Evaluating definitions of social entrepreneurship: A rulebook from the philosophy of science

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Abstract

Scholars have long debated the definition of social entrepreneurship, but disagreement persists. Despite sustained efforts to craft a universal definition, social entrepreneurship has been characterized as an 'essentially contested concept'. However, little is known about the root causes of this ongoing contestation. Therefore, we delve into the literature's social entrepreneurship definitions to examine this complex issue. Our systematic literature review leverages insights from the philosophy of science and formal logic—specifically, a theory of definition—to present four rules for definitional evaluation in the social sciences. Accordingly, definitions should convey the essence of a concept (Rule 1: *essence*), differentiate between their defining and defined terms (Rule 2: *expression*), be phrased positively (Rule 3: *explication*), and avoid figurative and obscure language (Rule 4: *eloquence*). Using these rules to analyse 156 original social entrepreneurship definitions reveals varying interpretations of the concept's essence and sheds light on epistemological issues, such as tautological definitions. Integrating these findings into a practical 'rulebook' for definitional evaluation significantly contributes to the social entrepreneurship literature and other highly contested fields by helping to understand different sources of contestation. Guided by our rulebook, we suggest future research avenues and highlight diverse theorizing styles, the engagement of opposing and paradoxical definitional views and the role of academic language in shaping the social entrepreneurship field.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars commonly depict social entrepreneurship as employing business activities to tackle pressing societal and environmental challenges (Haugh, 2007; Mair et al., 2012; Santos, 2012). This phenomenon has become widespread; for instance, following the 2007/2008 financial crisis, many social enterprises have addressed social problems stemming from sharp economic downturns (Maclean et al., 2013). Concurrently, the topic has entered mainstream management research (see e.g., Austin et al., 2006; Mair & Marti, 2006; Peredo & McLean, 2006) and continues to attract increasing research attention (Hietschold et al., 2022; Saebi et al., 2019; Schätzlein et al., 2022; Vedula et al., 2022). Surprisingly, a unified definition of social entrepreneurship remains elusive

(Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Certo & Miller, 2008; Morris et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2020). Recently, Vedula et al. (2022, p. 398) noted that 'the focus on definitional debates has continued unchecked', reflecting a broader and increasing academic interest in concept definitions and theoretical developments in management and organizational studies (e.g., Makowski, 2021; Podsakoff et al., 2016; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021).

This 'unchecked' definitional debate is problematic for two reasons. First, it may jeopardize social entrepreneurship's legitimacy as a field of research. For instance, many scholars have recurrently voiced concerns over tautological definitions (e.g., Hu, Marlow et al., 2019; Lamy, 2017; Rivera-Santos et al., 2015; Santos, 2012; Stevens et al., 2015). If these epistemological deficiencies persist, they risk undermining the conceptual foundations of social entrepreneurship (Vedula et al., 2022). Second, while some prominent scholars describe social entrepreneurship as an 'essentially contested concept' (Choi & Majumdar, 2014, p. 363; Vedula et al., 2022)—permitting multiple and potentially conflicting instantiations of the concept (Gallie, 1956b)—others advocate for a universal definition (Aliaga-Isla & Huybrechts, 2018; Forouharfar et al., 2018). We posit that the inherent tension of this status quo slows down cumulative knowledge generation and impedes the field's growth (Dacin et al., 2010; Lepoutre et al., 2011; Saebi et al., 2019).

Our systematic literature review seeks to discern the factors driving definitional disputes, heeding Vedula et al.'s (2022) call for critical appraisals to advance the definitional debate. While scholars acknowledge that rigorous literature reviews can foster improved or harmonized definitions (Bacq et al., 2021; Post et al., 2020; Rojon et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020), the criteria for a logically coherent definition and its construction remain underspecified. Therefore, we analyse a sample of 156 original social entrepreneurship definitions by drawing on the philosophy of science (Rosenberg, 2015; Scherer, 2003; Tsoukas & Chia, 2011). Specifically, we harness early but underappreciated philosophical studies that delve into what makes a logically coherent definition (see Cohen & Nagel, 1934; Suppes, 1957). Guided by what Suppes (1957, p. 151) called a 'theory of definition', we synthesize prior philosophical and logical discourses into four normative rules: definitions should convey the essence of a concept (Rule 1: *essence*), differentiate between their defining and defined terms (Rule 2: *expression*), be phrased positively (Rule 3: *explication*) and avoid figurative and obscure language (Rule 4: *eloquence*). In our analysis of the social entrepreneurship literature, we identify instances of both compliance with and violation of these rules.

Our key contribution to the literature is the development of a philosophically informed 'rulebook' for definitional evaluation that applies not only to social entrepreneurship but also to other fields grappling with high levels of contestation. Expanding from our rulebook, we outline four important avenues for future research seeking to bring definitional insight and clarity to the social entrepreneurship debate, thereby bolstering its legitimacy as an independent field of research. First, we specify how our rulebook supports different theorizing styles. Second, we explain how the rulebook helps leverage opposing views to cultivate multifaceted social entrepreneurship definitions. Third, we delineate the rulebook's potential in clarifying the evolution of research fields via language use. We conclude with a reflection on how the rulebook may be taken further.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Scholars have grappled with social entrepreneurship definitions since the field's inception. This section examines the current debate and its challenges. We then show how the philosophy of science can advance the definitional debate.

An unresolved definitional debate

From the outset of social entrepreneurship research, scholars have sought to formulate a unifying, context-independent and universally accepted definition of the concept (Austin et al., 2006; Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Dacin et al., 2010; Mair & Marti, 2006; Peredo & McLean, 2006; Santos, 2012; Zahra et al., 2009). However, as the field has grown, it continues to exhibit 'ongoing disagreement regarding the very definition of social entrepreneurship' (Morris et al., 2020, p. 2). To illustrate, Kimmitt et al. (2022) discovered that affluent urban areas are more prone to derive advantages from social entrepreneurship, challenging the idea that social entrepreneurship focuses on deprived areas. Such findings have definitional implications and fuel efforts to identify more congruent definitions (Aliaga-Isla & Huybrechts, 2018; Forouharfar et al., 2018).

Countering the efforts to seek definitional consensus, scholars have emphasized social entrepreneurship's indeterminacy (Dey et al., 2016), category ambiguity (Chliova et al., 2020) and perpetually morphing nature (Parkinson & Howorth, 2008). For instance, some depict social enterprises as non-profit organizations (e.g., Goyal, 2021), while others view them as for-profit ventures (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2018). In this perspective, the meaning of social entrepreneurship 'depends on the perspective of

the researcher and the context of the study' (Hietschold et al., 2022, p. 178). In the same vein, Choi and Majumdar (2014) posited that arriving at a universally accepted social entrepreneurship definition is a practical impossibility. An important reason is that scholars vary in the level of analysis they adopt: an actor-centric view on social entrepreneurs, an organizational perspective on social enterprises or more of a field-level view on social entrepreneurship can each influence our understanding of the concept. Therefore, Choi and Majumdar (2014) proposed conceptualizing social entrepreneurship as an 'essentially contested concept', similar to what others have suggested for corporate social responsibility (CSR) (e.g., Matten & Moon, 2008).

Essentially contested concepts were introduced by Gallie (1956a) during his analysis of art. He observed that some concepts, due to their highly abstract and multifaceted nature, often lead to rivalling truth claims. The use of such concepts 'inevitably involves endless disputes about their proper uses on the part of their users' (Gallie, 1956b, p. 169). Failing to acknowledge this intrinsic complexity would either 'mislead us by circumscribing the idea [...] too narrowly' or cloak it 'in language so general and so vague that [it] can do nothing to illuminate' (Gallie, 1956a, p. 98). Gallie (1956b) subsequently argued that recognizing a concept as essentially contested could remedy these inadequacies by permitting multiple instantiations of a multifaceted idea.

Based on these premises, Choi and Majumdar (2014) proposed expressing social entrepreneurship through the complementary subconcepts of entrepreneurs and their organizations, outcomes, markets and innovation. However, this approach remains problematic because the authors did not specify the roots of contestation surrounding social entrepreneurship. We contend that these tensions stem from disputes about its definitional core and functional shortcomings in its formulation.

The limitations of previous works coincide with management scholars' limited engagement with the philosophy of science in developing, evaluating, categorizing and applying concept definitions, including that of social entrepreneurship. Problems arise, for example, when definitions of social entrepreneurship imply someone with a 'social' intention does something 'social' to achieve a 'social' outcome. Both Haugh (2012) and Stevens et al. (2015) lamented such tautological aspects in social entrepreneurship definitions. Focusing on a concept's expressional qualities is crucial because they relate to truth claims and their justifications (Hetherington, 2019), thus underpinning definitional validity (Locke, 2003, 2012; Miles et al., 2014).

Mobilizing the philosophy of science and a theory of definition

While interest is growing in how theories and concepts enhance our understanding of organizational phenomena (Cornelissen et al., 2021; Makowski, 2021; Oswick et al., 2021; Sandberg & Alvesson, 2021), concerns arose about the limited focus on their building blocks, specifically, their definitions (Podsakoff et al., 2016). Suddaby (2010) described concept definitions as 'the skilful use of language to persuasively create precise and parsimonious [...] distinctions between concepts' (p. 347). Thus, we turn to the philosophy of science and formal logic research to provide concrete guidance on *how* to achieve this.

Philosophers have extensively debated definitions and criteria for evaluating their quality. Integrating ideas from formal logic, the work of Aristotle and more contemporary philosophy by Cohen and Nagel (1934), Suppes (1957) recapitulated the 'theory of definition', outlining four rules for articulating logically coherent definitions. According to Rule 1, definitions must convey the *essence* of what they delineate. This means definitions should succinctly communicate a concept's basic qualities (Cohen & Nagel, 1934; Suppes, 1957). The Latin roots of the word 'definition' capture this idea: *dē* means 'from' and *fīnīre* means 'to end'. Thus, a definition delineates a concept and thereby clarifies its very nature.

