

enterprise scholarship which they argued was hitherto often descriptive and atheoretical. [Dacin et al. \(2011\)](#) suggested that social enterprise researchers should attend to those network theories and perspectives being deployed in conventional entrepreneurship research. They also saw particular potential for the engagement with social network approaches, for the deployment of concepts of embeddedness and social capital, and for consideration of virtual networks, as well as power in networks, particularly in relation to issues of social enterprise scaling. In a more recent review of social enterprise and network literature, [Dufays and Huybrechts \(2014\)](#) similarly highlight the insights traditional (commercial) entrepreneurship literature provides for developing theoretical arguments relating to the role of social networks in social entrepreneurship. They also make proposals for future research using social network theory to examine the emergence of social enterprise, while critiquing that “*social networks are little used so far to explain the emergence of social entrepreneurship*” ([Dufays and Huybrechts, 2014](#), p. 231). Finally, further calls for social enterprise scholars to engage more with network theories and perspectives are made by [Dacin et al. \(2010\)](#), and [Steyaert and Dey \(2010\)](#), amongst others.

In this paper, we examine the extent to which social enterprise scholars have responded to these calls from authors such as [Dacin et al. \(2011\)](#) and [Dufays and Huybrechts \(2014\)](#) for more social enterprise and networks research. We assess how far, and in what ways, social enterprise scholars have embraced network perspectives, concepts and theory. The aim of this paper is therefore to provide insight on the state of the field in research on social enterprise and networks, as well as offering direction for future scholarship in this area. We do this through a systematic review of social enterprise and networks literature in business and management journals. Journals sampled included all those in the Entrepreneurship and Small Business subject area of the Association of Business Schools (ABS) Academic Journal Guide 2018, the journals in the *Financial Times 50* research ranking, and selected wider social enterprise and business and society journals – further detail is provided in the method section.

This paper contributes to social enterprise literature by providing a much needed summary of the state of play in social enterprise and networks research. Through systematic review it identifies where debates about social enterprise and networks are occurring, signposting this for researchers, as well as where such work has focussed geographically. It further identifies how social enterprise and networks are being researched, the theories being deployed and in what ways, as well as the methodologies that are being used, and how contributions to knowledge and theory and implications for practice are being addressed. Informed by gaps and limitations in the literature identified through the preceding review, we also provide insights on what next for social enterprise and networks research. Finally, in light of these discussions, we introduce the papers in this special issue on “Social Enterprise and Networks”.

The paper’s structure broadly follows that mentioned above. In the next section, we explain the methodology used in our systematic review. The findings of this review are then presented. We then discuss future directions for social enterprise and networks research. Finally, the papers in this special issue are introduced.

Method

Sample and time period

To better understand the state of current research on social enterprise and networks, a systematic literature review was undertaken. We conducted a review of 77 top business and management journals – with a particular focus on the entrepreneurship field. The sample included journals in the Entrepreneurship and Small Business subject area of the Association of Business Schools Academic Journal Guide 2018 (ABS 2018), those in the *Financial Times 50*

(FT50) research ranking, and selected wider business and society, and non-profit management and public administration journals – these were *Business and Society*, *Business Ethics a European Review*, *Business Ethics Quarterly*, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*; and *VOLUNTAS: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*.

The ABS 2018 sample (30 journals) was selected so that our systematic review captured how social enterprise and networks were being examined and discussed in top entrepreneurship and small business management journals. The FT50 journals (50 journals) were included in the search reflecting their significant use globally in business and management schools for promotion and tenure decisions, as well as for the awarding of research time and/or incentives (after [Kolk and Rivera-Santos, 2018](#)). These journals are some of the leading outlets in their respective sub-fields, they are often where key debates are occurring, and making it important capture how, if at all, social and networks are being considered within them. Finally, wider business and society, and non-profit management and public administration journals, were included (five journals) as it was thought possible that the subject of social enterprise and networks were being considered within them. In respect of these journals, an approach was adopted to focus on a limited set of recognised top-tier journals (after [Aguinis and Glavas, 2012](#); [Kolk and Rivera-Santos et al., 2018](#)). These were selected on the basis of criteria like their inclusion on Social Science Citation Index (SCCI), their relatively high impact factors, their longevity and their association with prominent and relevant research communities, e.g. *Voluntas* is the official journal of the International Society for Third-Sector Research, while *Business and Society* is associated with the International Association for Business and Society.

