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Paper Title: Unveiling the Nexus: Strategic Leadership in Action through Personal Values-guided Social Entrepreneurship in the US Energy Sector

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Abstract

This research investigates the intricate interplay between the personal values of a social enterprise CEO, Paul, and their consequential impact on strategic leadership and decision-making processes. Grounded in the upper-echelon theory posited by Hambrick and Mason (1984), which underscores the bounded rationality inherent in executive decision-making, our study seeks to unravel the nuanced lived experiences of an executive social entrepreneur. Specifically, we delve into how Paul's personal values shaped the establishment of Local Power and influenced strategic choices.

Methodologically, we adopt Kempster and Stewart's (2010) co-produced auto-ethnography approach, likened to a metaphorical sandwich structure with interpreted observations serving as the 'bread' and reflections on experience constituting the 'filling.' The substantive narrative, or 'meat,' encapsulates pivotal episodes spanning 1995 to 2022, encompassing Paul's pivotal role in the development of Local Power, as well as his positions as California C Corp CEO and LLC President.

From a critical theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the discourse on creative opportunity recognition and the intricate alignment of personal values with strategic leadership and decision-making in the domain of social entrepreneurship. By engaging with the upper echelon theory, our findings offer a critical lens on the bounded rationality inherent in executive choices, shedding light on the complex dynamics at play. This work not only advances theoretical insights but also holds practical implications for executives, policymakers, and scholars navigating the multifaceted landscape of social entrepreneurship.

Introduction

In this investigation, the conceptualization of strategic leadership is approached as an iterative learning progression encompassing distinct facets of leadership practices, notably 'sensemaking' and 'sense giving', as delineated by Aitken and Higgs (2010). Strategic leadership, as herein construed, entails the capacity for learning, adaptive change, and the cultivation of managerial capacity (Boal and Hoojiberg, 2000). Notably, while conventional leadership, managerial roles, and entrepreneurial endeavours contribute to change, social entrepreneurs are specifically oriented toward effecting societal transformation. However, this pursuit of social change is confronted with intricacies and resource constraints (Farinha *et al.,* 2020; Lubberink *et al.,* 2019). The complexities faced by social entrepreneurs are contingent upon multifaceted factors, including their underlying motivations, resource allocation strategies, and governance mechanisms (Zahra et al., 2009). Nonetheless, social entrepreneurs harness available resources and experiential insights to advance their mission (Gigauri *et al.,* 2022).

Social entrepreneurs constitute pivotal actors in identifying and seizing opportunities. Initial characterizations described them loosely as 'change agents' (e.g., Dees, 2001; Seelos and Mair, 2005), while subsequent scholarship defines them as individuals who identify societal issues, devise solutions, and proactively act upon them (Yitshaki and Kropp, 2011). These individuals embody leadership oriented actions towards sustainability and social change (Jeong *et al.,* 2020), motivated by pro-social inclinations (Diaz and Rodriguez, 2003). The personal values of social entrepreneurs intricately interlace with the objectives of their social enterprises (Zahra *et al.,* 2009). Although extant studies (e.g., Hemmingway, 2005) have examined the catalytic role of personal values in corporate social entrepreneurship and the influence of individual values on motivating social entrepreneurs (Kruse *et al.,* 2019), the precise impact of these personal values

on strategic leadership remains a subject of inquiry. Consequently, our research endeavours to elucidate whether altruistic personal values, as posited in the literature, singularly propel social entrepreneurs or if alternative motivational drivers significantly guide their entrepreneurial endeavours. We posit that altruistic values ostensibly guide social entrepreneurs, while acknowledging the potential co-existence of other equally influential motives for action. This study aims to investigate the role of personal values in shaping the strategic leadership practices of a social enterprise CEO, specifically elucidating how these values underpin strategic decision-making and leadership in the pursuit of societal transformation.

