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Sources of expertise in social enterprises

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Abstract

Social enterprises draw upon multifarious sources of expertise in pursuit of their social and business goals. The social enterprise's first source of expertise is that of their own relational experience derived from their previous employment or experiences and context expertise developed from a deep understanding of their own business. They seek advice from a wide expert-support network favoring those associated with business acumen more than any other. The expert-support network consists of eight distinct categories that are described in a comprehensive model.

KEYWORDS

entrepreneurship, expert, networks, social enterprise

1 | INTRODUCTION

The full scale of sources forming the pool of expertise drawn upon by social enterprises to pursue their social and business goals has not been examined. Previous research has identified a degree of reliance on networks, support services, and governance (Conway, 2008; Cooke & Willis, 1999; Granados & Rivera, 2018; Hynes, 2009; Low, 2006; Podolny & Page, 1998; WYSEL, 2005) but there is a paucity of research that addresses the specific expertise utilized by social entrepreneurs. Studies suggest that in order to succeed, an organization requires access to expertise. It has been studied in several environments including military training (Williams et al., 2008), scientific problem solving (Chi, Glaser, & Rees, 1982), law (Martire & Edmond, 2017; O Ciardha, 2015; Sandefur, 2015), knowledge acquisition (Gordon, 1992), healthcare (Benner, Tanner, & Chesla, 2009; Lesgold et al., 1988; Phelan & McCormack, 2016; Tracey, Wampold, Lichtenberg, & Goodyear, 2014), memory (De Groot & Gobet, 1996; Simon & Chase, 1973), music (Sloboda, 1991), hazard detection (Durso & Dattel, 2006), education (Kalyuga, Ayres, Chandler, & Sweller, 2003), and sport (Starkes & Allard, 1993; Starkes & Ericsson, 2003).

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The term "expert" denotes someone who possesses knowledge, skills or capabilities that are judged superior to others (Glaser & Chi, 1988). An expert is determined by their ability to undertake tasks that a nonexpert cannot, and by a social process where the title of an expert is conferred on them (Agnew, Ford, & Hayes, 1994; Vernon, 1962). The word "expert" has numerous connotations and its use is often dependent on the circumstances in which it is used, the perceptions of those using it, and the type of the person it describes. Sternberg and Frensch (1992) argue that expertise has two principal aspects (cognitive and attributional) and that the two "…may, but need not, correspond." They describe the cognitive aspect as the ability to perform difficult things a nonexpert cannot perform, and the attributional aspect as an individual being an expert because they are regarded as so by others.

Dees (1998) suggests that a social enterprise is a hybrid organization that occupies a position along a spectrum between the purely philanthropic and the purely commercial. Indeed, Defourny and Nyssens (2006) posit that a social enterprise is essentially the application of private-sector methods to achieve the primary social aims usually associated with the public and voluntary sectors, whereas Harding (2004) suggests that social enterprise "potentially covers everything."

Globally there has been a bloom of social enterprises through four principal causes. First, there has been a marked decline in local and

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national contributions to the provision of services in society (Spear, 2001). Second, the market is experiencing the continual privatization of former state-provided welfare and social needs (Mulgan, 2006). Third, there is a significant and far-reaching move away from authority grants in favor of competitive tendering (Defourny, 2001; Goerke, 2003). Finally, there is increased competition for philanthropic donations (Eikenberry, 2009). These factors have combined with an influential rise in general entrepreneurship (Kuratko, 2005), promoting the concept to mainstream education (Hardy, 2014) and leading to an increase in social problem-solving (Hervieux & Voltan, 2016) by individualistic change agents applying business skills to create and sustain social value (Dees, 2001). The economic, social and political value of social enterprises has been highlighted by the U.K. Government and have featured in policy initiatives and governmental discussions (Small Business Survey, 2017; HMG, 2018; Prime Minister Rountable, 2018). Indeed, 9 % of U.K. small businesses are described as social enterprises (HMG, 2017), and the United Kingdom is a world leader in the provision of support for such entities (Nicholls, 2010). The U.K. Government's commitment to social enterprise was confirmed by the emergence of the first specific business model, the "Community Interest Company" in July 2005 with the "Office of the Third Sector" being established in May of the following year (Bull, 2008).