There was some overlap between the ABS2018 and FT50 sample. As will be further discussed, the Web of Science database was also used in this systematic review, and five journals: *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Small Business*; *International Journal of Globalisation and Small Business*; *Journal of Small Business and Entrepreneurship*; *Manufacturing and Service Operations Management*; *World Review of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development*, were found not to be present in this database and were therefore removed, leaving us with 77 journals in total. The search was also restricted by year. We searched for articles on social enterprise and networks since January 2005, which was the first year in which the *Social Enterprise Journal* was published. The *Social Enterprise Journal* was the first specialist journal focusing on social enterprise. Its founding was a landmark in social enterprise scholarship, and we thus considered it a fitting starting point for our review.

Analysis

The sample of 77 business and management journals was subjected to an “Advanced Search” using the Web of Science database. This search was refined by document type to exclude book reviews. The “Topic search” option was selected, which searches the following fields within records: Title; Abstract; Author Keywords; Keywords Plus@[1]. The “Topic Search” option was used with the aim of increasing the potential for social enterprise and networks literature to be detected. Boolean operations were used in the search which was based on the following key word string:

TS=(“*Social Enterprise*” OR “*Social Entrepreneurship*” OR “*Social Entrepreneur*” OR “*Social Innovation*”) AND TS=(“*Network*” OR “*Networks*” OR “*Networking*” OR “*Relationship*” OR “*Relationships*” OR “*Connection*” OR “*Connected*” OR “*Social Capital*” OR “*Embeddedness*”) AND SO=(*Academy of Management Journal* OR *Academy of Management Review* OR *Accounting Organizations* OR *Administrative Science Quarterly* OR *American Economic Review* OR *Business Society* OR *Business Ethics A European Review*

OR Business Ethics Quarterly OR Contemporary Accounting Research OR Econometrica OR Entrepreneurship "AND" Regional Development OR Entrepreneurship Research Journal OR Entrepreneurship Theory "AND" Practice OR Family Business Review OR Harvard Business Review OR Human Relations OR Human Resource Management OR Information Systems Research OR International Entrepreneurship "AND" Management Journal OR International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour Research OR International Journal of Entrepreneurial Venturing OR International Journal of Entrepreneurship "AND" Innovation OR International Review of Entrepreneurship OR International Small Business Journal OR Journal of Accounting Research OR Journal of Applied Psychology OR Journal of Business Ethics OR Journal of Business Venturing OR Journal of Consumer Psychology OR Journal of Consumer Research OR Journal of Enterprising Communities People "AND" Places in the Global Economy OR Journal of Enterprising Culture OR Journal OF Entrepreneurship OR Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies OR Journal of Family Business Strategy OR Journal of Finance OR Journal of Financial "AND" Quantitative Analysis OR Journal of Financial Economics OR Journal of International Business Studies OR Journal of International Entrepreneurship OR Journal of Management OR Journal of Management Information Systems OR Journal of Management Studies OR Journal of Marketing OR Journal of Marketing Research OR Journal of Operations Management OR Journal of Political Economy OR Journal of Small Business "AND" Enterprise Development OR Journal of Small Business Management OR Journal of Social Entrepreneurship OR Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science OR Management Science OR Marketing Science OR MIS Quarterly OR Nonprofit "AND" Voluntary Sector Quarterly OR Operations Research OR Organization Science OR Organization Studies OR Organizational Behaviour "AND" Human Decision Processes OR Production "AND" Operations Management OR Quarterly Journal of Economics OR Research Policy OR Review of Accounting Studies OR Review of Economic Studies OR Review of Finance OR Review of Financial Studies OR Sloan Management Review OR Small Business Economics OR Small Enterprise Research OR Social Enterprise Journal OR Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal OR Strategic Management Journal OR Accounting Review OR Journal of Entrepreneurship "AND" Public Policy OR Venture Capital OR Voluntas OR Journal of Accounting "AND" Economics OR Journal of Accounting "AND" Economics).

As can be seen in the keyword string we searched for instances where, in the sample of 77 journals, "Social Enterprise", "Social Entrepreneurship", "Social Entrepreneur" or "Social Innovation" were present alongside "Network", "Networks", "Networking", "Relationship" OR "Relationships" OR "Connection" OR "Connected" OR "Social Capital" OR "Embeddedness". Our initial search resulted in a total of 155 articles. The 155 articles were then each reviewed to determine whether or not social enterprise and networks were significantly addressed. To assess whether an article was included in our sample we used the following criteria: did the article significantly focus on social enterprise, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs or innovation; was there an empirical focus on a social enterprise network, on social enterprises or entrepreneurs networking, or on networking in processes of social entrepreneurship or innovation; were network theories being deployed to examine social enterprises, entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs or innovation. On the basis of these criteria our sample was further reduced. Additionally while reviewing each paper we used a snowball approach to identify any further potential social enterprise and network articles, within the 77 journals, with these then also reviewed according to the criteria above. Through following this process we were left with 105 articles, in which by our assessment there was some meaningful engagement with the topic of social enterprise and networks. These 105 articles were then coded according to the following dimensions: *journal; year;*

geographic focus; how networks featured in the paper; network theories deployed – if any; methods used; and contribution and implications.

