If Not for Profit, for What?: Ahead of its Time

by Simon Teasdale

Dennis Young is one of the most thoughtful and thought-provoking academics in the area of nonprofit studies and I am fortunate to have had the pleasure of working with him and visiting Georgia State University. In 2012 I was organizing the International Social Innovation Research conference which was timetabled to take place in the same week as the NCVO Researching the Voluntary Sector conference - the UK's national research event for the nonprofit sector. I suggested to the organizer of the NCVO conference that we could pool resources to attract a big name speaker to provide a plenary session at both events. Not unreasonably the NCVO conference organizer was skeptical that anybody giving a keynote presentation at a predominately social entrepreneurship conference would be suitable for an audience of nonprofit scholars, at least until I mentioned Dennis Young. Dennis was able to provide excellent plenaries at both conferences demonstrating a rare ability to straddle the divide between social entrepreneurship and nonprofit studies. This of course will come as no surprise to readers of his book *If Not for Profit for What? A Behavioral Theory of the Nonprofit Sector Based on Entrepreneurship*, which was published 30 years ago this year.

As the other commentators already provide an excellent overview of the book I have decided to use this opportunity to briefly explore the influence of the book on the fields of nonprofit studies, social enterprise and social entrepreneurship. A quick search on Google Scholar at the start of June 2013 reveals that the book has been cited 305 times. Dennis was probably the first author to apply entrepreneurship theory to the study of nonprofits to help determine why some entrepreneurs choose to operate in the nonprofit sector. Since then, and particularly in the new millennium, the development of a "new" field of social entrepreneurship has seen considerable attention paid to similar questions using similar theories in attempting to make sense of social entrepreneurship. Given this relevance to at least two relatively established academic fields each with their own journals, I was somewhat surprised therefore that the number of citations wasn't even higher.

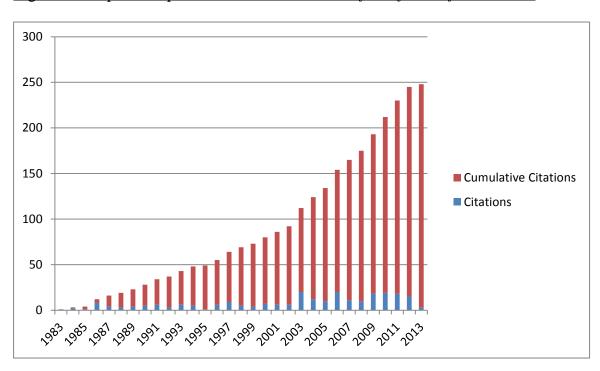
<u>Table 1: Citations to *If Not for Profit* broken down by year of publication, derived from Google Scholar, 05 June 2013</u>

| Year | Citations | Cumulative Citations |
|------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| 1983 | 1 | 1 |
| 1984 | 2 | 3 |
| 1985 | 1 | 4 |
| 1986 | 8 | 12 |
| 1987 | 4 | 16 |
| 1988 | 3 | 19 |
| 1989 | 4 | 23 |
| 1990 | 5 | 28 |
| 1991 | 6 | 34 |
| 1992 | 3 | 37 |
| 1993 | 6 | 43 |
| 1994 | 5 | 48 |
| 1995 | 1 | 49 |
| 1996 | 6 | 55 |
| 1997 | 9 | 64 |
| 1998 | 5 | 69 |
| 1999 | 4 | 73 |
| 2000 | 7 | 80 |
| 2001 | 6 | 86 |
| 2002 | 6 | 92 |
| 2003 | 20 | 112 |
| 2004 | 12 | 124 |
| 2005 | 10 | 134 |
| 2006 | 20 | 154 |
| 2007 | 11 | 165 |
| 2008 | 10 | 175 |
| 2009 | 18 | 193 |
| 2010 | 19 | 212 |
| 2011 | 18 | 230 |
| 2012 | 15 | 245 |
| 2013 | 3 | 248 |

Notes: Two citations occurred prior to the date of publication. Three citations are undated.

Table one reveals a breakdown of 253¹ of the citations by year of publication. A glance at the graph derived from this data showing cumulative citations over time (see Figure 1) suggests that If Not for Profit was ahead of its time when first released. Only 16 authors cited the book in the first five years after publication, and eight of these were in a single year (1986). The next three five year periods saw steady if unspectacular progress: 21 authors cited If Not for Profit between 1988-1992, 27 authors between 1993-1997, and 28 authors between 1998-2002. However the last decade (from 2003) has seen the annual rate of citations increase by more than 150%: there were 73 citations between 2003 -2008, and an additional 73 citations in the most recent five year period (2009-2013). This is certainly unusual for an academic text. According to Thomson Reuters the "generalized citation curve" suggests that citations peak after three years, and that an article's "half-life" (whereby 50% of total citations are reached) occurs after six years². If this had been the case with *If Not for Profit* then the 19 citations achieved by 1989 would have marked the half-life. Over the next 24 years citations would have gradually tapered leaving a cumulative total of 38, and I would almost certainly not be writing this introduction to the new edition.





