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# Narrating the 'social': the evolving stories of Pakistan's social entrepreneurs

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**ABSTRACT**

Social enterprises are often characterized by the vision and drive of an individual founder. We challenge this by taking inspiration from Alistair R. Anderson's arguments that social entrepreneurship is better understood as enacted within a social context. We move beyond linear conceptualizations to consider a more nuanced, contextually informed picture, where understandings of what it is to be 'social' in one's *entrepreneuring* are created at the interaction of the individual and their situation. A narrative approach is used to analyse 25 life stories used by social entrepreneurs in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan, an area of social transition. We access how these entrepreneurs give meaning to the 'social' aspects of what they do. Our findings present a multifaceted character, defined by their responses to changing social contexts. This is manifest in entrepreneurial practice, where we have a vacillation between acts of social rebellion and an enterprising organization of benevolence, evolving in a social context which changes with and, in part, because of our social entrepreneurs. We move beyond definitional characteristics and closer to a theory of practice, by considering how social entrepreneurs interact with changing social demands and adapt their activities accordingly.

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## Introduction

Traditionally, social entrepreneurship is considered a particular organizational form, characterized by not-for-profit and voluntary enterprises. However, recently we have begun to acknowledge a more nuanced approach, where hybrid forms of business and mixed values can direct entrepreneurial activity of all kinds (Korsgaard and Anderson 2011). As such, structural certainty around the concept of social entrepreneurship is reduced. In his work on social *entrepreneuring*, Alistair R. Anderson responds to this issue by making repeated calls for theories of practice to be further developed (Diochon and Anderson 2011; Anderson et al. 2019). He argues that structural conceptualizations aiming for defined typographies are increasingly limited in a world where the very notion of social welfare is itself complex, value-laden, and ever changing. In this article, we address these calls by embracing the ambiguity of social entrepreneurship. We root social entrepreneurial practice in localized understandings of what it is to be 'social', which in turn, are both ambiguous and continuously evolving. To elucidate this, we interpret narrative data from self-defined social entrepreneurs in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan, an area of acute poverty and deprivation –

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where social change is accompanied by a conservative society with prescribed social expectations. We consider how these social entrepreneurs identify as being 'social' in a context of such diverse and complex need, and the implications for their everyday activities. Through our findings, we construct a socially entrepreneurial character born of the trials and consequences of its surroundings, where identity is multi-faceted, and the future seems hinged on the development of society more broadly.

Our theoretical starting point is taken from a dominant argument in all of Alistair's work, that the shape of entrepreneurship and the practice of *entrepreneuring* relates to the social institutions the entrepreneur encounters. One could argue that social entrepreneurs may be even more informed by their surrounding social context, as they must respond to temporal needs which evolve as local views on social welfare shift (Karanda and Toledano 2012). However, Mair and Marti (2006) suggest that much of our theoretical understanding of social entrepreneurship posits a 'grand narrative', where there exists a clear social vision furthered by individual drive, an image borrowed from the hegemonic economic discourse of individualist entrepreneurship (Dey and Steyaert 2010). As such, we are inclined to conceptualize social entrepreneurs as enlightened visionaries, those who spot problems in need of solving (Parkinson and Howorth 2008), in the same way traditional entrepreneurs may spot economic opportunity in need of exploiting (Robinson 2006). This opens theories of social entrepreneurship to the very same criticism Alistair placed at the door of economic perspectives, that to reduce our understanding to that of individual endeavour neglects the role of social processes and institutional interaction (Anderson 2015). By adopting a narrow individualist focus, theorizing on social entrepreneurship falls foul of an atomized approach (Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2012), ignoring how a social entrepreneur's practices fit with contextual forces (Dodd and Anderson 2007). Of particular relevance here is Anderson and Smith's (2007) notion of 'moral space', within which an entrepreneur's activities are informed by what is considered right and good in society. If entrepreneurial activity must be socially approved, then to understand it we must focus more on the impact of social surroundings, than on the individualized aims of the entrepreneur What it is to be a 'social' entrepreneur is determined by the interaction of the entrepreneur with their social context (Defourny and Nyssens 2010).

To achieve this, we investigate the multiple and 'little' narratives drawn upon by social entrepreneurs as they provide meaning to their activities (Johansson 2004; Gartner 2007; Seanor et al. 2013). The use of entrepreneurial narratives allows us to access the value-laden and often emotional perceptions of lived experience (Poldner, Shrivastava, and Branzei 2017). Of these narratives, we ask two research questions: *how do entrepreneurs perceive and give meaning to the 'social' aspects of what they do?* And, *in what ways can we construct the various interactions social entrepreneurs have with their social context?*

Our contributions are three-fold. First, we support Anderson and Lent (2017) by showing social entrepreneurship as socially constructed, with what counts as 'social' dependent on localized perceptions. We uncover how this frames entrepreneurial action (Anderson and Warren 2011), but extend this to consider the temporal and dialectic nature of these constructions, where the practice social *entrepreneuring* adapts as contextual notions of social value change. Second, a narrative approach in the analysis allows us to recognize important contradictions and ambiguities in the entrepreneurial process (Hamilton 2014), and develops a nuanced and multi-dimensional construct (McKeever, Jack, and Anderson 2015). We encourage a move beyond simplistic notions of a 'social' or 'non-social' entrepreneur, and present social entrepreneurship as a storied presentation, where different narratives can be utilized at different times and for different purposes. Finally, our research setting addresses Anderson et al.'s (2019, 108) continued calls for greater understanding of social entrepreneurs in the developing world, as an area of entrepreneurship which deserves *'to be understood and supported because of the close fit with local needs and local resources and the appropriateness, the usefulness of what they achieve'*.

## *Storying* the social

While much of what we know on social enterprises emanates from conventional articulations of charity and not-for-profit (Alexander and Weiner 1998), modern conceptualizations acknowledge a more muddied picture, where hybrid organizations integrate the demands of for-profit drive with

more socially conscious ambitions (Austin 2006; Dey 2006). The result of this shift in perspective is that we become less certain on what it is that makes an enterprise 'social', and what characteristics enable the entrepreneur to claim the moniker 'social'.