Rule 2 stipulates that definitions must differentiate between their defining and defined terms. Adhering to this, a definitional *expression* should respect the rules of logic. Particularly in definitions, circularity is a prevalent logical error where a definable term (i.e., the *definiendum*) and its explanation (i.e., the *definiens*) overlap (Cohen & Nagel, 1934; Suppes, 1957). Such statements of the obvious are known as tautologies: a tendency to express the concept at least partly in its own terms, thus rendering it empirically unfalsifiable (Popper, 2005) and impeding theory development and testing (Priem & Butler, 2001).

Rule 3 posits that definitions should be phrased positively whenever feasible. For instance, Suonuuti (1997, p. 25) stated that a definition is about *explication*; it must 'describe what a concept is, not what it is not'. Reflecting this, the third rule emphasizes affirmativeness (i.e., the importance of explicitly accentuating the presence rather than the absence of a definition's distinguishing features). Such 'positive language' should not be conflated with cheerful language. Moreover, Löckinger et al. (2015, p. 73) indicated that concepts should only pursue 'negative definitions' when absence is an essential characteristic, such as when defining a drug suitable for animals but not humans.

Following Rule 4, a definition must avoid figurative and obscure language. This rule emphasizes the importance of clear and compelling speech, known as *eloquence* (Cohen & Nagel, 1934; Suppes, 1957). However, eloquence is more than just a combination of informative conceptual characteristics (i.e., Rule 1), the application of logical standards (i.e., Rule 2) and detailed explication (i.e., Rule 3). In this context, Ragins (2012) argued that effective academic language is direct, crisp, precise and compelling.

The four definitional rules mentioned above serve as a valuable foundation for our review. They are succinct yet thought-provoking and stimulate a non-dogmatic, dispassionate reflection on definitions of social entrepreneurship. Moreover, given the ongoing definitional disputes in the realm of social entrepreneurship, it is helpful to draw on a theory of definition originating from a discipline *outside* this field, such as the philosophy of science. Therefore, we employ these four definitional rules to critically examine the conceptualizations of social entrepreneurship presented in the literature. We aim to show how social entrepreneurship and its underlying definitions can benefit from a philosophical lens and how this field of research can advance with more solid definitional foundations that clarify and explain its essentially contested nature rather than merely questioning it.

METHODOLOGY

Identification, screening and sampling of articles

We build on and expand prior studies that either examined definitions of social entrepreneurship without conducting a systematic review (e.g., Bacq & Janssen, 2011; Dacin et al., 2010) or provided a systematic review of the social entrepreneurship literature without specifically focusing on definitions (e.g., Hietschold et al., 2022; Schätzlein et al., 2022; Vedula et al., 2022). Our definitional selection process was structured into three stages: identification, screening and sampling. These stages comprised nine main steps (see Figure 1 for details), adhering to the transparent, replicable and comprehensive research principles that informed our theorization (Post et al., 2020; Rojon et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019).

We initiated our sample collection using Web of Science, focusing on academic journal articles published between 1998 and 2022. The starting year, 1998, was chosen because it saw the release of one of the early influential publications on social entrepreneurship (Dees, 1998), thus setting a significant benchmark for academic debate (for a similar argument, see Dacin et al., 2010). To identify relevant papers, we carried out a keyword search within

articles' titles, abstracts and keywords in May 2022, targeting the terms 'social entrepreneur*', 'social enterprise', 'social ventur*', 'sustainable ent*', to encompass the varied perspectives on social entrepreneurship (Thompson et al., 2011). Following common practices of high-quality journals (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2012; Frynas & Stephens, 2015; Risi et al., 2022), we initially focused on publication levels 4*, 4 and 3 in the 2021 Academic Journal Guide (AJG). This led to the exclusion of 1494 records from the original 2096 (see Steps 1 and 2 in Figure 1). Additionally, we extended our search to include two specialized journals in social entrepreneurship: the *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship* (AJG rating 2) and the *Social Enterprise Journal* (AJG rating 1). Including these journals was essential, as even with their lower journal rankings, they stand as significant platforms for emerging ideas and innovative research. As previously shown in the case of philanthropy (Maclean et al., 2021), such journals tend to get higher ratings as their content gains broader legitimacy, which increases their prominence in literature reviews.

Including specialized field journals in the sample added another 460 records (see Step 3 in Figure 1). We aimed to identify a representative subset of both recent and influential articles from this latter selection (similarly, see Crossan & Apaydin, 2010), ensuring a balanced representation compared with higher AJG-rated sources (i.e., 3 and above). To this end, we first sorted the articles from Step 3 by Publication Date (from newest to oldest) and selected the 100 most recent articles to our preliminary reading list. Next, we sorted the articles from Step 3 by the Times Cited field (from highest to lowest) in Web of Science and added the 100 most-cited articles to our reading list. This process resulted in one duplicate article in Step 4, which means 199 records were included in our sample.

We screened the ensuing 801 articles (i.e., 2096 records from Step 1 less 1494 records from Step 2 plus 460 records from Step 3 less 261 records from Step 4) to identify definitions of social entrepreneurship (Step 5). From this, we excluded 272 records (Step 6). In most cases ($n = 163$), these removals occurred because the articles did not contain social entrepreneurship definitions. This left us with 529 full-text articles with definitions (Step 7). Typically, definitions were found in the articles' introduction and literature review sections. We did not derive definitional statements from abstracts or executive summaries because these sections usually omit references. If an article had multiple substantially overlapping original definitional expressions, we chose the most comprehensive one. Our focus was on 'intensional definitions' (Löckinger et al., 2015, p. 60), considering both explicit and implicit definitions. Implicit definitions were more challenging to identify than explicit ones as they were 'softer' in tone but
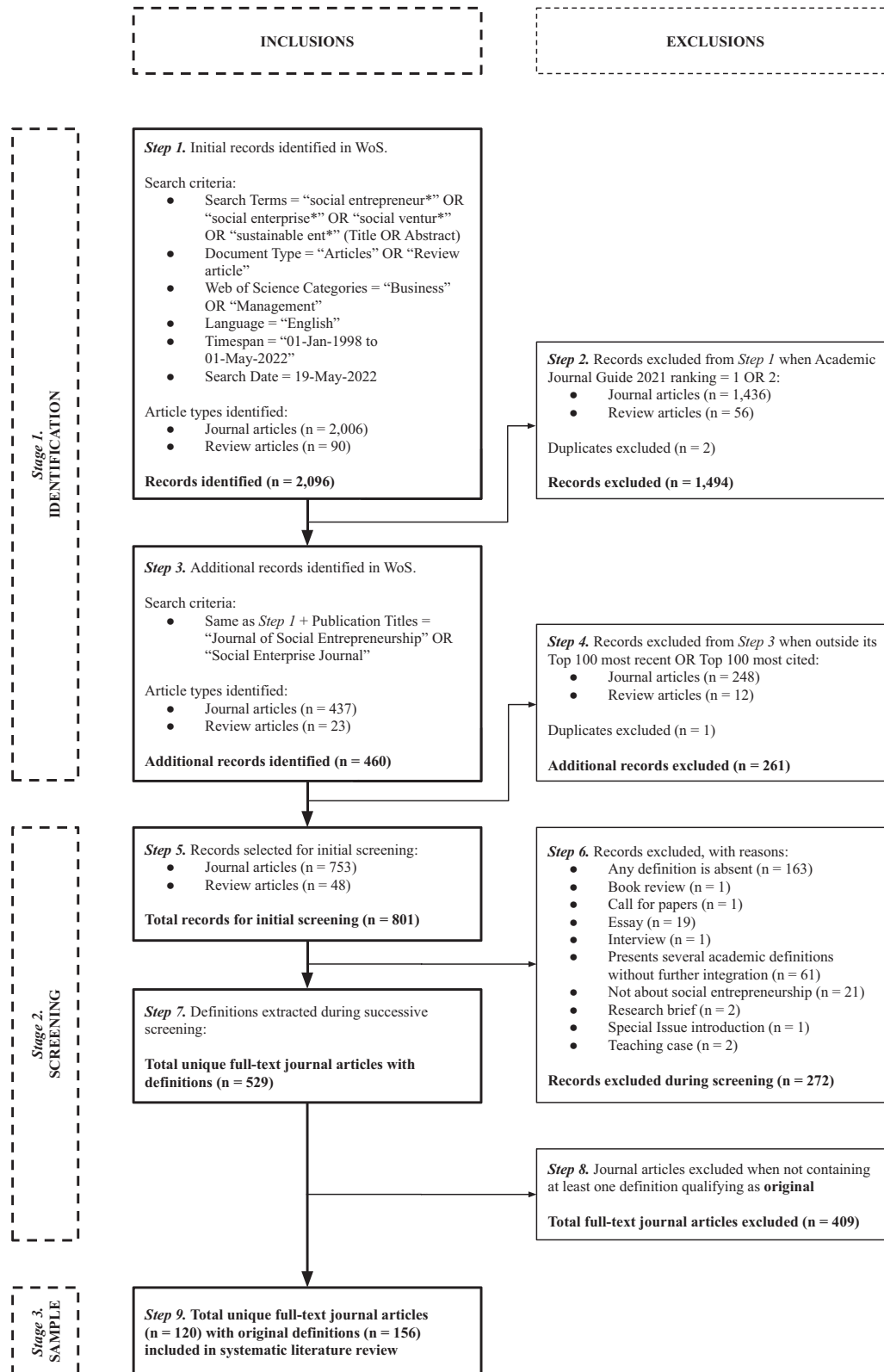
INCLUSIONS

EXCLUSIONS

Stage 1. IDENTIFICATION

Step 1. Initial records identified in WoS.

Search criteria:
- Search Terms = "social entrepreneur*" OR "social enterprise*" OR "social ventur*" OR "sustainable ent*" (Title OR Abstract)
- Document Type = "Articles" OR "Review article"
- Web of Science Categories = "Business" OR "Management"
- Language = "English"
- Timespan = "01-Jan-1998 to 01-May-2022"
- Search Date = 19-May-2022

Article types identified:
- Journal articles (n = 2,006)
- Review articles (n = 90)

Records identified (n = 2,096)

Step 2. Records excluded from *Step 1* when Academic Journal Guide 2021 ranking = 1 OR 2:
- Journal articles (n = 1,436)
- Review articles (n = 56)

Duplicates excluded (n = 2)

Records excluded (n = 1,494)

Step 3. Additional records identified in WoS.

