

Social enterprise in Oceania: *Evidence, opportunities and challenges*

Introduction

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Often, the Oceania region is oddly under-represented in the more general body of social enterprise (SE) knowledge. As scholars who are highly engaged with both SE and social innovation (SI) in the region, we knew it would be wrong to assume that this under-representation could be due to a lack of interesting, innovative and unique work. Therefore, we made it our goal to redress that oddity by inviting researchers in the region to bring their work to a wider, global SE audience.

Our *Call for Papers* targeted several research topics broadly relevant to empirical phenomena relevant to developing SE knowledge in the region, with a particular focus on the wider SI ecosystem(s) in which SE operates. We also invited researchers to take these suggestions in directions beyond what we had suggested. The papers accepted for this special issue responded to that challenge. They remind us that SI is both constituted in and contributory to its social, political and cultural contexts, explicating contextual differences and their effects on SI practices within the Oceania region.

We have been long interested in the transdisciplinary potential of SE research, especially what this might imply for a field in a pre-paradigm phase (Nicholls, 2010). In using the word “transdisciplinary,” we align with Moulaert *et al.*'s (2013, p. 17) reflection that:

SI cannot be separated either from its socio-cultural, or from its social political process. But at the same time it implies a commitment to engage with SI research itself in a democratic way, by involving all actors concerned with improving the human condition.

Naturally, we extend this view of the need for a transdisciplinary approach to SE too. Indeed, we began the task of arranging the special issue by seeking to trace the emerging theoretical trends and capture innovative research practice.

Yet we returned to our exploration to the role of the region's SE research within the broader development of the field. Understanding where region-based research “fits” or “contributes” to a still developing field remains unclear, especially during its ongoing pre-paradigm phase (Nicholls, 2010). However, aside from illuminating the emerging field's diversity, the papers we selected for this special issue contribute new insights across the thresholds between macro, meso and micro spaces in SE and SI ecosystems. As such, we hope to show that SE research from the geographical and ontological margins can reinvigorate serious discussion of what it could mean to proceed to “normal science” in the SE field.

The remainder of this editorial is structured around key themes in our *Call for Papers*, with a particular emphasis on relevant enabling and constraining factors argued by our authors as necessary for building the field. We begin by outlining the rationale for conceptualizing SE studies as pre-paradigmatic thinking. We draw attention to the apparatus that might be useful in re-thinking the development of transdisciplinary combinations in pre-paradigms. This is followed by a discussion of how the papers selected for our special issue contribute to some of the new directions we hope for, provoking ideas around popular debates in the field. We conclude by considering if being pre-paradigmatic might encourage deeper and wider transdisciplinary thinking in this field, and thus be preferable to the limiting dominance of an illusionary normal science.



Social enterprise and pre-paradigms: purgatory or paradise?

Pre-paradigm status fields have been described as inchoate, fragmented and unstable spaces (Kuhn, 1970; Urry, 1973). In the Kuhnian view of scientific revolutions, pre-paradigms are considered a prelude to the establishment of normal science. This outcome is the culmination of a series of “normal puzzle-solving” challenges (Kuhn, 1970, p. 179), with dominant schools of thought ascending to an (albeit) temporary hegemony in the maturing field. Kuhn wrote of pre-paradigms that they are “regularly marked by frequent and deep debates over legitimate methods, problems, and standards of solution [serving] rather to define schools than produce solutions” (Kuhn, 1970, p. 46).

Pre-paradigms are contested knowledge spaces, with proponents of competing factions struggling for hegemony over each other, while seeking consensus over fundamental aspects of the formative paradigm. The pre-paradigm process contains a “variability of fact-gathering and interpretation [...] overcome when one or other of the pre-paradigms assumes dominance within that field” (Urry, 1973, p. 463). The outcome is “normal science,” i.e. the most compelling empirical or theoretical puzzle solving techniques that direct future work by field participants (Ritzer, 1975; Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013; Hassard, 2016). Consequently, field-specific languages, methods, identities and knowledge become naturalized, only to be disrupted if new scientific methods and/or empirical evidence can disrupt the dominant paradigm. Yet we are specifically interested in the idea that this process is also a (politically) discursive contest rather than about epistemological and ontological primacy (Ritzer, 1975). Alongside the most compelling theories, evidence and explanations, the ability of competing schools to dominate, and thus shape, the direction of pre-paradigm discourses is critical (Keller, 2012). According to Ritzer (1975, p. 157), for competing schools seeking hegemony, these discourses end up “waging a political battle of their own, [overthrowing] a dominant paradigm and [gaining] that position for themselves.”