As we embrace such a definitional void, the role of narrative became increasingly important. There has always been considerable debate on the precise influence a story or narrative has (Gabriel 2000; Boje 2001). However, if we focus on stories as a form of retrospective meaning-giving, Downing (2005) suggests these patterns and flows among entrepreneurs form, in part, their identities. For the 'social' entrepreneur this retrospective of storytelling can, at times, fall victim to ideological myth-making, relying on optimism for what is in reality a complex and multi-layered issue (Bull 2008; Dey and Steyaert 2010). This leads Houtbeckers (2017) to posit an implicit tension between the discourse of social entrepreneurship, and the everyday practices of social *entrepreneuring*. However, Diochon and Anderson (2011) suggest that it is the guiding values of what it is to be social, expressed in the entrepreneur's storytelling (Anderson 2005), which provide direction through the ambiguities of reality.

The story which the entrepreneur tells can be influential in determining how, and in what ways, their entrepreneurial practice is considered to be 'social' – if at all. In lieu of structural criteria, the personal narratives of social entrepreneurs provide the ability to interpret and transmit their identity, connecting them with others, allowing them to make sense of their social enterprising and even providing legitimacy (Johansson 2004; Parkinson, Howorth, and Southern 2017). Kearins and Collins (2012) suggest that such narratives are often constructed in hindsight, to rationalize decision making and allow for a plausible explanation of experiences. So, narratives give order to an entrepreneur's practice, drawing attention to the dominant discursive strands and interpretations of what it means to be entrepreneurial (Caprotti and Bailey 2014; Downing 2005). By engaging with these narratives, social entrepreneurs position themselves in their own enterprise story, giving meaning to what it is to be 'social' (Anderson and Smith 2007; Anderson 2005).

However, the concept of social activity is itself a value-laden and often emotionally subjective understanding of what is socially-beneficial, this can be individualistic and is often contentious (Poldner, Shrivastava, and Branzei 2017). There can be multiple ways in which the more social aspects of entrepreneurship are conceptualized, with often competing and paradoxical ambiguity (Seanor et al. 2013).

## Myth of the 'grand narrative'

In a move to greater understand the narratives of social entrepreneurship, the image of the individual driving the enterprise has come to the fore (Bornstein 2004; Steyaert and Hjorth 2006). Mair and Marti (2006) suggest that this image is the result of a desire to see social enterprise though the eyes of the founder and their unique 'social vision'. However, Parkinson and Howorth (2008) suggest that such a focus on the individual echoes a neo-liberal enterprise discourse set in (mostly Western) capital-oriented societies. Social entrepreneurs, form such a perspective, are painted as having *flair* and afflicted by a desire to *give back*. Thus, fantasies of individual elitism contribute to a 'grand narrative' on social enterprise, where those with a special ability to spot social need (opportunity) become the problems-solvers of society (Pearce 2003; Robinson 2006). The implications of an enterprise-based narrative mean that social entrepreneurs should seek to mirror traditional enterprise in their quest for future sustainability, but with a social rather than economic goal (Pomerantz 2003).

As a theoretical frame of reference, the 'grand narrative' of individualistic social drive is useful. However, more recent investigations into the narrative draws of social entrepreneurs uncover a nuanced character. Muñoz and Cohen (2017), for example, look to how social sustainability is understood by entrepreneurs and find that, instead of a mission to affect sustainable activities, the entrepreneurs see their activities as embedded in their surrounding – and therefore become socially sustainable because they read from their environment what is necessary. Through this lens, the

entrepreneur is seen less as a change agent, but more a follower of change (Cajaiba-Santana 2014), meaning the actions of the enterprise must be observed within the broader context of social meaning and discourse. This revises the simplistic notion of designed social problem-solving and altruistic assumptions, to uncover something more reactive, a more holistic understanding of entrepreneurship within society and all the complexities this involves (Calás, Smircich, and Bourne 2009). Karanda and Toledano (2012) also challenge unidimensional notions of a heroic social warrior, suggesting that social entrepreneurs respond to the needs of their localized community in a manner more mundane than transformational. In particular, the authors see social entrepreneurs in South Africa as supplementing local services, a cooperation with the public sphere, as opposed to individual activism against it. Thus, social enterprise is drawn as more interactionist and evolving than proactive and targeted. The authors restate calls from Austin (2006) to greater understand the nature of social enterprises in developing contexts, where the specific social problems are unclear, and may themselves be changing – a call continued by Anderson et al. (2019).

As we move away from singular images of righteous social crusading (Harding 2004; Pearce and Doh 2005), we are able to uncover narratives around alternative themes, including conceptualizations of opportunity, resources, outcomes and the process of social change itself (Cohen, Smith, and Mitchell 2008). Kimmitt and Muñoz (2018) see this as the various ways in which the social entrepreneurship makes sense of what is indeed 'social'. Seanor et al. (2013) describe this as the entrepreneur wearing 'different hats' at different times, acknowledging that narratives of mission and narratives of market each have their place, though perhaps under different circumstances. This echoes Welter, Baker, and Wirsching's (2019) suggestion of multiple contexts for entrepreneurs to navigate and adapt their story to, these stories and identities evolve as the social situation evolves.

We therefore reject assigning a constant normative idea of what it is to be 'social', and instead look to engage with a more multifaceted character (Santos 2012). In doing so we join calls from Anderson et al. (2019), Shaw and de Bruin (2013) and Mair, Battilana, and Cardenas (2012) to provide a deeper theorization of the practices of social enterprises, enabled through a more critical reflexivity of what it is to be social. In this paper, we move beyond categorizations of social problem-solving (Cohen, Smith, and Mitchell 2008; Kimmitt and Muñoz 2018) and turn our focus on the social entrepreneurs themselves. Specifically, we uncover the narrative discourses drawn upon, providing practical meaning to the role of social entrepreneurship within contextual settings (Gartner 2007).

## Methodology

In line with the narrative approach, we consider the stories that social entrepreneurs tell of their business, and indeed of themselves. These stories are often used as a way of building legitimacy for what they are doing (Johansson 2004), so by accessing them, we interpret how they inform entrepreneurial activity. Qualitative data are taken from 25 life-story narrative interviews with self-declared social entrepreneurs in the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) region of Pakistan. Viewed through a constructionist lens, these narratives allow us to elicit meaning attributed to the various aspects of entrepreneurship (Atkinson 2002; Riessman 2008). We specifically look to how the entrepreneurs' narratives illustrate their response to context and through this process understand their role (Dodd, Anderson, and Jack, 2021). Our findings present the key narrative draws for these social entrepreneurs and we discuss the implications for how we understand and theorize social entrepreneurship more broadly (Larty and Hamilton 2011).

The Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa (KP) region of Pakistan is an area characterized by the tension of social change in the context of a traditionally conservative and hierarchal society (Ullah 2018). This tension and dynamism in society allows us to follow Karanda and Toledano (2012) by moving beyond the conventional US and European conceptualizations, as we look to an area of distinct transition where social entrepreneurship can take on a role of change facilitator, rather than problem-solver. Two authors knew the KP region well and organized a range of free workshops in Social Entrepreneurship sponsored by IMSciences. This led to some willing participants and aided introduction to others.

Snowball techniques were used after initial purposeful sampling (Mason 2002; Jack et al. 2010; Patton 2015), which allows us to choose respondents based on their experience of social entrepreneurship. All our respondents are embedded in KP region and state an aim of making a difference to social wellbeing in the area.

Data were collected on location by a co-author, with interviews conducted in Urdu or Pashto and translated into English. It was important that the interviewer was native to the region to allow for explanation and sensitivity to local dialect, where required. Data collection consisted of extended semi-structured interviews, using a narrative life story approach to capture both context and action. Interviews lasted between 90 and 160 minutes, were recorded and transcribed, and data anonymized to protect respondents. This method is frequently used for examining contextual issues in the field of entrepreneurship (Gartner 2007; Diochon and Anderson 2011; Korsgaard and Anderson 2011; Yunis, Hashim, and Anderson 2018). The interview protocol allowed for more open discussions and reflective responses, enabling the respondents to give their individual account of social *entrepreneuring*. The interviews commenced with initial generative questions and were developed with two main types of elaborative questions: 'planned prompts', for example, 'can you tell me what is specifically "social" about your social enterprise?', and nondirective, such as 'explain how your social entrepreneurial journey started?'. The extended nature allowed respondents to elaborate relevant events, or descriptions that aligned directly to the theoretical aims of the work (Korsgaard and Anderson 2011).

The analysis follows Braun and Clarke (2006) and utilized the constant-comparative method to explore connections and patterns in the data, which involves a recursive sense-making of the data (Anderson and Jack 2015). We started the data analysis by sifting and sorting, an iterative review of data with emerging themes. Each story from our respondents in KP region represents an illustration of their attempts and interpretation of what it is to be social in their *entrepreneuring*. By repeatedly comparing narratives and patterns of detail, we built themes that may be conceptually linked for convincing explanations (Jack et al. 2015). For example, many respondents use a narrative of legitimization to explain the dynamism in the process of their social entrepreneurship and their long-term goals. We then analyse these themes in relation to our guiding theory to form an explanation. Quotation and data structure diagrams allow us to present our findings and the connections in the data. This uncovers the interplay of social purpose with contextual setting, along with the actual stated practices of the entrepreneurs themselves (Diochon and Anderson 2011).

Due to the sensitive nature of personal and business detail in the geographical area, some participants were wary of providing full descriptive information on their enterprise. Where information has been withheld, this has been respected and reported as such. Table 1 describes the 25 participants of the study, with general information on the nature of the enterprise to provide reference to the narrative findings.

Our analysis of interview data leads to the construction of three dominant narrative draws relied upon by our entrepreneurs, what Dey and Steyaert (2018) term *repertoires* of interpretation among the participants. These are: *dealing with social consequences; benevolence through enterprise*; and *changing with society*. Each core narrative draw is made up of various components, more micro-narratives that build to produce the core narratives. These narratives are now taken in turn and discussed in relation to the individual components from which they are made.

## Findings and analysis

### *Dealing with social consequences*

Our participants are rooted locally in the KP region, an area characterized with poverty and deprivation. More than 49% of 30 million are reported living in acute poverty and vulnerability (Government of Pakistan, 2016). As our participants discuss the story of themselves and their entrepreneurial journey, they often return to the notion of poverty and limited resources, and how their initial entrepreneurialism overcame such challenges. Figure 1 presents the summary coding

**Table 1.** Sample.

| Respondent[a] | Business | Age | Gender | Time in business (years) | Business size (employees)[b] | Social activities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Farhad | Internet training | 22 | M | 2 | 2 + 12 paid interns | Free workshops/training to young people |
| Karim | School | 42 | M | - | 400 students | Quality education at lowest costs |
| Mithra | Child welfare | - | F | 1 | 2PT + volunteers | Free food, free education to street children |
| Samir | Tutoring | 20 | M | - | 10 | Quality home tutoring at low costs |
| Nasreen | Small school | - | F | - | - | Offer scholarship; changing 'ratta' (memorization) education to better understanding of taught subjects |
| Jareria | Beauty salon | 23 | F | 3 | 1 + apprentices | Free training to women |
| Laila | Vocational training | - | F | 15 | - | Free vocational training to women |
| Tahmina | Henna training | - | F | 6 | 1 | Free henna training to poor girls |
| Rashid | Land cultivation for farming | 31 | M | 2 | 12PT | Rent cultivated land to local farmers at low rates; provide employment opportunities |
| Iffat | Baking (online and offline) | 28 | F | 3 | 1PT | Profits donated to social organizations |
| Deedar | Beauty Salon | 27 | F | 7 | 1 | Free training to poor kids |
| Ainy | Vocational skill training; retail | - | F | 8 | 1 + trainees | Improve the wellbeing of women artisans |
| Sara | Stitching centre | 29 | F | 2 | 1 | Free training to poor girls; fund raising for deaf and mute girls; free magazines |
| Naseem | Diet and healthy cooking & delivery | 40 | F | 1 ½ | 1 | Free healthy food and preserved food training for women |
| Saim | Primary education | - | M | - | - | Good quality education to poor kids at affordable costs |
| Muhammad | Workplace Training | 28 | M | 4 | 20 | Train women on their basic rights and ethics |
| Owais | Training | - | M | 5 | 75 volunteers | Creating awareness on social issues (e.g. women education, child labour, environment) |
| Ismail | Student exchange platform | 28 | M | 1 | 1 | Providing university students with career counselling and opportunities such as exchange programmes, scholarships, undergraduate scholarships, cultural exchange programmes |
| Faryal | Digital platform for women | 34 | F | 10 | | KP's first digital platform that encourages women writers |
| Maryam | Groceries | 23 | F | 2 | 3 | Online shopping platform promoting access to food |
| Ushna | Food supply | 44 | F | 18 | 1 | Provide training on farming and horticulture |
| Sohail | Consultancy | 24 | M | 6 | 20+ | Animal feed and farming consultancy |
| Wafa | Online newspaper | 20 | F | ½ | 40 volunteers | Spread awareness; the national and international news, 'Unsung Heroes' in Pakistan |
| Haya | Entrepreneurship education | 32 | F | 2 | 3 | Creating curriculum teaching for entrepreneurs and workshops to develop soft skills |
| Nadia | Training | 27 | F | 4 | 15 | Free training to girls living in poverty |