Successful social enterprises, led by socially aware problem solvers, are assumed to be heroic, innovative risk-takers (Seanor & Meaton, 2007) that work differently from those in the third sector (Bornstein, 2004; Dees, Emerson, & Economy, 2001; Leadbeater, 1997). The social entrepreneur must stand astride the social and the enterprise elements of their organization, aware, alert, and striving to balance tensions (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Samuel, White, Jones, & Fisher, 2018; Smith, Besharov, Wessels, & Chertok, 2012; Tracey & Phillips, 2007; Zahra, Gedajlovic, Newbaum, & Shulman, 2009). In an examination of failure in social enterprises, Seanor and Meaton (2008) note that concentrating on the social goal can risk the commercial factors, and that support agencies (who are sometimes clients) are increasingly demanding that social entrepreneurs aspire to greater efficiency in business improvement and administration. It is to this end that Austin, Stevenson, and Wei-Skillern (2006), p. 373) suggest that those within and outside the organization must be involved for the venture to succeed; noting that "People's skills, attitudes, knowledge, contacts, goals, and values provide the resource mix that contributes centrally to success." Existing research has not investigated the resource mix in detail, and therefore this study aims to examine the categories of expertise used by the social entrepreneur. It will do so by utilizing the theory of expertise as a lens to determine the internal and external social actors connected to social enterprises within a geographical area.

In addressing this aim, the study presents a theoretical contribution through the use of expert-theory to study social enterprises and has practical implications for those seeking to educate and share knowledge about the potential sources of expertise in the pursuit of market efficiency and social goals. The article begins with a general review of the topic of expertise and its role in social enterprises, and then describes the methodology, data analysis, and discussion. Finally, an inclusive model of the sources of expertise is proposed, along with the study's implications and the limitations of the research.

1.1 | Literature review

1.1.1 | Describing expertise

Hoffman (1998) notes the difficulty of establishing a definition of "expert," which is dependent on circumstances, profession, and the domain of expertise. A view of expertise is offered by his utilization of a proficiency scale ascribed to the "craft guilds of the Middle Ages":

"The distinguished or brilliant journeyman, highly regarded by peers, whose judgments are uncommonly accurate and reliable, whose performance shows consummate skill and economy of effort, and who can deal effectively with certain types of rare or 'tough' cases. Also, an expert is one who has special skills or knowledge derived from extensive experience with sub-domains." (Hoffman, 1998, p. 85).

The novice, on the other hand, is defined as:

"Literally, someone who is new—a probationary member. There has been some ('minimal') exposure to the domain." (Hoffman, 1998, p. 84).

Expertise then refers to the characteristics, skills and knowledge that distinguish experts from novices and other, less-experienced people (Ericsson, 2006). The journey from novice to expert has been documented by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) where a new professional enters at one end of a time and experience continuum and emerges as an expert at the other, essentially knowing more about less. Experts perceive the world differently to nonexperts (Durso & Dattel, 2006) and have the ability to use their perceptual skills to make fine distinctions. They see more in a situation than a novice by noticing cues that a novice will miss (Ross, Shafer, & Klein, 2006). They revel in the nonroutine work and ambiguity that adds to their depth of knowledge and allows the application of their matured skills (Kuhlmann & Ardichvili, 2015).

Expertise takes time to acquire and the importance of the number of years of practice in the purposeful measurement of expertise has been highlighted by Ericsson (1996), Charness, Krampe, and Mayr (1996), Simonton (1999), Mieg (2009, 2014), and Germain and Tejeda (2012). Indeed, Ericsson (1996) suggests that peak performance in any given domain is acquired after a 10-year period. However, the achievement of expertise is not unique to a particular type of person because excellence in any field can be attained by anyone (Ericsson and Pool, 2016). In essence, experts excel in the accumulation of knowledge in their respective domains, and in time become the recognized masters as a result of their "deliberate and well-structured practice" in which they attain a higher level of performance than that of the novice (Horn & Masunaga, 2006).

1.1.2 | Expertise in social enterprise

Newell, Tansley, and Huang (2004) propose that successful operations are highly dependent on the selection of team members with the necessary skills and expertise, thus creating the optimum mix of knowledge and capabilities. There is great value in drawing upon the expertise within an organization to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Herling, 2000; Pfeffer, 1998; Swanson, 1994). However, there may be limited access to expertise in their pool of volunteers, who come with unique behavioral issues such as commitment to multiple organizations, feeling they are independent of the organizations policies and procedures, differences in motivation and being emotionally and morally committed without instrumental commitment (Alfes, Antunes, & Shantz, 2017; Cnaan & Cascio, 1999; Cooley, Singer, & Irvin, 1989; Pearce, 1983).

Social enterprises must secure the resources they need to compete in the marketplace (Diochon & Anderson, 2009), and several innovative solutions have been proposed to address this issue. Desa (2012) suggests that, in the face of resource constraints and sometimes penurious environments, social entrepreneurs are adept at mobilizing resources like the enterprising bricoleurs first described by Levi-Straus (1966), by making do with materials and pre-existing resources to achieve their goals. This observation was confirmed by the work of Kannampuzha and Suoranta (2016), whose case study of a health venture in rural India described entrepreneurs drawing upon an existing collaboration with a university for professional and personal contacts to "shatter" resource constraints. Although the study concentrates on the early stages of a social enterprise, utilizes only one example as its basis, and concentrates on existing sources, it offers a valuable insight into the mechanisms employed and the central role of networks in social enterprises. An issue for the bricoleur is often one of availability and compulsion—being forced to use "any and all" rather than having a choice. Consequently, the proactive sourcing of those that can offer advice, guidance, professionalism, and expertise is even more pronounced.