Search criteria:
- Same as *Step 1* + Publication Titles = "Journal of Social Entrepreneurship" OR "Social Enterprise Journal"

Article types identified:
- Journal articles (n = 437)
- Review articles (n = 23)

Additional records identified (n = 460)

Step 4. Records excluded from *Step 3* when outside its Top 100 most recent OR Top 100 most cited:
- Journal articles (n = 248)
- Review articles (n = 12)

Duplicates excluded (n = 1)

Additional records excluded (n = 261)

Stage 2. SCREENING

Step 5. Records selected for initial screening:
- Journal articles (n = 753)
- Review articles (n = 48)

Total records for initial screening (n = 801)

Step 6. Records excluded, with reasons:
- Any definition is absent (n = 163)
- Book review (n = 1)
- Call for papers (n = 1)
- Essay (n = 19)
- Interview (n = 1)
- Presents several academic definitions without further integration (n = 61)
- Not about social entrepreneurship (n = 21)
- Research brief (n = 2)
- Special Issue introduction (n = 1)
- Teaching case (n = 2)

Records excluded during screening (n = 272)

Step 7. Definitions extracted during successive screening:

Total unique full-text journal articles with definitions (n = 529)

Step 8. Journal articles excluded when not containing at least one definition qualifying as **original**

Total full-text journal articles excluded (n = 409)

Stage 3. SAMPLE

Step 9. **Total unique full-text journal articles (n = 120) with original definitions (n = 156) included in systematic literature review**

FIGURE 1 Identification, screening and sampling of articles via Web of Science (WoS).

frequently used to delineate the social entrepreneurship concept. We followed contemporary practice in identifying articles with original definitions of social entrepreneurship, meaning definitional expressions without citations or references (see Meuer et al., 2020). We removed 409 articles that only cited existing conceptualizations of social entrepreneurship (Step 8).

Given our study's specific focus on social entrepreneurship, we excluded definitions of apparent social entrepreneurship subtypes or neighbouring concepts, such as collective social entrepreneurship, female social entrepreneurship, ecopreneurship, cultural entrepreneurship and ethnic entrepreneurship. Our final sample comprises 156 original definitions of social entrepreneurship from 120 unique full-text journal articles (Step 9), indicating multiple original definitions in some articles. For each article, we recorded metadata (e.g., definitional focus, level of analysis, paper type and empirical context) to account for the contextual implications of social entrepreneurship definitions (Hietschold et al., 2022). The final sample is presented in Table S1 (see Appendix).

Analysis

To analyse our sample, we used MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software tool, to identify and organize the characteristics of the definitions. We first highlighted language segments that conveyed pertinent definitional properties and labelled them with short descriptors ('first-order codes'). These highlighted sections considered allusions to social entrepreneurs, social enterprises and social entrepreneurship. While these concepts are intrinsically related, they are not identical. Social entrepreneurs are individuals associated with different organizational designations (e.g., founder/CEO; also see Price et al., 2023), whereas social enterprises refer to organizational entities with varying legal forms (e.g., cooperatives; see Datta & Gailey, 2012; Litrico & Besharov, 2018). Social entrepreneurship encompasses both individual and organizational 'levels', including their materials, practices and outcomes, that pertain to tackling societal or environmental challenges through business endeavours. These three definitional orientations are indicated in the fourth column of Table S1 (see Appendix), and all three have guided our analysis.

We further grouped and synthesized the first-order codes into more abstract 'second-order categories' to provide a higher-level structure for understanding the data patterns. We positioned the subsequent framework within the four definitional rules mentioned above ('aggregate dimensions'), thus drawing from theoretical references to inform our empirical analysis (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007; Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021). At this stage, we ventured into what Gioia et al. (2013, p. 20) characterized as the 'theoretical realm', oscillating between the insights from our data and those from the literature. We continuously reflected on the emerging whole, reconsidering definitional expressions while inserting, removing, revising and merging codes to reflect their meaning until we were confident in the meaning and clarity of our assessments. As our understanding deepened, some subjective interpretations were unavoidable (Bryant & Charmaz, 2019). Hence, we deliberately attempted to describe and explain our observations rather than impose normative judgments. Divergent views among the authors led to extensive discussions to reach agreement.

We observed an uneven numeric spread of coded segments across the emerging four aggregate dimensions. Although quantifying coded segments in qualitative data analysis was not the primary task (Flick, 2013), this count provided valuable insights: Our sample predominantly highlighted the first definitional rule, affirming that researchers put the most deliberate efforts into conveying the essence of social entrepreneurship. The second rule was also substantial, although it contained 58% fewer coded segments than the first. Finally, the third and fourth definitional rules had notably fewer coded segments than the second. Figure 2 shows the resulting data structure, visualizing first-order codes, second-order categories and the theoretically informed aggregate dimensions.

FINDINGS: REVIEWING DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

In this section, we delve into definitions of social entrepreneurship, aligning them with the four rules of a theory of definition as explained above. Each segment illustrates how prominent definitions of social entrepreneurship adhere to or defy these rules.

Rule 1: Essence—definitions must convey the essence of the concept

A definition should help understand the *essence* of the concept. Our literature review revealed that scholars have identified four prominent features of social entrepreneurship definitions to convey their essence: origin, purpose, functionality and resources (see the second-order categories in our data structure). This distinction was helpful because, in line with modern logic (Paquette, 2018, p. 6) and the notion of essentially contested concepts (Gallie, 1956a), it showed how a definition could pinpoint *an*
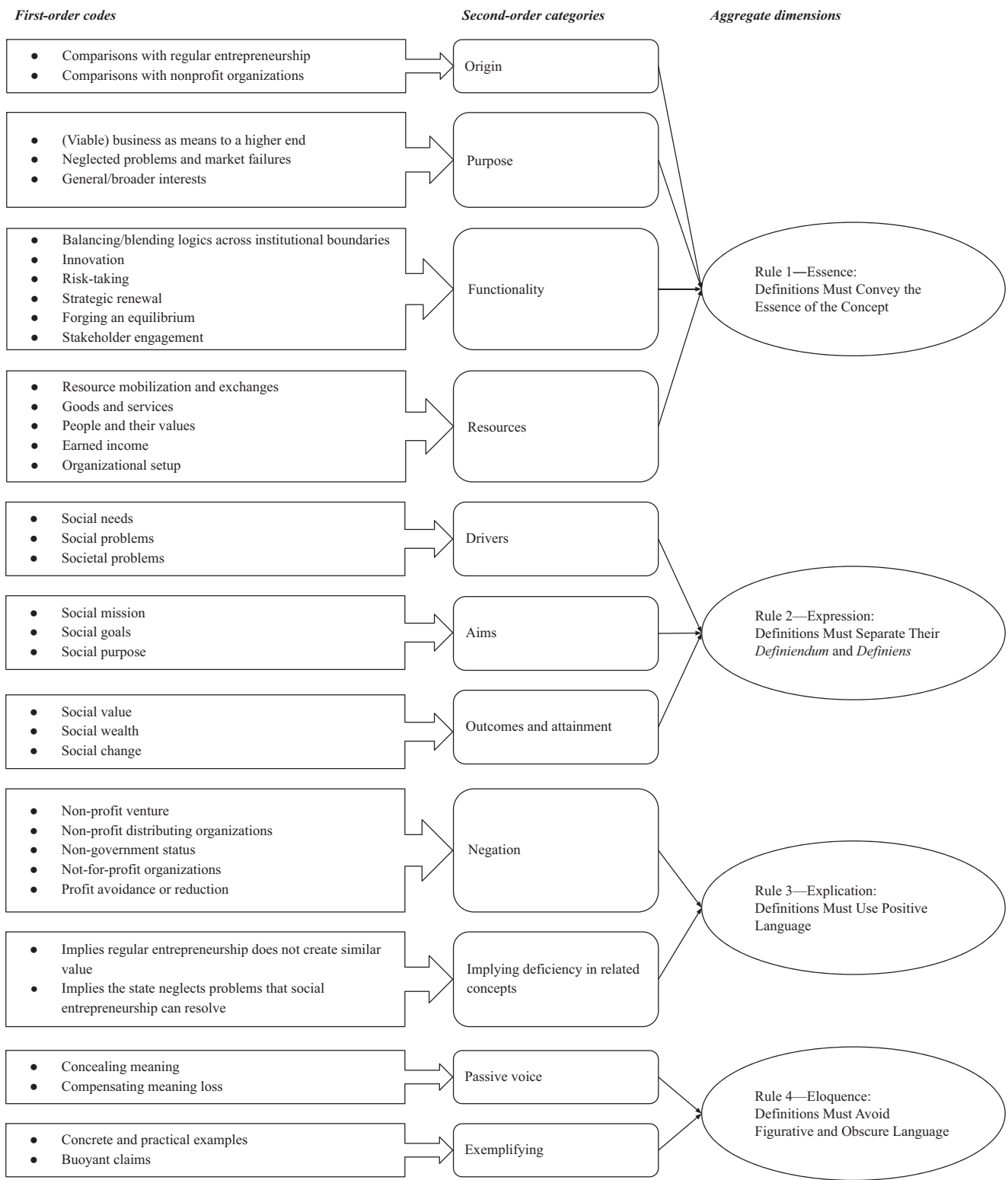
First-order codes   **Second-order categories**   **Aggregate dimensions**

- Comparisons with regular entrepreneurship
- Comparisons with nonprofit organizations

→ Origin

- (Viable) business as means to a higher end
- Neglected problems and market failures
- General/broader interests

→ Purpose

- Balancing/blending logics across institutional boundaries
- Innovation
- Risk-taking
- Strategic renewal
- Forging an equilibrium
- Stakeholder engagement

→ Functionality

- Resource mobilization and exchanges
- Goods and services
- People and their values
- Earned income
- Organizational setup

→ Resources

Rule 1—Essence:
Definitions Must Convey the Essence of the Concept

- Social needs
- Social problems
- Societal problems

→ Drivers

- Social mission
- Social goals
- Social purpose

→ Aims

- Social value
- Social wealth
- Social change

→ Outcomes and attainment

Rule 2—Expression:
Definitions Must Separate Their *Definiendum* and *Definiens*

- Non-profit venture
- Non-profit distributing organizations
- Non-government status
- Not-for-profit organizations
- Profit avoidance or reduction

→ Negation

- Implies regular entrepreneurship does not create similar value
- Implies the state neglects problems that social entrepreneurship can resolve

→ Implying deficiency in related concepts

Rule 3—Explication:
Definitions Must Use Positive Language

- Concealing meaning
- Compensating meaning loss

→ Passive voice

- Concrete and practical examples
- Buoyant claims

→ Exemplifying

Rule 4—Eloquence:
Definitions Must Avoid Figurative and Obscure Language

FIGURE 2   Data structure.

essential property of the concept it delineated while accommodating varied definitions revealing multiple aspects.