[a]Pseudonyms given to protect participants
[b]Unless otherwise stated

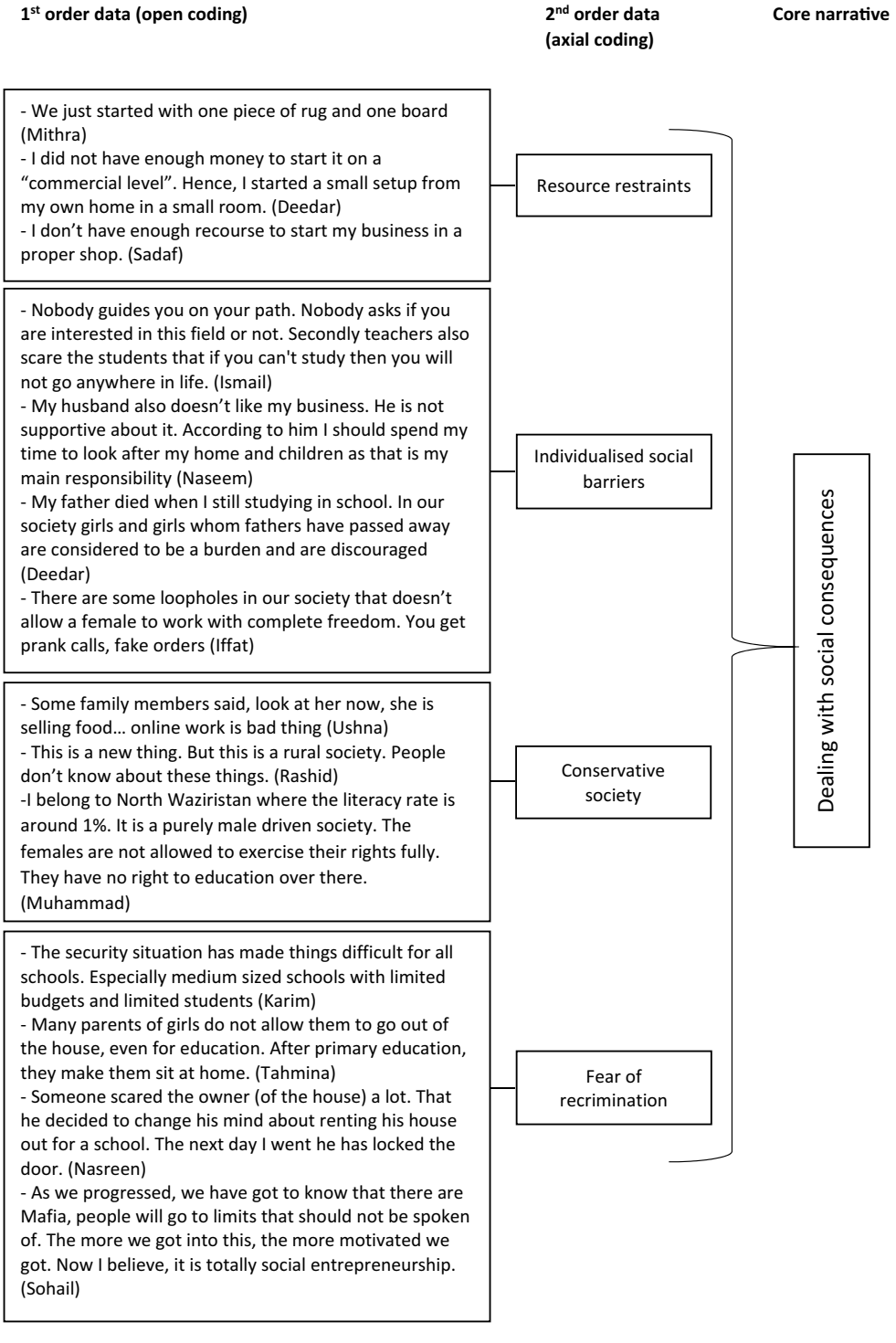


**Figure 1.** Data structure (Dealing with social consequences)

around this narrative. For instance, images such as, *'I started with one piece of rug and one board'* (Mithra) and, *'I did not have enough money to start it on a "commercial level", I started a small setup from my own home in a small room'* (Deedar), dominate discussions on the genesis of the enterprises.

The social entrepreneurs of our sample confront restraint in terms of the financial and physical resources to build an enterprise and speak of the ways in which they make use of what they have, echoing Sarasvathy and Dew's (2005) broader arguments on the process of effectuation, and a 'tough beginnings' story not uncommon of entrepreneurs more broadly. As Laila explains:

> At the start of the business I was short of funds, however I did not get financial support from others. Therefore, I sold my wedding jewellery worth 2000 Rupees (20 Dollars) at that time for initial investment. I couldn't afford to employ any supporting staff, but I was not ready to give up. I started to stitch by myself. I was living with my family; so I worked mostly at night time so that my family would not be disturbed. (Laila)

This lack of access to capital and resources in the setting of extreme poverty constrained our participants and characterizes much of how they see being 'social'. The hardship and struggle are expected, as a lack of support is assumed, perhaps in contrast to more supportive Western ecosystems.