The importance of online and offline networks that can be converted to social capital for competitive advantage is well documented (Burt, 2001). Putnam (2000, p. 22) notably described the benefit of "bridging networks" whereby there could be "linkage to external assets and for information diffusion." The networking literature consistently emphasizes that the entrepreneur must be innovative, persistent and seek a variety of sources in order to develop and maintain professional and personal contacts to maximize financial and social benefits (Baker, 2000; Ford, Gadde, Håkansson, & Snethota, 2011; Forret & Dougherty, 2001; Granovetter, 1973; Hakansson & Ford, 2002; Naude, Zaefarian, Tavani, Neghabi, & Zaefarian, 2014; Rauch & Hamilton, 2001; Townshend, 2014). Within the network, such resources can be tangible or intangible because both offer value (Barney, 1991). Granados and Rivera (2018) note that such networks offer considerable potential, especially in the development of sustainability, acquisition of resources, the identification of opportunities, and the achievement of legitimacy. Jenner (2016) concludes that funding remains the principal issue for researchers, but, as suggested by Borzaga and Defourny (2001), there is an increasing need for the development of greater management expertise, and this remains a fundamental challenge in the domain. As far back as 1959, Penrose suggested that organizations are defined by the resources they use to construct goods and services, and the literature confirms that social enterprises need to act to increase business nous and professionalism to match the demands of their chosen field (British Council, 2015; Dees, 1998; Frank, 2007).

1.1.3 | Incubator organizations and experience

An entrepreneur can draw on many resources to realize an opportunity, including the know-how and life lessons gained from previous employment (Chell, 2007). Cooper and Bruno (1977) suggest that entrepreneurs will create businesses that are similar in market reach and technology to the organizations they have recently left. Cooper (1985) used the phrase "incubator organizations" to describe them and to highlight the importance of an entrepreneur's place of employment before commencing a new venture. Bull and Willard (1993) suggest this strategy may allow the entrepreneurs to supplement their expertise, form the relationships needed for the new venture, and shorten the time required to learn the essentials of operating a successful business. In a study of factors that contribute to organizational survival, Bruderl, Preisendorfer, and Ziegler (1992) point to the experience of the founder as a significant contributory factor. The significance of learning from success and failure is also noted by Wadhwa, Aggarwal, Holly, and Salkever (2009), whereas Baron (2006) suggests that experience is fundamental to the targeted identification and pursuit of opportunities with an accompanying increase in expertise in a given domain, ultimately helping to improve performance.

Similarly, Westhead, Ucbasaran, and Wright (2009) suggest that concomitant experience manifests in deeper technical expertise. This does not prevent a novice gaining expertise based on experience. This is borne out by health studies in the United Kingdom that record the phenomenon of expert patients, a term first coined by the Chief Medical Officer (DOH, 2001) to describe a patient's knowledge and experience of their condition, sometimes fed by the availability of information online (Fox, Ward, & O'Rourke, 2005) but regarded with antipathy by some medical practitioners (Shaw & Baker, 2004). The objection of the medical profession is perhaps understandable because professionals have seen a steady decline and erosion of their group power after a peak in the 1950s, and a move away from noncapitalist values towards access to expertise resting in the hands of capitalists (Krause, 1999). There is also evidence that a little knowledge or a veneer of expertise can be dangerous in extreme circumstances, as borne out by the Haddon-Cave Report (2009).

Following a review of the pertinent literature, the most referred to themes are presented in Table 1. Each theme is supported by the principle issues revealed in the SE literature and these have been utilized to steer the operationalisation of the study.

TABLE 1 Social enterprise expertise themes

Theme	Principle issues	Literature review
Team members	Selecting, motivating and leading specialist and voluntary staff.	Swanson (1994), Pfeffer (1998), Herling (2000), Newell et al. (2004)
Volunteer limitations	Deficiency of organizational and management skills among voluntary staff.	Cooley et al. (1989), Pearce (1983), Dees (1998), Cnaan and Cascio (1999), Borzaga and Defourny (2001), Frank (2007), British Council (2015), Alfes et al. (2017)
Resource	Compromising through innovation and bricolage	Levi-Straus (1966), Diochon and Anderson (2009), Desa (2012), Kannampuzha and Suoranta (2016)
Networks	Securing and efficiently utilizing networks to secure expertise	Granovetter (1973), Barney (1991), Putnam (2000), Baker (2000), Forret and Dougherty (2001), Burt (2001), Rauch and Hamilton (2001), Hakansson and Ford (2002) Ford et al. (2011), Naude et al. (2014) Townshend (2014) Granados and Rivera (2018)
Incubator organizations	Exploitation of transferable skills	Cooper and Bruno (1977), Bull and Willard (1993), Department of Health (2001)
Founder experience	Founder experience assists but can be limited.	Bruderl et al. (1992), Wadhwa et al. (2009), Baron (2006), Westhead et al. (2009)
Intangible	Operationalizing intangible benefits	Barney (1991)