Origin

Researchers frequently draw on comparisons with regular entrepreneurship to explain the origin of social entrepreneurship. This comparative approach is understandable, given that the essential adjective 'social' moderates the noun 'entrepreneurship'. Nevertheless, the degree to which regular entrepreneurship principles pervade social entrepreneurship definitions can vary. For example, some authors have considered financial sustainability through earned income strategies an essential social entrepreneurship property (Di Domenico et al., 2010; Hockerts, 2017; Zhang et al., 2018), while others appear more amenable to alternative sources of income like donations, grants and government tax breaks (Somerville & McElwee, 2011). However, these positions are irreconcilable within a single, universally applicable definition of social entrepreneurship. Similarly, many academics have emphasized social entrepreneurship's market orientation (Liston-Heyes & Liu, 2021; Longoni et al., 2019; Nicholls, 2010) and opportunity-seeking behaviours (Liu et al., 2015)—hallmarks of regular entrepreneurship (Austin et al., 2006). Others have positioned them as nongovernmental organizations situated in or around institutional voids (Brunetto et al., 2020; Calò et al., 2017; Stephan et al., 2014). Again, these perspectives are fundamentally different. Some definitions attempt to harmonize seemingly conflicting positions; for instance, Kruse et al. (2018) acknowledged the importance of capitalizing on opportunities in both commercial and social entrepreneurship. They proposed that while the former 'address[es] an opportunity in the market to yield profit', the latter 'address[es] a social problem by means of creating opportunities' (Kruse et al., 2018, p. 58). Opportunities exist in either case, but they serve fundamentally different purposes.

Many researchers have viewed social entrepreneurship as a derivative of regular entrepreneurship, for instance, manifesting itself through its resource management approaches (Kickul et al., 2012) while also incorporating other ideas (Rey-Marti et al., 2016). We found a notable influence on social entrepreneurship definitions, emphasizing that social enterprises should not treat profit as the ultimate goal, thus differing from commercial ventures. This view suggests that social entrepreneurship does *not* consist of traditional profit-distributing organizations (Calò et al., 2017) but rather channels profits to meet social goals. Choi et al. (2021) exemplified this school of thought, stating that social entrepreneurship thus reflects

'the legacy of non-profit organizations, philanthropy, cooperatives, and/or social economy' (p. 710). However, not all scholars recognize social entrepreneurship as a subdiscipline of regular entrepreneurship. Dempsey and Sanders (2010), for example, described it as evolving from non-profit management rather than entrepreneurship: 'Social entrepreneurship involves the application of the tenets of capitalist entrepreneurship to non-profit organizations' (p. 438).

Such varying perspectives illustrate the diversity in scholarly views and highlight the challenges in assessing whether social entrepreneurship can be seen as a derivative of regular entrepreneurship or non-profit management. Di Domenico et al. (2010) attempted to resolve this conundrum by casting social entrepreneurship as sharing 'the pursuit of revenue generation with organizations in the private sector as well as the achievement of social (and environmental) goals of non-profit organizations' (p. 682). Essentially, these authors have not strictly aligned with either the regular entrepreneurial or non-profit perspective but have impartially accentuated what social entrepreneurship has in common with both strands. Nevertheless, it is debatable whether this reconciliatory stance overlooks social entrepreneurship's original endeavour, which many have argued is principally the pursuit of public benefits (Choi et al., 2021).

Purpose

Social entrepreneurship definitions also frequently emphasize essence by highlighting its purpose and corresponding drivers—in particular, persistent social problems (Acs et al., 2011), communal breakdowns (De Beule et al., 2020), financially unprofitable opportunities that discourage regular ventures (Di Domenico et al., 2010), the state's ignorance or negligence (Brunetto et al., 2020; De Beule et al., 2020) and impediments preventing markets from functioning normally (Santos et al., 2015). These conditions form the *raison d'etre* for social entrepreneurship, guiding its operative aims, such as to 'deliver social value' (Andre et al., 2018, p. 661), 'fulfil a social mission' (Andre & Pache, 2016, p. 659), 'achieve their social purpose' (Calò et al., 2017, p. 1794), 'provide goods or services with the primacy of their social aims' (Brolis, 2017, p. 2876) and 'satisfy societal needs with financial sustainability' (Lee, Kim, et al., 2021, p. 492). While these definitional expressions may sound similar, they are not interchangeable. For instance, a 'social mission' may denote a venture's formalized, documented aspiration, whereas a venture's 'social purpose' may reflect an idea that organizational members tacitly share about why their venture exists. Graikioti et al. (2022, p. 184)

expanded on this notion of purpose, stressing that social entrepreneurship provides customers with a 'purpose behind every purchase'. None of these scholarly interpretations is definitive; the range of possible meanings could imply different things to different actors experiencing various circumstances as unique individuals. Thus, it is challenging to state definitively which term best captures the essence of social entrepreneurship, and efforts to consolidate social entrepreneurship definitions might foster conceptual nihilism. Instead, we consider such different definitional elements as usefully coexisting, even if only moderately different, thereby conveying different shades of meaning. This approach promotes semantic richness while consistently supporting the view of social entrepreneurship as an essentially contested concept.

Functionality

Functionality describes what social entrepreneurship essentially does. Although social entrepreneurship's tangible or intangible resources may not always be evident to an outsider, its function of conducting business activities for social purposes is typically signalled to external observers (Agarwal et al., 2018). Thus, one can discern a basic operating model employing two 'logics' with potentially differing goals, norms and values (Smith et al., 2015). Our definitional sample included vigorous attempts to reconcile such value capture (i.e., generating income) with value creation (i.e., addressing societal issues). Some scholars have posited that these mechanisms are fundamentally incompatible (e.g., Smith et al., 2015). However, Child (2019) drew on paradox and sensemaking theories to argue that this may be primarily an academic concern because practitioners do not regularly experience similar conflicting interests in their work, instead 'framing away' (p. 156) tensions of 'doing well by doing good' (Waddock & Smith, 2000, p. 75). The latter opposing view fits with scholars more neutrally emphasizing social entrepreneurship's general ideal to 'blend' or 'combine' social value creation and revenue generation (e.g., Choi & Park, 2020; Graddy-Reed, 2019; Lee, Kim, et al., 2021).

Scholars have also indicated that innovation is vital to social enterprises and their branding, and the definitions in our sample repeatedly reflected this function. For example, De Beule et al. (2020, p. 1) noted that social entrepreneurship aims to 'deliver [...] innovative solutions' to social problems, whereas Tracey and Jarvis (2007, p. 670) cast it as 'innovation that leads to positive social change'. We also noticed researchers pinpointing different innovational orientations in social entrepreneurship. For instance, Murphy and Coombes (2008) referred to new products and services, Alegre and Berbegal-Mirabent

(2016) discussed designing new strategies and Johannisson (2018, p. 393) alluded to creative organizing as a mechanism to capture 'irregularities and irrationalities, surprises and synchronicities, spontaneity and ongoing improvisation'. Given that innovation entails uncertainty, several researchers have incorporated risk-taking into their definitions. For example, Garcia-Uceda et al. (2022, p. 567) posited that social entrepreneurship involves 'proactive risk takers [...] relying on the social capital and social networks they are able to build'.

Resources

The inherent qualities of a concept are at least partially revealed through its tangible or intangible resources. In our definitional sample, most allusions to social entrepreneurship's resources referred to the role of tangible resources (Doherty et al., 2014). Researchers have used various verbs in relation to these resources, such as mobilizing (Choi et al., 2021), pooling (Dutta, 2016), exchanging (Gupta et al., 2020), deploying (Liu et al., 2015) and converging (Murphy & Coombes, 2008). Each verb carries distinct connotations and describes how social entrepreneurship aims to employ tangible resources to generate value. This resource utilization could occur in a structured manner, often within 'wider networks of common purpose' (Somerville & McElwee, 2011, p. 319). Occasionally, scholars adopt a broad perspective on what such networks may look like, noting that 'social entrepreneurship includes formally constituted and informal organizations and activities' (Bacq et al., 2013, p. 43). While this definitional statement encompasses a broad range of resource configurations, it complicates the task of distinguishing social entrepreneurship from other forms of entrepreneurship or social initiatives.

Frequently, scholars have referred to social entrepreneurship's goods and services as instruments (i.e., resources) for attaining financial sustainability (Di Domenico et al., 2010) and greater societal well-being (Brolis, 2017). Moreover, we observed that some researchers distinguish between private and public goods. Private goods are explicitly linked to the earned income from social entrepreneurial activity (Calò et al., 2017). By contrast, the added value of public goods (e.g., providing clean drinking water in economically deprived areas) is usually difficult to assess, and thus may go unnoticed (Liston-Heyes & Liu, 2021).

Issues of financial sustainability and private goods raise the issue of profit orientation. Ghalwash et al. (2017, p. 271) characterized social entrepreneurship as encompassing 'economic agents who [...] create value without concern for profits'. Analogously, many scholars have formally

cast social entrepreneurship as non-profit oriented (e.g., Calò et al., 2017; Di Domenico et al., 2009; Dubb, 2016; Goyal, 2021), while a few others considered profit generation a viable option (e.g., Andre et al., 2018; De Cuyper et al., 2020). We also found that social entrepreneurship's conceptual space seemed open to other emerging ideas, such as considering cooperative legal forms (Choi et al., 2021).

