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Striving for inclusion through participatory practices in social enterprises

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<abs>Abstract

The aim of this research case is to shed some empirical light on the effects of participatory practices from the perspective of Sen's capability approach in a Finnish social enterprise. Using a mixed method approach we explore how participatory practices build social inclusion by enabling both company's employees and customers to engage in social agency. The case study findings articulate the importance of participatory practices to employees' perceptions of meaningfulness of life and being able to meet customers (who are mentally disabled) needs on the one hand and customers' experience of information sharing and feedback giving to the employees and helping other customers.

Keywords: case study, empowerment, Finland, participatory practices, social agency, social enterprise, social inclusion

<H1> Striving for inclusion through participatory practices in social enterprises

Social inclusion and empowerment of society members are the key blocks on which social and economic sustainability of societies are constructed. They raise challenges to many national governments and public organizations, demanding innovative approaches to social problem solving and socio-economic development. During the last two decades, social enterprises (hereafter SEs) have gained considerable attention from academia and governments for the innovativeness in treating complex social problems and developing strategies of multiple, i.e. economic, social, environmental and cultural value creation (Bacq and Janssen, 2011; Chell et al., 2010; Santos et al., 2015). Notably, SEs have been found as a significant vehicle for building social inclusion, changing stereotypes and introducing innovations in communities (Griffiths et al., 2013; Haugh and Tawar, 2016; Huysentruyt, 2014). However, little is known how they initiate and manage (sometimes, micro and incremental) changes to achieve social impact such as empowerment, social inclusion and well-being.

The starting point of this paper is that participatory practices are a means through which SEs can develop empowerment and social inclusion of both their customers and employees. By embedding participatory principles in everyday operations they build a capability for, what A. Sen (1985a) named, agency freedom, i.e. the power of choice for action (functioning) and realization of goals and values that a person considers important and meaningful. In other words, social enterprises can socialize their customers to not only be (passive) recipients of social benefits which well-being is targeted at but also developers of their contents and profile. SEs also train their employees to be active caregivers who enhance the sense of dignity of the care-receivers and empower them to achieve the goals they

consider valuable and, in this way, make positive change in their lives. In addition, participatory practices may enhance employees' perceptions of meaningful work, which enables their agency for choice of a definite well-being (e.g. abstaining from a better paid job and doing something that they value or/and consider as good). All in all, participatory practices may enable the organization to engage in caring relationships and develop its capacity to listen and respond to different voices, which is a skill needed for building social inclusion at societal level. It is assumed here that participation is needed when social change, for example to create innovative solutions to social problems in SEs, becomes possible (Senge, 1990). Additionally, to support the development of social change and innovation with the help of participatory practices it is important to reveal the variation of social meanings and voices of people involved in the change process. To borrow from Bakhtin (1981) it can be said that the voice of people such as employees and customers in SEs is not solely a medium of communication but involves viewpoints, values and ideas that supports learning and can change action (Nesari, 2015).

<H1>Objectives

In this paper, we explore the case of a for-profit social enterprise in Finland. We discuss how participatory practices used in this SE empower employees and customers to engage in social agency. In particular, we focus on several groups of outcomes of participatory practices from the perspectives of two agent groups, i.e. 1) employees' perceptions of the meaningfulness of work and capability to meet their (special) needs and 2) the customers' perceptions of their role in value co-creation.

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

1. To introduce the case organization and the participatory practices they apply in their daily operations, arguing the importance of these practices to empowerment for social agency as a human capability. This perspective so far has received little attention in the management and entrepreneurship literature;
2. To discuss the relationships between participatory practices and the case organization's a) employees' perceptions of meaningfulness of work and engagement with customers when serving their needs and b) customers' perceptions of their engagement in information sharing, feedback-giving to the employees, helping other customers as freedom of choice in the process of value co-creation. We propose that these practices operationalise agency freedom, a concept developed by Sen (1985b) and Nussbaum (2011). Participatory practices from the perspective of two key stakeholder groups have received little attention and their effect on social agency and social inclusion as social impact has received insufficient attention in studying organizational contexts.