2 | METHODOLOGY

The major reason for qualitative interview-based research is to describe and clarify experiential life "as it is lived, felt, and accomplished by human beings" (Schwandt, 2001, p. 84). Semi-structured interviews provide a means to stimulate conversation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe, & Jackson, 2015), achieve flexibility (Dawson, 2009), and capture rich situational information (Denscombe, 2010; Fox, 2009). Accordingly, interviews were conducted with 11 social enterprises in the county of Wiltshire, Southwest England. Their legal structures and activities were diverse, representative of the wider sector (Pearce, 2003).

Purposive sampling was used to a point of theoretical saturation (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). In addition to their online self-identification as a social enterprise, the sampling was guided by the social enterprise selection criteria of Thompson and Doherty (2006). Specifically, the enterprise must have a social purpose; assets and wealth must be used to create community benefit; the social purpose must be pursued at least in part by trade in the market; profits and surpluses should not be distributed to shareholders, as would be the case with a profit-seeking business; the enterprise must be accountable to its members and a wider community; and there must be a double or triple-bottom-line paradigm.

Each interview lasted approximately 1 hr and the questions were open-ended and based on the literature to encourage discussion (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The questions were reviewed and refined after each interview to ensure that theoretical saturation was achieved (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guest et al., 2006). The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the content was analyzed to identify the sources of expertise (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Kothari, 2004). The validity of any study of interpretive design can be subject to criticism. Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016) suggest that participant validation is a useful tool in ensuring the correct interpretation of data, particularly where the researcher is both the data collector and data analyst (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Accordingly, participant validation was used to substantiate the interpretation of the data and consequent modeling.

The personal details of participants have not been included in this study to maintain anonymity (Samuel et al., 2018) and to encourage a candid exchange of views (Stewart, Gill, Chadwick, & Treasure, 2008). The 11 individuals from the social enterprises that participated comprised three from support services (legal and organization), two from service-based retailers (cafés and meeting places), two from garden and farm projects (for neuro-diverse, elderly and schools groups), three from education services (covering addiction, therapy, and mechanical training), and one from a goods retailer (furniture). The newest business had been established for 1 year and the oldest for 8 years.

3 | ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The semi-structured interviews with participants revealed that sources of expertise were dependent on circumstances, the legal structure of the enterprise, and the business model adopted. A thematic analysis of their detailed accounts is presented below in a logical narrative, broadly comprising discussions on expertise defined by experience and external sources.

3.1.1 | Social entrepreneur contextual expertise

An overriding theme emerging from the interviews was that no-one knows more about the business of the social enterprise or its social and business environment than the owner. For example, one participant commented that social entrepreneurs could:

"…become expert in [your] own social enterprise."

Accordingly, many participants noted that this learned expertise afforded them a unique insight that should be more broadly regarded

in business and within society, with one participant noting that the social entrepreneurs.

"…need to be recognised as being people with that expertise. As being the people who know."

In some cases this does happen, and a number of participants stated they had been invited by local and government institutions, and by other social enterprises and charities, to contribute with their expertise. One participant spoke of council meetings attended by large charities and social enterprises invited because of their expertise in a particular area of child welfare and their ability to "…give guidance as the people on the ground doing the do." Another participant noted that, following a significant award for their work, they had received an invitation from a government department to talk about their project at a high-profile event as the expert on their social enterprise, and to discuss the possibility of rolling out the project to a London borough.

One participant spoke of the central role they played between government agencies, volunteers, and community leaders, describing their wider and more complex role as an expert "…in the middle and coordinating…" and describing themselves as "…the lynchpin in all of that." In order to emphasize the in-depth knowledge and expertise they had gained, some participants described the level of detail they retain, with one observing: "I know everything, every donation…every penny that's in our bank."

However, others noted that they sometimes struggle to articulate how well they know their own business to those who make suggestions for change: "You just know 'this is my plan', no that isn't going to work." Another said that the ability to express knowledge of their social enterprise was of paramount importance because without doing so funders and potential investors think it "…not [a] good enough reason to hand over a thousand pounds, two…whatever it is."