Moreover, academics have identified people and their values as essential resources in social entrepreneurship. For instance, Andre and Pache (2016, p. 660) wrote that 'social entrepreneurs differ from traditional entrepreneurs because they are animated by an ethic of care'. This portrayal showed how important virtues are as intangible resources in social entrepreneurship. Similarly, Kickul et al. (2012) expressed that those engaging in social entrepreneurship 'by definition are *not* motivated to maximize profits' (p. 485, emphasis added). The latter expression underscores that social entrepreneurship is primarily about making a difference in society. This desire, therefore, is a critical intangible resource that fuels their entrepreneurial activities. Boluk and Mottiar (2014, p. 62) provided further depth, suggesting that those engaging in social entrepreneurship also cater to their 'personal interests and need for achievement'.

In conclusion, our insights related to Rule 1 suggest that conveying social entrepreneurship's essence requires considering the concept from multiple angles (i.e., mapping out its origin, purpose, functionality and resources). Furthermore, multiple definitional expressions within each facet help convey social entrepreneurship's rich and sometimes contradictory meanings. While the pursuit of a single, universal statement may foster consistency in the scholarly understanding of social entrepreneurship, it is crucial to recognize that a complex socio-economic phenomenon manifesting in numerous empirical contexts should not be reduced to an overly simplistic construct. Table S2 in the Appendix contains representative examples from our analysis related to the first definitional rule.

Rule 2: Expression—definitions must separate their definiendum and definiens

The second definitional rule highlights that failing to separate definiendum and definiens can lead to tautological definitions. For example, Santos (2012) noted that scholars often resort to circular definitional expressions of social entrepreneurship when including the word 'social' in their definiens. He observed that 'explaining social entrepreneurship by adding the adjective "social" to characterize elements of the definition (e.g., social goal, social

mission, social change and social value)' inhibits precision and meaning (Santos, 2012, p. 336). Our analysis supports this contention, as our sample identified dozens of definitional expressions with tautological tendencies. Upon closer inspection, we found that scholars have used tautological language in various definitional contexts: drivers of social entrepreneurship, its aims and its eventual outcomes and attainment.

Drivers

In definitional statements attempting to capture the drivers of and motivational reasons behind social entrepreneurship, researchers have made passing references to 'social challenges' (De Beule et al., 2020, p. 1), 'social pains' (Lepoutre et al., 2011, p. 695), 'societal needs' (Lee, Kim, et al., 2021, p. 492), 'societal problems' (Prashantham et al., 2017, p. 4), 'pressing and emerging social-economic problems' (Yu & Defourny, 2011, p. 26) and 'social issues and social needs' (e.g.,, Zaremohzzabieh et al., 2019, p. 264). However, such definitional expressions are logically questionable because they tautologically state that social entrepreneurship addresses some form of social difficulties. Some scholars have used more abstract language, transcending conventional expressions to navigate the issue. For instance, Kickul et al. (2018, p. 407) stated that social entrepreneurship focuses 'on problems affecting the well-being of a society's members'. Such problems could include anything from poverty and inequality to accessing healthcare, education and job opportunities (Lepoutre et al., 2011).

Aims

Similarly, we regularly encountered instances where researchers stated the goals of social entrepreneurship by using terms like 'social mission' (Hudon et al., 2018, p. 627), 'social goals' (Litrico & Besharov, 2018, p. 345), 'social objectives' (Hu, Liu, et al., 2019, p. 3656) and efforts to fulfil 'social causes' (Murphy & Coombes, 2008, p. 326). However, alternate formulations that avoid such inherently circular expressions seemed worth considering. For instance, Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos (2021, p. 567) depicted social entrepreneurship as 'a type of agency that initiates divergent changes with the aim of restructuring organizational fields'. This perspective emphasizes disruptive change and a reshaping of the way in which industries or sectors operate. Kickul et al. (2018, p. 407) provided another helpful example indicating that social entrepreneurship primarily endeavours to 'go beyond financial profitability toward benefits for their

communities'. This concise phrase avoids needless repetition of words while still conveying a purpose.

Outcomes and attainment

We also reviewed references to the intended outcomes of social entrepreneurship, such as 'social value' (e.g., Dempsey & Sanders, 2010), 'social benefits' (Quélin et al., 2017), 'new social arrangements' (Maseno & Wanyoike, 2022), 'social wealth' (e.g., Estrin et al., 2013) and 'social welfare' (e.g., Pache & Santos, 2013), including how they may be attained, such as via 'social innovation' (e.g., Rao-Nicholson et al., 2017) and 'social change' (e.g., Barberá-Tomás et al., 2019). We would like to spotlight a non-tautological equivalent aimed at conveying similar ideas. For example, Nicholls (2010, pp. 246–247) eloquently stated that social entrepreneurship 'entails a context, process and/or set of outputs that might reasonably be considered to be in the public benefit'. While this definitional statement does not capture the full meaning of social entrepreneurship—for instance, it does not clarify its entrepreneurial stance—it avoids being repetitive. Liu et al. (2015, p. 272) enriched this definition: '[I]n order to achieve both their social and economic objectives, social enterprises must be capable of deploying market-based resources to recognize opportunities, develop and deliver innovative solutions and communicate their benefits to the public'. This clarification introduces the entrepreneurial angle absent from the above definition by Nicholls (2010) as a fitting accompaniment.

We generally found that non-tautological definitions of social entrepreneurship use abstract language and incorporate other theoretical ideas. For instance, Nicholls (2010, pp. 246–247) provided a persuasive illustration, explaining that '[s]ocial entrepreneurship can further be defined as any action that displays three key characteristics: sociality, innovation and market orientation'. The author subsequently clarified these core ideas: 'The notion of "sociality" entails a context, process and/or set of outputs that might reasonably be considered to be in the public benefit. "Innovation" indicates the creation of new ideas and models [...]. Finally, "market orientation" here suggests that social entrepreneurship exhibits a performance-driven, competitive outlook that drives greater accountability and cooperation across sectors' (Nicholls, 2010, pp. 246–247).

Nevertheless, logically coherent definitions adhering to Rule 2 need not necessarily be verbose. A case in point came from Santos et al. (2015, p. 40), who noted that social entrepreneurship's 'production and delivery of products and services have potentially significant value spillovers [...] beyond the transacting partners'. This suggests that social entrepreneurship's provision of goods and services could have significant positive influences beyond those directly involved in the exchange. Illustrative examples from our investigation of the second definitional rule are presented in Table S3 in the Appendix.

Rule 3: Explication—definitions must use positive language

The third definitional rule emphasizes affirmativeness—the importance of explicating definitions using 'positive language'—and, in so doing, contributes to delineating the boundaries of a concept (Löckinger et al., 2015). For instance, noting that social entrepreneurship 'does *not* necessarily involve new venture creation' (Bacq et al., 2013, p. 43, emphasis added) might be more insightful if reframed in a positive form. In other words, if social entrepreneurship does not involve new venture creation, what does it explicitly entail? Our review identified frequent portrayals of social entrepreneurship in negative statements, particularly when detailing its legal form or implying that related concepts are deficient in comparison.

Negation

Affirmativeness becomes a significant factor in definitions of social entrepreneurship when addressing its presumed 'not-for-profit' disposition. This characterization describes the concept by what presumably it is *not*; namely, a form of entrepreneurship primarily focused on not pursuing profit. For example, Bull and Ridley-Duff (2019) showed that early conceptualizations of social entrepreneurship were closely associated with the non-profit sector. Similarly, Mair and Marti (2006, p. 37) identified a stream of research characterizing social entrepreneurship as related to 'not-for-profit initiatives'. This inclination also surfaced in our sample of definitions. For instance, Brolis (2017, p. 2876) explicated: '[W]e [...] define social enterprise as not-for-profit organizations that combine an entrepreneurial dynamic to provide goods or services with the primacy of their social aims'. Several other researchers have adopted similar definitional positions (e.g., Calò et al., 2017; Choi et al., 2021; Di Domenico et al., 2009; Dubb, 2016). However, it is unclear what precisely the terms 'not-for-profit' and 'non-profit' mean in the context of social entrepreneurship. This ambiguity extends to whether incurring losses or breaking even is preferable. Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity regarding what happens if a not-for-profit generates accidental or even structural profits. Notably, while a non-profit status has different and evolving meanings across jurisdictions, the definitions in our sample did not reflect such variations. Moreover, our analysis showed that research has used various terms without providing further clarification regarding social entrepreneurship's not-for-profit

disposition. Among the terms we encountered were 'not-for-profit organization' (Brolis, 2017), 'non-profit distributing organizations' (Calò et al., 2017) and 'non-profit business' (Dubb, 2016). It should not be assumed that these expressions are equivalent.

While such terms may be implicitly understood as altruistically reinvesting profits in a social venture and the community for broader societal benefits, they do not explicate these aspirations, thus blurring the boundaries of the concept, and their exact meaning may differ across national and societal contexts. Furthermore, they fundamentally depict social entrepreneurship as 'negative facts' (Patterson, 1996), which are not necessarily false but negations that lack meaning or are possibly confusing. An example of the latter is the use of double negatives, such as in the phrase 'Social entrepreneurs do not aim to make money without harming their environment' (Mair et al., 2012, p. 353). Conversely, positively phrased expressions offer greater explanatory clarity and better capture the essential definitional characteristics of social entrepreneurship. For instance, indicating that social entrepreneurship intends to 'benefit society more so than organizations' (Lumpkin et al., 2018, p. 24) conveys its priorities without relying on negations.

Implying deficiency in related concepts

In some instances, we encountered more subtle uses of negative definitional language. For instance, the statement that 'social entrepreneurship [is] entrepreneurship that creates social value' (Acs et al., 2011, p. 791) could suggest that regular entrepreneurship does not create social value, although this view has been challenged (see, e.g., Neal, 2005), as generating jobs and driving innovation tend to benefit society at large. Moreover, indicating that individuals engaged in social entrepreneurship 'act in a selfless manner and contribute to society' (Forster & Grichnik, 2013, p. 153) may imply that taking self-interests into account is an obstacle to creating societal value. However, many scholars have argued that a hallmark of social entrepreneurship is its ability to achieve multiple goals (e.g., Oloke, 2021). Hence, one might question to what extent self-interests are inherently problematic in social entrepreneurship. Adopting the term 'other-orientation' instead of 'selfless manners' (i.e., a negation meaning being without self) could allow room for individuals to address their own needs while serving others. They may prioritize others' needs over their own, but that does not necessarily imply they are, or should be, 'selfless'.