Transitioning from pre-paradigms to *status quo* is considered vital for a field to gain legitimacy among other fields and in society more widely (Ritzer, 1975; Hassard, 2016). Notably, pre-paradigms are largely treated as transitory phases toward paradigm maturity (Kuhn, 1970). We find this problematic, especially since Kuhn (1970, p. 76) himself noted that the “invention of alternates is just what scientists seldom undertake except during the pre-paradigm stage.” We propose that pre-paradigms offer a rich seam for their participants to understand how emerging fields could develop a diverse and tolerant, as well as combative, social science community. This approach contrasts with typical thinking about paradigm development, where the drive for hegemony represents an on-going battle between competing factions. Reconceptualizing pre-paradigms as sites for resistance, rather than (or as well as) precursors to hegemony, can help to address the problem of politically dominated knowledge communities. In this case, resistance takes the form of adopting critical, or unorthodox, positions outside of emergent norms in a pre-paradigm.

As many scholars have noted, paradigm hegemony is achieved more through the wielding of power rather than through valid claims to truth or reality (which can be rather problematic in the social sciences in any case). Such critiques of the “political project of hegemony” (Butler *et al.*, 2000, p. 11), applied to pre-paradigms, embraces theories and techniques that exist in the margins of most social scientific inquiry. Butler refers to Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) interpretation of hegemony to contend that the “haunting” of democratic policies is based on the articulation of those excluded. We are indebted to this vision of hegemony but define subject-positions of the typically excluded somewhat differently. In pre-paradigms, subject-positions (e.g. of researchers) are fluid and contested. As power and control over competing schools is unfixed in a pre-paradigm, discourse participants are more able to resist hegemony, taking advantage of the unsteady epistemic grounds that

advocates of competing schools seek to occupy. Where no consensus exists over core definitions, theories, constructs, “facts” or proofs, the political wrestling match between powerful actors becomes critically important to the future direction a pre-paradigm will take. Regional studies of SE represent a meso-level analytic intervention that can contest emerging dominant narratives by applying these to diverse empirical situations, drawing out the irreducibilities of cultural and social norms to singular constructions of what the world is. Having discussed the potential for pre-paradigms to serve as spaces for resistance, the following section deals with the theoretical apparatus needed to address how this resistance might play out in nascent paradigms.

Liminality and discourse in pre-paradigms. Recent research on meta-theory in organizational studies has opened the way for a reconsideration of pre-paradigms and their value to redeveloping diverse research communities (Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013; Hassard *et al.*, 2013; Shepherd and Challenger, 2013). This work has re-energized research and debate over paradigms (and especially the place of history in paradigm work – see Decker, 2016). Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013) adopted a “quasi-essentialist” approach to organization theory paradigms, suggesting discourse as a third order that intersects the poststructural with structural and antistructural paradigms (Figure 1).

In their model, they portray the paradigms through three partially contained and intersecting boundaries. The three fields represent structural, antistructural and poststructural paradigms, each containing a normative and critical stream. Each of the three distinctive and liminal zones is in tension. Although Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013) argue for a quasi-essentialist interpretation of their model, their central premise rests on the possibility of identifying relatively discrete knowledge domains. Of particular note are the transitory spaces

