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## Going pro-social: Extending the individual-venture nexus to the collective level



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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this Special Issue is to demonstrate how drawing on multidisciplinary insights from the literature on prosociality can broaden the individual-opportunity nexus to make room for a variety of actors. Five feature articles emphasize the collective level of the analysis, underscoring the social distance between the entrepreneurs and the different communities they serve. Leveraging construal level theory, we abductively derive an organizing framework that helps us articulate how stretching or compressing social distance can transform initial opportunities into occasions for serving the greater good. We identify two distinct mechanisms present in all five empirical studies that explain how the needs and hopes of many others may add creativity, consistency and connectivity to one's venture. We also connect these abductive insights with the two editorials that follow this introduction and nudge our collective attention towards the research opportunities awaiting our academic community once we begin to relax the egocentric reference point that, until recently, has defined the discipline of entrepreneurship.

### 1. Executive summary

The March 2018 volume of the Journal of Business Venturing, “*Enterprise Before and Beyond Benefit, Entrepreneurship and For Benefit Corporations*,” was the first part of a double special issue. The five articles featured in the first part discussed different ways in which individual entrepreneurs choose to imprint their ventures with purpose in different geographies (Moroz et al., 2018). This current issue is the second part. The seven papers assembled below underscore the involvement of multiple stakeholders from both outside and inside the venture to reveal how “the many” identify and pursue opportunities within varied types of collectives and communities (Fletcher, 2006; Jennings et al., 2013).

The individual level of analysis has dominated the entrepreneurship field for over three decades (Busenitz et al., 2003). Yet few entrepreneurs truly venture alone (Busenitz et al., 2014; Hoogendoorn et al., 2017), especially when purpose takes precedence over profit (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Smith and Besharov, 2017). The five empirical articles featured in this special issue underscore communal aspects of entrepreneuring, noting how others' needs are identified (Peredo et al., 2018), communicated (Moss et al., 2018), negotiated (Powell et al., 2018), referenced (André et al., 2018), and leveraged (Dentoni et al., 2018) over time. The two invited editorials remind us that creating impact is a collective endeavour (Wry and Haugh, 2018), fundamental to understanding, and cautiously altering, the broader entrepreneurial ecosystems that prosocial ventures inhabit (McMullen, 2018).

We argue for stretching the individual-venture nexus to more explicitly take into account the roles many others, often in desperate need, typically play in prosocial organizing. The five empirical articles comprising this special issue, the two editorials, and the

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overarching framework abducted in this introduction, stretch the ego-centric reference point that has dominated our discipline for over three decades to make room for *alters* and articulate the elastic relationship between ego and alters in recalibrating the nexus of entrepreneurial intention and action (Dimov, 2007).

Alters include both human and non-human actors (Muñoz and Dimov, 2015), and do not require prior entrepreneurial intentions or skills (Fletcher, 2006). Together, we complement theorizing and testing at the individual-venture nexus – the interface between one entrepreneur and her/his venture (Shane, 2003) by asking who else may inform what an opportunity is, or should be (Garud and Giuliani, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2015).

Until recently, the critical role of others in defining what an opportunity is has been largely overlooked in traditional entrepreneurship (for exceptions see Mezas and Kuperman, 2000 and Wright and Zammuto, 2013). Social entrepreneurship, however, has long drawn attention to tight interdependence between individual entrepreneurs and others. Because social ventures aim to alleviate poverty (Bruton et al., 2013), mitigate suffering (Williams et al., 2017), and restore well-being (Gamble, 2018; Wiklund et al., 2018), social entrepreneurs pursue quintessentially alter-oriented opportunities (Bacq and Janssen, 2011) and identify strongly with the communities they serve (Wry and York, 2017). Therefore, many others inclusive of and beyond the initial entrepreneur(s) may shape the norms, roles, and structures that enable entrepreneurial action (Plowman et al., 2007; Sine and David, 2010).