Subsequent sections of this paper will unfold as follows: a review of extant literature pertaining to strategic leadership and personal values, anchored in the theoretical framework of upper echelon theory; followed by the research design and method; and a presentation of findings.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framing

Social Entrepreneurs' Personal Values and Strategic Leadership

In their examination of social entrepreneurship research, Gupta et al. (2020) underscored the pivotal role of values in shaping the orientation and innovative conduct of social entrepreneurs. Notably, their comprehensive analysis primarily focused on cultural and social values, thereby necessitating a deeper inquiry into the specific contribution of personal values within the realm of social entrepreneurship (Gupta *et al.,* 2020), particularly concerning the social entrepreneur. Personal values, as elucidated, encompass the cognitive understanding of behavioral courses of action or the comprehension of ideal behavioral standards (Hueso, Jaen, and Linan, 2021). The establishment of these behavioral standards assumes critical as it significantly shapes an

individual's ability to formulate objectives, especially within ambiguous or uncertain contexts (Gorgievski *et al.,* 2018). Within organizational settings, personal values rank among the most influential drivers guiding individual behaviors (Maio *et al.,* 2001). Hence, we ask - *what specific values serve as guiding principles for social entrepreneurs?*

The scholarly discourse posits that social entrepreneurs are predominantly propelled by social objectives (Gupta et al., 2020), a commitment to altruism, and an ethical obligation to aid others, an area of focus for this present inquiry (Pless, 2012; Renko, 2013). These individuals embody leadership centred on sustainability for effecting social change (Jeong *et al.,* 2020), underpinned by pro-social motivations (Diaz and Rodriguez, 2003). Chandra and Shang (2017) contend that the commitment of social entrepreneurs to fostering societal transformation can be comprehended through their personal values of collectivism, adherence to ideological principles, altruism, and spiritual inclinations. Similarly, other scholars (e.g., Bargsted *et al.,* 2013; Braga, Proenca, and Ferreira, 2015; Ruskin, Webster, and Lundmark, 2014) echo these perspectives, indicating that social entrepreneurs draw motivation from altruism, liberal political values (Van Ryzin *et al.,* 2009), and personal values intertwined with notions of justice (Diaz and Rodriguez, 2003).

Consequently, the exact drivers motivating social entrepreneurs remain a subject of contention within scholarly literature. Notably, Schwartz (1992, 2010) delineated ten overarching values (including benevolence, universalism, self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, and tradition) categorized into four motivational domains (e.g., conservation) that can either motivate or inhibit pro-social behaviors. Previous research has highlighted both conflicts (e.g., benevolence versus power) and congruence (e.g., security and

conformity) among personal values (Schwartz, 1992, 2010). Building upon these discussions, the ensuing propositions are formulated.

> *P₁ The social entrepreneurs' personal values orientation of self-transcendence influences the need for social change.*
>
> *P₂ Pro-social behaviours of altruism and collectivism are the primary motivations influencing social entrepreneurial actions.*
>
> *P₃ Social entrepreneurs' approach to social change is also shaped by their ideology that is associated with their social and political status.*

The prevalence of collectivist principles as drivers for social entrepreneurs prompts the development of distinct management approaches aligning with their organizations' strategic visions. However, the precise nature and degree of influence exerted by specific personal values on their strategic leadership remain ambiguous and subject to debate within scholarly discourse. As alluded previously, strategic leadership embodies an iterative learning process encompassing various leadership practices. In this investigation, we adopt Hambrick and Mason's (1984) upper echelon theory, recognized as a pivotal framework linking personal values to strategic decision-making and performance, to elucidate the impact of a social enterprise CEO's personal values on their strategic leadership choices. The upper echelon theory posits that senior executives perceive their strategic landscape through personalized filters. These filters, shaping their comprehension of strategic contexts, are molded by the personal values, individual personalities, life experiences, and other idiosyncratic factors inherent to top executives (Hambrick and Mason, 1984), as depicted in the accompanying diagram. The personal values and experiences of strategic leaders undergo a process of selective perception and interpretation, significantly influencing the

organizational vision, mission, goals, and values, thereby informing strategic choices, priorities, and overarching business strategies. Intriguingly, additional factors, such as organizational performance and future potential, also interplay with leaders' strategic decisions and priorities. As such, the fourth proposition is outlined below.