Limitations in our methodology are acknowledged. First, it is recognized that some may disagree with our choice of journals and the selection criteria for this. For instance, on the basis of the criteria chosen, we did not include journals like the *California Management Review*, *Journal of World Business*, *Journal of Business Research* and other similarly well regarded more general business and management journals that are not FT50, yet in which significant social enterprise research – including special issues – have been published. We recognise that this may also result in some significant works not being recorded. This review is also focused on business and management journals, yet social enterprises are studied in numerous disciplines with research often a cross-disciplinary endeavour. This again may result in significant works and perspectives not being included in our review. Some relevant but quite new journals like *Social Business* were at the time of this review also not searchable through the Web of Science database and so were excluded. We recognise these limitations, nevertheless, boundaries for the review were necessary. We feel that our study as it is still contributes significantly to understanding of how social enterprise and networks have been examined in business and management scholarship. Nevertheless, it is our hope that our review not only provides insights for business and management social enterprise scholars but also wider interested parties.

Findings

“Where” and “when” in social enterprise and networks research

Table I shows where within our sample of 77 journals social enterprise and network research has been published. As can be seen, social enterprise and network research is concentrated in a relatively small proportion of the journals (26 journals). The top four journals – the *Social Enterprise Journal* (15.2 per cent); *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* (13.3 per cent); *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* (12.4 per cent); *Journal of Business Ethics* (10.5 per cent) also account for 51.4 per cent of the total. This suggests that a significant proportion of academic conversation about social enterprise and networks is occurring in these specialist social enterprise and nonprofit management journals, which is

Journal name	No. of articles
<i>Social Enterprise Journal</i>	16
<i>Entrepreneurship and Regional Development</i>	14
<i>Journal of Social Entrepreneurship</i>	13
<i>Journal of Business Ethics</i>	11
<i>Voluntas</i>	10
<i>International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behaviour and Research</i>	6
<i>Journal of Management Studies; Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly</i>	4
<i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice; International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation;</i>	2
<i>International Small Business Journal; Journal of Business Venturing; Journal of Enterprising Culture; Journal of Small Business Management; Organization Studies</i>	
<i>Administrative Science Quarterly; International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal;</i>	1
<i>Journal of Enterprising Communities – People and Places in the Global Economy; Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development; Journal of International Business Studies; MIS Quarterly;</i>	
<i>Organization Science; Research Policy; Small business economics; Small Enterprise Research;</i>	
<i>Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal</i>	
All other journals in sample	0

Table I.
Number of social
enterprise and
networks articles by
journal

perhaps hardly surprising. Nevertheless, these results highlight that aspiring social enterprise and networks scholars would do well to turn to these journals early on when first approaching this topic.

Something else that can be taken away from these results is the relative paucity of social enterprise and networks research in top entrepreneurship, and wider business and management, journals. This perhaps represents an opportunity for social enterprise scholars, but maybe also suggests that, at least in respect of network theories and approaches, that social enterprise scholars have hitherto struggled to overcome [Dacin *et al.* \(2011\)](#) criticism of social enterprise research as relatively atheoretical. One challenge here may lie in articulating how social enterprise network research provides fresh insights of relevance to the study and understanding of relationships between conventional entrepreneurship and networks.

We turn next, to the examine trends in the number of articles being published on social enterprise and networks. As can be seen in [Figure 1](#), since 2005 we have seen a growth in such work. This proliferation of research on social and networks perhaps reflects the wider growth we have seen in social enterprise and social entrepreneurship scholarship (see recent reviews by [Choi and Majumdar, 2014](#); and [Saebi *et al.*, 2018](#)), as well as rapid developments and expansions in its practice.

In our systematic review, one of the first papers we found to be meaningfully addressing issues of social enterprise and networks was that by [Todres *et al.* \(2006\)](#). This paper was published in the Social Enterprise Journal, and focused on the development of social enterprise through capacity building. From a networks perspective, the empirical focus of the paper was a social enterprise network organization – the West London corridor-based “WestFocus” Partnership. However, the authors also engaged with notions of strategic networking, and recognized the significance of social capital for wider development of the social venture, as well as the benefits of fostering social capital development in communities for social impact. In this first paper, implications for practice were strongly evident, but the depth of theoretical engagement was more limited.