The case organization is an exemplary but exceptional case (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). It carries out business yet prioritizes social mission such as providing care to (typically) socially excluded people, which is not typical of business enterprises. Such a case can provide valuable information how a for-profit organization combines social mission with economic gains and creates positive social impact on the society through voice giving and empowering as a means to building social inclusion.

<H1>Key Concepts

In this paper, we consider social enterprises being actors in the field of social entrepreneurship, which we define following Mair & Marti (2006: 37): “a process of creating

value by combining resources in new ways. ... these resource combinations are intended primarily to explore and exploit opportunities to create social value by stimulating social change or meeting social needs. ... as a process, social entrepreneurship involves the offering of services and products but can also refer to the creation of new organizations”.

Respectively, a social enterprise can be defined as:

“...an operator in the social economy whose main objective is to have a social impact rather than make a profit for their owners or shareholders. It operates by providing goods and services for the market in an entrepreneurial and innovative fashion and uses its profits primarily to achieve social objectives. It is managed in an open and responsible manner and, in particular, involves employees, consumers, and stakeholders affected by its commercial activities” (Social Business Initiative, 2011).

A SE can promote various social and cultural goals. Their business model typically emphasizes ethical values and principles, such as openness, customer orientation, community spirit, and transparency (Lundgaard et al., 2016). Therefore, SEs are likely to adapt a collaborative style of working and **may be** more willing to give voice to their employees by allowing them to participate in decision-making and granting autonomy to accomplish their tasks.

So far, participatory practices, in particular the ones concerned with employee involvement, have received considerable attention in human resource management and industrial relations literature. They argue that organizational practices such as information sharing, feedback giving, participation in strategic decision-making can increase employees' efficiency, motivation and responsibility (Drehmer et al., 2000; Ichniowski et al., 1996) or promote self-organization of employees to secure the quality of work conditions (Streeck,

2002). On the other hand, customers' participation practices such as information providing, co-creating and co-developing of new products or services (Chang & Taylor, 2016; Fang, 2008) have comparatively recently come into the academic focus. In both cases, the business perspective is quite outstanding.

In this paper, we take a slightly different approach towards participatory practices. We do not reject their benefits to business. Yet, we direct our attention to their ethical character which becomes explicit in the instances of employees' opportunities for self-fulfillment, capability-building or interpersonal and interorganizational trust development (Cludts, 1999; 2002; cf. Bonvin & Moachon, 2012) and which is more in line with the concept of social entrepreneurship. We argue that participatory practices addressed at both employees and customers induce a person's belief of being empowered, i.e. being able to direct organizational activities and processes towards the desired ends (Albrecht, 1988; Ciulla, 2014) such as social mission, and responsible for the impact her decisions and actions. Moreover, we relate empowerment with the notion of social agency, i.e. we consider SEs as a platform for individuals practicing their human rights and enhancing capabilities which ensure human dignity.

The notion of human capability draws on the works by Sen (1985b; 1999) and Nussbaum (2011). Sen holds that human well-being as freedom of functioning and being rests on capability to practice the rights and make choices about them. He relates choice making to agency freedom. Disposing social agency means being able to pursue a life plan that an individual considers valuable. Nussbaum extends the idea of capability adding that "people are entitled not only to mere life but to a life compatible with human dignity, and this means that the relevant goods must be available at a sufficiently high level" (Nussbaum, 2009: 335) and argues that a decent political order must secure to all citizens, including the

weakest ones such as the disabled, capabilities ranging from bodily health, integrity and longevity to experiencing and cultivating senses, imagination, emotions, empathy, non-discrimination etc. These capabilities, *inter alia*, embrace housing as a constituent of human dignity. Absence or lack of capabilities denotes absence of equality or presence of discrimination and undermines self-respect and dignity of an individual (Nussbaum, 2009: 335).

Considering that business organizations can be regarded as political actors (cf. Mäkinen & Kourula, 2012), we apply the human capability approach to business as well: a decent enterprise should be able to empower its employees, customers and societies. As ethical values are at the core of SEs, they can be regarded as actors who enhance social agency that is needed to ensure social justice and social sustainability of societies.

