

## Article

# Social Entrepreneurs as Role Models for Innovative Professional Career Developments

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**Abstract:** Through qualitative analysis, this paper examines the role of social entrepreneurs as an example of innovative and alternative professional career development. We review the dominant literature about social entrepreneurs' distinct intentions, attitudes, abilities, and behaviors. We also directly connect social entrepreneurs' biographies and discourses with the actual nature of their social enterprises. We have found some fundamental common factors as critical determinants of the final social entrepreneurial decision and result: (i) motivations such as emotional connection, moral judgment, personal dissatisfaction, purpose achievement and change, and social needs; (ii) personal internal resources such as connection skills, conviction, creativity, efficiency skills, and learning orientation; (iii) facilitating external factors such as financial and social support, higher and social education, relevant past events, and previous professional experience. Putting together all these factors, we develop a theoretical framework that can explain social entrepreneurship as an alternative career option and connect it with a dominant social entrepreneur's narrative and profile.



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## 1. Introduction

Social impact and innovation are crucial aspects of any social entrepreneurship project [1]. This research aims to detect the key factors leading social entrepreneurs to finally build and put into action their social entrepreneurship and, more specifically, their social enterprises. Added to this initial objective, we want to realize which among these factors have a more profound impact and a more transformational effect in the final decision of these social entrepreneurs to build their organizations. We also explore the connection between these factors and the dominant narrative of these social entrepreneurs in building their projects. Finally, we take all these components and try to offer a theoretical framework that can explain social entrepreneurship as a process of creating an alternative career path. We show practical ways to further develop these factors and facilitate alternative and innovative professional career developments in connection with previous literature.

Social entrepreneurs face different tensions [2]. Their organizations must find the right balance between being economically efficient and, at the same time, socially responsible [1,3] and sustainable [4]. Social entrepreneurs are experts in managing paradoxes and identifying and implementing diverse and, sometimes, apparently opposing strategies with success [5,6].

Throughout this research, we tried to understand the process by which social entrepreneurs decide their professional future: how is the decision-making process in terms of career development; how do they manage the balance from both personal and professional perspectives. We initially identified three major categories in this process of building up their social entrepreneurship as a professional in coincidence with previous literature studies: (a) motivations such as emotional connection, moral judgment, personal

dissatisfaction, purpose achievement and change, and social needs; (b) personal internal resources such as connection skills, conviction, creativity, efficiency skills, and learning orientation; (c) facilitating external factors such as financial and social support, higher and social education, relevant past events, and previous professional experience.

This study offers a comprehensive and straightforward scheme that puts together different crucial aspects involved in the process of a particular individual becoming a social entrepreneur and how this is relevant in certain moments of his/her professional life.

To gather and understand all the relevant inside information specific to these entrepreneurs and their social ventures, this qualitative investigation is based on contrasting a theoretical approach with some relevant data obtained from interviews with eight social entrepreneurs in 2019 [7]. Our objective is to identify the personal and organizational clues behind these social entrepreneurs' successful projects.

After this introduction, the rest of this document is as follows. Part 2 (Previous Relevant Literature) contains prior research in terms of what key aspects define social entrepreneurs and what elements intervene in their decision-making process. Part 3 (Materials and Methods) details our data gathering and testing methods. In Part 4 (Results), we present the findings of our study. Part 5 (Discussion) shows the main propositions based on our research, and Part 6 (Conclusions) summarizes the main findings, specific conclusions, limitations, and invitation for further research.

## 2. Previous Relevant Literature

### 2.1. Social Entrepreneurs

Social entrepreneurship is a relevant field of study from sociological and research-based perspectives [8]. Social entrepreneurs are oriented towards a social mission [9]; they pursue a fair distribution of social income [10], focusing on alleviating the most unfavored segments of society [11] and establishing commercial profit as a secondary priority [12].

Social entrepreneurs deal with opposing forces in a continuous effort to balance brain and heart, logic and feelings, and results and values [13]. They build their projects by combining ideas, passion, and engagement from every relevant person in the organization. They elaborate a common discourse, incorporating all possible sensitivities and priorities [14].

These entrepreneurs need to be in the marketplace, offering competitive products and services [15]. They have beneficiaries, not only customers, who need those products and services, which they cannot afford [16]. Following the inner purpose of their organizations is the best way to make them sustainable [17]. The commercial perspective should be compatible with the mission statement [18–20] and very much connected with a specific local community's needs and aspirations [21–23].