We can contrast [Todres *et al.*'s \(2006\)](#) study, with one of the most recent works found in our literature search by [Barinaga \(2017\)](#). In her study, Barinaga examines nascent organising in social entrepreneurial ventures through a framework of, and using an approach inspired by, Actor Network Theory (ANT). [Barinaga's \(2017\)](#) richly theoretical work offers insights for social entrepreneurship research but also wider organizational scholarship. Further contrasting

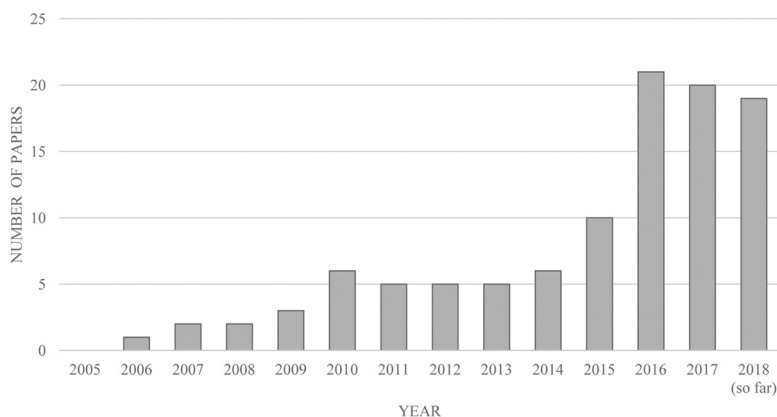


Figure 1.
Number of articles by
year

with the work of [Todres *et al.* \(2006\)](#) its discussion of implications for practice is more limited. These two examples suggest that alongside the recent proliferation of work on social enterprise and networks as previously noted, that there has been an evolution in such work, with growing conceptual and theoretical sophistication evident.

Later in this review, we shall explore how contributions and implications are framed in social enterprise and networks scholarship, and whether and how we have seen a change in this over time. However, before that, we will persist in considering the issue of where, but this time in relation to the geographical focus of extant social enterprise and networks studies. [Table II](#) shows the geographical focus of social enterprise and network articles, identifying whether they focus on developed economies, emerging economies, developing economies, are cross country studies, or have no explicit geographical focus – for instance if they are purely theoretical, or are literature reviews.

These statistics show that social enterprise and network studies have, to date, particularly focused on developed economies (33.3 per cent), for examples see [Vestrum \(2014\)](#), [Christopoulos and Vogl \(2015\)](#), [Pret and Carter \(2017\)](#), etc. This percentage rises still further if the data for multiple country studies is included, as many of these focus on multiple developed economies, e.g. [Jenner \(2016\)](#) who examines social enterprise sustainability comparing Australia and Scotland. Fewer studies have been conducted focusing on social enterprise and networks in emerging/transition economies (10.5 per cent), see [Easter and Conway \(2015\)](#), [Qureshi *et al.* \(2016\)](#), [Bhatt and Ahmad \(2017\)](#). Fewer still examine them in developing economies (7.6 per cent). Multiple country studies and studies with no explicit geographical focus comprise 28.6 and 20.6 per cent, respectively. These results highlight the uneven geographical coverage of existing social enterprise and networks research across developed, emerging and developing economies. There is, therefore, a need for further research on social enterprise and networks in institutional complex transition economies, and in developing economies, where the nature and significance of networks in social enterprise may differ, and where network theories may work differently and need to be extended, or else new theories devised, reflecting local contextual factors.

Within these categories certain countries have received much more attention than others. For instance, in the developed economies category, the UK has been the subject of significant academic attention, see for example [Christopoulos and Vogl \(2015\)](#), [Ko and Liu \(2015\)](#), [Tasavori *et al.* \(2018\)](#), etc. Meanwhile, India has most often been the focus of social enterprise and networks research amongst the emerging economies ([Bhatt and Ahmad, 2017](#); [Jammulamadaka and Chakraborty, 2018](#)). In research on social enterprise and networks in developing economies, Kenya has most frequently been the setting, e.g. [Bradley *et al.* \(2012\)](#). Future social enterprise and networks research may go outside of these better studied country contexts. It might also undertake further comparison of networks across developed, emerging and developing economies, something which has hitherto been quite rare.

“How” in social enterprise and networks research

In this section, we further explore the “how” of social enterprise and networks research. We examine how networks are positioned within social enterprise scholarship, as well as how

Geographical focus	No. of articles
Developed economies	35
Emerging/transition economies	11
Developing economies	8
Multiple country studies	30
No explicit geographical focus	21

Table II.
Geographical focus
of social enterprise
and network studies

this work is engaging with network theories. We furthermore examine how different methodologies are being deployed in social enterprise and networks research. Finally, we consider how social enterprise and network research contributes to knowledge and theory, its implications for practice, and how these are being framed.