Many of the participants described how they developed the ability to examine a situation and adapt accordingly by applying their expertise in their own business. This can manifest as ensuring that different revenue streams are embraced "…have a blend of income…" or as client scanning to adopt the best use of knowledge. One example was illustrated by a participant who described the role of their social enterprise in providing care to those with dementia: "Talking to whoever is booking you to do the work, what the needs of the people [are]…" They take a general view from the care home staff, but their proficiency in the field means that they use their own source of expertise to determine how best to deliver a service.

Some participants described their continual development within their area, allowing them to provide a better service: "When you undergo an experience or process you often become an expert in it from experiencing it." Some participants had experienced a life event that, like the "expert patients" described above, enhance the development of their expertise and ultimately proved beneficial to the enterprise because "…people are often more trusting of somebody who has experienced it."

3.1.2 | Social entrepreneur relational experience

The majority of those who were interviewed came to their social enterprise with some form of related experience. For some, it was within an incubator organization: "I used to work for a care charity, so I could take the skills that they taught me and [that] I've gained over the years with me into the social enterprise. I knew what was coming." One participant noted that they had taken an intern wanting to learn about social enterprise who later went on to run their successful social enterprise—using the knowledge they had gained to increase their expertise. Another participant described their invaluable time as a volunteer in the shop that they now manage as a means of building their expertise within the business. The skills learned before setting up or working in a social enterprise were different for each participant and included those related to human resources (HR), leadership training, law, retail and "…soft skills, people skills, empathy…" that one participant suggested was "…a really strong factor in a social enterprise." The social enterprise did not always provide a sufficient income, and in these cases, the participants also continued with external work, which contributed to the development of further expertise that could be brought to bear. This was summarized by one participant who described their core knowledge as being "…the compass from which I find my information." Experience related to the enterprise but gained elsewhere also took the form of formal education through university degrees or courses with organizations such as the School for Social Entrepreneurs. For some, the related experience (especially business skills) was so important they believed a social enterprise should not be set up without it because it is "…key that you know your subject when you launch." Without such experience, another participant felt that the likelihood of failure was higher because they "…don't understand that actually you are setting up a business."

The expertise derived from the business context and related experience principally involves the social entrepreneur drawing upon their expertise for the management of their business. However, the prevalent sources of expertise were external. The interviews revealed a complex network of expertise drawn upon by social enterprises to further their business and social aims, and were encapsulated by one participant who said:

"I have built a really wide network…a lot of people have a lot of experience in various topics, areas and charity."

3.1.3. | Expert support network

All the participants stated that success depended on the ability to construct, maintain and use a network of experts: "Everyone knows loads of people but it's [more important] knowing how those people can be relevant to the particular situation." Another participant commented that to draw on external expertise, social enterprises had to "…offer them something that they'd be interested in." The feeling among the participants was that there was mutuality in the relationship, with one stating: "You have to tell them how they can benefit from you." Another noted that the source can "…guide me in the process…" adding that "People don't mind doing that, especially when it's a social enterprise." There was a general acknowledgement among the participants that if they work hard at cultivating their sources of expertise they will have access to first-hand knowledge that is unavailable to other businesses:

"The advice and information is quite phenomenal and in business that would never happen because it's all competitive."

3.1.4 | Peer support

The network of expertise provides significant value because it is unfiltered and direct. One participant claimed that it is "…inside information, not the usual rubbish that you might hear."

The interviews revealed a great sense of camaraderie among social enterprises, in which they willingly share knowledge and details about experts and thereby increase their own network: "Anybody will share anything with you." One participant described the togetherness across the geographical region and attributed some elements of their success to it: "I can see the arms of the project like this go really far and a lot of that is ideas and working together." Another participant praised a fellow social entrepreneur for helping them to secure grants. However, there are times when this companionship is put to one side, for example, when social enterprises bid for work or funding. At those times, "…people clam up. They go 'we're in tender' and they stop." This was regarded as a reality of business and as a consequence of "… only a certain amount of funding pots to go round."

The network of supporting experts has a massive impact on social enterprise, and within it there are distinct categories that emerge. Of immediate importance are with one participant noting: "I go to get expertise [from] people who have done social enterprise." The participants turn to their peers as a first recourse, not only for convenience (although this is a factor) but because they offer insight and expertise about social enterprise that other categories of expert cannot provide:

"[They are] a major resource because you can go and tap on their shoulder and say 'I've got a problem, I don't know how to solve it,' and the chances are that they've had the very same problem themselves."

"…talking with colleagues who have been through the same journey."

By using their contextual expertise and relational experience, a social entrepreneur can draw from peers as part of a "…sharing economy within the social enterprise sector." Peers are often the source of expertise for more specialized tasks, and the social entrepreneur will offer something in return: "I try to find someone who needs expertise that I have and they don't, and I try to exchange." The social enterprise sharing economy offers both a richness of information and depth of expertise. One participant recalled a conversation with another enterprise in which they had said: "I can review your employment contract if you can do my logo." Indeed, the contribution of one to another within this sharing economy was described as a "…particular strength in social entrepreneurship."