Social entrepreneurs live in what Swanson and Zhang [24] call "the social entrepreneurship zone", including social change as part of their mission. However, they do not want to depend on external resources that they cannot control. They want to generate their own sources of income in order to be sustainable and be able to accomplish their social missions in the long run. A commercial activity offers social entrepreneurship more flexibility and autonomy in its operations. However, excessive dependence on their commercial activity might be a concern for this kind of organization, as they risk losing focus on fulfilling their social missions. Many questions, still to be fully answered, can be raised in that respect: Can social entrepreneurship behave like a commercial enterprise and still accomplish its social mission? Will commercial activity negatively affect a social entrepreneurship's reputation, or could it be considered a new source of legitimacy in a changing environment in terms of resource management? There is still uncertainty today about the impact of commercial strategies on the fundamental cultural values of these institutions. As Froelich [25] states, existing studies initially manifest the compatibility between this commercial approach and the preservation of founding mission statements due to the flexibility that it allows. However, future research must establish a more precise conclusion to this issue.

## 2.2. The Decision-Making Process in Social Entrepreneurships

Social entrepreneurships are born within a context of high volatility and uncertainty. They depend on vital resources, the supply of which may be affected by unknown circumstances, damaging the effectiveness and efficiency of their operations [26]. Resource dependence theory helps in identifying these potential problems [27] and offers alternative solutions to satisfy stakeholders' needs [28] without losing control over the mission to accomplish [29].

Resource dependence theory develops the idea of interdependence [30], meaning that anyone acting in a certain context depends on others in terms of vital resources for its operations in that context [31]. That is why the ability of social entrepreneurs to establish rich and long-term alliances with different stakeholders, in a kind of resource exchange process, makes their ventures more productive and sustainable [32,33]. These symmetric relationships are based on mutual trust, with frequent and close interactions not only on a professional basis but with a personal touch too [34–36]. Resource dependence theory is a good reference to understand the difficulty and complexity of managing scarce resources in the most collaborative and efficient way [37,38].

Social entrepreneurships bring social change [39] through creative initiatives [20,40], contributing to solving social problems [41]. They efficiently manage scarce resources with new transformative ideas, improving vulnerable people's lives [42–44]. None of these would be possible without close interaction with their local communities [45,46] and the persistent commitment of prominent local members [47,48]. To achieve their objectives, social entrepreneurs build rich platforms for collaboration [49]; they welcome everyone who is able to contribute to the solution of the social problem they want to solve [34–36].

Social entrepreneurs have become role models for an alternative professional career path to develop sustainable socio-economic projects with their narratives and psychological circumstances [50]. Analyzing these narratives can lead us to the biographical aspects of their lives and backgrounds that are related to their intentions to build their social enterprises [51,52]. Identifying and describing the specific social entrepreneurial intentions and motives have been another critical issue in understanding the determinants behind social entrepreneurship [53–55]. Social entrepreneurs can then become role models to be followed by young graduates in order to build personally fulfilling and socially beneficial careers [56,57].

In their decision-making process [58], social entrepreneurs have a clear motivational component that includes aspects such as the desire to become so and how feasible they think this might be. The motivational component has a lot to do with the entrepreneurial intention process, connected with the entrepreneurs' desire and conviction to start their ventures [16]. The feasibility that they see in that accomplishment is related to the personal resources that they have developed in terms of personal competence and self-efficacy, with external facilitating factors such as social support [59–61].

Personal resources are another critical component of this decision-making process. Some authors connect this component with the concept of human capital, which includes aspects such as knowledge, skills, and the ability to integrate other people's resources [62–65]. An essential part of that knowledge is understanding customers' needs and satisfying them in innovative ways [60,66]. Other researchers have identified some critical abilities in the decision-making process, aligned with what they consider virtuous entrepreneurial behaviors [67]. Four of them are dominantly mentioned: entrepreneurial opportunities recognition, innovativeness, proactiveness, and risk-taking [68,69]. Another vital skill is especially present in later stages of the decision-making process: learning [70]. The decision-making process of social entrepreneurs involves learning orientation and learning capability as key adaptive instruments to manage the impact of uncertain influence factors [71].

Finally, there is a third component related to all the external circumstances that might positively influence the final decision of these entrepreneurs to initiate their projects. There are authors relating this component to the concept of social capital, which includes

environmental and institutional factors such as financial support, education programs, public policies, and network relationships [72,73]. Networking is both an external factor facilitating entrepreneurship in its initial phase and a personal resource in terms of the social entrepreneurs' ability to build their network [74].

Social entrepreneurship has a unique strategy adaptation: building alliances with different stakeholders to manage uncertain factors in a diverse manner [75]. High levels of uncertainty and resource limitations make social entrepreneurs very efficient managers, keen on identifying market opportunities, building strategic alliances, and approaching every challenge in the most flexible way [76]. The decision-making process of these entrepreneurs is meant to answer this simple question: what can be done, in terms of mission accomplishment, with the resources at hand to fulfill their aspirations [77]. Decision-making is then equivalent to a learning process with no linear progression, adapting to every relevant circumstance changing in the environment [78].

As we can see in Table 1, different authors concur in studying the factors behind the decision to launch a social enterprise. We integrate these different factors into a classification with three main categories: motivations, personal internal resources, and external facilitating factors. A fourth category, "unintended consequences", is much less present in the literature, with only some scarce references to "unexpected spillovers" [79].