Similarly, the statement that 'social entrepreneurs differ from traditional entrepreneurs because they are animated by an ethic of care' (Andre & Pache, 2016, p. 660) may

imply that regular entrepreneurs do not have such motivations, which is also a questionable proposition. Therefore, avoiding subtly unfavourable comparisons may encourage researchers to explore more nuanced distinctions in their definitions. Likewise, we found that social entrepreneurship involves addressing neglected issues. Sometimes, authors have attributed this neglectfulness to the state (e.g., Bacq et al., 2017; Di Domenico et al., 2010), while on other occasions, authors have not provided further information on the origins of these neglected issues, such as when stating that social entrepreneurship aims to 'generate social value by finding solutions to neglected social problems' (Pache & Chowdhury, 2012, p. 496). Regardless of the attribution, without offering concrete instances of neglectfulness within (or immediately following) a definition, these expressions are merely based on an unspecified phenomenon that is lacking elsewhere, effectively characterizing the concept as a negative fact. We refer to Table S4 in the Appendix for specific instances from our research related to the third definitional rule.

Rule 4: Eloquence—definitions must avoid figurative and obscure language

The fourth rule specifies that definitions should use straightforward vocabulary and avoid figures of speech and idioms. Although our coding related to this rule was limited, we consider it an essential aspect of definitional quality.

Passive voice

We encountered 26 passive voice usages in our sample of definitional statements, where it remained unclear who or what performed the actions described by the verbs. This practice hindered readability and made definitional expressions evasive, impersonal and less informative. The acclaimed writer and editor Zinsser (1991, p. 68) suggests a simple solution: 'Use active verbs unless there is no comfortable way to get around using a passive verb'. Active verbs make definitional statements more engaging and informative, while passive verbs usually make them less compelling. To illustrate, the sentence 'We define a social enterprise as a […] venture which aims to achieve a given social purpose' (Di Domenico et al., 2009, p. 893) contains a passive element ('a given') that fails to explain who or what provided the venture with its purpose, which is a relevant consideration. Similarly, the statement '[S]ocial entrepreneurship has been defined by considering the entrepreneurial characteristics, activities and the purpose of the entrepreneurial venture' (Goyal,

2021, p. 2) is problematic because it lacks references to the agent responsible for the verb 'define'. As a result, social entrepreneurship's source of definition is unidentified, and this omission is not clarified in the preceding sections of the text. In such cases, substituting the restricting element (i.e., 'has been defined') with an active voice would have enhanced the statement's precision. Similarly, authors have regularly attempted to compensate for the restrictive nature of passive writing, but the result has often needlessly complicated the language. For instance, the statement that social entrepreneurship 'addresses problems that are not adequately resolved *by the state, civil society or the market*' (Bacq et al., 2017, p. 821, emphasis added) adds a by-clause (i.e., prepositional phrase) to indicate which institutions perform the verb but fails to specify the problems of interest.

Exemplifying

We identified several instances of definitional statements that include concrete examples to clarify the content. For instance, Lepoutre et al. (2011, p. 695) suggested that one should 'expect a higher prevalence of social entrepreneurship in areas with higher levels of social pains (e.g., poverty, environmental degradation, drought, war or illiteracy), higher levels of state failures (e.g., corruption, education or health provision) or lower levels of civil society involvement (e.g., trade unions, social dialogue or volunteering)'. The latter definition becomes more precise regarding the types of societal problems that social entrepreneurship addresses when compared with the earlier definition by Bacq et al. (2017) in the previous paragraph.

However, another definition characterizes social entrepreneurship actors as 'engaging in a highly flexible, decentralized innovation, experimentation and problem-solving that expands the portfolio of options available in a society [...], thus providing an essential ingredient for enhancing its adaptive efficiency' (Zeyen et al., 2013, p. 91). The definition employs ambiguous terms such as 'highly flexible', 'expand[ing] the portfolio of options' and 'adaptive efficiency'. Without clear and concrete examples of these terms, the overall concept remains ambiguous. By contrast, Murphy et al. (2022, p. 364) posited an essential aspect of social entrepreneurship as organizations using 'one operational model', which the authors subsequently described as 'the whole structure, entire process and set of activities required within a firm for the provision of services and/or products directly to the people or entities that it serves'. Thus, Murphy and colleagues enhanced their definition's utility by promptly providing examples of the embedded concept. Refer to Table S5 in the Appendix for representative examples from our analysis related to the fourth definitional rule.

DISCUSSION: A RULEBOOK FOR DEFINITIONAL EVALUATION

Our review of the social entrepreneurship literature enabled us to leverage four philosophically grounded and abstract rules of a theory of definition into a practical 'rulebook' to evaluate definitions. This is our foundational contribution to the literature. Such an approach is essential because definitional ambiguity resulting from breaches of one or more of these rules can hamper the progress of contested concepts (Clegg et al., 2022; McKinley et al., 1999). While scholars have identified social entrepreneurship as a contested concept (e.g., Choi & Majumdar, 2014), the sources for this contestation have remained underexplored. Our review prompts us to consider different sources of contestation in social entrepreneurship definitions and align them with the guidelines in our rulebook. We now evaluate our rulebook to illustrate how it advances social entrepreneurship research and other (typically nascent) debates in management and organization fields with high contestation levels. We also identify the causes of rule violations and consider how this understanding prompts us to move to a more pluralistic understanding of social entrepreneurship, leading to several future research avenues.

Our rulebook aids social entrepreneurship scholars in evaluating existing definitions and developing new ones. Our findings relating to Rule 1 show different essences in social entrepreneurship. While the essence should express the core of a phenomenon, this rule suggests that such essence might depend on one's point of view. Therefore, what is considered 'valid' or 'real' can vary based on such perspectivism (Baert, 2005). Consequently, the essence of a concept may depend on the researchers' empirical starting points and broader research interests, making this rule context dependent. Our findings specify this imperative by emphasizing a concept's origin, purpose, functionality and resources. Each viewpoint can transport *an* essence, yet these views remain partial rather than all-encompassing. Thus, Rule 1 underscores why supposedly universal and decontextualized definitions are generally unviable. Miles (2017) adopted a more resolute position, asserting that striving for a universally accepted definition is objectionable because it could erode conceptual richness.

Rule 2 refers to a definition's expressional logic, urging researchers to differentiate definiendum from definiens to avoid tautological statements. While not unusual, such tautologies may signal uncertainty or gaps in a researcher's knowledge, highlighting specific aspects within a body of literature that warrant deeper investigation (Townsend et al., 2018). Particularly in social entrepreneurship research, this is evident when considering how the notion of 'social' is integrated into a definition (e.g., Santos,

2012). Moreover, our findings regarding Rule 2 emphasize the importance of having logically coherent definitional expressions when evaluating social entrepreneurship's conceptual drivers, aims, outcomes and attainment. These practices remain equally crucial when formulating definitional subcategories in mainstream concepts across different fields, such as *responsible* innovation (Voegtlin et al., 2022), *responsible* leadership (Siegel, 2014) and *alternative* organizing (Parker et al., 2014). All of these could be susceptible to tautological tendencies if approached without caution.

Rule 3 calls on researchers to explicate social entrepreneurship definitions through positive language. This can be a challenge since researchers, particularly in a field's earlier developmental stages, may need to express concepts in relation to their semantic opposites. In philosophy, many constructs are unthinkable without their counterpart, such as light versus dark and good versus evil. The use of negative language may indicate researchers' tentative efforts to grasp the boundaries or limits of a newly understood phenomenon. Our findings show that researchers violate Rule 3 when distancing the concept from commonly established notions of entrepreneurship and, in so doing, emphasize what social entrepreneurship is not (e.g., a not-for-profit organization) rather than what it is (e.g., a purpose-driven business). Nonetheless, researchers may not accomplish this immediately, benefiting from temporarily contemplating what something is not (i.e., negation) to gradually understand what something is. This progression is similar to the development of other complex ideas, such as ambidexterity and paradox (Birkinshaw & Gupta, 2013; Schad et al., 2019).

Lastly, Rule 4 encourages eloquent speech while shunning figurative and obscure language; however, our findings show that adhering to this rule can be challenging. For instance, we frequently encountered passive forms, which create unnecessary ambiguity and leave the reader 'unsure of who is doing what' (Ragins, 2012, p. 494). A violation of this rule may indicate that researchers are struggling to capture a new phenomenon. Unclear definitions may lead to multiple interpretations—or, worse, guesses—thereby blurring a study's conceptual boundaries and associated theoretical model. Therefore, eloquent definitions reflect what others have described as the 'craft of clear writing' (Ragins, 2012, p. 493).

Table 1 depicts these four rules, draws on our findings to suggest their operationalization and provides sample definitions. Our rulebook provides a versatile yet pragmatic toolkit for navigating the multifaceted nature of social entrepreneurship. Although we applied these rules within the social entrepreneurship domain, they are relevant to a broader audience in the fields of management and organization studies. The rulebook is particularly beneficial

for scholars who are crafting new definitions or working within contested fields. For instance, while scholars agree that the CSR field has matured over the past few decades, it continues to grapple with definitional ambiguity, which is hindering progress (Matten & Moon, 2020; Mitnick et al., 2021). This is problematic because while many see CSR as an umbrella term for the broader debate about the role of business in society (e.g., Scherer & Palazzo, 2007; Wickert & Risi, 2019), various derivatives like CSP (corporate social performance), ESG (environmental, social and governance) and CC (corporate citizenship) frequently emerge, each claiming to offer a new take on CSR without specifying how this change can be enacted (e.g., Gillan et al., 2021). As Wickert and Van Witteloostuijn (2023) lamented, such definitional ambiguity may lead to tautological operationalizations of CSR and undermine the validity of findings and theoretical arguments in its subfields. Thus, applying our rulebook to prior and new definitional perspectives on CSR and related ideas about responsible business will help add clarity to this mature concept. In doing so, it can prevent duplication of scholars' efforts to advance this field of research. Thus, our rulebook is also valuable for identifying and exposing 'overlaps and contradictions' in related definitions of an established concept (Alegre et al., 2023, p. 237; Breslin et al., 2020).