3.1.5 | Professional and specialist support

Social enterprises draw upon a host of professionals, some of whom they pay but many of whom they do not. One of the first to be called upon is accountancy: "If you've got to do company accounts you've got to have an accountant." Not all social enterprises employ accountants: some participants noted that they undertook that function themselves. However, for others, it was a means of risk mitigation, and their exposure to the profession came at an early stage: "If someone is setting up and getting a legal status of any sort they would have to do that through an accountant, so the accountant should be doing it for them."

The engagement of law practitioners was noted as being another early-stage connection that was usually related to the type of business being set up: "Knowing what legal status to choose is a minefield." However, it is professionals within the business world that appear to offer the higher value, because although social enterprises are often staffed by those well versed in the social aspects of the enterprise, they often lack business skills: "Most of the ones I've met are really passionate about their cause but haven't got a mind for business." One participant was more forthright, declaring that "The business skills and the business mindset is lacking." Many participants voiced concerns that funders and investors were also becoming more demanding in wanting to see them demonstrate business skills, especially in the construction of bids for grants, and this was a reason for an increased draw on business professionals to assist directly or to improve entrepreneurial and staff skills. With this in mind, one participant declared that they must "…learn from business and use what business does for the greater good…" adding that this element is "…sometimes missed along the way." A few participants described instances where they had approached business neighbors and sought their advice and guidance. An example was a conversation with a business neighbor:

"I asked exactly what he delivered, exactly what his business model was and he said 'Why are you asking all this?' I said it's because this is what I want to set up and I want to make sure I don't set up near you if I'm going to be delivering the same thing."

The direct approach to the business professional was perceived as an unusual one and the encounter afforded the participant with a great deal of expertise that they would not otherwise have gained. The business professionals regarded as most valuable were those providing expertise in fundraising, sales, and marketing, with one participant saying that "They are worth their weight in gold." Musing on the importance and advantage, they had gained from a connection with a marketer, and one participant said: "Finding someone who's got marketing skills and getting them to do it… if you don't, you're gone!"

3.1.6 | Technological support

Although many of the social enterprises had set up social media sites, exploiting technology to maximize online impact was often described in terms of drawing on an expert in their network: "I know some very tech-savvy people [who I go to] if I don't know something about marketing." The Internet was noted as a valuable source of expertise, which is often used for research and to widen the participant's network:

"I do go to the Internet… How you get sponsors? How do you approach someone? How do you ask someone for money? I spend a lot of time researching that."

"You can search for other organisations either just seeing what they're doing or because they've got similar interests."

3.1.7 | Academic support

The nature of some of the enterprises has led them to seek expertise from academic sources. In addition to academics providing education through formal business courses and with whom they stay in touch as part of their expert support network, there are those from the social and natural sciences who have taken an interest. The engagement is noted as reciprocal, with the social enterprise gaining further validity for its cause through the presence of a noted individual with the latest scientific thinking and data. In return, the academic gains access to practitioners. One participant observed that academic experts are given a voice because they "…do science, they don't campaign, they don't get out into the public and create public awareness. That's not what they do."

3.1.8 | Institutional support

Many participants lamented the minimal assistance from local and national institutions, particularly that available to more mature enterprises. Although some praised the local government for their support, others noted indifference, with one participant suggesting that: "There could be more support. Financially." Others disagreed, declaring that they were no different to other businesses and therefore, must be able to stand on their merit and skills as an enterprise. Furthermore, some noted an advantage "…because you can get really bogged down by trying to jump through hoops but being a social enterprise gives you… you're independent from the council." One avenue to institutional expertise is membership of a local government forum, where the social enterprise has informal access to voluntary sector expertise and councilors who "…sit on so many groups." Chartered institutions were also noted as a source of expertise, with those such as the Chartered Management Institute and Royal Societies being particularly useful.

3.1.9 | Workforce support

Many participants referred to those who worked within their enterprise as a source of expertise. The voluntary workforce includes trustees, many of whom are successful in senior business positions, have contextual expertise, or are specialists in resolving societal issues: "I will go to one of my CEOs who has got that skill." One participant noted the array of skills that a voluntary workforce brings to an enterprise: "There's knowledge from everyone in this." Another added that they "…add value to everyone's thinking. Everyone's skill set." These responses suggest that the key to a successful workforce in a social enterprise is the same as for any other business, namely a broad set of skills that the enterprise can draw upon to limit the need to go outside of the business: "We've got a nice mix of expertise amongst them." A few participants spoke of business and context-related skills development for their workforce, in which both parties gain from experience, with one participant observing that doing so made voluntary staff more useful. Skills development encourages specialism and in turn increases expertise in a particular aspect that the enterprise can draw upon. Although the business is often bound by those that step forward to work in the enterprise, this is not always the case and some participants said that they had directly approached people to request their expertise as part of the workforce: "I've just asked two people I know with really good admin skills and they're happy to do all that." Despite the high praise and genuine appreciation, the heavy reliance on volunteers was noted as a potential area of weakness because "…they can just walk away, they don't owe you anything, they don't have to give you any notice." The fear, apart from potentially losing a trusted and valuable member of the team, is that there is a risk of no longer being able to draw upon their expertise and consequently harming the social goal.

