Understanding experienced impact of social enterprises through stakeholder narratives

Outi Vehka-Aho - Tampere University

This paper focuses on examining experienced impact in the context of social enterprises through stakeholder narratives. The purpose of the study is to enhance our understanding on how experiences of the surrounding stakeholders can be used to describe the impact that social enterprises can have. While there is growing international academic discussion on social enterprises and impact, the research on experiences as means to understanding impacts is still scarce.

This study is built around three concepts, social enterprises, stakeholders and social impact. Social enterprises can be viewed as one of the answers to changing the role of business in societies, as they aim towards creating societal impact through the means of profitable business (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Smith et al., 2013). In this study, stakeholders are defined as groups or individuals that can be affected by or can affect a focal issue, they all aim to address (Roloff, 2008). Impact in social enterprises on the other hand, can be viewed through the concept of social impact (Barraket & Yousefpour, 2013), which can be defined as the portion of societal change that the activities of an organisation have produced, which go beyond what would have happened anyway (Clark et al., 2004).

The phenomenon is examined empirically through an intense case study of a social enterprise and main part of the data will consist of experience narratives collected with interviews from a variety of stakeholders of the case enterprise. In addition, secondary data will be collected through ethnographic observation and from public sources, such as the webpages and reports of the enterprise.

The theoretical contribution of this study aims at the discussion of social impact among social enterprises by broadening the concept, through showing the significance of viewing experiences as part of impact. By doing so it also adds to the literature of understanding impact in other than numerical terms. In practice, the study contributes to the enterprises' own understanding of their operations as change agents in the society and enhances the society's ability to recognise social enterprises as a new way of positioning business as part of the society.