**Table 1.** Total coding and literature.

Propositions, Classification, and Factors		Literature
Motivations	Emotional connection	Emotional antecedents (empathy) [80]
	Moral judgment	Compassion [81]; Social justice and sense of obligation [53]; Spiritualism [51]; Compassion [79]; Morality [82]
	Personal dissatisfaction or need	Emotional antecedents and frustration [80]
	Purpose, achievement, change recognition	Prosocial cost–benefit analysis [81]; Altruism, achievement, influence [53]; Altruism [51]; Prosocial benefit [79]; Altruism [82]; Achievement orientation, changing structures and policies [55]
	Social and community needs	The entrepreneurial process [80]; Commitment to alleviating suffering [81]; Nurturance [53]; Positive externalities [79]; Closeness to social problem and commitment to helping society, creating social value [55]
Personal resources	Connection skills	Network embeddedness [80]; Integrative thinking [81]; Relatedness [53]; Collectivism [51]; Stakeholder involvement [79]; Relationship with the community, Cooperation [82]
	Conviction	Persistence [82]
	Creativity	Creativity and innovation [80]; Innovation [82]
	Efficiency skills	Managing and structuring social enterprise [80]; Autonomy [53]
	Learning orientation	Strategic openness [79]
Facilitating factors	Financial and social support	The nature of financial risks and profit [80]; Institutional conditions [81]; Resources [51]
	Education	Higher education [51]
	Past events	Emotional antecedents [53]
	Professional experience	Entrepreneurialism, professionalism [51]

Source: own elaboration.

Shaw and Carter [80] conducted inductive research that led them to identify the “emotional antecedents” and “themes” found in the interviews of a broad sample of social entrepreneurs. In a different line of study, some authors [81,82] have produced theoretical papers summarizing the “motivations” leading to setting a social enterprise. Others [53,55,79] have established social entrepreneurs’ “motives” based on case studies. A study by Chandra et al. [51] shows a quantitative analysis aimed at clustering social enterprises by the motive behind their creation.

Accordingly, we elaborate the following proposition:

**Proposition 1.** *There are motivation factors (emotional connection, moral judgment, personal dissatisfaction or need, purpose achievement and change recognition, and social and community needs) affecting the intention and decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects.*

From the studies mentioned above, we have extracted some key concepts related to what we consider “personal internal resources”. For example (see Table 1), we integrate into “connection skills” aspects such as network embeddedness [80], integrative thinking [81], stakeholder involvement [79], and collectivism [51].

Accordingly, we elaborate the following proposition:

**Proposition 2.** *There are personal internal resources (connection skills, conviction, creativity, efficiency skills, and learning orientation) affecting the intention and decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects.*

Previous literature is coincidental in underlying the dominant effects of some external conditions related to the context in which social entrepreneurs decide to start their projects. We have labeled all these conditions under the category of “external facilitating factors”. For example (see Table 1), we compile in “financial and social support” issues such as institutional conditions [81], resources [51], and nature of financial risk and profit [80].

Accordingly, we present this proposition:

**Proposition 3.** *There are facilitating external factors (financial and social support, higher and social education, past events, and professional experience) affecting the intention and decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects.*

### 3. Materials and Methods

This research has been designed to further identify the type of key aspects influencing the decision of social entrepreneurs to start their projects at a specific moment of their career. To accomplish this objective, we interviewed eight social entrepreneurs leading social enterprises to understand this process. We elaborated an initial theoretical approach to be contrasted with the data obtained from the interviews. We designed a semi-structured interview to allow our social entrepreneurs to contribute with all their possible rich information [7].

This exploratory analysis [83,84] helps us to understand if these factors are present in the process of decision-making across cases. We also wanted to classify them consistently with reality and literature and contrast their relative intensity and transformational force.

The eight interviewees are social entrepreneurs who have successfully established their enterprises in Spain, covering a variety of purposes and industries.

We have elaborated a script, including questions such as:

- What is the most important value in your life, personal as well as professional?
- How has this value been present throughout your life?
- Any example or specific situation showing the importance of this value?
- How is this value reflected in your social enterprise?
- Why did you create this specific enterprise?

- How did you create it?
- How is your company now?
- How do you visualize it in the future?
- What problem is your company trying to solve?
- Why did you focus on this specific problem?
- How do you understand this problem and its possible solution?
- Do you have professional career development with a purpose?
- If so, what is your purpose?
- What is your personal definition of success?

In your opinion, what are the clues for a successful personal and professional life?

We identified a set of social entrepreneurs that receive media attention. Four of these social entrepreneurs were contacted and interviewed. In order to enlarge the sample, we applied the snowball technique, so four more social entrepreneurs were referred to us by the first group. This second set was contacted and interviewed. All eight shared the following characteristics: (i) their enterprises were operating in 2019; (ii) their CEO was also the main founder; (iii) they recognize themselves as social entrepreneurs. Their average age was 38, and 25% were women.