<H1>Methods

Several types of data were gathered to conduct the analysis. Texts from the website of organization that dealt with the case were used. We relied on the stories of the customers of the company that were published in the news releases or as video testimonies about the service quality and changes in their lives. The content analysis method (Krippendorff, 2013) was applied to the data to produce a descriptive case.

In addition to qualitative data two surveys of the SE's employees and customers were carried out. 108 responses from the employees (the response rate being 27%, N=395), and 303 responses to the customers' survey were collected. The questions used for the purpose of developing this case came from a larger questionnaire and included the thematic blocks of participatory practices (8 items adopted from Mor Barak (2005) measured by a 6-point Likert scale where 1 meant completely disagree and 6 – completely agree, e.g. *I have influence in*

decisions taken by my work group regarding our tasks, My supervisor often asks my opinion before making important decisions), meaningful work (9 items taken from the original 10-item scale by Steger, Dik and Duffy (2012), a reverse formulated statement was eliminated, a 5-point Likert scale where 1 meant completely disagree and 5 – completely agree was used, e.g. *I view my work as contributing to my personal growth, My work helps me better understand myself*), and quality of service provision (6 items, 4 taken from Yang and Peterson (2004) and adapted to the employees' perspective, two statements created by the authors, a 5-point Likert scale where 1 meant completely disagree and 5 – completely agree was used, e.g. *Employees understand customers' specific needs*). In the questionnaire to the customers, the thematic bloc of participatory practices was reformulated to capture the customers' perceptions of employees' behaviour (e.g. *The employees openly share service-related information with me*), using the same scale as in the questionnaire to the employees. The instrument for measuring outcomes such as customers' information sharing (4 items in the questionnaire, e.g. *I clearly explain the employee what I want her/him to do*), feedback giving (3 items, e.g. *If I have a useful idea on how to improve service I let the employee to know*) and helping other customers (4 items, e.g. *I help other customers if they seem to have problems, I teach other customers to use the service correctly*) was taken from Yi and Gong (2013) and a 5-point Likert scale where 1 meant completely disagree and 5 – completely agree was used to measure these aspects of social agency.

First, descriptive statistical analysis was carried out to evaluate the perceptions of the phenomena of the SE's employees and customers. Secondly, correlation analysis (Spearman coefficient for the employees' data and Pearson coefficient for the customers' data) and linear regression analysis were applied to the data.

<H1>Analysis: The case organization

The case organization was founded by a respective Foundation (est. in 1995) and its Subsidiary (est. in 2006) in 2006. It is a for-profit SE, and in 2018 it was a workplace for almost 400 persons. The case organization set a mission to promote opportunities for persons with disabilities and people recovering from mental health problems to live an independent and autonomous life in Finland.

Following its mission, it strives to influence the design and construction of housing and local communities so as to treat the needs of all members of society equally. The company owns about 1000 housing units all over the country. It acquires housing units that are available on the open market with financial support from Funding Centre for Social Welfare and Health Organisations (STEA). The housing units are rented to persons with disabilities and persons recovering from psychiatric problems who need assisted living services. The organization builds its business on the values of respect, reliability and expertise which have an instrumental value to tailor the living conditions to their customers' needs without compromising safety and well-being of other members of society.

<H2>Empowering customers

The enterprise promotes services that support independent living. The residents must have the opportunity to decide about their own home, influence their communities and work life and be involved in planning and evaluating housing and services. They develop housing and services together with residents, experienced experts, professionals, authorities and decision-makers. Peer Review™ is a residential-based method developed by the enterprise to evaluate the quality of housing services. Peer reviews are implemented by people with disabilities and mental health rehabilitators who use housing services. The organization has

trained more than 60 service users to evaluate and develop the quality of housing services. Peer reviews are implemented in housing units and supported housing across the country.