P4 The personal values of social entrepreneurs can add value or hinder the strategic choices for social change.
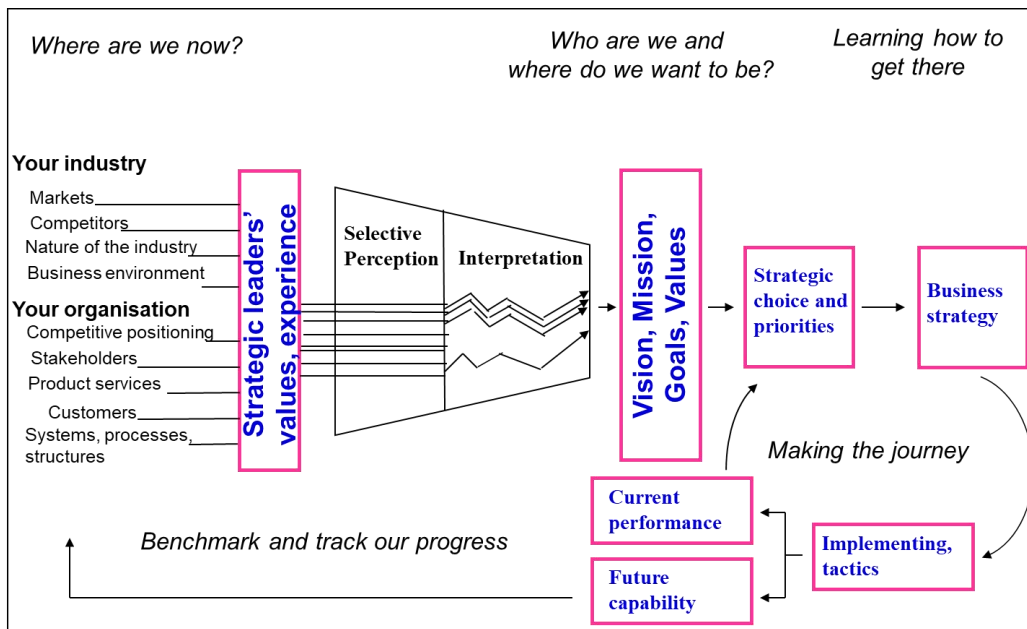
Adapted from: Hughes and Beatty (2005), Hambrick and Mason (1984)

Figure 1. Personal values guide strategic choices and priorities

The Coproduced Auto-Ethnography Research Design

This study employs a co-produced ethnography approach to address the research question and propositions. Co-produced research involves collaboration between partners in all stages of a research process (Facer and Enright, 2016). It is used as a form of narrative inquiry to yield qualitative and value-laden insights (Lapadat, 2017). This design involves a comprehensive cocreation of knowledge involving both researchers and the researched individuals (Dilger, Pels, and Sleeboom-Faulkner, 2019). The generated materials and contributions are inherently intersubjective, incorporating reflections from the participants. In alignment with Kempster and Stewart's (2010) framework, which Ellis (2004, p. 198) analogously characterizes as a "sandwich" consisting of interpreted observations (the "bread") and reflections on the experience (the "filling"), this research employs a similar structure. The core narrative, akin to the "meat", (the participant personal values and strategic decisions) of this autoethnographic sandwich.

The Participant

Insights on how personal values influence strategic leadership in a social enterprise is drawn from an American social entrepreneur named Paul (also second author). Paul is the Founder and CEO of Local Power, established in 1995 when he co-authored the Community Choice Aggregation known as CCA for Massachusetts to provide an alternative energy economy that focuses on localization. In 1999, Paul helped Ohio draft Community Choice Law/Legislations, followed by New Jersey in 2003 and New York in 2015. Since its inception, CCA has been adopted in 1300 cities in the US, serving about 5% of the US population, predominantly in

Illinois, Ohio and Massachusetts. The first author and the participant, Paul, have known each other for over twenty years from a social capacity, not professional. Therefore, to ensure quality and minimize bias in the co-production (Goodson and Phillimore, 2012), multiple data is collected to corroborate the findings. In addition, another researcher not known to Paul is involved in the formulation of the structured interview questions and analysis of the data. We show transparency in the co-production, data used and analysis (Howard and Thomas-Hughes, 2021).