Table 2 shows basic information about these entrepreneurs and their entrepreneurship.

**Table 2.** Entrepreneurship ' profiles and information.

	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6	Case 7	Case 8
Age of venture	6	5	4	7	4	10	5	6
Sector	Food	Education	Health	Water	Food	Consulting	Health	Logistic
Product/Service	Natural food	Science education	Medical software	Water	Straws	Consulting	Medical software	Food retail
Target communities	Local community, environmental	Poorer neighborhoods	Unattended health niches	Development, water resources	Environmental	Support for social entrepreneurs	Unattended health niches	Rural communities
Number of employees	15	5	4	20	25	12	5	4
Seniority of entrepreneur (age)	55	33	31	29	32	52	38	35
Education (school, graduate, post-graduate)	Graduate	Doctor	Graduate	Graduate	Graduate	Graduate	Graduate	Graduate
Experience (business experience, social sector experience, work in sector)	Business and sector	Business, social, and sector	Sector	Social	Sector	Business, social, and sector	Business	Social and sector

Source: own elaboration.

A semi-structured questionnaire was the basis of the interviews run in 2019. The average duration of each interview was two hours, and they were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo 12. The interview guide covered the main topics of the study [85]. This process allowed us to detect the most important aspects that facilitate these social entrepreneurs to embark on business projects.

We initially coded the interviews and then revised the codes. We ended up with a codebook identifying the relevant factors present in the creation process of the different social entrepreneurs.

As a result, the authors agreed upon the key factors of the analysis, with a Cohen kappa coefficient of 0.66 [86]. Mentions of the key factors were counted and integrated within the codes. We ended up having the coding references sorted by factors and groups of factors. We could then identify the relative importance of every factor present in the different social entrepreneurs' discourses. Another aspect in our analysis consisted of a

word count from which we have identified what the key concepts embedded in the various social entrepreneurs' narratives were.

#### 4. Results

There are three groups of factors present in the social entrepreneurs' narratives: motivation, personal internal resources, and facilitating external factors. Table 3 shows the relative importance of these factors, and Figure 1 shows the same information graphically. Table 4 shows several quotes from the interviewees, ordered by factors.

**Table 3.** Total coding references in the interviews.

Observed Factors	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3	Case 4	Case 5	Case 6	Case 7	Case 8	Total	%	
Motivations	Emotional connection	10	11	18	6	13	11	4	9	82	13%
	Moral judgement	6	4	2	15	2	5	0	3	37	6%
	Personal dissatisfaction or need	7	2	15	6	2	11	1	1	45	7%
	Purpose achievement—change recognition	6	7	10	5	7	13	4	4	56	9%
	Social and community needs	4	9	8	5	0	1	7	15	49	8%
	Total motivations	33	33	53	37	24	41	16	32	269	44%
Personal resources	Connection skills	4	4	14	4	14	4	4	3	51	8%
	Conviction	4	8	0	7	15	4	6	5	49	8%
	Creativity	1	2	4	1	9	0	5	3	25	4%
	Efficiency skills	1	1	4	0	3	1	1	4	15	2%
	Learning orientation	8	14	13	10	3	6	12	5	71	12%
	Total personal resources	18	29	35	22	44	15	28	20	211	34%
Facilitating factors	Financial and socials	3	9	12	5	8	1	6	2	46	8%
	Higher and social education	2	6	3	3	0	0	2	0	16	3%
	Past events	4	4	18	5	0	7	2	1	41	7%
	Professional experience	5	8	0	1	1	1	3	6	25	4%
	Total facilitating factors	14	27	33	14	9	9	13	9	128	21%
Unintended consequences	Total unintended consequences	0	1	0	0	2	0	1	0	4	1%
Total coding references		65	90	121	73	79	65	58	61	612	100%

Source: authors' elaboration.

We have found that all factor groups are present across all the cases studied, and, largely, most individual factors are present too. Since we found "unintended consequences", we introduced the fourth dimension under this label to explore whether it could be extended. As we only found this factor in three of the eight cases (see Table 3), we regarded the result as negative with respect to this fourth group.