Another consequence of the KP regional context, is the spectre of religious extremism causing threats and fear. Our respondents explain how the terrorist threats affected them and their social endeavours:

> Since 2001, there has been a rise in religious extremism in KP and the surrounding tribal areas which had a direct effect on the lives of women in our community and on the business. We noticed bomb threats were made to schools providing education to girls and we too came under direct criticism from far-right religious groups for promoting women freedom, liberty, and expression. In 2008, my father was kidnapped for the same reason, and it was a severe blow to our efforts. (Jareria)

Individualized and societal resistance to social endeavour is an added element, very specific to context (geographical and social), and brings with it a fear of recrimination. Our social entrepreneurs present an image of not only overcoming the barriers of limited resources, but also living with social barriers and active resistance each day they continue in operation. What we have here is a contextually bound social entrepreneur. They respond to the needs that emerge from the social environment, but are also restrained by them, as straying too far from societal constraints, or being too courageous in ambition could have dire consequences for their welfare. We find that those working with females, or are themselves female, are keen to draw attention to the social barrier they face, defining how and why they endeavour in their social offering. Such challenges are often individualized by our entrepreneurs, where they reflect on their own family situation as being an issue to overcome, rather than as a function of support. Sara presents this in a striking way:

> *My parents were scared of the idea that I have to work and earn. Furthermore, they were scared what society will say.* (Sara)

It seems that in this context, our social entrepreneurs deal with the constraints of family and role expectations, on top of that from broader society. Faryal shared with us,

> *The biggest challenge we faced was that we were going against the society norms.* (Faryal)

Anderson and Obeng (2017) argue that social context often manifests as culture and social norms, we see our participants expected to conform to role expectations in their culture and tradition. The social norms determine the division of labour by gender, with women typically receiving little assistance to venture on their own (Amine and Staub 2009). Society and the expectations for family and community values informs what is possible for the individual. Ushna discovered '*as Pukhtoon society demands, all of my business decisions were taken under [the community] umbrella . . . To become a successful social entrepreneur, I needed to establish partnership with the strong [community] stakeholders . . . taking great care of the cultural values to keep the business going*'. We recognize 'moral

space' for these social entrepreneurs, with their *entrepreneuring* subject to a *'socioeconomic process, an ongoing synthesis of self and society . . . a heavy cultural and ideological loading'* (Anderson and Smith 2007, 486). Our participants show how their entrepreneurial efforts are morally encoded and constructed to fit with the demands of the localized context, or at least to acknowledge when they do not. They navigate culture and social values and strive to act in a socially acceptable manner to gain credibility and support from those which a business normally relies upon.

This couples with a traditionally conservative society, where anything 'new' may be considered problematic:

> *No awareness [of] Internet businesses. Our KP society thinks this is useless, furthermore they can't even accept the idea of earning from home. They don't believe it. Our formal education system only teaches children to become either doctor or engineer. These are the only fields worth trying for. This limits students' thinking, and they cannot think outside the box. So, this created major challenges for us.* (Farhad)

The narrative illustrates the need for individual resilience to the social forces which seek to halt their offering, but paradoxically fitting with the social script to maintain the relationships needed to build operation. Our entrepreneurial 'heroes' are not characterized by the righteousness of their social vision, but rather by their ability to withstand and circumnavigate social consequences arising from their activities.

## *Benevolence through enterprise*

A variety of *motifs* are offered when building a narrative around the role of social entrepreneurship in society, summarized diagrammatically in Figure 2. In the first instance, they seek to create an image of enterprise development. In such a way, our social entrepreneurs tap into the usual trope of resource efficiency, income and even growth. Thus, our findings echo voices suggesting that social enterprise cannot always be seen as a purely altruistic endeavour but is instead embedded in a nuanced image of economy (Cajaiba-Santana 2014; Kearins, Collins, and Tregidga 2010). This seeming contradiction in the character of social entrepreneurs demonstrates the complexity of role. From this finding, it cannot be that economic discourse and ideologies have no place in the building of a social endeavour. At times, these social agents will dress as economic entrepreneurs, to present themselves as a more robust contributor, highlighting what Seanor et al. (2013) see as the ambiguities and vacillation of the social entrepreneur's mindset.

That said, themes of enterprise development are fixed with the key drivers of benevolence. Positing themselves as catalysed for the 'aid of others', our social entrepreneurs are still susceptible to the mythology of a 'higher calling'. Sohail offers us an example:

> *[The] social aspect is basically empowering. Empowering means that we are trying to uplift a certain farmer from where he used to be to a level where he wants to be. So, I believe if I am able to help one farmer to go where he wants to be, helping his household, helping him get a future and for his family . . . . . People like us who should step up, who have knowledge and from my end, I am contributing this way in the society. If you give a fish to a person and he will just eat it. Unless you help him learn fishing and that is what will make him sustainable. Similarly, our consultation is a continuous process.* (Sohail)

This reinforces the ideological view of the 'social warrior' reaching areas others, public and private, cannot (Dees and Anderson 2006), in turn lending to an aura of infallibility (Andersson 2011). In the following excerpt, Mithra characterizes how this image can prevail, even bolstering the drive to succeed:

> *First day we went there, no kid came. Although I already had been asking those kids in my area for the last two weeks that I am starting a free education school and you kids should come. For two weeks we went there, no kids turned up. After two weeks I got tired of waiting so I just sat in my car, drove to the area where those beggar kids were working, and I just got them in my car and brought them to the one room class that we had created in [the] office. So the first day that we officially started I had three kids that I myself grabbed from the streets.* (Mithra)