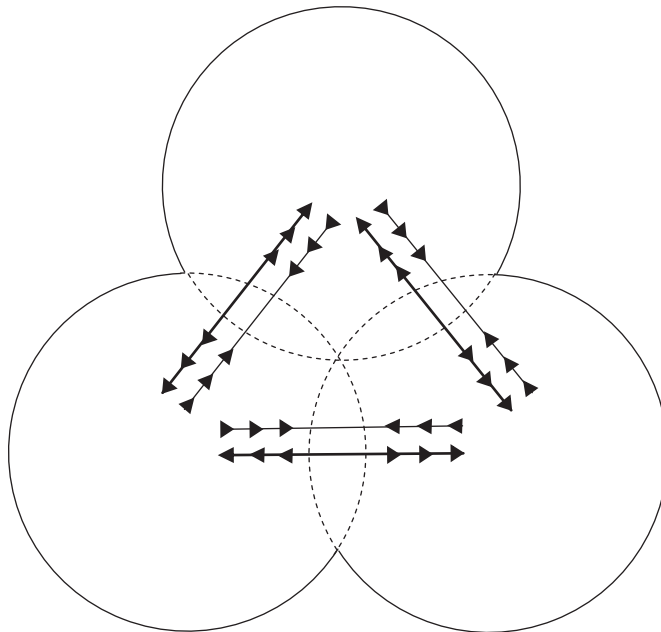


Figure 1.
The relationship
between paradigms

Source: Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013, p. 1708)

in-between domains, where assumption is more fluid and difficult to classify, and may be permanently caught “in-between stations.”

There are two features of Hassard and Wolfram Cox’s argument that we find especially instructive to reconceptualize pre-paradigms: liminality and the “third order” of discourse. In the relational metaphor model, paradigms are partly commensurable, i.e. each paradigm is discrete, with threshold (or liminal) zones between each. The relative “openness” of relations between paradigms means they are not “intellectually sealed, professionally static or methodologically uniform” (Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013, p. 1708). Thus, liminal zones become the transition spaces “where paradigm fields can intellectually overlap” (Hassard and Wolfram-Cox, 2013, p. 1719).

In terms of liminality, conceiving of pre-paradigms as liminal spaces deepens their transitory, unclear and ambiguous nature further. The “betwixt-between” description of liminal subjects and spaces is aptly applied to pre-paradigms that have no “here or there” into which they must necessarily mature. Liminality prompts us to ask deeper questions of the pre-paradigm itself rather than treat it as a means to an end. What is going on in the pre-paradigm, other than the assumed contest for primacy between competing schools? Might it be possible for the lack of epistemological consensus to encourage resistance to emerging hegemony? Following Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013), could multi-directional tensions within a nebulous pre-paradigm create conflict and unorthodox combinations among the most basic elements, such as epistemology, ontology and methodology?

Howard-Grenville *et al.* (2011) argued that liminality can be used as a cultural apparatus. This accentuates the symbolic importance of “crafting experiences that bring forward new approaches and invite different interpretations that hold potential for altering the cultural order” (Howard-Grenville *et al.*, 2011, p. 523). Furthermore, Garsten (1999, p. 601) argued that liminality also prompts subjects to form “transient and episodic imagined communities,” shaping the subjectivity and identity of community members. We see a clear parallel between how liminality has been applied in organization studies and how pre-paradigm participants might create and disrupt emergent knowledge communities. Unlike in the more stable conditions of post-revolutionary normal sciences, pre-paradigms lack structural conventions that bind epistemic communities together. Rather, these liminal conditions readily prompt resistance to emergent orthodoxy; the absence of firm boundaries makes it difficult to assert hegemony, particularly in less mature social sciences (Hassard, 2016).

Regarding the “third-order” of discourse, Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013) argued that discourse is worthy of consideration alongside agency and structure, two factors that have been used to distinguish between paradigms (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). The emancipation of discourse into paradigm thinking prompts deeper analysis of how certain tropes in emerging paradigms become naturalized over time, creating dominant communities while consigning others to the margins. The intersections between discourse, agency and structure offer fertile transdisciplinary ground, as Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013) argue. However, we suggest that the inherent friction between participants in paradigm dialogues (Guba, 1990) also spurs the creation of imagined communities that create powerful counter-discourses. This is in the sense of alternative, perhaps radical departures from an emergent orthodoxy, that can thrive in the absence of naturalized political elites or consensus over central tenets, including core definitions, and an exhaustive evidence base. In the next section, we introduce our specific pre-paradigm “case” and explain some of the core issues and research patterns in this emerging field.