Similarly, nascent fields or subfields can benefit from comprehensively applying our rulebook. For instance, in debates related to necessity entrepreneurship or female entrepreneurship, our rulebook could help avoid problematic definitions, especially concerning the boundaries of the concept or tautological statements. Moreover, applying our rulebook could significantly enhance the clarity of definitions in the recently emerging debate about CDR (corporate digital responsibility; see Flyverbom et al., 2019; Lobschat et al., 2021) at the intersection of artificial intelligence and CSR. Likewise, the expanding yet contentious discussion about 'societal grand challenges' (e.g., Carton et al., 2023; George et al., 2016) could greatly benefit from the application of our rulebook. In a critical appraisal, Seelos et al. (2022) even suggested 'retiring' the concept of grand challenges due to the 'incoherence of [its] current uses [and] lack of efforts to improve its analytical competence' (p. 1). Broadly, we propose that our rulebook contributes to a better understanding of why some fields thrive and retain their legitimacy while others disappear (Clegg et al., 2022; McKinley et al., 1999).

In addition to our philosophy-informed 'new conception' (Alegre et al., 2023) of social entrepreneurship definitions, management and organization studies can provide further perspectives to enrich definitional endeavours. Utilizing insights from this discipline, we propose directions for future research that extend the solid philosophical foundations of definitional strength we have

TABLE 1 Rulebook for definitional evaluation and development.

Rule and description	Operationalization	Illustrations of definitional statements aligning with rulebook
Essence (Rule 1): Definitions must convey the essence of the concept.	• Reveal the origin. • Clarify the purpose. • Describe the functionality. • Identify the resources.	'Social enterprises have distinctive advantages over focused commercial firms in sectors or domains that exhibit at least one of two key characteristics: the production and delivery of products and services have potentially significant value spillovers that go beyond the transacting partners; and transaction obstacles prevent the market from operating efficiently. In these contexts, markets tend to lead to weaker societal outcomes if providers are subject to strict commercial goals, leading to unrealized opportunities for value creation in the economy. Social business hybrids are organizations deploying business models that can deliver value to society in domains with these transaction characteristics' (Santos et al., 2015, p. 40).
Expression (Rule 2): Definitions must separate their definiendum and definiens.	• Specify the drivers. • Clarify the aims. • Distinguish outcomes and attainment.	'Social entrepreneurship can further be defined as any action that displays three key characteristics: sociality, innovation and market orientation. The notion of "sociality" entails a context, process and/or set of outputs that might reasonably be considered to be in the public benefit. "Innovation" indicates the creation of new ideas and models […]. Finally, "market orientation" here suggests that social entrepreneurship exhibits a performance-driven, competitive outlook that drives greater accountability and cooperation across sectors' (Nicholls, 2010, pp. 246–247).
Explication (Rule 3): Definitions must use positive language.	• Prevent negation where possible. • Refrain from implying deficiencies in related concepts.	'The "social" in "social entrepreneurship" is indicative of actions intended to benefit society more so than organizations. In other words, the social impact created by [social entrepreneurship] is best captured at the societal level rather than the organizational level because the social missions of most [social entrepreneurship] initiatives are typically extraorganizational, that is, they extend beyond organizations and their members' (Lumpkin et al., 2018, pp. 24−25).
Eloquence (Rule 4): Definitions must avoid figurative and obscure language.	• Avoid passive forms. • Exemplify and make the definition concrete.	'[S]ocial entrepreneurship [involves] pooling voluntary resources (time and money) to organize to provide collective goods in the community – such as by founding homeless shelters, soup kitchens, voluntary fire departments, local youth groups and other such locally organized non-profit human services organizations' (Dutta, 2016, p. 444).

promoted thus far, intending to foster plurality in social entrepreneurship research.

FUTURE RESEARCH: MOVING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP TOWARDS PLURALITY

Social entrepreneurship needs a continued focus on definitional discussions to remain a vital research topic. To this end, we expand our definitional rulebook and propose four avenues for future research alongside illustrative research questions for each avenue (see Table 2). First, we advocate for embracing different theorizing styles to recast how definitions come about. Second, we recommend leveraging opposing views without losing sight of a given field's conceptual essence(s) to offer complementary insights into definitions. Third, we propose examining the evolution of concepts by focusing on the language used in definitional debates. We envision these three directions working in concert to move social entrepreneurship and other contested fields beyond mere contestation and towards a more coherent embrace of plurality. We conclude by reflecting on how these avenues of research might inspire a fourth future research avenue, taking the rulebook itself further.

Embracing different theorizing styles

Scholars have observed that only a few prevailing theorizing styles dominate the landscape of management research, which can limit the options for fundamentally different definitional constructs (Cornelissen, 2017;

TABLE 2 Proposed future research questions.

Research avenues	Research questions
Embracing different theorizing styles.	1. How can process theorizing shape our comprehension of the interplay between individual endeavours and social entrepreneurship ideals, transcending conventional linear perspectives and uncovering evolving multi-dimensional dynamics? 2. Through the lens of configurational theorizing, how do various configurations of essential components such as 'social', 'profit' and 'impact' interrelate within diverse contexts of social entrepreneurship? 3. How can theoretical provocation challenge foundational constructs such as 'social', 'purpose' and 'change' within social entrepreneurship definitions?
Leveraging paradoxical views to advance social entrepreneurship definitions.	1. How can persistent tensions be reflected in a definition, especially around aspects that may mutually define one another while simultaneously in conflict? 2. How can the separation of purpose and profit on lower levels be transcended on a higher level of analysis to advance definitions? 3. How can paradox thinking uncover historical shifts and temporal nuances that have shaped the ebb and flow of contestations within social entrepreneurship definitions, shedding light on the evolving nature of these conflicts? 4. Is synthesis between profit and purpose desirable, and are there 'guardrails' to preserve a balance of both sides over time?
Examining language to understand how research fields evolve.	1. How does the emergence and evolution of the social entrepreneurship domain as a 'language in the making' influence the development of definitions, and how can our rulebook be employed to structure and validate this linguistic assessment? 2. How does language drive the trajectory of social entrepreneurship definitions, and how may one unveil distinct stages from early emergence to maturity within the field? 3. How can we visualize and analyse the interplay between centrifugal forces of divergence and centripetal forces of convergence within the social entrepreneurship research community, recognizing that these tensions are integral to driving theory development and defining the field's conceptual core?
Enhancing the rulebook for evaluating and developing definitions.	1. Which philosophical concepts might be integrated into the definitional rulebook to improve the clarity and effectiveness of definitions? 2. Which research contexts are particularly beneficial or challenging to the rulebook's flexible application, and what are the contributing factors? 3. How can the rulebook be more fully utilized to formulate questions that stimulate deeper inquiries into the essence of a contested concept?

Haveman et al., 2021). To remedy this issue and encourage a multifaceted view of social entrepreneurship, we advocate for future studies to incorporate diverse theoretical perspectives when crafting definitions. We highlight three theorizing styles based on Cornelissen et al. (2021). First, *process theorizing*, which 'plots the sequencing of events and outcomes (as processes) that explain a topic' (Cornelissen et al., 2021, p. 7), is a promising approach to better understand phenomena through their trajectories rather than viewing them as fixed entities (Langley, 1999). While processes are complex, potentially recursive and imply different pathways and drivers (Van de Ven & Poole, 2005), process theorizing can help convey different essences of social entrepreneurship and more eloquently express and explicate the concept. For instance, in an exemplary social entrepreneurship study, Corner and Ho (2010, p. 656) allude to entrepreneurial opportunities (i.e., one of the essences around 'origin', see findings) as a development, which they describe as a 'messy, complex, emergent process'. Similarly, one may better understand an organization's emphasis on profit as a processual phenomenon. Hence, at different moments in their lifecycle, social enterprises may be in situations requiring a solid profit orientation to survive (Marshall, 2010) while seeking to attain, at least temporarily, a competitive positioning or an environment that less requires it (Calò et al., 2017), depicting their essence and, for instance, corresponding purpose and resources as inherently dynamic and time dependent (see also Maclean et al., 2023). We advocate for additional research into these aspects of definition formulation. Furthermore, process theorizing can also help in understanding disputes about studies' levels of analysis. While some studies have viewed social entrepreneurship as an individual endeavour, others have centred on social enterprises as organizational entities. However, the interplay between individual endeavours within (or directed towards) established organizations would be more eloquently described as an evolving process that is likely non-linear. Future research holds the promise of shedding more light on this subject.

Second, *configurational theorizing*, which 'interrelates interdependencies between concepts (as configurations) that explain a topic' (Cornelissen et al., 2021, p. 7), has recently attracted interest (Misangyi et al., 2017). Instead of rigidly demarcating constructs, configurational theorizing may help understand whether one can flexibly combine different definitional elements and, if so, how to do so (Furnari et al., 2021). This approach provides a philosophical basis for the work by Choi and Majumdar (2014, p. 373), who proposed creating and examining 'configurations' of organizational functions, such as market orientation and innovative capabilities, in the realm of social entrepreneurship. Notably, Muñoz and Kimmitt (2019) seek to overcome the dichotomy between social entrepreneurs' social and economic missions through fuzzy-set qualititative comparative analysis, a method aimed at identifying novel combinations among seemingly unrelated or contradictory elements. We encourage further research that embraces such unorthodox approaches. For instance, investigating and explicating how different configurations of different definitional essences (Rule 1) interrelate within and across contexts and how they potentially evolve may yield valuable insights.

Third, *theoretical provocation*, which 'aims to provoke interest in topics of social concern and by questioning taken-for-granted assumptions' (Cornelissen et al., 2021, p. 7), may scrutinize the essential components of social entrepreneurship definitions through our rulebook. Rather than accepting and working with contestation in only general terms, this approach can question and decompose key constructs that hold significance in the literature (Cornelissen et al., 2021). Thus, theoretical provocation may (re)examine social entrepreneurship's central building blocks such as 'social', 'purpose' and 'change'. These fundamental concepts often occupy a central place in social entrepreneurship definitions. However, our research has uncovered their vulnerability to issues related to one or more of our rules. Hence, we call for more definitional research that incorporates theoretical provocation to enhance the legitimacy of social entrepreneurship, which might entail an enquiry into the dark side of social entrepreneurship, shedding light on its pitfalls and unintended consequences (Dey & Steyaert, 2012; Dey et al., 2022).