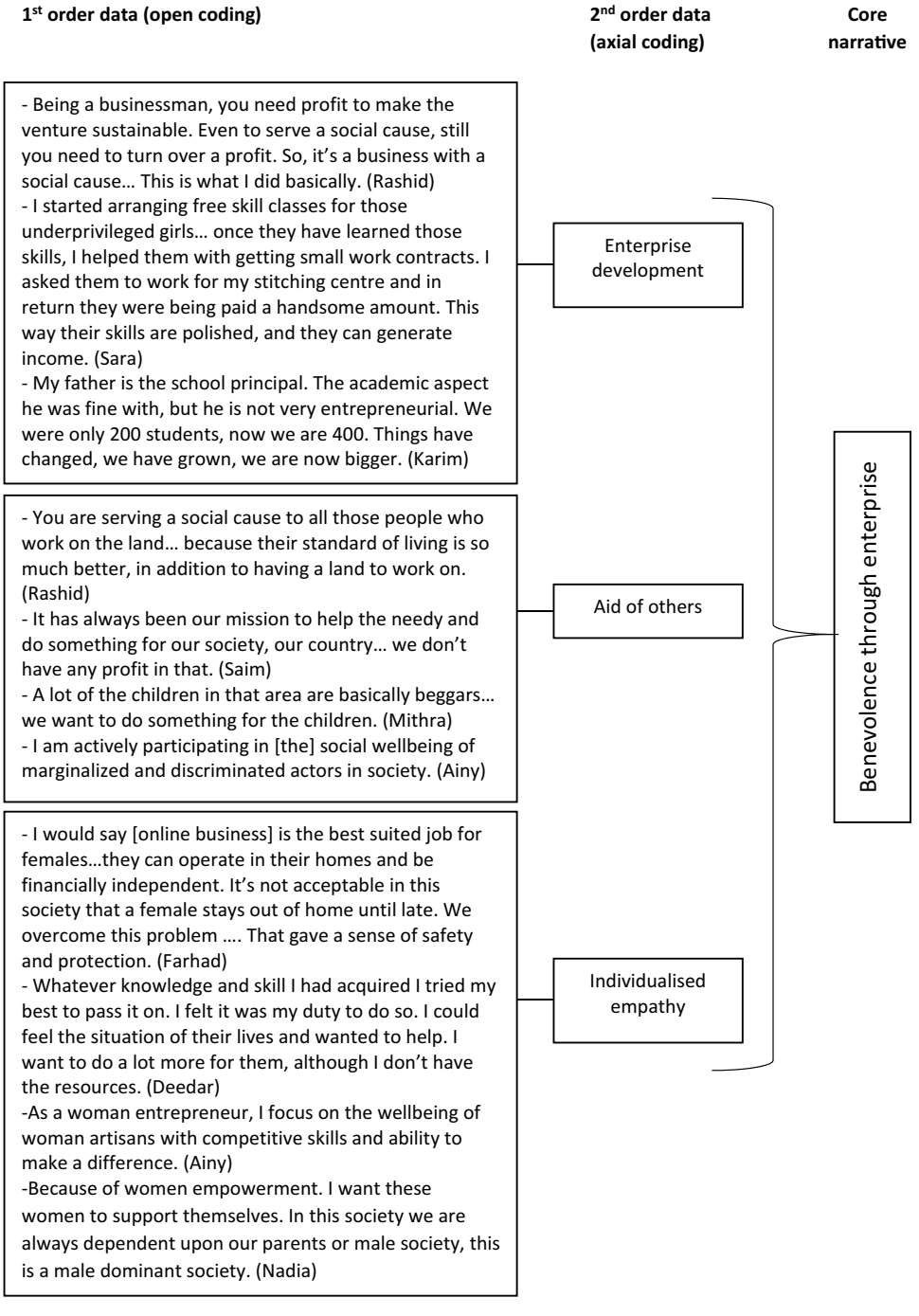


**Figure 2.** Data structure (Benevolence through enterprise)

Confidence in the meaning and intentions of one's actions is crucial for every entrepreneurial journey, particularly in the initial stages (Cunningham and Anderson 2018). However, it could be said that for a social entrepreneur, this framing of their own role is even more critical, particularly when facing such intense resistance in the form of social consequences. Without the belief and moral backing of a social cause, perhaps our entrepreneurs would not have the confidence to face down the forces against them.

We also notice that these social entrepreneurs are strongly geared towards creating value for others in the society, while at the same time rely on co-producing with others. Sara provides free training to poor girls in the neighbourhood. She integrates the sense of self and meaning in life through her narratives, and expands her entrepreneurial identity beyond the constraints of her individual life story,

> *I started arranging free cost skill classes for those underprivileged girls. Once the girl guides learned those skills … I asked them to work for my stitching centre.* (Sara)

The social mission of doing things for 'underprivileged girls' is achieved by doing things with them, not for them. As Clarke and Holt (2010) explain, the integral element of working effectively with others is to create meaning, both for themselves and for the others.

If we follow the classic enterprise discourse, we are led to images of an individual with 'entrepreneurial flair' (Jack and Anderson 1999) and a special ability to spot a social 'opportunity' (Robinson 2006). However, instead of such enlightened gap-spotting, we find notions of individualized empathy to dominate as a call to social action, producing a more utilitarian view. It seems that our entrepreneurs draw from a modified narrative around their own experience, in a similar way to how Cope (2005) describes entrepreneurs justifying what they do by reflecting on their own journey. Thus, the entrepreneurial activity itself becomes a modified version of the individual's own experiences, and what they see mirrored in others. Here, the individual is at the source of entrepreneurial action, but this individual is themself empathetically reflecting on socio-structural surroundings and reacting to it by making change possible for others. Rather than the enterprise being formed around the entrepreneur's vision, it is formed around the struggles that they encounter, and the hope for more to join them in this fight. Had the entrepreneurs not experienced the struggles of context for themselves, they would not form their entrepreneurial practices in the same way.

### *Changing with society*

A final core narrative draw among our social entrepreneurs can be constructed though the notion of change. There are two key aspects informing this narrative draw: one, in which the entrepreneurs reflect on their own practice and how it evolves and adapts; and a second where our entrepreneurs consider their enterprise in terms of the impact and place it has in a changing society – represented in Figure 3.