Social enterprise studies as a pre-paradigm

One of the most enduring and acknowledged facets of SE is its pre-paradigmatic status. The impetus for this discourse around SE started with Nicholls (2010), who proposed that SE

was in a pre-paradigm state. The core argument, as it relates to SE specifically, is that the field “lacks an established epistemology,” with scholars engaged in the field being “small, under-resourced, and somewhat marginalized” (Nicholls, 2010, p. 611). SE is considered a “playground” (Mair and Marti, 2006, p. 37), marked by “deep debates over the legitimate methods, problems and the usefulness and quality of alternative solutions [...] appropriate to the new area of study” (Nicholls, 2010, p. 613).

Despite this, he discerned the first signs of institutionalization that were emerging in the field, seeking “control of the legitimating discourses that will determine the final shape of the paradigm” (Nicholls, 2010, p. 611). Drawing on neo-institutional theory, specifically the micro-processes of legitimization, Nicholls identified those dominant actors’ public discourses as reflective of their paradigm-building activities. These included government, foundations, network builders and fellowship organizations.

We argue that this implies SE researchers should work to hasten legitimacy by identifying competing explanatory schools of thought, to which they might seek to contribute as part of the drive toward a more legitimate, and seemingly coherent, epistemology. As we see it, the challenge for SE research here is crafting a unique epistemology that reflects multiple epistemological traditions. For example, it is commonly argued that SE straddles multiple disciplinary boundaries: business ethics (Smith *et al.*, 2013), entrepreneurship (Dey and Mason, 2018), development studies (Eversole *et al.*, 2013), health studies (Roy *et al.*, 2014), human geography (Munoz *et al.*, 2015), management studies (Jay, 2013), organization studies (Huybrechts and Haugh, 2017), public policy (Teasdale, 2012) and, more recently, design theory (Irwin, 2015).

In the years that followed, Nicholls’ (2010) paper has been cited more than 160 times according to Scopus, becoming a significant touchpoint for most scholarly papers seeking to describe the emergence of SE as a field. SE research tends to be published in entrepreneurship, management or organization studies journals, because their contributions to knowledge can reside within (or across) more established fields (Mair and Marti, 2006). Thus, following Nicholls (2010), we argue that SE scholars are still determining the relatively enduring normative boundaries of SE knowledge and practice, especially with reference to management science and organization studies (Dacin *et al.*, 2010).

To bring unity to a seemingly discordant field, a few studies have attempted to trace the research trajectories in the SE pre-paradigm. Short *et al.* (2009, p. 169) provided a review of the SE literature, claiming SE was “embryonic,” with a focus on conceptual papers and lacking “formal hypotheses and rigorous methods” (Short *et al.*, 2009, p. 161). Following this, Lehner and Kansikas (2013) attempted to coordinate the emergent patterns in SE research, using Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) framework as a guide. In part, they agree with Short *et al.* (2009) that the prevalence of conceptual papers “may be seen that SE research is still in flux” (Lehner and Kansikas, 2013, p. 213). They go further though, suggesting that extraordinary research (Kuhn, 1970) in the pre-paradigm fits across meta-paradigmatic assumptions, thus encouraging “a paradigmatic shift in the researchers’ communities, toward a more pragmatic viewpoint [...] [and] a fruitful exchange between these disciplines” (Lehner and Kansikas, 2013, p. 214). Such studies adopt a shared view that empirical and conceptual development will enhance SE’s chances of becoming a legitimate field of inquiry.