Beginning with the positioning of networks in the social enterprise literature, we find four principal ways in which networks feature in such work:

- (1) the empirical focus is a social enterprise network organisation;
- (2) the work addresses the networking activities of social entrepreneurs, with skills in this respect regarded as a key characteristics of successful social entrepreneurs (Dufays and Huybrechts, 2014);
- (3) the focus is on the composition of social enterprises' networks, and implications of this for organisational growth, social impact, etc.; and
- (4) network perspectives and theories are deployed to understand processes of social enterprise/social entrepreneurship more broadly.

It should be stressed that these network positionings are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive. For example, an empirical focus on a social enterprise network organisation does not preclude examination of the networking activities of social entrepreneurs in this organisation, or of network composition, or indeed the deployment of network perspectives and theories (or indeed non-network theories) to understand processes of social enterprise/entrepreneurship. Some articles also do not fit strongly within any of these positionings, suggesting a need for further conceptual development. Nevertheless, we find numerous examples of each of these positions across the articles reviewed. Table III shows these four uses of networks, including references and illustrative examples. Finally, it is worth highlighting that in our analysis we do see somewhat of a shift in the literature. Initially, engagement with networks in social enterprise scholarship often came in the form of an empirical focus on say a social enterprise network organisation, or else recognition of the importance of networking for social entrepreneurs. However, more recently, we find more instances of deeper engagement with network perspectives and theory to understand social enterprise/social entrepreneurship processes; this suggests to us a growing maturity of work on this subject.

In the previous discussions, we explored different ways in which networks feature in social enterprise literature. We turn next to consider how, and in particular which, network perspectives and theories have hitherto been applied in social enterprise scholarship. Our analysis finds, quite significant engagement with social networks perspectives, and concepts of social capital (Bourdieu, 1980; Lin, 1999; Portes, 1999) and embeddedness (Granovetter, 1995) and strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). For example, Richards and Reed (2015) explore social capital development in third sectors organisations in the North West of the UK, while Easter and Conway (2015) examine the leveraging of social capital and social ties in a social enterprise in a very different context of Vietnam. Embeddedness meanwhile is a central concept in studies by Kistruck and Beamish (2010), Maclean *et al.* (2013) and Pret and Carter (2017) amongst others. Nevertheless, there remains significant scope for further research engaging more deeply and in different ways with these perspectives and concepts, as will be expanded upon in the next section.

Looking beyond social network perspectives, engagement in social enterprise literature with other network theories remains relatively modest. We found a few scholars applying ANT – Actor Network Theory (Latour, 2005) to the study of social enterprise/entrepreneurship – see Barinaga (2017), Petitgand (2018). Interestingly, in a

Network as the empirical focus	Social entrepreneur networking activities	Social enterprise network compositions and implications	Networks and social enterprise/social entrepreneurship processes
<p>Todres <i>et al.</i> (2006), Seanor and Meaton (2007, 2008); Squazzoni (2009); Scott and Laine (2011); McKague and Tinsley (2012); Tallontire and Nelson (2013); Toivonen (2016)</p> <p>Examples: Seanor and Meaton (2007) examine what they describe as a social enterprise network in Bradford, West Yorkshire. They explore sense-making by various actors within this network. Interestingly in this case, this network is not formalised. This contrasts with the earlier work of Todres <i>et al.</i> (2006) where the network 'WestFocus' Partnership was formalised. Finally, more recent work by Tallontire and Nelson (2013), examine developments in the global fair trade movement/network</p>	<p>Todres <i>et al.</i> (2006), Chell (2007), Seanor and Meaton (2007, 2008), Ryzin <i>et al.</i> (2009), Ghalwash <i>et al.</i> (2017), Rakic <i>et al.</i> (2017), Grohs <i>et al.</i> (2017), Jammulamadaka <i>et al.</i> (2018)</p> <p>Examples: Early work by Todres <i>et al.</i> (2006) highlighted the importance of "strategic networking" in developing emerging social enterprises. More recent work by Ghalwash <i>et al.</i> (2017) identifies not only the significance of social entrepreneur's networks in motivating their activity but also the important role networking activity and domestic and international networks can play for social entrepreneurs to acquire resources, achieve legitimacy and in social value creation</p>	<p>Smith and Stevens (2010), Bradley <i>et al.</i> (2012), Meyskens <i>et al.</i> (2009, 2013), Jenner (2016); Jenner and Oprescu (2016), Scheuerle and Schmitz (2016), Tasavori <i>et al.</i> (2018)</p> <p>Examples: Smith and Stevens (2010) argue that the embeddedness of the social entrepreneur and social enterprise, which is in turn affected by geographic factors, has implications for their selection of social entrepreneurial pursuits. They also suggest that degree of structural embeddedness influence processes of measuring and scaling social value creation. In a second example, Jenner and Oprescu (2016) examine the social capital of social enterprise and the opportunities stemming from this for collaboration and sustainability</p>	<p>Somerville and McElwee (2011), Lehner (2014), Christopoulos and Vogl (2014), Qureshi, <i>et al.</i> (2016), Hazenberg <i>et al.</i> (2016), Pret and Carter (2017), Barinaga (2017)</p> <p>Examples: Hazenberg <i>et al.</i> (2016) examine the emergence of social enterprise ecosystems drawing upon stakeholder network perspectives and biological evolutionary theory. Baringa (2017) explores through a framework of ANT the nascent organising of social entrepreneurial ventures</p>