The Procedure: Four Cycles of Narratives

Two types of data were used in this research: written narratives from the structured interview questions and the personal value self-assessment (PVSA) by Lichtenstein and Higgs (2022). Paul was given a list of written interview questions to complete in February 2022. There were four cycles to the written narrative, from February 2022 to June 2023. This method allowed Paul to reflect and express deeper perceptions about the motivation for establishing Local Power, his personal values, and strategic decisions about his organization. During the second cycle in 2022, the first and third authors engaged in a virtual dialogue with Paul. The virtual dialogue has two purposes.

First, it clarified the scope of Paul's reflections and introspection. Second, build trust and understanding about the ownership of this knowledge creation. After the virtual dialogue, structured questions were sent to Paul, who produced written responses to those questions about his experiences as a social enterprise strategic leader. The approach emphasizes writing and describing the role of personal values in strategic leadership choices. Ellis (2004) argues that an important aspect of auto-ethnographical research is a continual reappraisal and interpretation of the story through theorizing. As we present some early narratives of Paul's experiences, we

consider validity in how the story is interpreted to 'evoke in readers a feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 751). Consequently, issues of reliability and validity must resonate with the reader (Kempster and Stewart, 2010). For us, the goal of the auto-ethnographic account is to uncover how to practice strategic leadership with a focus on the personal values of a US social entrepreneur. The next two sections present some narratives from our interpretation of Paul's experience. The written narrative was analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis based on ideas in Noon (2018). The figure below illustrates the process.
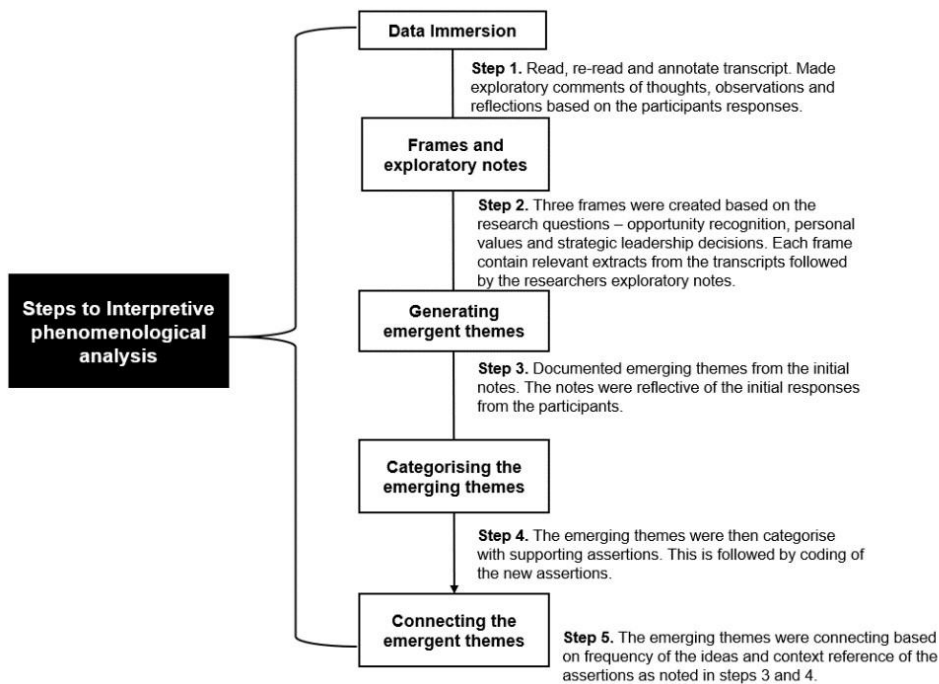
Figure 2. Steps to interpretive phenomenological analysis
Source: Authors own (Content adapted from Noon, 2018)

After completion of the narratives, Paul was given the PVSA questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire contained three categories – the settler (security and solidarity), the enterpriser (achievement and excitement) and the explorer (growth and harmony).