In reflecting on the development of their own enterprise, our entrepreneurs employ a narrative of continued legitimization. In many ways this interacts with the elements of an enterprise discourse in the earlier narrative. However, here we see our entrepreneurs communicate the trajectory of their offering. For instance, the word 'proper' is frequently used to describe their vision for what the enterprise may look like in the future. *'I want to have a proper big school'* (Nasreen); *'getting a proper building setup'* (Mithra); or to *'have a proper training centre'* (Tahmina). Firstly, this implies that the entrepreneurs do not see their current, socially-driven, practices as sufficient to be considered a legitimate business entity. Second, there is a suggestion that what they currently do will become more 'commercial' as things develop. Ismail explained,

> *Today my venture is worth 1 million rupees ($13000), which is a big deal in Pakistan, but I did not sell it to the people offering the money. I wanted to take this venture further. My aim is to take this venture to an even bigger level than [names major industry competitor]. I want to take it to a higher scale and turn it into a company, which has its own employees and its departments.* (Ismail)

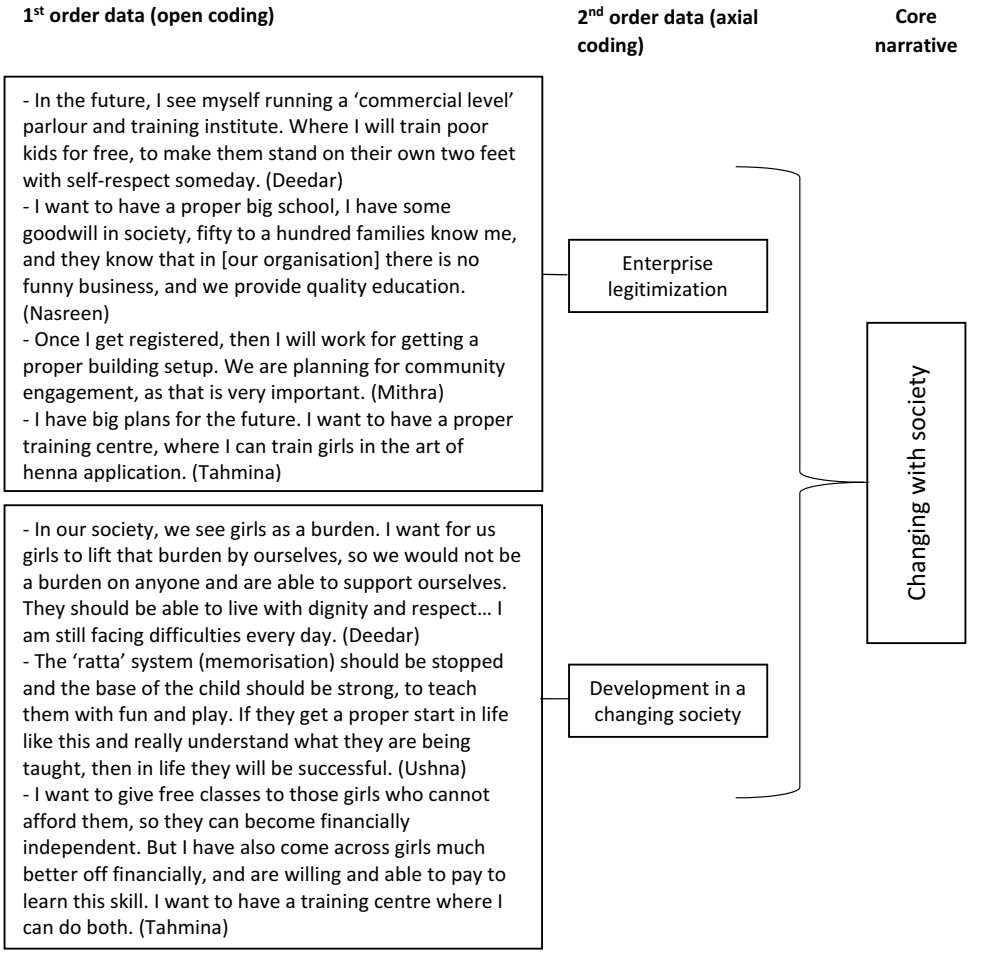


**Figure 3.** Data structure (Changing with society)

The entrepreneurs themselves appear to be entertaining the dichotomy of social versus economic where, as the story goes on they are accepting that economic narratives will eventually dominate all others, an outcome of economics' hegemonic presence (Anderson 2015). Owais shared with us,

> *Creating awareness (on social issues) is our first priority and profit is our second priority obviously but right now we need to earn some profits and pitch our ideas, so we are also focusing on the profit portion just as much. I am a social entrepreneur and I have an experience of five years so why should I sell my ideas for free. We have ideas that have value, so we are measuring their worth.* (Owais)

In this context, Kearins, Collins, and Tregidga's (2010) view that business growth may not be as important as the founder's vision of change does not seem to hold. These entrepreneurs do not necessarily see the social vision as their defining characteristic, but in many ways see themselves as what Karanda and Toledano (2012) term 'mundane entrepreneurs', looking to use the social elements to drive the enterprise into a more conventional business sphere. Employing narratives of the increasingly economic can be a means of convincing others of their potential for legitimacy (Garud, Schildt, and Lant 2014). This clearly presents a tension, even a paradox, in relation to utilizing an enterprise narrative to show the reach of their benevolence, but it is in the tension that our

entrepreneurs paint themselves as a dynamic entity – not binary but evolving. Certainly, our entrepreneurs do not see themselves as static social problem-solvers, but rather part of a changing and competitive environment, as Karim illustrates,

> *Those will remain in business that are at the top of their game. The idea right now is not to wait and see what happens. One has to be proactive; we have to be as innovative in our product . . . our long-term plan is to make it a complete package.* (Karim)

This focus on the changing nature of the enterprise is paired with our entrepreneurs' views of the changing society around them. In contrast to the retrospective acrimony noted in portraying the societal obstacles they have come across; our entrepreneurs present an optimistic view of what they will be able to achieve as their social surrounding develops with them. Ushna told us,

> *I want to expand my business to national level. Women of this region are held back by an unconscious fear. In recent years, they are seen to be climbing up the corporate ladder . . . The rising concept of social entrepreneurship is helping them to be more empowered and aware . . . so that more women enter business.* (Ushna)

As education develops, gender barriers reduce, and problematic conservatism tempers, our social entrepreneurs see themselves as both facilitating this change, and subsequently having to adapt with it. They each have a vision of what they will do when the social problem they address is widely acknowledged, and that vision is to become a 'proper' entity using a typically enterprise-based narrative. Whether this is the overconfident folly of an entrepreneurial mindset (Cunningham and Anderson 2018), or the realistic view of a socially embedded change agent, is unclear; but what is clear is the way in which the social entrepreneur looks to co-construct themselves in relation to how their societal context shifts. The stories of the entrepreneurs themselves can be seen as social artefacts, a representation of a changing society where the most useful narratives to draw upon depend on the stage of their relations with the surrounding social contexts. If the social optimism our entrepreneurs rings true, they will move from narratives dominated by obstacle and individualized struggles, to what they see as more legitimized commercial and economic discussions.