Table III.
Positions of networks
in social enterprise
literature

different review paper aimed at reimagining the social entrepreneurship research agenda, Steyaert and Dey (2010, p. 247) identified ANT as a perspective that "could offer an effective approach to studying social entrepreneurial projects which are often based on innovations and bricolage". While it seems that their suggestion has not yet been significantly taken up by social enterprise scholars, this does not make it a bad one, and we therefore feel there is potential for future social enterprise research to deploy ANT perspectives.

Use of other network based theories was also found to be still quite limited, although this did seem to be growing. For instance, recent work was found deploying concepts of network bricolage (Tasavori *et al.*, 2018), as well as stakeholder networks and ecosystems perspectives (Hazenberg *et al.*, 2016). Works combining network perspectives and theory with other theories, e.g. institutional theories, resource-based theories, etc., were also found (Stephan *et al.*, 2015; Slimane and Lamine, 2017), suggesting evolution in, and the growing sophistication of, research on social enterprise and networks.

We move next to consider how social enterprise and networks have been researched, focussing on questions of methodology. In general, we find a preponderance of work deploying qualitative methods, and often case studies e.g. [Lehner \(2014\)](#), [Easter and Conway \(2015\)](#), [Bhatt and Ahmad \(2017\)](#). Quantitative studies are still relatively few in number, as remains the case in wider social entrepreneurship scholarship ([Rivera-Santos et al., 2015](#)). Instances are found of research deploying alternative and more creative methodologies. For example, [Friedman and Desivilya \(2010\)](#) adopt an action research approach in their work on social entrepreneurship and development in a conflict affected region, meanwhile [Barinaga \(2017\)](#) deploys an ANT inspired processual qualitative approach in her study. Studies deploying mixed methods were also found e.g. [Todres et al. \(2006\)](#), [Jenner \(2016\)](#) and [Scott and Laine \(2012\)](#). Longitudinal work was quite limited. Interestingly, work applying rigorous detailed social network analysis methods ([Wasserman and Faust, 1994](#)) was also somewhat limited.

Finally, we examine how contributions and implications are addressed and framed in extant social enterprise and networks literature. We first find that in a significant number of papers in our sample, contributions for research are not explicitly identified, with this particularly the case in early social enterprise and networks scholarship. While over time such explicit identification of research contributions has become more common, often these contributions are more empirical than conceptual and theoretical. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the predominance we found of qualitative social enterprise and networks studies, theory building in relation to social enterprise and networks was more common than theory testing. It was also relatively rare for authors to link their research contributions to the conventional entrepreneurship field, and wider business and management scholarship, or to explain how (if at all) their work contributed to general theory development.

Regarding treatment of implications for policy and practice, in general, we found this rather limited. Discussions were often – although not always, see for instance [Meyskens et al. \(2010\)](#), [Estrin et al. \(2013\)](#), etc. – woven into conclusions sections rather than being given full attention on their own. Such discussions were also frequently rather short, presented at quite a high level, intangible and at times somewhat of an afterthought. Therefore, we feel that in general, there is scope for social enterprise and network scholars to consider further, and convey more effectively, the real-world implications of their research.

“What next?” in social enterprise and networks research

In the preceding review, we have explored broad trends in publishing on social enterprise and networks, discussed where such work has been has appeared, and its geographical focus. We have also examined how networks are positioned in the literature, how theory is being engaged with, the methodologies being used, and how contributions and implications are considered and presented. In so doing we have provided an overview of the state of the field, as well as identifying various limitations and gaps in extant literature and research. Building upon this we turn now to consider “what next” for social enterprise and networks scholarship.

