

Book Review

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Young, D. R., Searing, E. A. M., & Brewer, C. V. (Eds.). (2016). *The social enterprise zoo: A guide for perplexed scholars, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, leaders, investors and policymakers*. Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar. 320 pp., \$140.00, ISBN 9781784716059.

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The Social Enterprise Zoo, a volume edited by Dennis Young, Elizabeth Searing, and Cass Brewer, presents an innovative perspective on social enterprise research. Comparing the different facets of the social enterprise field to those of a zoo—from outlining social enterprise “animals” to their respective “habitats” and interactions—the volume aims to offer a holistic exploration, covering the design, the growth, management, and evaluation of the social enterprise field.

Given the diverse discourses and perceptions of “social enterprise,” the volume starts with putting forward the idea of a “social efficiency frontier.” Derived from welfare economics and building on earlier work by Young, the social efficiency frontier is a two-dimensional curve that brings together organizations’ net social impact and profitability. Through mapping different organizational forms on this curve, six overarching types of social enterprises are identified: “public sector social enterprises,” “commercial nonprofits,” “social cooperatives,” “public private partnerships,” “social businesses,” and “sustainable businesses.” These move from a strong emphasis on social impact and limited emphasis on profitability in the case of public sector social enterprises, to an increasing focus on profitability and a decreasing emphasis on social impact in the case of sustainable businesses.

Building on the idea of the social efficiency frontier and drawing on lenses from institutional research and population ecology, chapters in the second part of the volume explore the zoo’s operation. To this end, contributors address issues relating to social enterprises’ legal forms, institutional environments, ecologies of organizational survival, and sustenance, as well as life cycles. As part of this, questions that are examined include how cultural, political, and economic histories, as well as governmental structures and nonprofit traditions shape and influence the development and characteristics of social enterprises. Furthermore, the different challenges that social enterprises face at each life stage and potential ways in which these might be addressed and utilized are discussed.

Moving from the broad to the specific, the book’s third part draws attention to the managerial and governance aspects of social enterprises. The section begins by unpacking the idea of the entrepreneur. What are different entrepreneurial mind-sets,

characteristics, and traditions? How might social entrepreneurs choose among different organizational expressions to achieve their aims? What roles can social entrepreneurs take on in shaping and developing the social enterprise zoo? Thereafter, questions of “sustenance,” of appropriate financial and material resourcing, are highlighted, before an exploration of the policies and regulations for social enterprises in Italy, the United Kingdom, and the United States point to wider governmental influences in the curation of the social enterprise zoo.

Having mapped and discussed the different facets of, and influences on, the social enterprise zoo, the penultimate section turns toward the actual and potential performance of social enterprises. Innovation—from product to process, marketing, institutional, and ecological innovation—the sustainability of social enterprise, and the challenges and difficulties they face, as well as their overall impact and appropriate ways to capture it, are touched upon.

Bringing together the insights gleaned from the various expressions, applications and uses of the zoo analogy across the volume’s chapters, the editors wrap up by highlighting the potency of the zoo metaphor and its promise to embrace the complexity and diversity of the social enterprise landscape.

Reflecting on the volume, it seems that the use of the zoo analogy goes above and beyond many other lenses aimed at unpacking and explaining the general social enterprise phenomenon, and it does so in a readily accessible manner: The volume unfolds the design and diversity of the social enterprise zoo, incorporates the application of various management and organizational theories, and offers myriad insights and cases. The diversity of theories and approaches applied by the contributors is fascinating and broad-ranging: from the aforementioned ideas drawn from population ecology to benefits theory; from grounded theory to macroinstitutional approaches. Despite this, through using the overarching idea of a zoo, the editors achieve a high degree of integration and intellectual cohesion across the different chapters.

There is no doubt that the volume can offer plenty of food for thought to anybody interested or involved in the social enterprise landscape: from entrepreneurs to investors, philanthropist, and policy makers. At times, however, the volume appears to be strongly rooted in a prosocial enterprise perspective; it might benefit from further critical engagement with the social enterprise idea. Furthermore, although the use of the social efficiency framework offers a clear structure, it could also imply a somewhat mechanistic and positivist perspective. These, though, are minor issues. In general, the book offers a thought-provoking introduction on theories and research frameworks surrounding social enterprises, and the extensive and systematic coverage of ideas provides a comprehensive package of tools, opportunities, and subjects for further studies of social enterprise. It is a must-read for social enterprise researchers.

Reviewer Biography

Tracy Shicun Cui is a doctoral student at Georgia State University with a major in nonprofit and public management and a minor in organization studies. She focuses her research on commercialism and management of the nonprofit sector and comparative study of social enterprise in China and in the United States.