## Discussion

Our findings offer three main contributions to further Alistair's theoretical impetus. The first relates to the social entrepreneur's place in social context. Images of a heroic saviour of society are distant in our findings. When an individualized view is apparent it takes the form of a personalized struggle against societal expectations. This extends into narratives around their role in society, where images of individualized empathy and deeply personal experience drive the intended outcomes of entrepreneurial activity. These findings move us on from a view of the social entrepreneur as an enlightened problem-solver (Dees 2012), and support Anderson and Lent (2017) by demonstrating how our social entrepreneurs read from societal cues on what it is to be 'social'. The practice of our entrepreneurs is presented as a direct response to how they see society as changing, aligning themselves with that progressive change. However, in this context, our entrepreneurs do not portray themselves as elitist, but instead highlight their resilience and effort in facing a resistance to change and want that same resilience to be built up in others. They provide a story of themselves as part of a broader social movement, where they are playing a part in much larger story arch.

Surrounding context is writ large in our narratives (Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2012). For instance, where obstacles and barriers are considered, these are social and localized, even down to family relations. Where future direction is in focus, this is inextricably linked to the direction of societal change they anticipate in their environment (Muñoz and Cohen, 2017). An implication of this is how our entrepreneurs view their practice changing with society, the way the narratives modify to reflect on something more 'proper', even commercial, as societal problems are gradually addressed. This brings to mind Anderson and Smith's (2007) notion of 'moral space', in that the activities of entrepreneurship must be considered right and good for society in order to be socially accepted.

However, here we see a situation where the value of social activity is not always immediately apparent to society, at times even vigorously and violently repelled. The resilience of our entrepreneurs seems possible only with an understanding of a future state, in which their activities will not provoke such strong reaction. In this scenario, the fit between entrepreneurial practices and acceptance in the social context occurs as a progression, a hopeful process of development for both the entrepreneurs and society.

Theoretically, this is important. When we look to an informative social context to help us understand entrepreneurial activity (Anderson 2015), is not to say that our social entrepreneurs are objects of a dictating context, but rather they are part of its evolving story. Narratives drawn upon not only reflect current local realities but also themselves create imagined realities (Larty and Hamilton 2011). These new realities are not ideological in nature but more dialectic (Dey and Steyaert 2018), they provoke a reaction from the social context and test what is – and what is not yet – possible. By observing this interaction, we move beyond static checklists of what it is to be a social entrepreneur (Anderson et al. 2019). Gaddefors and Anderson (2019) suggest that, in practice, entrepreneurship should not be considered a *noun*, but as a *verb*, a concept of doing, a behaviour that creates value. Our findings endorse this, but also see that this behaviour must adapt as contextual notions of what is socially valuable change. This is manifest in the practice of social *entrepreneuring*, the initial rebellion of our entrepreneurs illuminates a perceived social issue, but this gives way to a more valuable organization of benevolence as society gradually accepts what our entrepreneurs are doing. The practice of the entrepreneur and the acceptance of society aligns in a 'moral space' of acceptance.

Second, and in many ways the mechanism through which the entrepreneur attempts to fit with social context, we provide explicit evidence to support Jones, Jones, Latham, and Betta's (2008) contention that entrepreneurial narratives are multi-faceted in their presentation. The narrative approaches we construct are rarely ordered, and do not always follow a linear representation of entrepreneurial processes (De Fina 2009). Our findings demonstrate that dichotomies on social versus economic oversimplify a more complex reality. We support O'Neill and Gibbs (2016) in recognizing that different narratives can be brought into use at different times and when reflecting on different implications. For instance, in considering the future, our entrepreneurs rely on more commercially coloured narratives, while in making sense of their own role in society, they focus on aspects of empathy and overcoming social barriers. In considering social impact, the emphasis appears to be on scale, something only achievable through organized enterprise. This brings us closer to the theory of practice Alistair calls for (Anderson et al. 2019). The ambiguities inherent in issues of the social mean that social entrepreneurs must navigate these multi-dimensional and even contradictory identities. This is not a confused identity (Diochon and Anderson 2011), but is a purposeful adaptation of their story narratives. That is not to say that any telling of the story is a fictionalized account, all elements are true and accurate, but the emphasis depends on the image they are portraying – the benevolent empath, the resilient nonconformist, the rational organizer. Each has its place for these entrepreneurs, and social *entrepreneuring* becomes the practice of changing faces as appropriate.

Finally, we offer evidence that social entrepreneurs in developing economies align closely with the society in which they operate, and the implications of their impact run deep. We can speculate that this may be due to the presence of acute social need, or the immediacy of a conservative societal response to entrepreneurial action, in comparison to what we see in more enterprise-aware cultures. Regardless, it is the vibrancy with which the role and 'usefulness' of social *entrepreneuring* (Anderson et al. 2019) is expressed that we have found enlightening, and which makes such settings prime areas of interest in the continued development of a theory of practice for social entrepreneurship.

## Conclusion

The importance of gaining a more nuanced understanding of social entrepreneurship is difficult to overstate. An enhanced theory of practice which acknowledges the interaction of the individual with broader elements of society has the potential to drive a collaborative approach to social welfare. Where there has been a premature or misjudged assumption on the nature of these entrepreneurs, this can lead to the misallocation of resources, conflicting goals between the individual and contextual values, and a loss of motivation for those practitioners embedded in the locality. From the practical perspective, greater acknowledgement of the dynamic and multi-faceted character of social entrepreneurs may allow practitioners to serve the needs of their environment more appropriately and with less resistance.

Clearly, a qualitative work such as this is not without limitations. Most importantly, we cannot claim to have represented all forms of social entrepreneur in this study, there are many others operating in other areas, with their own stories to tell. Future studies may look to engage more with the variety of social enterprise types and investigate difference in how they portray their individualized stories. Also, while a tight geographical focus is necessary to access the localized nature of the narratives, it may be that other regions, other countries, will produce alternative findings. As work on social entrepreneurship moves forward, more comparative studies would be beneficial. While our findings cannot be generalized to other areas, there is nothing to suggest that the evolving interaction of the social entrepreneur with their social context is not universal, but the articulation of how this takes place will vary depending on the context under study.

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