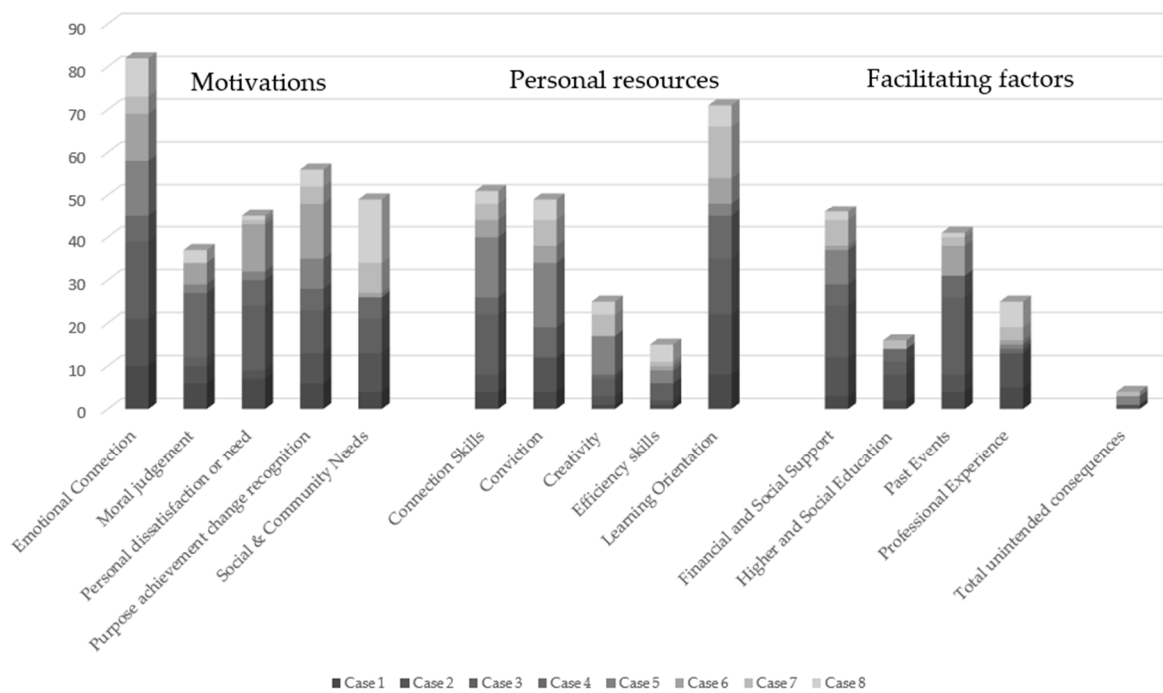


Figure 1. Relative importance of factors (source: authors’ elaboration).

Table 4. Factors and quotes.

Factors	Sample Quotes	Cases
Motivations	Emotional connection	Case 3
	Moral judgment	Case 4
	Personal dissatisfaction or need	Case 2
	Purpose achievement, change-recognition	Case 1
	Social & community needs	Case 3
		Case 2

Table 4. Cont.

Factors	Sample Quotes	Cases	
Personal resources	Connection skills	During a tour in Asia, while we were presenting our project, someone came, very impressed, and offered to put me in touch with someone who wanted to invest in health and the environment, so our investor finally came from Sweden.	Case 5
	Conviction	Persistence is also key, insisting and insisting, over and over again. Many investors valued that we presented the project several times. According to them, “if you come one day and I don’t see you again, how do you want me to trust you? Most likely, you have already given up.”	Case 7
	Creativity	The child, almost blind, could only see shadows. He had the idea of what a star was but had not seen one. That gave us the clue to combine a laser with binoculars to re-create a star. It was “the great moment” for him; he saw a star for the first time.	Case 3
	Efficiency skills	I believe that it is essential to make social good and, at the same time, manage efficiently and professionally. It is necessary to generate economic profits so social development can be funded.	Case 6
	Learning orientation	When we listened to the stories of these people, we found that water played a central role in their miseries, from stomach diseases from drinking contaminated water.  At that time, we did not know the entire ecosystem that exists around the entrepreneurial world and start-ups. We discovered that we were a start-up with an idea and that we needed investors to make that idea a commercial reality. There, we realized the difficulty of presenting and explaining a project, and we got a lot of negatives. But, in the end, we learned.	Case 5  Case 7
Facilitating factors	Financial and social support	Initially, we raised 100,000 euros through a crowd-funding system. We had 36 participating partners. We also opted for a mentorship program, which gave us visibility and more funding partners. In the next round, we raised another 250,000 euros from 40 more participating partners.	Case 1
	Higher and social education	I was studying architecture in Madrid, and in the summer of the second year of university, I went with a missionary to help build a school in Peru.	Case 4
	Past events	At the age of 21, I suffered my first anxiety attack. I was stubborn, and, ignoring the signs, I kept on living as before. After not too many years, I was back in hospital, this time in panic. That made me rethink my life decisions.	Case 6
	Professional experience	Before, I had worked 10 years in an international NPO. I was passionate about that job.  As a computer engineer, I devoted my efforts to designing robots for artificial vision. Not only did I bring technical knowledge but also the project management skills I acquired in my role as chief engineer at a multinational company.	Case 8  Case 7
Unintended consequences	Unintended consequences	By accident, I got involved in science dissemination activities at the National Centre for Oncological Research (CNIO in Spanish). Once in the job, we realized that these activities fell a bit short, so we developed many more as there was a lot of unmet demand in unexpected segments of the public.	Case 2

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

Under this category of “unintended consequences” are included events such as, for example, a social dimension of entrepreneurship derived from an initially pure economic intention and initiative.

