Social Venture Incubation: an ethnography

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Ethnography as a methodology and social enterprise as a concept are both on the edge, in between two opposing logics. Ethnography marries the analytical nature of research and researcher (detached) to the pragmatic nature of practice (participant). Social enterprise on the other hand lies between making profit and making a difference (social). This paper presents what ethnography offers to understanding a local support initiative for social ventures. It reveals the multi-layered and varied nature of what social ventures are, and presents how becoming involved in their everyday life in the incubator contributes to their understanding.

The paper is based on empirical work at the Social Venture Incubator, in the South East of England. This is a programme funded by the Social Incubator Fund delivered by Big Lottery Fund. It is one of ten similar initiatives which benefited from the fund. The programme is delivered through a partnership of a charity (leading the programme), a local university, a social enterprise finance institution and a development trust. This complex context in which the social enterprises are embedded is discussed and the benefit of a participatory approach is presented as the only possible way to gain access to the variety of actors involved and the multitude of voices present.

The incubation programme is, we suggest, a rite of passage for social ventures to self-sufficiency. Joining the 12 month initiative gives start-up social enterprises access to free workspace, business advice and a network of contacts. In addition to the complexity of the context, the social enterprises undergo an accelerated development having access the three elements listed above. Furthermore they are recruited in cohorts and thus go through the experience together. Whereas for a social venture to start and grow outside of the programme it would likely take much longer than 12 months, the process is accelerated in the incubator. The outcomes for the ventures are expected to be either fast growth or quick failure. Therefore this incubation programme provides a dense, longitudinal and amplified environment to access social enterprises.

The aspects which will be presented include the researcher’s role in the field and the change between roles throughout the time spent working for the programme, the access journey, and researcher’s identity. Each one will be discussed and evaluated vis-à-vis its usefulness for gaining knowledge on the programme and the social ventures involved.