3.1.10 | Pastoral support

A number of participants referred to drawing upon those who provide emotional and spiritual support to the enterprise and their customers and clients. This pastoral care came from two principal sources that provide encouragement and emotional support in often-difficult trading circumstances. The first was family and friends, without whom many participants said they would not be able to function. They provide most of the emotional support. The story of the social enterprise was described as one of highs and lows, frustrations and elation, in which relationships and friendships play an essential role. The second pastoral source catered more for spiritual needs and was through religious institutions. One participant claimed that religious leaders have always had a general role to play in charities and that the church had especially noted "…the sustainability of social enterprises and want to engage with that." There was a feeling too that there was a commonality in that some churches had been operating as a social enterprise for many years by selling goods to fund social work. The interviews indicated that social enterprises providing care services or treatment for addiction were more likely to associate with the church. On the whole, religious institutions were seen as a ready-made network of specialists and experts that could be utilized, and as a valuable resource because they "…have buildings, money, people—whole congregations…" who can be mobilized to a cause. However, other participants actively distanced themselves from any religion "…even if that pastoral advice could be quite helpful."

3.1.11 | Unrevealed and unattributed support

On the whole, the participants could usually identify where they had gathered a particular piece of information or expertise. However, this was not always the case, and some participants described how they had received specialist information or an expert opinion but that they

did not always know its source. It just seemed to happen for them, appearing as if from nowhere and often proving to be correct when tested. One participant summarized this information: "I can't always see where stuff has come from." Referring to this occasional reliance on expertise without being able to recall or trace the source, one participant revealed that: "It's not a conscious thing that goes on that I do."

3.1.12 | Social enterprise expert characterization

Of particular note was the participant's view of whether there was such a thing as an expert in social enterprise. Some named other participants they knew by reputation or through the connections they had made at conferences or during formal training events. Others named successful public figures such as Lord Bird, the founder of *The Big Issue* magazine sold by homeless and vulnerable people in the United Kingdom. Experience in the running of one or more social enterprises and drawing upon a support network was most often cited as an indicator of expertise. However, the ability to successfully bring together the various elements of operation in terms of social and commercial aims was most strongly emphasized.

3.2 | Modeling sources of social enterprise expertise

This investigation revealed that social enterprises draw upon a complex network of expertise, the makeup of which depends on the legal structure of the enterprise, its social goals, and commercial aims. Based on these observations, a comprehensive model representing all the sources of expertise needed to achieve the desired outcome of the social enterprise is shown in Figure 1.

Social entrepreneurs are adept at learning from experience. They come to their enterprise with relational experience and this feeds into their contextual expertise, which feeds back into their relational experience and so on, in a continuing cycle of discovery and assimilation. This investigation revealed that entrepreneurs use this ability to great effect when client and situation scanning, adapting, and innovating to meet the needs of their customers. They turn to external sources only when they can no longer rely on their intrinsic expertise.

Although the type and difficulty of a situation determine the nature of the required expertise, it is desirable for the social entrepreneur to continually make contact with knowledgeable people from all occupations, vocations, and professions in order to expand the network of experts. The network is constructed by the social