You also must be lucky. I anticipated the issue of edible straws, but, at the same time, we have arrived at a good moment with all the awareness regarding the problem of plastic. (Case 5)

References to “motivation factors” are more numerous than the other two (44%), followed by “personal internal resources” (34%) and finally by “external facilitating factors” (21%). The remaining 1% of the references are included in the “unintended consequences” category (see Table 3).

#### 4.1. Group 1: Motivation Factors

The “motivation factors” category covers all the aspects provoking and nurturing the initial decision of these social entrepreneurs to start their business projects. There are five elements in this group: emotional connection, moral judgment, personal dissatisfaction or need, purpose achievement and change recognition, and social and community needs.

A dominant element within this group of factors is an “emotional connection” with those in need of help (13%).

It made me empathize with her problem, seeing that, in addition, it was relatively easy to solve and not much was being done. Her pain hurt me, that they could laugh at her, and she couldn't live a normal life. (Case 3)

The other prevalent element is “a clear purpose” connected with “change and innovation” (9%). This explains the capacity of these entrepreneurs to pursue social change with an innovative approach. Social innovation is a crucial element facilitating social change and is an essential characteristic of a social entrepreneurship profile.

My purpose is to transcend, be helpful to improve things, go beyond my own limits. From there, I'm aware that my happiness consists of generating happiness for others, that I'm not the most important, but what happens through me. (Case 6)

“Moral judgment” (the need to do something good for society), “personal dissatisfaction” (being unhappy in their previous dedications), and “attending social and community needs” (being socially connected to their close community networks and their needs) are important factors also present in their motivational repertoire, but not as much as the other two already mentioned.

The key value we pursue is that of social equality, democratizing access to science in very vulnerable environments. In poor neighborhoods, children don't have any exposure to science for interest in it to emerge. (Case 2)

Hugo, my partner, had six stores distributed in six towns in the province of Soria, and, in June 2013, with the crisis, there came a time when we had to close them. (Case 8)

The problem is twofold, on the one hand, a huge rate of youth unemployment, around 50%, and on the other, the shortage of scientific callings. (Case 2)

#### 4.2. Group 2: Personal Resources

This group is composed of those different skills and abilities linked to the special personality of these social entrepreneurs that allow them to pursue their objectives and gather other people's will and resources to cooperate with them. There are five elements in this category: connection skills, conviction, creativity, efficiency skills, and learning orientation.

A prevalent aspect within this repertoire of entrepreneurial skills is “learning orientation” (12%). These social entrepreneurs are always open to new experiences and to get from them new knowledge that they can effectively implement in day-to-day professional activities.

At that time, we did not know the entire ecosystem that exists around the entrepreneurial world and start-ups. We discovered that we were a start-up with an idea and that we needed investors to make that idea a commercial reality. There, we realized the difficulty of presenting and explaining a project, and we got a lot of negatives. But, in the end, we learned. (Case 7)

“Connection skills” (8%) and “conviction” (8%) are the two other important ingredients of this social entrepreneurship recipe. They have strong beliefs about how their initiatives are much needed to improve society as a whole, and, as part of this conviction, they know that they need to build rich networks and long-term alliances with all their relevant stakeholders.

We started 4 years ago, having a few beers with two friends, one of them already working in a social enterprise, and we decided to combine social enterprise and water. We went to see a friend of my father who was dedicated to the valuation of companies. It helped us to know what a business plan was. (Case 4)

Persistence is also key, insisting and insisting, over and over again. Many investors have valued that we presented the project several times after successive refusals. According to them, with this, we demonstrate the ability to learn, correct, and apply the improvements that they suggested, and that is very good. (Case 7)

“Creativity” (as the ability to create new projects out of nothing) and “efficiency skills” (the capacity to make the best possible use of limited resources), although very much present in their narratives, are not as relevant as the other three aspects already mentioned.

Within this digital world, we are getting them to trust us for their basic and essential purchases. We have already overcome one difficulty, that of the need to “touch” the product, and they believe in us. We are putting together basic, natural, and traditional products with digital technology; what is local, rural, and ecological, with what is global. (Case 1)

I believe that it is essential to make social good and, at the same time, manage efficiently and professionally. It is necessary to generate economic profits so that social development can be funded. (Case 6)

#### 4.3. Group 3: Facilitating Factors

In this category, all the external circumstances, events, contexts, situations, and resources are considered very useful instruments, propelling the will and determination of these social entrepreneurs and the implementation of their entrepreneurial projects. They make up their singular backgrounds, including the tensions in their lives and the need to balance difficult situations as part of those special contexts affecting these social entrepreneurs’ decisions to become what they are. There are four components within this group: financial and social support, higher and social education, past events, and professional experience.

“Financial and social support” (8%) is very much present in these social entrepreneurs’ discourse. They appreciate a lot the helping hand of those important persons and institutions that have supported them and their projects in some specific and crucial moments of their lives. They especially refer to family and friends as invaluable assets for their success.