Of course, there are alternative views on the patterns of SE research. As the field has grown, there have been calls for SE scholars to also embrace critical, as well as normative, studies (Bull, 2008; Curtis, 2008; Calás *et al.*, 2009; Steyaert and Dey, 2010). Steyaert and Dey (2010, p. 249) argued that the enactment of SE research “acknowledge[s] the political ramifications of this field of research and [raises] questions concerning how to use research as a medium to represent, involve and emancipate certain issues and people.” Analysis of

discourses surrounding SE have found that institutions (Dey and Teasdale, 2016; Mason, 2012; Teasdale, 2012), organizations (Di Domenico *et al.*, 2010) and identities (Calás *et al.*, 2009; Jones *et al.*, 2008) have exposed just how important open resistance is to the drive toward consensus-seeking research outcomes. Indeed, largely these studies suspend or critique arguments over consensus-seeking SE research, instead seeking out epistemological, ontological or methodological positions from the margins of the entrepreneurship, management and organization science literatures. Rather than inhibiting SE's transcendence toward a legitimate paradigm, these critical voices advocate a resistance to linear or naturalized conceptualizations of SE. For example, as de Bruin and Woods (in this issue) show, even in cases of relatively enlightened SI practice, we need to critically examine the (re) colonization of culturally diverse practice through dominant cultural lenses.

While this diversity is a striking feature of our field, we also acknowledge that the most challenging puzzle to be solved is how to derive a unique, and thus normal, science from so many diverse trajectories. Our concern is two-fold. First, we are concerned that the drive to a dominant epistemology eschews (even temporarily) the interests of some from those of others. Relegating so-called marginal disciplinary combinations that lack a groundswell of theory or empirical acknowledgement is typical of the Kuhnian view of paradigms. Yet there would be significant ramifications for the funding of transdisciplinary research, challenging the collaborative ethos of the field.

Following this, given the view of researchers enabling resource-rich actors to legitimize the paradigmatic field implies that resources, once released, will find their way to actors in those dominant schools of thought. Our concern is that this will promote research that is too focused on gap-spotting rather than assumption-challenging research. As Alvesson and Sandberg (2014) have discussed, this is an increasing problem for more mature (but linked) disciplinary fields of management and organization studies. They argue there is an intensifying trend toward gap-spotting research, which reflects a systemic preoccupation with the production of less impactful or less original theories. Rather than presenting assumption-challenging or problematizing alternatives as a competing puzzle-solving approach, they introduce it as a complementary approach designed to embed more profound and diverse scholarship. Indeed, problematization is also a riskier endeavor – meaning that research communities should likely engage in combinatory approaches to gradually develop the theoretical terrain along whichever orthodoxy currently prevails.

Second, there are practical implications. As we have noted, SE and SI works are often transdisciplinary. However, this approach reflects the demands of the real problems and challenges that are frequently systemic in nature and profound in their impacts on individuals, communities and society more broadly. If we accept an epistemological orthodoxy, what does this mean for how we conceptualize, develop and implement innovative and socially enterprising responses to these challenges? Although an orthodoxy would provide the knowledge base for systems and approaches that link to what is “proven” to work, the ever-shifting nature of the political, ecological and social contexts leaves us with an increasingly uncertain ontology. In other words, the view of reality that is supposed to anchor our epistemology is so unstable and dynamic that “fixed” notions of what works is impractical. In fact, it is precisely this type of thinking that creates and exacerbates the social and environmental problems that we aim to tackle.

Having briefly examined the constraints of paradigmatic thinking in the SE field, next we refocus on the contributions of the current special issue with this in mind. To increase awareness of field contributions from the Oceania region, we were motivated to explore themes that align research with resource-rich actors that can confer legitimacy. In the

following section, we explore the potential of some of these themes as they relate to insights from papers in this issue.

Organizational and environment factors enabling SE. SE researchers have promoted a new heroic figure in organizational practice and research, namely, the social entrepreneur. But even though many SEs are start-ups emerging from the socially innovative ideas of an individual founder, the phenomenon of SE itself is facilitated by a host of organizational and environmental factors. The burgeoning research on this topic has already sketched several subcategories of such factors. At the organizational level, the main categories that have been discussed so far are organizational history, organizational resources and organizational capabilities (Agrawal and Sahasranamam, 2016).

