

Mapping the added value of design thinking in social entrepreneurship

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Abstract

Social designers and social entrepreneurs aim at improving life quality locally and globally. As research on social entrepreneurship is intensified in the Nordic countries, it is important also for designers to understand what their role is and can be compared to the social entrepreneur; as well as for social entrepreneurs to understand the value of design thinking in their efforts. This article extracts an updated portrait of the social designer based on interviews, before it compares it with the image of the social designer. A central finding is that social design adds a sustainable, less resource demanding orientation to the equation. Finally it reflects upon how this companionship could be improved.

Key words: social design, social entrepreneurship, design thinking

Introduction

Politicians, academics and practitioners in the Nordic countries are currently increasing their effort to define social entrepreneurship (SE). Simultaneously, we are witnessing a growing tendency for public sector and non-for-profit (NFP) organizations to recruit designers for the purpose of solving social challenges through design or what designers would refer to as “design thinking”. We are left wondering what the role of the designer is in SE, and what exactly the convergences and divergences between social entrepreneurs and social designers (SD) may be. We will approach this task step-by-step. First we will discuss the characteristics of social entrepreneurs versus the social designer extracted from literature review. Further we will discuss this in lieu of data achieved through six semi structured interviews with social designers and design researchers. Some of the respondents are represented through short introductions to their work, to illustrate for the reader how Norwegian socially responsible designers have a real and direct impact on people’s wellbeing. By comparing the interview data to the academic descriptions of the social entrepreneur we present a model showing the overlaps and differences between designer, social designer, social entrepreneur and entrepreneur. The model exemplifies the potential added value of including designers and design thinking in social enterprise. The article is summed up by a discussion of the findings and a list of questions for further research focus.

Method and rationale

A larger part of the defining literature, of European and U.S. tradition, is devoted to personal characteristics needed to “be” a *social entrepreneur*. This serves as our basis for drafting a picture that can be compared with the social designer’s. Comparatively, more of the literature describing the *social designer* defines purpose and methods rather than characteristics of the individual. Additionally, there is an increasing amount of ongoing research focused specifically on SE in the Nordic countries, for example through the SE Research Network for the Nordic Countries (SERNOC) initiative. There has been no equivalent initiative in the region to define the social designer, which lead to our choice of method; interview as data will help us to achieve a contemporary description of who the social designer is. The method choice is in this case therefore also founded on the general assumption that the description of a social designer is context-dependant. A subjective, descriptive view of “the social designer” and “design thinking” in a contextual frame is therefore attempted. Consequently, six semi structured interviews with six designers ranging from both business and social oriented professionals, researchers and students were therefore conducted to draw a picture of the social designer by single words. When identifying respondents for our study, we approached industrial designers working with a variety of social issues; with a rather broad interpretation of the word “designer”. Included are both examples of designers working with local challenges in Norway and also designers working on a global scale. The findings were put in a diagram together with the literature descriptions of the social entrepreneur.

The Social designer

Social design (SD) or socially responsible design has emerged within the social innovation movement and resulted in a generation of designers whose aim is to achieve an impact on people’s wellbeing. Dean Nieuwsma (2004) describes ‘alternative design scholars’ as designers who seek to ‘understand how unequal power relations are embodied in, and result from, mainstream design practice and products’. Within these alternative design scholars Nieuwsma lists socially responsible designers, but also universal design, participatory design, ecological design and feminist design; providing inspiration for designers who seek to improve society rather than simply creating products for a market. The difference between social model design and market model design are ([Margolin and Margolin, 2002](#)), the *priorities* of the commission rather than the method of production or distribution. Some indicators to describe the design thinker have been introduced -Tim Brown argues a design thinker’s characteristics should include *empathy, integrative thinking, optimism, experimentalism and collaboration*. Concerning empathy, this is something that has been highlighted relentlessly. ‘It is perhaps the most important distinction between academic thinking and design thinking. In contrast to our academic colleagues, we are not trying to generate new knowledge, test a theory, or validate a scientific hypothesis. The mission of design thinking is to translate observations into insights, and insights into the products and services that will improve lives[...].designers have learned that is it possible to apply the principle of empathy not just to individuals, but also to groups and the interactions among them..’ ([Brown and Katz, 2011](#)) Nieuwsma ([Nieuwsma, 2004](#)) highlights the need to find new alliances around socially relevant projects, that the designer can take the role as an advocate important alliances to work with designers who want to achieve a real social impact, to balance the