Initially, we raised 100,000 euros through a crowd-funding system. We had 36 participating partners. We also opted for a mentorship program, which gave us visibility and more funding partners. In the next round, we raised another 250,000 euros from 40 more participating partners. (Case 1)

“Past events” in their lives (7%) are also very important for them as an opportunity to show others and themselves their inner value as persons and their potential as developers of sound professional and business projects.

In Peru, the people I knew didn’t ask themselves these kinds of questions; they couldn’t afford that luxury, they couldn’t get depressed; their struggle was to survive each day. (Case 4)

On a second level, “higher and social education” (a clear exposure to formal education and a social-oriented context) and previous “professional experience” (especially if connected with the same sector of their social entrepreneurship) are also relevant aspects of these social entrepreneurs’ background.

I got the Hong Kong scholarship first. Then, I got another scholarship to study molecular biology at Princeton. Later, I entered the CNIO (National Center for Oncological Research), also with a scholarship system. From there, I decided to do my doctorate with good publications. I was awarded the doctorate with an extraordinary prize. Everything indicated that if I continued, I would get a post-doctorate in a cool place. (Case 2)

I started in this five years ago as a brand ambassador. I was a salesman, with grace, to promote the brand that was paying me. I wanted to sell the product, the gin, in another way, with a different touch. (Case 5)

The next step of our study led us to select the most common words in these social entrepreneurs’ discourses and try to connect those words with the dominant messages embedded in their narratives. Table 5 shows the word count extracted from their narratives based on their interviews, and Figure 2 shows the same information graphically.

**Table 5.** Word count.

	Word	Count <sup>1</sup>	%	% Cum.	Word	Count	%
1	people	158	1.56		better	34	0.34
2	did	136	1.35		felt	34	0.34
3	could	96	0.96		leave	33	0.33
4	life	90	0.89		moment	33	0.33
5	work	82	0.81		came	32	0.32
6	knew	65	0.65		experiences	31	0.31
7	created	63	0.63		same	31	0.31
8	projects	58	0.58		all	31	0.31
9	companies	57	0.57		case	30	0.30
10	years	56	0.56	8.56	carry	30	0.30
11	how	55	0.55		decided	29	0.29
12	social	53	0.53		always	29	0.29
13	help	49	0.49		value	29	0.29
14	world	49	0.49		lived	29	0.29
15	friends	45	0.45	11.07	every	28	0.28
16	past	44	0.44		form	28	0.28
17	stuff	41	0.41		personal	28	0.28
18	children	41	0.41		only	28	0.28
19	first	38	0.38		change	27	0.27
20	account	38	0.38		good	26	0.26
21	idea	38	0.38		call	26	0.26
22	now	37	0.37		time	26	0.26
23	mother	37	0.37		many	25	0.25
24	leave	37	0.37		clear	24	0.24
25	wanted	37	0.37	14.95	talk	24	0.24

<sup>1</sup> The first 10 words have a total count of 861 and 8.56%. Source: authors’ elaboration.

The 10 first words account for 9% of the total words used in their discourses (see Table 2). These words are “people”, “did”, “could”, “life”, “work”, “knew”, “created”, “projects”, “companies”, and “years”. The extra 5 words in the list of 15 more used are “how”, “social”, “help”, “world”, and “friends” (accounting for a total of 11%).



decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects; (2) there are personal internal resources (connection skills, conviction, creativity, efficiency skills, and learning orientation) affecting the intention and decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects; and (3) there are facilitating external factors (financial and social support, higher and social education, past events, and professional experience) affecting the intention and decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects.

**Proposition 1.** *There are motivation factors (emotional connection, moral judgment, personal dissatisfaction or need, purpose achievement and change recognition, and social and community needs) affecting the intention and decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects.*

Motivation is always a big issue in terms of its direct influence on the process of these entrepreneurs to initiate and develop their projects [53,55].

“Emotional connection” with the beneficiaries of those projects is the most potent motivational factor among our specific sample of social entrepreneurs. This result goes in line with previous literature, giving a leading role to compassion and empathy as crucial traits for this kind of entrepreneur [81,88]. Having “a clear purpose” in life is another dominant trait in these social entrepreneurs. There is a close connection between their resolute personal aims and the transformational nature of their business projects.

We find ample support to state that social entrepreneurs share common skills to connect, learn, manage innovation, and portray the necessary conviction for their projects.

**Proposition 2.** *There are personal internal resources (connection skills, conviction, creativity, efficiency skills, and learning orientation) affecting the intention and decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects.*

Social entrepreneurs are action-oriented people; they have their projects clear in their minds, and they link their aspirations to clearly designed objectives. They have people as a priority, and their ability to connect with them is a crucial aspect of their cooperative profile [42,44].