Findings

Our interpretive phenomenological analysis of the structured written narrative with Paul revealed several key themes. Equally, the PVSA unveiled distinct personal values that extend those in the narrative material. We organize our findings based on the four research propositions. The initial segment, analogous to the 'base bread', delves into Paul's personal values, thus drawing from the narrative and PVSA result. Moving to the second part, akin to the 'fillings' of a sandwich, we focus on the actions leading to the development of CCA 2.0 and 3.0. This involves the exploration of activism, resources, and challenges associated with establishing a business structure for decentralizing energy power. The third proposition encompasses Paul's ideological views. Then the final segment serves as the 'top layer', investigating Paul's personal values and the intricate interplay between these values, political actions, and community empowerment.

A Twilight of Values

P$_1$ The social entrepreneurs' personal values orientation of self-transcendence influences the need for social change.

Following our previous conversation with Paul, it became evident that he views personal values as intricate ideals due to their connection to faith and societal expectations. Despite this complexity, when Paul reflects on the principles guiding his strategic decisions, he describes his values as self-evident and impactful. Paul describes his values as self-evident and impotent values that are impossible to express without this four: *(i) economic justice, (ii) save nature from industrialization, (iii) give people power over their economic lives, and (iv) make democracy real.* He went on to say that the *four values always governed my decisions as means to the*

transcendent and dependent values, which defined the subject matter or purpose of Local Power,
which is to intervene significantly in Energy to serve those purposes.

Interestingly, the PVSA revealed two sets of personal values: 'towards values' and 'away values.'
Towards values refers to the positive qualities and fulfillment associated with being a social
entrepreneur. Paul's values are: successful, capable, influential, intelligent, self-respect, freedom
from thought, creativity, choosing one's own goals, protecting the environment, wisdom, a world
at peace, inner harmony, honesty, true friendship, a spiritual life, mature love, and meaning in life.
On the other hand, away values are those avoided or preventing values that individuals may find
threatening. Paul's away values are devout, forgiving, moderate, respect for tradition, obedience,
national security, reciprocation of favors, sense of belonging, social power, wealth, and
preserving image.

Our analysis shows that Paul's 'towards values' of inner harmony, wisdom, protecting the
environment, and meaning in life align with self-transcendent values. For this social entrepreneur,
these values are critical for achieving social change. They reflect a broader and more
interconnected perspective beyond personal interests.

Local Power for Self-futures

P₂ Pro-social behaviours of altruism and collectivism are the primary motivations influencing
social entrepreneurial actions.

Paul's professional background and experience as a strategist of several laws and policy
campaigns influenced his engineering of CCA 2.0. He says: "*I set up Local Power because I had*
gotten fired, basically, for writing a Bill to restructure the electricity industry as a legislative aide of a
Senator who sat as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy in the Massachusetts General Court:

the Commonwealth's state legislature. I had found him and gone to work for him on an intellectual mission to come up with an alternative to neoliberal economic policy, which I had learned was guiding electricity industry restructuring: the "Jihad" of the deregulators in the United Kingdom (Thatcher) and the United States (Reagan)".

Paul purposefully pursued an alternative energy model, displaying a deliberate commitment by choosing to collaborate with the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy. This intentional approach aligns with Monllor and Attaran's (2008) concept of creative opportunity recognition, asserting that a social entrepreneur amalgamates past experiences in varied ways to create novel patterns for addressing social issues. Additionally, Paul's restructuring of the energy Bill showcases disruptive thinking. His out-of-the-box approach, characterized by unconventional methods, played a crucial role in realizing his objectives. Paul describes Local Power as *working with municipal councils and Mayors to use our Community Choice Aggregation (CCA) law to not only transform energy but do it through transforming fixed electricity, gas and petrol bills into investment revenue to borrow self-futures.*

We interpret Paul's motives for action in alignment with Chandra and Shang's (2017) concept of altruism and ideologism. This involves acting in the interest of others and prioritizing the needs of the people, as exemplified by the value of giving people power over their economic lives. This altruistic value is complemented by a governance system where the civic society has a say in choosing state leaders and individuals enjoy freedom of choice. Paul's amalgamation of values and ideology directs his strategic choices, influencing his collaborations, target municipalities, and the utilization of the new energy model to reinvest in localization. Further analysis is

required to ascertain whether self-transcendent personal values, such as altruism, serve as the primary motive for action for this social entrepreneur.