political side of public institutions and make sure marginalized groups really are heard. Ramsay Ford emphasizes how the criteria for a successful SD projects require “management, fundraising, design and engineering” thus forcing the designers to act within many different fields. Designers need to “recognize their own limitations and network with others to fill project needs” seeking both to establish closer partnerships with other fields such as social entrepreneurs, and investigate the potential of educating designers broadly within other fields, to better be able to manage the main goal of all social projects making a “positive” social impact.

The social entrepreneur

The focus of this study is to compare characteristics of the social entrepreneur versus the social designer, and not entrepreneurship or design, which again has defined our literature selection. “A substantial controversy remains in the conceptualization of the SE construct. SE remains an emerging but ill-defined concept” ([Weerawardena and Mort, 2006](#)).

Dees ([Dees, 1998](#)) regards social entrepreneurs as the solution to a problem: “Many governmental and philanthropic efforts have fallen far short of our expectations. Major social sector institutions are often viewed as inefficient, ineffective, and unresponsive. Social entrepreneurs are needed to develop new models for a new century” ([Dees, 1998](#)) Dees considers the social entrepreneur as “one species in the genus entrepreneur”, where the difference between a business and a social entrepreneur lie in the entrepreneur’s mission and how he/she acts in relation to the market. Where the social entrepreneur has the social mission explicit and central as component to how the entrepreneurship will act and be evaluated in the market, the business entrepreneur will be more confined to the framework and the constraints of economic value creation. To further the discussion, Dees makes an early attempt to define a set of proposed requirements as a mean to define the social entrepreneur: (1) Adopt a mission to create and sustain social value (not just private value), (2) recognize and relentlessly pursuing new opportunities to serve that mission, (3) engage in a process of continuous innovation, adaptation, and learning, (4) act boldly without being limited by resources currently in hand, and (4) exhibit a heightened sense of accountability to the constituencies served and for the outcomes created. These requirements can be recognized in Pedrero and McLean’s ([Peredo and McLean, 2006](#)) article which emphasize the “aim to create social value, either exclusively or at least in some prominent way” as the main criteria for distinguishing SE from other entrepreneurial enterprises. The social entrepreneur is very much described as a single individual, acting as a driving force without whom the enterprise would never succeed; a responsible risk taker, however contradictory that may sound. Some literature specifically target the differences between SE in different regions, for example between the US and Europe ([Defourny and Nyssens, 2010](#)) The political differences between European countries are also quite significant. Ranging from Spain, Italy or Portugal, on the one hand with low welfare spending and a comparatively low state financed social service to the Nordic countries where welfare has mainly been delivered by the state ([Defourny and Nyssens, 2010](#)). Accordingly, the European research network EMES have in recent years worked on a series of “indicators” towards a definition of social enterprises especially applicable for the latter political context.