In addition to the core activities the enterprise has carried out several projects in partnership with other organizations which play a key role in the emergence, development and provision of services to citizens. For example, the project “Digi in hands” aimed to support residents as more independent users of digital services. They can have a Digi Fellow for a digital coursework organized by a public college or library. Another project, “Involvement of Cooperatives” (2015-2018) was aimed at developing a cooperative model that takes into account the special needs of people with partial work ability and providing their members with rehabilitation and work. It was funded by the European Social Fund and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health of Finland and supported the working life of people with part-working ability by training participants to set up a working cooperative and start operations. According to the project participants, working in the projects has improved the quality of life and increased the feeling of self-esteem and inclusion. They gained motivation to work and work ability after several years of unemployment and living on social benefits because of mental ailments.

The organization regularly carries out surveys to find out their customers’ satisfaction with housing and the services provided. Most of them report high satisfaction with the housing. There are many stories from the customers indicating positive changes in life such as developing social connections (“I found friends”), increased self-confidence and self-efficiency through experience of being trusted (“the services made it possible for me to be trusted, accountable and take care of myself”).

In our survey, 55% of the customers were male and 43% women. 34% had vocational qualification, and 35% no qualification at all. Customers with a university degree comprised

11% of the sample. Average age of the customers was 47,7 years (std dev.=15,187) and half of them have been using the company's services for 5 years (mean=6,6, std. dev.= 4,984).

The descriptive statistics of the variables measured from the customers' perspective are presented in Table 1. Most of them were rated higher than average, with the exception of help to other customers which scored lower than 4 in a 5-item scale.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (*customers' perspective*)

Phenomenon	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Standard deviation
Participatory practices	6	1	6	4,9	1,049
Information-sharing	5	1	5	4,4	0,778
Feedback-giving	5	1	5	4,3	0,885
Help to other customers	5	1	5	3,8	1,162

<H2>Empowering employees

The majority of the employees respondents in the survey were women (93,5%).

Average age of the respondents was 43 years (std. dev. = 10,9). 50% of them were over 40 years of age. The youngest respondents were 21 and the oldest ones 67 years old. 42% of the respondents held higher education qualification at University level and 35% vocational qualification. More than a half (56%) of them were care service and healthcare employees.

The average number of years of work experience was almost 17 years (std. dev. =10,1), They worked for the company for 7,6 years on average (std. dev. = 4,7), 6,9 years on average (std. dev. = 4,5) in the current position. The means of evaluations of the studied variables from employees and customers' perspectives are presented in Table 2. The strength of the perceptions of participation practices, meaningfulness of work and service quality were above average, which is a positive indicator considering the capability approach.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics (*employees' perspective*)

Phenomenon	Range	Min	Max	Mean	Standard deviation
Participation practices	6	1	6	4,1	1,012
Meaningfulness of work	5	2	5	4,0	0,741
Service quality	5	2	5	4,3	0,669

H2>Participatory practices leading to social agency

Correlation analysis of the variables from the employees' perspective yielded average yet statistically significant ($p < 0,001$) Spearman coefficients. Respectively, participatory practices correlated with perceived meaningfulness of work $R_{Sp}=0,4$ and service quality $R_{Sp}=0,3$. The results of regression analysis indicate that participatory practices increase outcomes associated with employees' social agency: it explains 11% of perceived meaningfulness of work (Adj. $R^2=0,105$, $\beta=0,337$, $p < 0,001$) and 15% of service quality/social exchange with the customers (Adj. $R^2=0,147$, $\beta=0,394$, $p < 0,001$).

Correlation analysis of the variables from the customers' perspective resulted in statistically significant ($p < 0,001$) interrelations of medium strength: participatory practices correlated with information sharing, feedback giving and help to other customers, respectively, at $R_p=0,6$, $0,5$ and $0,4$. Regression analysis between participatory practices and information sharing with employees yielded Adj. $R^2=0,33$ ($\beta=0,578$, $p < 0,001$), feedback-giving Adj. $R^2=0,25$ ($\beta=0,498$, $p < 0,001$), help to other customers Adj. $R^2=0,18$ ($\beta=0,422$, $p < 0,001$).