We address first the role and use of theory in social enterprise and network scholarship. As outlined previously, social network perspectives and related concepts of embeddedness, social capital, strong and weak ties, are prevalent in the literature. However, frequently, the depth of engagement in literature with these concepts is shallow, and they have been deployed rather unevenly in examining different facets and types of social entrepreneurial activity. For example, future research might consider a phenomena like social enterprise internationalisation drawing upon these concepts and perspectives. Alternatively, they might be deployed in explaining the relative performance (social and/or economic) of social

enterprises. Social enterprises are also heterogeneous, working in diverse ways to address varied social needs. Therefore, although some social enterprise models and social enterprising activities may have been considered through a lens of these concepts, others have not. These concepts are also multi-dimensional, for instance social capital has been described as an “*umbrella concept*” (Adler and Kwon, 2002, p. 34), with multiple variants of social capital identified in extant literature e.g. bridging social capital, bonding social capital, linking social capital, structural social capital, relational social capital, cognitive social capital, etc. (Putnam, 2000; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998). There is therefore potential for further social enterprise scholarship unpacking and deploying these concepts in more fine-grained ways. The related concept of trust, itself also multifaceted, and its relationship with social capital and these wider concepts could also receive further attention, as could the concept of “structural holes” (Burt, 1992). Finally, these concepts could be deployed in understanding processes of social enterprise/entrepreneurship in more varied geographies and contexts.

The aforementioned perspectives and concepts have at least received some attention in the literature. Some other network perspectives, concepts and theories have hitherto been engaged with much less. We see promise in more widespread application of ANT, especially given the growing prominence of more processual understandings of, and approaches to studying (social) entrepreneurship/social entrepreneuring. Similarly, we see scope for further application of concepts like network bricolage (Baker *et al.*, 2003), effectual networks/networking (Saravathy, 2001) and stakeholder networks (Roloff, 2008), amongst others. If a network is understood as a group or system of interconnected things, then this might also lead to the (further) application of concepts like systems of innovation (Lundvall, 1992), entrepreneurial ecosystems (Isenberg, 2010), and indeed wider systems perspectives, in social enterprise scholarship. Finally, from a theoretical perspective we would encourage scholars to explore opportunities to further combine network concepts, theories and perspectives with wider theories e.g. institutional theories, resource based perspectives, motivational theories, social movement theory, etc., to better understand social enterprise phenomena.

We identify next some promising topics for future social enterprise and networks research, potentially deploying some of the theories and concepts previously mentioned. In recent times, we have seen the emergence of new digital technologies, e.g. blockchain, cryptocurrencies, the rise of social media, and the growing reach and significance of virtual communities. Technology is also transforming the way people work, for instance enabling more remote and virtual working, as well as work in the so called “gig” economy. We have also seen the emergence of innovative financial technologies, e.g. crowdfunding, personal money transfer systems like M-Pesa, etc. These developments create both threats and opportunities for social enterprises. On the one hand, these new technologies may provide solutions to intractable sustainable development challenges. Social enterprise may emerge, or existing ventures may begin leveraging these new technologies to achieve their social missions. On the other hand, there may be unanticipated consequences of the emergence of these new technologies, for instance displacement of jobs, the rise of more precarious working, the phenomenon of “fake news”, etc. We believe that network perspectives and theories provide a useful lens to examine the emergence and application of these new technologies, and as part of understanding the consequences of them, for good and ill.

Following on from the above comments, in general, there is a need for the adoption of more critical perspectives in social enterprise scholarship, including in network studies. Network perspectives and theories may be deployed in exploring negative aspects of social enterprise and innovation. For example, whether and how social entrepreneurs might

exploit or abuse their network positions. A significant literature exists examining the “dark side” of social capital across varied settings (Di Falco and Bulte, 2011). Future research might examine such a dark side in a social enterprise context. Questions of power within and between network actors are also critical, and future scholarship could both examine this, and should remain cognisant of it, as part of developing a more critical and reflexive social enterprise and networks research agenda.

Power is also a central consideration for any future research on flows of knowledge, as well as of more tangible resources, between actors in global social enterprise and innovation networks. In recent times, we have seen a growth in organisations aiming to support social enterprises and entrepreneurs, foster social entrepreneurial activity globally and shape the wider field of social enterprise, e.g. Ashoka, UnLtd, the Skoll Foundation, the Social Enterprise Alliance, etc. (Nicholls, 2010). As yet, these network organisations and the work they undertake remain little studied. Future research could therefore develop a typology of these organisations, could examine the role they play in building global social enterprise networks, we well as the personal networks/social capital of social entrepreneurs. However, critical perspectives might also be applied to the work of such organisations, questioning for example issues of power, the dominance of particular discourses and the nature of knowledge exchange. Similarly, critical questions might also be asked in future research on networks of financial flows, e.g. impact investing in social enterprise, big philanthropy, etc.