More generally, embracing different theorizing styles would benefit from mobilizing perspectives on social entrepreneurship from other disciplines which may complement and contrast the concept. For instance, social entrepreneurship has been discussed in domains outside of management studies, such as regional studies (e.g., Cinar, 2019; Kibler & Muñoz, 2020) and voluntary and non-profit organizations (e.g., Young & Lecy, 2013). In conclusion, applying different theorizing styles to social entrepreneurship while adhering to the parameters of our rulebook can help move the field from definitional contestation to a more pluralistic view. Social entrepreneurship presents a fruitful context for advancing management research more broadly.

Leveraging paradoxical views to advance social entrepreneurship definitions

A promising avenue for future research on social entrepreneurship involves systematically examining the concept's inherent contradictions (Cherrier et al., 2018; Santos, 2012; Zahra & Wright, 2016). Scholars are increasingly enhancing theoretical understanding and literature by placing paradoxes at the centre of their analysis (see, e.g., De Keyser et al., 2019; Keller & Sadler-Smith, 2019; Lindgreen & Maon, 2019). A paradox denotes a 'persistent contradiction between interdependent elements' (Schad et al., 2016, p. 10), emphasizing both the importance of ongoing tensions and fundamental linkages (Smith & Lewis, 2011). Poole and Van de Ven (1989) argued that adopting paradoxical thinking to explore conceptual tensions leads to a more comprehensive representation, outlining four approaches: (1) acceptance, (2) spatial separation, (3) temporal separation and (4) synthesis.

First, *acceptance* entails 'learning to live' with inherent tensions and leveraging them to facilitate theoretical advancements (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989, p. 566). This form of acceptance involves acknowledging contradicting ideas because they are informed by different conceptions and disciplines (Bednarek et al., 2021). This approach resonates with social entrepreneurship, as scholars increasingly recognize and acknowledge the enduring conflicts within the realm of social entrepreneurship definitions (Santos et al., 2015). Smith et al. (2015) categorize various paradoxes within social enterprises, providing a valuable foundation for modelling organizational tensions. Future studies can build on these insights derived from paradox theory to further the field of social entrepreneurship research by systematically collecting and categorizing the essential tensions present in definitions, thereby recognizing and addressing divergent perspectives. In this regard, our rulebook is helpful as it enables improved categorization and specification of such tensions across the dimensions of essence, expression, explication and eloquence. Our analysis of different essences may also inform this enquiry, providing concrete examples such as in our earlier discussion on profit orientation. Embracing these tensions rather than seeking their resolution may lead scholarly pursuits away from trying to achieve a universal social entrepreneurship definition.

Second, a *spatial separation* of definitions' differing constitutive elements may lead to a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurship. This perspective sheds light on various sources of conflicting viewpoints, such as different levels of analysis, which can lead to contestation (Poole & Van de Ven, 1989). Paradox theory provides the insight that the same conceptual tensions may manifest differently across organizational levels (Andriopoulos & Lewis, 2009). Future research could further compare and contrast these different definitional levels and the tensions they exhibit (Table S1 in the Appendix contains the level of analysis for each definition). In their study on leadership tensions in social entrepreneurship, Smith et al. (2012) analyse the constitutive elements of social entrepreneurship. Subsequent research endeavours may similarly aim to unearth and analyse these constitutional definitional elements, thereby enriching our understanding of the multifaceted landscape of social entrepreneurship. These efforts have the potential to illuminate relevant definitional aspects, including the significance of spatially segregating 'purpose' and 'profit' into distinct teams, units and logics, and how these dynamics can effectively contribute to the formulation of definitions.

Third, *temporal separation* encompasses the various time-related aspects of paradoxical definitional aspects, projecting differing viewpoints along different time horizons to enhance understanding. In an ethnographic study, McMullen and Bergman Jr. (2017) employed a paradox lens to theorize the organizational tensions associated with the prosocial motivation of social entrepreneurship. Time-related aspects become particularly relevant when reporting certain social entrepreneurship practices aimed at maximizing profit 'in the shortest possible time' (McMullen & Bergman Jr., 2017, p. 254). Temporal separation may, therefore, help refine definitions by emphasizing sequences and pathways, specifically concerning the concept's essence (Waddock & Steckler, 2014). Future research could explore whether profit and purpose form a sequential relationship in which one is more dominant. Furthermore, shifts in the dominant side could inform future research directions, including an examination of the role of the larger institutional environment (Doherty et al., 2014).

Fourth, some scholars have suggested reducing conflict between opposing views by proposing more encompassing terms through *synthesis*. For instance, Valentinov (2015) demonstrated that substituting specific terms for others, such as choosing 'value capture' over 'profit-maximization', may alleviate apparent contradictions. Similarly, Jackson (2014) conceptualized an 'economy of mutuality' as an alternative to the divide between economic and social ideologies. However, paradox theory provides insight that, while this approach can mitigate conceptual tensions, the ongoing friction between opposing views

is unlikely to disappear (Lewis, 2000) because achieving a complete synthesis is rare (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017). In social entrepreneurship, some have warned that overemphasizing profit can come at the expense of purpose (Pache & Santos, 2013), while others have cautioned that an overemphasis on purpose can jeopardize financial survival (Smith et al., 2015). Future research could investigate whether a more comprehensive synthesis is attainable and desirable. It could also explore how adding 'guardrails' around conflicting ideas (Smith & Besharov, 2019) might prevent negative impacts on others, thereby reducing tensions.

Examining language to understand how research fields evolve

As a third avenue for future research, we link our rulebook to the renewed interest in the evolution of research fields and the critical role of language therein (McKinley et al., 1999; Rabetino et al., 2021), as exemplified by the work on the 'linguistic turn' by Alvesson and Kärreman (2000). Recently, Clegg et al. (2022, p. 385, emphasis added) argued that researchers should strive to adopt a shared theoretical grammar to reach 'social agreement about the *nature of things* being discussed' in their field. This undertaking may help explain the persistent scholarly attempts to articulate universal definitions of social entrepreneurship. We suggest that it is essential to acknowledge that theoretical grammar, like the grammar underpinning natural languages, is prone to inconsistencies, contradictions, less-developed areas and evolving insights. Clegg et al. (2022) indeed highlighted that tensions in a research field and community are commonplace rather than exceptional.

Our rulebook helps uncover tensions within the theoretical grammar of social entrepreneurship, such as instances where different essences of social entrepreneurship or tautologies arise. These grammatical tensions could hold intrinsic value, however, as the interplay between their 'centrifugal forces', which stimulate change and divergence, and 'centripetal forces', which provoke convergence, may foster theory development (Fairhurst et al., 2016; Schad et al., 2019). In turn, this critically shapes social entrepreneurship's conceptual core and boundaries. The research community's acceptance of both forces creates room for a more diverse range of expressions within the realm of social entrepreneurship, effectively moulding social entrepreneurship research into a 'well-made language' (Foucault, 2005, p. 96). At this stage, one may view the emergent social entrepreneurship domain as a language in the making, with evolving definitional statements as its underlying nascent grammar.

We propose that further research should delve into specifying the linguistic qualities (i.e., the 'grammar') of social entrepreneurship definitions. This refinement should encompass not only an emphasis on essence and expression, as previously noted, but also explication and eloquence. Moreover, additional research could connect other theoretical ideas to this undertaking, such as examining how language in a research field and community is path dependent (Clegg et al., 2022). The latter perspective on research may investigate the performative function of both well-cited and fringe social entrepreneurship depictions. Performativity acknowledges that language 'does' things (Gond et al., 2016); in our context, it explains how language 'not merely describe[s] but also shape[s]' scholarly realities (Marti & Gond, 2018, p. 487). Such research enables us to examine a field as an evolving entity with its own developmental patterns (Glynn & D'Aunno, 2022), thus offering a more historical perspective (Maclean et al., 2016). Future studies may therefore depict the trajectory of social entrepreneurship from its early stages to maturity and conceptualize the role of language in this evolution (see also, e.g., Parkinson & Howorth, 2008; Price et al., 2023). Similar to our arguments above on embracing different theorizing styles, we suggest that the examination of language use also offers intriguing interdisciplinary research opportunities. Specifically, we consider it crucial to extend our focus beyond management studies and include disciplines such as regional studies and research on voluntary and non-profit organizations, which examine social entrepreneurship through their distinct linguistic customs.

Enhancing the rulebook for evaluating and developing definitions

The three future research avenues outlined above emphasize the inherently dynamic, socially constructed and 'imperfect' nature of definitional statements. While we present a succinct theory of definition in our rulebook, other research communities may wish to explain its notions of essence, expression, explication or eloquence more comprehensively. For instance, certain scholarly fields may experience fewer issues with tautological expressions than we have encountered in the social entrepreneurship domain. Instead, they may benefit from emphasizing more elaborate definitional statements. Löckinger et al. (2015, p. 73) provide helpful guidance, asserting that intensional definitions 'should not contain definitions of other concepts. [T]hose concepts must be defined separately'. Future research that incorporates such guidance from the philosophy of science domain into the definitional rulebook could further enhance the definitional quality of the concepts it considers. Furthermore,

scholars could absorb other philosophical ideas into the rulebook. We have suggested 'perspectivism' earlier but encourage scholars to consider a range of other ideas.

Moreover, we encourage scholars to use the rulebook flexibly. For instance, one can employ the rulebook primarily to evaluate definitional quality by deriving closed questions from it (e.g., 'Is definition X tautological?'). Alternatively, one may use it to formulate open questions that prompt deeper inquiries into a concept (e.g., 'What is X's very essence?'). Thus, in such scenarios, the rulebook serves as a tool for validating definitions or as a catalyst for advancing individual or group learning. Future research could further articulate the various ways in which our rulebook can be applied. Table 2 proposes several future research questions related to the aforementioned four research avenues.

In conclusion, it is crucial to realize that the rulebook neither aims for nor can provide universal definitions on its own. As we have seen, the field of social entrepreneurship allows for numerous complementary and contradictory definitions, many of which may remain valid in diverse contexts. The rulebook does not eliminate this definitional diversity. However, it improves how scholars craft and engage with these definitions, potentially reinvigorating classical theories of definition further in contemporary scholarly debates.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.