<H1>Discussion: social enterprises contributing to social inclusion

The case study highlights the role of social enterprises as a medium for achieving social inclusion by doing business. It is exceptional in that respect that the business targets mentally disabled people as customers and turns them from passive service receivers to agents in a

market and problem-solvers. The case study provides evidence that by giving the right to decision about one's housing and connecting people through caring relations both employees and customers may increase their capabilities. In the instance of employees, this happens by enhanced sense of meaningfulness of their life, which is related to both business (e.g. improvement of services to the customers, serving them well) and human dimensions (e.g. understanding the other party as an autonomous human being who has the right for deciding about one's living). In the instance of customers, capabilities are enhanced through micro changes when becoming conscious of one's needs, learning to interact with others (primarily, the serving employees), gaining self-esteem and self-confidence. Hence, participatory or voice-giving practices do stimulate the capability to manage one's environment and provide an opportunity to have a choice in life, which are among the key capabilities in Nussbaum's list (2011).

Moreover, the case provides evidence that social impact, which is usually the aim of SEs, depends on systematic interrelations between its stakeholders which reinforce individual capability perceptions. In particular, participatory practices can contribute to social inclusion if voice-giving practices are approached from a caring perspective. In this respect, our study adds to the conceptualization of SE as a caring enterprise (Andre and Pache, 2016) that rests not only on the founder's ethical values, compassion or empathy to the suffering, weak or poor but on caring attitudes of the employees and integration of care in organization's management practices. We also extend the discussion by Bonvin and Moachon (2012) who argued that paternalism is not the way to pursue the development of capabilities; active participation of all concerned is needed to advance freedom to be and to function in an organizational setting and society.

Finally, our case lends support to other studies demonstrating that housing is an important resource for human dignity and social inclusion (Viljanen et al., 2017). As argued by Sen (1999), it significantly affects experience of life quality, disregarding the luxury aspect of the housing. Our case adds social agency as an outcome of participatory practices when co-developing housing and achieving social inclusion.

<H1>Theoretical Contributions and Managerial Implications

By this case study, we attempted to make contribution to the academic discourse on organizational and societal effects of participatory practices by applying the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1985a, 1985b, 1999) to the analysis of the processes in a SE. The case stresses the potential of participatory practices to strengthen human capabilities to make choices in life and lead it with human dignity by highlighting components of social agency which can be differently experienced by different social actors. Considering employees of a SE as empowered and active care-givers we highlight a feeling of meaningfulness of life as an attribute of social agency. From the viewpoint of customers who have special needs, being able to clearly provide information, voice ideas about service improvement, help others with similar needs but less experience or less self-esteem or confidence could be considered not only as parts of social agency and freedom of choice how to function but also stages of development of social agency.

Moreover, the case study sheds empirical light on entitling the disabled to the capabilities that advance human dignity and social inclusion. As argued by Nussbaum (2009), in contrast to utilitarianism or justice theory, the capability approach guarantees equality to this group of citizens, although it is costly resource-wise. This study implies that it is important that the typically socially excluded group can be turned into active customers and value co-creators not by a public or non-profit but rather for-profit organization such as a

social enterprise. This is an optimistic finding, suggesting that solutions for social problems are available in market.

From the viewpoint of managerial implications, the case highlights the importance of integrative participatory practices, i.e. voice-giving to employees and customers and advancing their interaction as relationship-building. It means that participatory practices can no longer be just a response to management or service content and quality decisions but a coherent part of the processes of decision-making and service co-creation. The case also has implications to governments and public organizations. It demonstrates that public finance can be efficiently used by engaging social enterprises in providing social services in an innovative way, i.e. not only providing services to a social group with special needs but also enabling them to help themselves and creating a context in which they obtain capabilities that are necessary for employability, long-term social relations and successful social inclusion.

<H1>Conclusions

In this paper, knowledge concerning a SE as a catalyst (mediator) of social changes was produced, namely, in enhancing social agency from the perspective of the capability approach. We acknowledge that more in-depth studies in diverse cultural and organizational contexts are needed in the future to contribute to the operationalization of the social agency concept. However, considering the discourse of social enterprises as responsibly caring institutions, we conclude that multi-stakeholder participatory practices in this setting can produce new ways of empowerment and social inclusion and, hence, contribute to social change and innovation at the organizational and also societal level. This can contribute to social and economic sustainability of organizational life and societies.

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