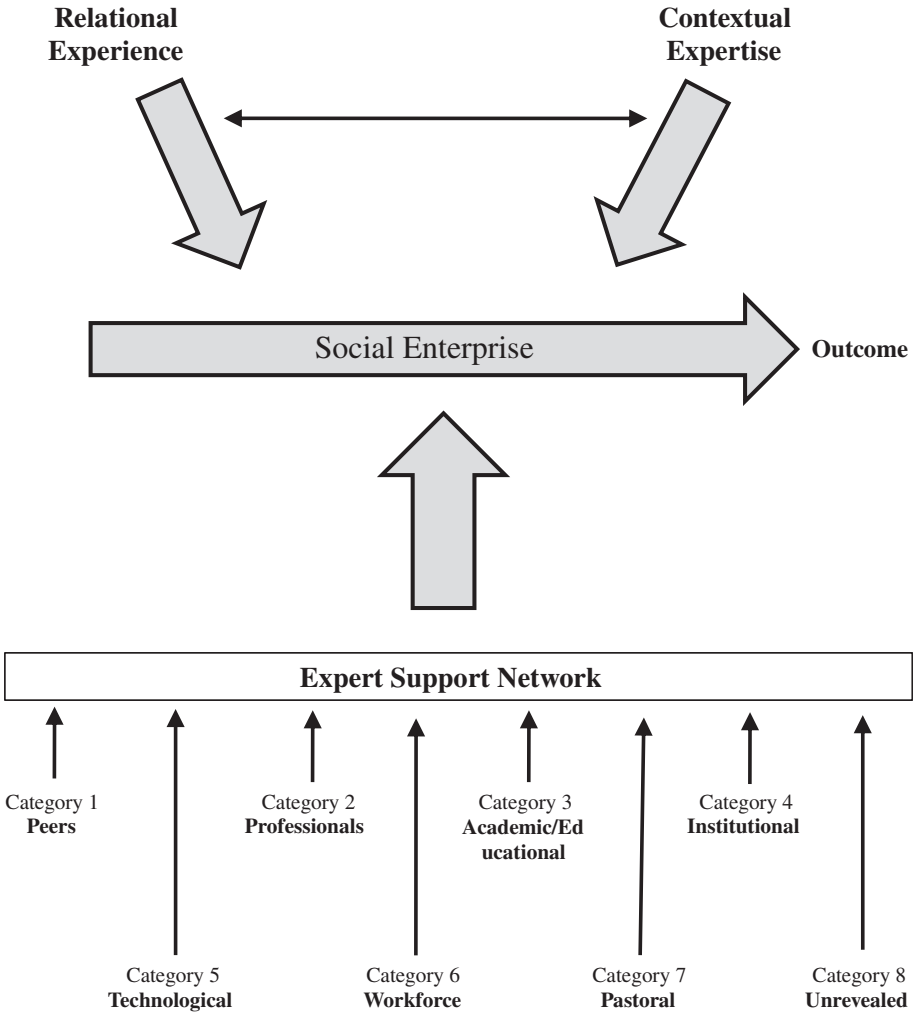


FIGURE 1 Social enterprise expert support network

entrepreneur using their skills, perseverance, and ability to capitalize on opportunities (Chell, 2007). Social entrepreneurs attribute expertise to particular individuals (Glaser & Chi, 1988; Mieg, 2009; Philips, Klein, & Sieck, 2004; Sternberg & Frensch, 1992) and will make the project attractive to them, targeting experts with an affinity for the project from a professional or moral perspective. These experts can then be drawn upon as and when needed, and their presence encourages organic business growth. There is an element of social enterprise bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1963; Desa, 2012) in that social entrepreneurs often turn first to experts that meet the criteria of convenience and specialist knowledge. This is why social entrepreneurs initially rely upon their relational experience and contextual expertise before seeking the advice of peers and professionals.

The expert support network presented in Figure 1 features eight categories of expertise observed across the geographic area considered in this study, and these are drawn upon to varying degrees. Even those regarded as distant from the enterprise, such as the pastoral category, are still drawn upon to some extent, for example, by client referral, the use of facilities, or intersecting vertical and horizontal connections. The expertise is layered, meaning that the individual experts come with their own largely-unseen, complex, almost mycelial network. Through these ever-growing connections, the social enterprises and experts are linked in a mutually beneficial relationship, sharing information that supports the expansion and continued wellbeing of social enterprises across the region.

4 | CONCLUSION

Experts and expertise have been examined in a variety of organizational structures but their utilization in social enterprises has received little attention. This study explored the sources of expertise by considering a range of enterprises within a geographical area. The results of the study revealed that the complexity of expert support available to enterprises is poorly understood. As a result of the research, a conceptual model was developed to address this current lack of understanding.

The model considers the various sources of expertise available to social enterprises and identifies the cycle of learning from relational experience and contextual expertise, noting this as a significant factor in the decision to engage external experts. This first study utilizes the lens of expert theory to generate a comprehensive model of the complex connections across an expert support network related to social enterprises. It explains how these connections allow the application of entrepreneurial knowledge, thus leading to more desirable outcomes. By describing the utilization of different categories of expertise, the model will be useful to researchers wishing to explore the connectivity of expertise and entrepreneurial businesses in more detail. Participant validation of the model suggests it could be used by social enterprises as a template in strategic gap analysis to assess the sources of expertise and to select those most likely to improve performance.

By design, this study was bounded by the businesses within the geographic area selected for analysis. Future research should examine in more detail the deeper connections between the categories that make up the expert support network and should cover a wider geographic area in order to document the breadth of connections and mutuality between social enterprises and experts. This study noted the camaraderie and level of support between social enterprises, and future studies should examine the extent and limitations of this aspect in more detail.

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