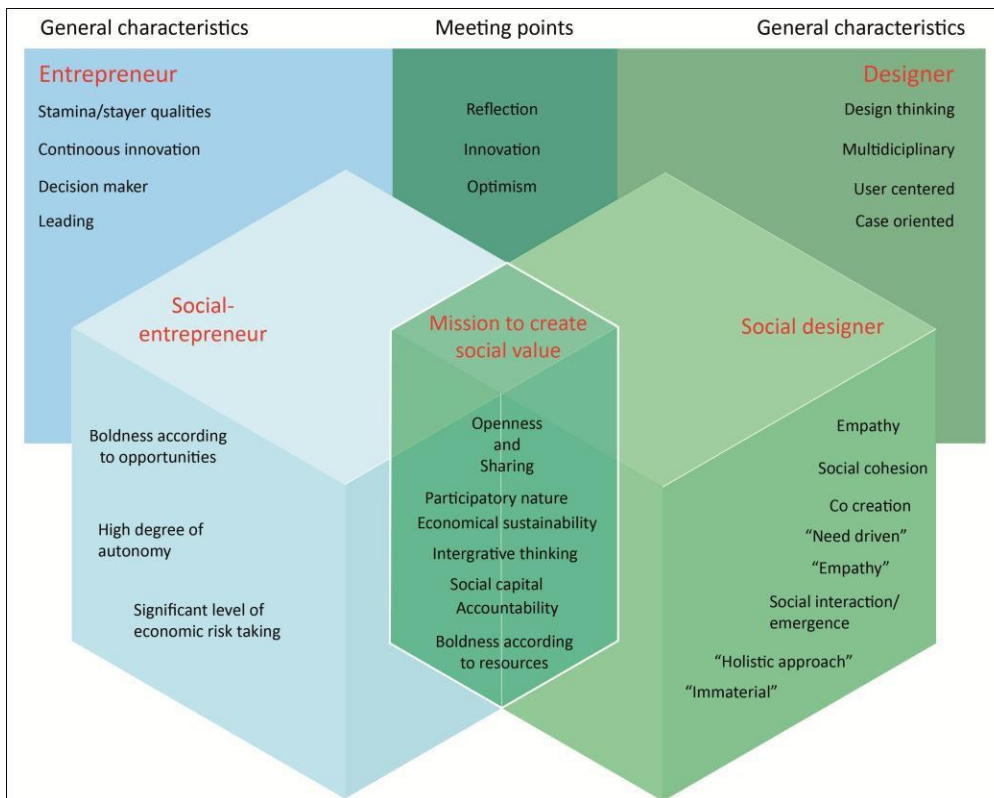
Interview findings

The interviews identified several areas where the respondents' opinions overlapped with the characteristics and motivations of SE, especially concerning local challenges. The answers concerning global challenges diverge, but the focus is more on product innovation and less on immaterial solutions. Several of the designers have also observed a tendency to work more on systems oriented design. The respondents who define themselves as social designers, have a different source of motivation than the business strategic one, something that is illustrating. Service design is one of the emerging areas among Norwegian designers and the socially responsible designers, defined as a way to improve (existing) services to make them more useful and usable for clients and efficient and effective for its organizations (Moritz 2005), in contrast to a tangible product, and a more multi disciplinary practice (Stickdorn and Schneider 2010). The socially responsible designers emphasize working with service design in the regional public sector, the local regions, will be important partners for designers. Working with the public health sector or education equals small budgets. However, they believe that there is much potential for changes that can have positive impact on people's lives. Changing attitudes and work patterns are one of the challenges. For example, introducing new technologies that require extra tasks by public personnel, or labor intensive solutions, can be difficult. All of the respondents highlighted *empathy* and *needs driven design* as a strength that leads them to increasingly challenging and fulfilling work. One of our respondents put it like this: *"I believe that we need the freedom to work thoroughly with one problem and enough time to meet the people who are going to use our products."* The respondents express that they find themselves working frequently as facilitators, intuitively seeking to include and *empower* the social group in focus through their entire work process. All designers in this review also focused on user-centred design as a core component of a social designers work strategy; spending much time at the beginning of projects trying to extract something referred to as the "real need" of the end-user. When asked what they meant by "real need", we find that it is characterized by its solution; that the solution should really be the *best* solution to a real problem not creating a need for a business to fill: *"It is important to design for the whole system, if not your solution for the one little problem will create five new problems that you need to solve."* One of the informants expressed the importance of realizing that we who reside in the "western world" represent ideals for the unfortunate rest; and that we have to carry this responsibility. Another one says that with large scale challenges such as the elderly wave or loneliness but that *"new products may not be the right solutions"*. As she puts it, sometimes we even *"design ourselves"* into more loneliness and less problem-solving attitudes. Technology and other products can make us less creative and less capable of solving our own problems, something that she believes that social designers should try to prevent. *Immaterial solutions* are another possibility that the respondents highlighted as important for their work: *"We do not only need food and clothes but we also have our fundamental needs such as identity, experiences and togetherness. Many of our needs are non-material, right, and this has to come in somehow"*. Half of the designers interviewed expressed that there is a current trend and will among designers and their employers to explore how to improve people's lives *without* necessarily introducing new technologies and sometimes without introducing a product at all. Sometimes what is needed is to be innovative with what already exists: *"I feel that because we haven't learnt enough about*