Our social entrepreneurs are “learning-oriented” individuals. This personality trait is linked to their inclination to innovate and implement every new knowledge acquired into a social business solution [56,57].

They find stable and long-term allies in their way, sharing the same big picture and “conviction” about what needs to be done and how it should be done, establishing long-term “connections” with relevant stakeholders. They have clear operating ideas on how to improve society, the ability to develop a rich network to empower their possibility to change the reality around them [21,22], and the capacity to assume a considerable amount of risk [39]. The ability to build innovative social projects that change the essential living conditions of many people is also part of their intrinsic nature [20,40].

We consider this proposition and the key drivers of motivation widely supported in the literature and in our study.

**Proposition 3.** *There are facilitating external factors (financial and social support, higher and social education, past events, and professional experience) affecting the intention and decision of social entrepreneurs to develop their social entrepreneurship projects.*

Social entrepreneurs are made around a series of circumstances, events, contexts, and resources impacting them and their wish and capability to start their projects. They come from specific backgrounds [51,52], and they have experienced different situations where they had to balance confronting aspects of their lives [2]. Paradoxically, what puts them into trouble makes them stronger and more prepared to build their entrepreneurial plans [5,6].

Among what we call “facilitating factors”, “financial and social support” is very much appreciated by these social entrepreneurs as a direct way to make their projects viable.

Important persons and the relevant institutions supporting them from the very beginning are present in their memories, especially family and friends [15,89].

Some critical “past events” are explicitly mentioned as turning points in their professional careers. They can directly connect those events and their impact on them to future challenges that they have been able to confront [90].

We found enough support for the critical role that facilitating factors play in the narratives of our entrepreneurs.

In the second part of our research, we identified and analyzed the building blocks of these social entrepreneurs’ discourses, as linked to the dominant messages embedded in their narratives [37]. They often use words such as “people”, “did”, “could”, “life”, “work”, “knew”, “created”, “projects”, “companies”, “years”, “how”, “social”, “help”, “world”, and “friends”. From there, we can detect four main areas of interest: people, project work, action, and vision.

From this analysis, we can describe some important characteristics of these social entrepreneurs and their priorities [14,46]. They create life projects [53,88], based on a vision of a better future [48], for them and for others important to them [81], with a clear professional orientation [4], building rich networks [21] around relevant people in their lives [89].

## 6. Conclusions

Our study explains the key elements present in the social entrepreneurs’ biographies, contexts, and backgrounds that intervene in the decision to build a social enterprise as alternative professional career development.

The literature approaches the characteristics of social entrepreneurship from different perspectives, producing heterogeneous sets of factors around the creation of social enterprises and the profile of the entrepreneurs that have successfully set their ventures. We reviewed preexisting literature, and, based on in-depth interviews, we proposed a systematic and integrative classification, which resulted in a set of 14 factors grouped into 3 categories: motivations, personal skills, and facilitating factors.

More specifically, we disclosed them into (i) motivations: emotional connection, moral judgment, personal dissatisfaction, purpose achievement and change recognition, and social needs; (ii) personal internal resources: connection skills, conviction, creativity, efficiency skills, and learning orientation; and (iii) facilitating external factors: financial and social support, higher and social education, relevant past events, and previous professional experience.

Putting together all these factors, we created a theoretical framework that can explain social entrepreneurship as an alternative career option and connected the framework with a dominant social entrepreneur’s narrative and profile. Thus, we contribute a scheme that connects entrepreneurs’ narratives and careers with their motivations, skills, and contexts, with practical implications in educating, consulting, and advising social enterprises.

Based on the analysis of these social entrepreneurs’ narratives, we incorporate a description of a general profile that coincides with the following characteristics: they create life projects based on a vision of a better future and a better world. Furthermore, these projects have relevant others (family, friends, and stakeholders) as a cornerstone, building rich networks around them and having a clear professional orientation towards an alternative career path.

A more sustainable business world needs to consider all the relevant factors present in the decision-making process of social entrepreneurs to initiate their ventures and promote this useful civil activism to face current globalization challenges. Considering the key factors to become a social entrepreneur has implications for education, especially in business schools, where a nascent trend in innovation in the social field is present. The development of emotional content skills, such as empathy, ethics, and social care, and a more human perspective of the business world could be inserted in business education, including the impact of these criteria for financial investment. By highlighting these characteristics of

social entrepreneurs, we want to contribute to a better theoretical base for future studies in social entrepreneurship as a business career.

Regarding the limitations of our research, given its exploratory nature, its results must be considered part of the general dynamics that might occur when a social entrepreneurship project is to be initiated. This limitation may be compensated with future research by conducting quantitative cross-sectional studies, which could also be helpful to grade the relative importance of the factors found with this exploratory investigation. Social and commercial entrepreneurs could be contrasted in terms of the type of determinants relevant to their process to build their projects. This conceptual framework can be tested against different contexts, sectors, and profiles of participants.

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