¹ Google Scholar contains two versions of *If Not for Profit*. This analysis is derived from the 255 articles citing the original (1983) version.

http://www.elsevier.com/editors/journal-metrics#impact-factor

We can also gain some idea of the influence of Dennis's work by looking at the articles, authors and books which cite him. Opening up the relevant link from Google Scholar reveals a veritable Who's Who of the great and the good in the world of nonprofit studies. The first page contains luminaries such as Burton Weisbrod, Henry Hansmann, Susan Rose Ackerman, Helmut Anheier, Jacques Defourny and Janelle Kerlin (who is fortunate enough to have been mentored by Dennis's influence has also spread beyond the confines of nonprofit / social entrepreneurship, with his work being cited in mainstream entrepreneurship texts such as Barbara Bird's (1989) classic Entrepreneurial Behavior. However this list also hints at the divide between those writing about nonprofits (most of whom are represented) and the newer social entrepreneurship field which is hardly represented among the most influential texts books citing If Not for Profit. This is particularly surprising given that Dennis's work, loosely based on behavioral economics, would seem to have greatest relevance to the current struggles to make sense of why some people become social entrepreneurs. Only two (Dees and Anderson, 2006; Sharir and Lerner, 2006) of those 25 publications with over 100 citations citing If Not for Profit can be firmly located within the social entrepreneurship literature, although articles by Jacques Defourny (2001), Marthe Nyssens (2010), and Janelle Kerlin (2006) begin to bridge the gap through their primary focus on social enterprise.

To some extent the lack of attention paid to If Not for Profit by the social entrepreneurship literature might conceivably be explained by much of this literature being published in the last decade and so not having sufficient time to build up citations. But this argument is somewhat negated when searching on Google Scholar using the keyword "social entrepreneurship." One has to trawl through 20 articles (half of which have over 300 citations) before arriving at the first article to cite If Not for Profit (Dees and Anderson, 2006). While two of the most highly cited articles in the social entrepreneurship literature do cite If Not for Profit (the aforementioned works by Sharir and Lerner (2006), and Dees and Anderson (2006)), with the exception of the recently published review of the field by Bacq and Jansenn (2011) and Gordon Shockley's application of Schumpeter and Kirzner's theories to social entrepreneurship (2011), the social entrepreneurship literature would seem largely ignorant of Dennis's work. No other articles with ten or more citations themselves, and citing If Not for Profit, would reasonably be considered primarily located in the social entrepreneurship literature. So what else might explain If Not for Profit experiencing such a dramatic rise in citations since 2003?

The answer is hinted at in articles by Jacques Defourny and Marthe Nyssens (2010) and Janelle Kerlin (2006). Both papers note a distinction between (mainly US based) authors writing about social enterpreneurship and (mainly European) authors writing about social enterprise, while noting that there has been some crossover in recent years (of which of course both articles are examples). Returning again to Google

Scholar a cursory analysis suggests that Dennis's work was picked up relatively early by European authors writing from a social economy tradition. In particular early work by members of the EMES network would seem to have introduced *If Not for Profit* to European scholars. Dennis was invited to speak at an early international conference on social enterprise organized by EMES members at Trento University in 2001. Since then, and particularly since 2003, Dennis's work has been cited in numerous articles by authors related to EMES, including Evers and Laville (2004), Thomas (2004) and Borzaga (2004).

This somewhat cursory analysis of the influence of *If Not for Profit* as determined by its citation record suggests that the book was clearly ahead of its time and took a number of years to be recognized for the classic it surely is. Nonetheless many of Dennis's contemporaries recognized its value in their own (often more highly cited) works. The book has consistently achieved high citation rates among nonprofit scholars. Around the turn of the millennium *If Not for Profit* began to achieve acclaim in Europe, particularly among social economy scholars, and citation rates doubled. However even today, only a very small number of influential articles from the social entrepreneurship literature refer to Dennis's work. It might be that recent articles by Shockley (2011) and Bacq and Jansenn (2011) pave the way for Dennis's work to be taken up by a third group of scholars. This freely available reissue of the book will help introduce Dennis's seminal work to a wider audience. Indeed, the book is probably timelier now than it was 30 years ago.

Simon Teasdale is Research Fellow at the Third Sector Research Centre, University of Birmingham, and Associate Editor of Social Enterprise Journal. In August 2013, he will be taking a new position at the Yunus Centre for Social Business, Glasgow Caledonian University.

References

- Bacq, S., and Jansenn, F. (2011). The multiple faces of social entrepreneurship. A review of definitional issues based on geographical and thematic criteria. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development*, 23(5-6), 373-403.
- Bird, B. (1989). Entrepreneurial Behavior. Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman & Company.
- Borzaga, C., & Tortia, E. (2009). Social enterprises and local economic development. In E. Clarence and A. Noya (Eds.), *The changing boundaries of social enterprises* (pp.195-228). Paris: OECD Publishing.

- Dees, J. G., & Battle Anderson, B. (2006). Framing a theory of entrepreneurship: Building on two schools of practice and thought. *ARNOVA Occasional Paper Series: Research on Social Entrepreneurship:* Understanding and Contributing to an Emerging Field, 1(3), 39-66.
- Defourny, J. (2001). Introduction: From third sector to social enterprise. In C. Borzaga & J. Defourny (Eds.), *The emergence of social enterprise* (pp.1–28). London: Routledge.
- Defourny J., & Nyssens M. (2010). Conceptions of Social Enterprise and Social Entrepreneurship in Europe and the United States: Convergences and Differences. *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 1(1), 32–53.
- Kerlin, J. (2006). Social Enterprise in the United States and Europe: Understanding and Learning from the Differences. *Voluntas*, 17(3), 246–262.
- Schockley, G. (2011). Schumpeter, Kirzner, and the Field of Social Entrepreneurship. *Journal of Social Entrepreneurship*, 2(1), 6-26.
- Sharir, M., & Lernet, M. (2006). Gauging the success of social ventures initiated by individual social entrepreneurs. *Journal of World Business*, 41(1), 6-20.
- Thomas, A. (2004). The rise of social cooperatives in Italy. *Voluntas*, 15(3), 243-263.