communication in our study, we could have had much more ethics and that kind of stuff. I have thought a lot about what I have perceived as the right. I have actually torn down many of my earlier principles about what I thought was right.... and rather taken an open approach where I take in what others perceive as the right thing, to... to find the right solution!" Ethics was seen an important part of the analytical process for all but one of the respondents; an increased focus on ethics in education as a necessity to make designers more capable of facing future societal challenges; "Our solutions have a highly social meaning in the sense that it makes people able to perform better in their job and help others with what they do." They are often told that they think more holistically and analyze a situation better than others, which prevents them from making the wrong decisions on behalf of the end users. "I think that we need to make partnerships with other; this will strengthen your project. Get more people in, more perspectives, at the same time as increasing quality. We cannot read all the subjects that are needed. Budgeting and marketing. We are a little bit like the architects; we think we know everything; which we do not." Four out of six respondents mention shortcomings when related to economics and management.

Meeting points and added values

Figure 1: The deeper green core shows characteristics shared by SE and SD. Squares represent general characteristics of the designer and entrepreneur while cubes represent the SE and SD characteristics. Quotation marks highlight interview findings.



The interview findings tell a story of designers observing a change from product design to more service oriented design, where the designer work more on solving social challenges through the reorganization or innovation of needs driven service solutions and support systems, thus bringing new perspectives into the complex world of social innovation. Still, the designers emphasized the collaborative and multi-disciplinary effort needed seeing design as an added value in social entrepreneurial enterprise one must ask what this added value might be. In both SD and SE the main goal is to create social value, on a participatory nature, a heightened sense of accountability and scarce resources available. Whereas the main differences between the two fields is that the entrepreneur focus on the managing opportunities and risks in relation to economy, designers emphasise empathy and ways of finding the needs of the user.

The design discourse focus seems to be more process oriented whilst the entrepreneurial discourse emphasize personal characteristics of the social entrepreneur. Concerning added value, a reoccurring topic is the focus on solving social challenges through a stronger focus on sustainability and immaterialism for the social designer. While there is less SE research focusing on solving social issues without a resource aspect, the designers interviewed highlighted the relevance of immaterial innovation. There are differences in the motivations of doing so, some more business strategic and others seem to lie closer to the designer's personal imperative. In either case, including social designers on the team would, according to the findings, increase the possibility of finding solutions that really fill the existing need without creating new ones and often without requiring more material resources. Empathy, or user insight, is in the entrepreneurial vocabulary is expressed as 'opportunity'. The social entrepreneur will focus on the possibility of making a business model based on a 'consumer need', while the designer sees it as more important to solve this need and to define what the 'real' need is, rather than directly regarding it as a business opportunity. Other important differences are found in the collaboration characteristics; a social entrepreneur being willing to act more independently while a social designer is more comfortable with the role as a team-player or a project leader within a social project. As shortcomings, the designer mentions her capabilities as primary decision makers and lack of economic background. The social entrepreneur on the other hand, need to understand the strengths designers have for understanding needs and transforming them into practical solutions, so that they either will include designers *or* design thinking in their business.

Final remarks

The findings suggest that adding design thinking in SE and public partnerships will result in more sustainable solutions, requiring less material resources and improve the social service sector. The strength of designers to identify human needs and idea creation are and will be an important asset when facing future societal challenges in Norway and abroad. "Design thinking" is something that can improve any businesses or the quality of the work done by public institutions; it would help them to think more holistically and pick the right solutions in for the sake of the wellbeing of entire populations and also the environment. In Stanford Social Innovation Review's blog, the designer Cheryl Heller emphasizes that "Design can make a game-changing contribution to social innovation."ⁱ - a statement that articulates our argument. However, if pursuing to become successful

social entrepreneurs, designers call for more business skills and leadership skills in their educational background as well as closer collaboration with social entrepreneurs. A few initiatives have been taken by educational institutions to merge design thinking and SE; we are looking forward to see more initiatives like this, also initiated by designers. It is worth mentioning that the sample size and geographic context could indeed have been larger; however one of the intentions of this article is to exemplify a need to define SD within SE. We invite other researchers to conduct similar studies for valuable comparison and discuss the future of SD and SE as a fruitful joint venture for social good.

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