While history plays a crucial role in the path dependency of an organization from a business to an SE, or from a nonprofit venture to an SE, it is an area that has not been as intensely researched or theorized as have internal resources and capabilities. In terms of internal resources, managerial and financial investment and support as well as the deliberate development of social sector networks (Tasavori and Zaefarian, 2012), are the most frequently mentioned factors. Extant research shows that, to be a true enabler of SE development and success, an organization's internal environment should wisely balance commitment to the creation of social value with adaptability and openness to change (Aziz and El Ebrashi, 2016; Tasavori and Zaefarian, 2012).

One crucial organizational capability is SI. Together with collective efficacy, the capability for SI has been identified as a key driver for nonprofit organizations, for example, to launch into SE types of projects (Tan and Yoo, 2015). SI begins its organizational history as a personal endeavor of the individual social entrepreneur, to then become part of the vision, mission and values of a collective enterprise, and then – as the organization matures – to be developed as a distinctive element in the DNA of the organization's culture. While studies on traditional businesses and non-profit organizations suggest that, once adopted in the mission and values of the organization, the production of innovation is gradually formalized or streamlined through the design of specific roles, functions and structures (Mamdouh, 2005), it seems that SEs do not necessarily fit with this pattern. Indeed, what may characterize SE as fundamentally as its hybrid objectives and mission tensions is its ability to absorb SI goals and responsibilities within its amorphous and dynamic organizational norms. More often than not, social entrepreneurs feel constrained by innovation development structures and prefer the serendipity of innovating organically, through experiences that are strongly connected with the social problems and sensibilities of the communities they are seeking to serve (Goldstein *et al.*, 2010). With its grounding in socio-legal analysis, Morgan's paper (in this issue) also begins to highlight the gaps in disciplinary insights that are critical to understanding and informing the development of SE and SI systems.

The environmental level has routinely been divided into social and institutional (Jiao, 2011), where the social environment of enterprise is defined as the area of community-based, local and informal relations, as well as social problems; and the institutional environment centers on government agency programs and supports, as well as regulatory regimes (Agrawal and Sahasranamam, 2016).

Academia itself is not divorced from dominant narratives. With their theoretical emphases on institutional logics, Luke as well as Castellás and Ormiston (in this issue) contribute to a growing and substantial researcher conversation that explains SI practice through the lens of institutional theory, drawing on less examined empirical data from the Australian setting. Such analyses are important in clarifying, contesting or refining the universal explanatory power of theoretical frameworks that are largely derived from other research settings.

We also note the importance of cultural influences on local or regional enactments of SE and SI. Oceania has many rich and ancient indigenous social and cultural histories, which have survived despite the invasions and colonization of lands in this region over the past three centuries. Thus, Oceania can offer unique insights from voices less often heard in the SE and SI research space. In empirical terms, de Bruin's paper (in this issue) notes the relative silence of indigenous cultural frames in accounting for SI developments in countries with identifiable indigenous populations, while Douglas *et al.*'s paper (in this issue) points to the lack of scholarly analysis of SI occurring within settings outside large and populous nations. With its prevalence of small island countries, Oceania is a useful research setting for redressing the latter limitation, and Douglas *et al.*'s paper draws on this to highlight the effects of geographic position and economic size on developments in SI.

Policy conditions that support SE innovation. A second space that is increasingly popular among scholars is the intersection between public policy, policy-making and SE development. It has long been argued that, in some jurisdictions such as the United Kingdom, a heavy investment in institutional reform creates many new opportunities for SE. In Australia, there is mixed evidence concerning supportive policy conditions, with an absence of direct federal policy framework to support SE development. That said, many state governments are pursuing SE strategies or social procurement policies that will directly or indirectly support SE growth. As recent comparative policy research has shown, tracing the effectiveness of policy support for SE can be explained historically and discursively (Kerlin, 2013; Mason and Moran, 2018; Roy *et al.*, 2014; Nicholls and Teasdale, 2017). This work has prompted researchers to explore alternative, yet complementary explanations for the emergence of these policies. Attention has been drawn to both the role of individual agency and institutional structures as sites for the ongoing re-construction for legitimate SE and SI policy platforms. Both Morgan and de Bruin's papers in this issue remind us, in addition, that understanding the institutional contexts for SI requires acknowledgement and understanding of the longer-term socio-cultural and political-economic trajectories of the countries and communities in which they evolve. Transdisciplinary approaches would help to expand the conceptual and analytical toolkit that we will need to extend the boundaries of this diverse field.