Comparison of social enterprises with traditional business ventures, or even other organisational forms e.g. charities, from a networks perspective and drawing upon network theories, is a further possible area for future scholarship. Differences in network composition might be explored, or variation in the action of strong and weak ties, institutional influences, social capital etc. There is also scope for social enterprise and network studies to be conducted focusing on more diverse geographies. As identified in the literature review, such work focussing on developing and emerging economies remains limited. Social enterprise and networks studies in such settings might also draw upon context specific network concepts, for instance “Ubuntu” (Lutz, 2009) if the focus of the research is Africa. Future social enterprise and networks scholarship might also focus in on particular population segments and demographic groups. For example, examining how women social entrepreneurs use their social networks, deploy social capital and assessing whether this is different from male social entrepreneurs.

We turn last to methodology. As noted in the literature review much existing social enterprise and networks research is qualitative, case study based, and deploys fairly standard methods e.g. semi structured interviews. There remains a need for more quantitative, theory testing research, which is also now more possible as the field has matured. In designing such work we would encourage scholars to look to exiting quantitative social enterprise and networks studies but also quantitative network studies in traditional entrepreneurship research. Opportunities should be explored for the adoption of more innovative and alternate methodologies, for example longitudinal studies, processual approaches, mixed-methods, in-depth ethnographic studies and action research, amongst others. Finally, there is scope for more rigorous and concerted application of social network analysis techniques in social enterprise and network studies.

The articles in this special issue

In the previous review, we have explored questions of “where, how and what next?” for social enterprise and networks scholarship. In the context of this review, we now introduce the papers in this special issue on “Social enterprise and networks”. However, before we do, we would like to thank the reviewers who helped us in this endeavour, and without whose

dedication, hard work and constructive feedback, it would not have been possible. Following a workshop at the International Social Innovation Research Conference 2018, and a rigorous and selective review process, four articles were accepted for publication in this special issue.

In the first article, [Kokko \(2018\)](#) considers how the embeddedness of stakeholders in different institutional logics shapes the creation of social value in a social enterprise. She draws upon concepts of institutional logics, structural holes, and strong and weak ties, in exploring the empirical case of Peepoople, a social enterprise which provides biodegradable, self-sanitizing, one-use toilet bags to people lacking sanitation infrastructure. [Kokko's \(2018\)](#) work contributes to understanding of social value creation by social enterprises and how this may occur through the bridging of structural holes. Linking [Kokko's \(2018\)](#) work to our literature review we especially welcome her use of structural holes concepts, the developing economy focus of her study, and her rigorous network analysis.

The second article in the special issue by [Spiegler and Halberstadt \(2018\)](#) also has a developing/emerging economy setting. They examine networks and the idea-fruition process of female social entrepreneurs in South Africa. In so doing, they provide insights on women's social entrepreneurship, and explore how this is shaped by sociocultural context and embeddedness, leading to female entrepreneurs developing particular kinds of networks, which ultimately facilitate idea fruition. [Spiegler and Halberstadt \(2018\)](#) deploy a mixed method approach, including social network analysis. In so doing, they align with our call in the literature review for the adoption of alternative methodologies. Their focus on female social entrepreneurs also chimes with our suggestion for more social enterprise and networks research attending to particular demographic groups and population segments.

The third paper in the special issue has quite a different focus. In it, [De Beer \(2018\)](#) examines social value creation by neighbourhood-based entrepreneurs, drawing upon social networks perspectives and the concept of embeddedness. Her work contributes to debates on the social value of entrepreneurship. She also provides insights on neighbourhood-based entrepreneurs as a relatively understudied type of entrepreneur. In the context of our review, [De Beer's \(2018\)](#) study speaks particularly to questions of new forms of technology enabled entrepreneurship and ways of working, including in residential neighbourhoods.

In the fourth article, [Folmer et al. \(2018\)](#) explore the importance of networks for the emergence and growth of social enterprise, how social enterprises use their networks throughout their life courses, and compare and contrast social enterprise use of networks to obtain resources and legitimacy with that of conventional commercial enterprises. Similarities are found in relation to the importance of networks for both social and commercial enterprises, but also divergences in how networks are used. This paper aligns strongly with our call for further research comparing social and commercial enterprises and deploying network perspectives, concepts and theories.

Conclusion

To conclude, in this review, we have explored systematically the state of the field in social enterprise and networks research. We have addressed questions of “where”, “how” and “what next” for social enterprise and networks scholarship. While we have found burgeoning social enterprise research examining network organisations and networking practices, as well as studies engaging with networks concepts, theories and perspectives, we have also identified a significant number of gaps and limitations, and areas for further future scholarly attention. The papers in this special issue on “Social Enterprise and Networks” provide a platform for addressing some of these gaps. It is our hope that they, and this special issue, will spur further interest and scholarly activity on this important subject.

1. Keywords Plus® is an additional feature of Web of Science whereby all titles are reviewed, and additional relevant but overlooked keywords that were not listed by the author or publisher, are highlighted. This potentially enables the discovery of more relevant papers in a search.

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