Unveiling the Nexus: Failed Philosophies and Markets

P₃ Social entrepreneurs' approach to social change is also shaped by their ideology that is associated with their social and political status.

Local Power aims to bring about societal change by reshaping the energy sector. Paul's approach to social change is well documented in the narrative. He says, *I believe, from the replacement of human labor by energy and the centralized ownership and control of energy by billionaires. Reflecting this fact, the end result realized by the opportunity perceived 30 years ago is the opportunity to change energy so that each energy user owns renewable energy in their homes and businesses, allowing the retention of money paid to energy companies to create a new form of wealth outside the Cold War options of profit or government redistribution.*

Paul's ideology focuses on decentralized power, energy ownership, and wealth distribution. These ideologies are personal *because of the dread of failure, which would reduce the importance of my theory about positive dialectics. My personal purpose was to prove or "demonstrate" this new model of political economy.* At a glance, these ideologies seem intentional and distant from political structures. Yet, it was the political landscape that enabled Paul to engineer the enactment of CCA 2.0. Also, the social interventions to achieve the organization's strategic goals are embedded in collaboration with municipal councils and mayors, utilizing CCA laws to not only revolutionize energy but also convert fixed utility bills into investment opportunities, fostering self-sustainability.

Evidently, Local Power's intervention is shaped by ideologies that markets have failed society for years and that it is time to change the energy sector. *Social leadership is bad business. The lesson that democratic political theory is incomplete to the extent that it does not attend to the means of human economic cooperation at the family, street, neighborhood, and municipal level, and that anarchist political theory, based on strictly voluntary economic cooperation, is incomplete and naive without the active legislation and support of local democratic government.*

Paul says. Social leadership prioritizes values and outcomes over profit and is at odds with a money-oriented society, and the persistence of such values requires sacrifice and the absence of superficial ideas. The statement underscores the importance of actively legislating and supporting local democratic government in both democratic and anarchist political theories to address economic cooperation at various community levels.

That said, Local Power has different roles depending on the context, demonstrating adaptability and versatility across municipal councils. Paul: *Our role has changed in order to drive the process forward, so we play different roles at different times in different places. Often, we are consultants to local governments, sometimes legislators, sometimes campaigners, sometimes engineers, sometimes developers, and sometimes administrators. It is one of the most difficult aspects of our business that we are interdisciplinary and constantly have to assimilate new systems, protocols and nomenclatures. We generally acquire our clients rather than them chasing us down. We are obscure but known all around the US, from Massachusetts to California to New York, and always as the controversial father of CCA.1. The utility industry's enemy number 1.*

Concluding Thoughts

While acknowledging the conventional inclusion of a discussion section in a comprehensive paper, we propose that this manuscript be viewed as a work in progress. The theoretical contribution of this study lies in advancing our comprehension of the intricate interplay between personal values and the strategic decisions undertaken by a social entrepreneur. The focal point of our inquiry holds significant implications for energy consumers and policymakers, particularly within the contemporary discourse surrounding clean energy and economic fairness.

This investigation illustrates that Paul's personal values exhibit a resonance with selftranscendence, exerting a discernible influence on the dynamics of social change. Selftranscendence values transcend individual interests, directing attention towards broader universal aspects of existence. In the case of the social entrepreneur explored in this study, these values manifest as a commitment to collective transformation aimed at fostering societal equity through decentralized power and wealth distribution. Moreover, political ideologies intricately shape the implementation strategy of Local Power.

In summation, we argue that employing auto-ethnographic methods for exploring the personal values and strategic leadership of a social entrepreneur yields novel insights and enables a more profound and versatile exploration of the phenomenon. Future research endeavors may leverage this methodological approach to delve into specific strategic decisions and examine market responses to innovative approaches in a highly centralized sector undergoing transformative change.

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