Reminiscent of Teasdale's (2012) analysis in the UK policy context, these papers also illuminate the power of different discursive constructions of SE and innovation in shaping their practices, as well as their legal and business forms. While each of these articles note the regressive effects of dominant discourses of SI framed, for example, by neoliberalism, each also notes the progressive possibilities of the spaces created by heterogeneity (in de Bruin's language) or multi-level framing (in Morgan's analysis). Following from this, we argue that SE and SI offer scholars an opportunity to unravel the progressive (and regressive) and discursive processes that create homogenous or heterogeneous policy environments.

Intermediaries enabling or constraining SE innovation. Intermediaries have been critical to the support and growth of both SE and SI. Recent developments in Australia, such as the introduction of a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and the emergence of State government-level SE strategies, illustrate the ability of government actors to shape market opportunities. Intermediaries intersect at different points of the SE and SI "ecosystem," and thus claim an important influence over how SE is developed "on the ground." For example, they can provide access to "resource-rich" actors such as impact investors, who hold a pivotal role in the ecosystem. Thus, the intermediaries are also potentially resource-rich themselves: they seek and acquire upstream and downstream legitimacy, as well as an extensive network of influential actors. As advocates for SE and SI, intermediaries also help to support the field politically, seeking to influence policy decisions that might support or

enable innovation. Naturally, they might also constrain innovation, in terms of having power and influence over the potential flow of resources to develop SE and to decide which enterprises or initiatives are worthier of support than others.

With that in mind, we wonder if tracing the patterns of discourse between intermediaries as a group might help to explain how new initiatives, support programs and policy decisions are contested and realized. For example, Castellás and Ormiston, as well as Luke, trace the emergence of new institutional norms in practices of impact investing and SE accountability in contemporary governance regimes, finding that institutional logics of hybrid organizing remain largely distinct, if not altogether in conflict, at this moment in the evolution of Australian SE.

Concluding reflections

While *SEJ* has historically been multi-disciplinary in orientation, it is arguably the case that dominant narratives in SE research have been shaped by management, sociological and policy sciences. We have used this guest editorial to frame several important contributions to the development of the SE field, from the Oceanic region. In so doing, we have tried to argue for a re-engagement in the conceptual development of pre-paradigm thinking as a creative, transdisciplinary space. Rather than predict which patterns of work will make the ascendancy to normal science, we argue that the strictures of Kuhnian pre-paradigm thinking make it difficult to pin down which research will shape the longer-term character of SE research. Indeed, despite a rapid increase in the publication of SE and SI research in leading management, organization studies and entrepreneurship journals, we argue that currently popular research topics do not truly reflect the current state or future possibilities of our field.

More widely, we have speculated whether embracing transdisciplinary studies in SE would be conducive to a sense of normal science. At a more concrete level, would these emergent and critical trends in SE reflect a lessening preoccupation of “gap-spotting” research? Following current debates in organization and management studies (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014; Sandberg and Alvesson, 2011), we echo the concern that much business, management, organization and entrepreneurship research risks falling foul of too much gap-spotting.

Thus, using Hassard and Wolfram-Cox (2013) as inspiration, we have tried to show that even from the geographic margins we can find many valuable insights that prompt us to re-think what we know about SE and SI. Using discourse as a lens to bring disciplinary boundaries together, SE’s notoriously liminal and ambiguous conceptual palette might become advantageous to developing the field. Indeed, although we briefly covered only three thematic areas worthy of discursive transdisciplinary projects, there are undoubtedly many more. Our hope is that this research from the margins continues to form part of a central heterodoxy, rather than of an orthodoxy that defines the field.

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