This special issue explores how interactions with different actors inside and outside their respective communities<sup>1</sup> inform and influence the individual-venture nexus over time (Smith and Besharov, 2017). Starting from the premise that prosociality, defined as an entrepreneur's orientation towards others (Shepherd, 2015), affords explicit attention to the underserved needs and hopes of human and non-human actors, we explain how alters may 'morph' ego's relationship to their venture over time (Rindova and Kotha, 2001; Williams and Shepherd, 2016).

## 2. Applications of prosociality in entrepreneurship theory and practice

While this special issue is the first concerted effort to empirically explore the specific ways prosociality informs the research and practice of entrepreneurship, it builds on several notable theoretical precedents. For example, the introduction to the 2009 Special Topic Forum of the *Academy of Management Review* suggestively titled “*Entrepreneurship as emancipation*” (Rindova et al., 2009) explicitly humanized the subjects we study, reversing then-received wisdom to suggest that entrepreneurship is merely a means to the greater end of individual growth and social transformation. Two out of the nine papers included in the 2012 special issue of the *Academy of Management Review* Special Topic Forum on “*Care and Compassion*” (Rynes et al., 2012) introduced compassion theorizing to entrepreneurship (Atkins and Parker, 2012; Miller et al., 2012). An open invitation from then Editor-in-Chief Dean Shepherd to “*Party on!*” at JBV's 30th anniversary (Shepherd, 2015) advocated for making room for others across a broader range of entrepreneurship theories.

There has since been considerable forward momentum in asking and answering how others help individual entrepreneurs cope with, and sometimes successfully overcome, adversity. Prosocial forms of organizing have been studied across a broad range of economic and political regimes – from Peru (Muñoz et al., 2018a; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006) to China (Marquis et al., 2015) – in good times (Mathias et al., 2017) and bad (Shepherd and Williams, 2014). The turn towards prosociality is especially informative for entrepreneurs facing matters of life and death (Hälgren et al., 2018; Muñoz et al., 2018b). Other actors can help entrepreneurs anticipate and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles (Smith and Besharov, 2017), ranging from sudden hardship (Ballesteros et al., 2017; Tilcsik and Marquis, 2013) – such as hitting rock bottom after job loss (Shepherd and Williams, 2018) or facing catastrophic political disruptions (Branzei and Abdelnour, 2010; Fathallah et al., 2018) – to chronic distress such as recession (Powell and Baker, 2014) or witnessing suffering in animal shelters (Schabram and Maitlis, 2017).

Transformative entrepreneurship is perhaps the most noteworthy stepping stone towards a programmatic integration of prosociality in theories of entrepreneurship. The core argument is that ventures sometimes “accidentally” (Plowman et al., 2007), but more often than not, deliberately (Tobias et al., 2013) tackle grand social and environmental challenges (Muñoz and Dimov, 2015). The study of prosociality underpins the increased interest of entrepreneurship researchers in the intentional grappling of endemic issues like poverty (Bruton et al., 2013; Packard and Bylund, 2018), informality (Godfrey, 2011), inequality (Suddaby et al., 2018; Pathak and Muralidharan, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2018), and inclusivity (Mair et al., 2012). Recent deliberate applications of entrepreneurship to affecting the desperate needs of others include decreasing inequality or increasing equality (Newbert, 2018; Sarkar et al., 2018) by overcoming class, race and immigration biases (Gray and Kish-Gephart, 2013; Neville et al., 2018; Wosu Griffin and Olabisi, 2018). Transformative entrepreneurs who are prosocially motivated can scaffold entire ecosystems that replace the status quo (Autio et al., 2018; Spigel and Harrison, 2017; Roundy et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2018) to enable large-scale positive change (George et al., 2016; Mair et al., 2016; Stephan et al., 2015).

Collective-level phenomena, such as the genesis of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Autio et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2018) or the regeneration of nature (Branzei et al., 2017; Muñoz and Cohen, 2018) begin to suggest that individual entrepreneurs may also, and with the help of others, leverage venturing to repair the socio-cultural fabric of communities (Martí et al., 2013), protect endangered species (Volery, 2002), and create symbiotic links with highly vulnerable natural eco-systems (Muñoz et al., 2018b). Initial attention

<sup>1</sup> By employing the terms ‘communities’ and ‘collectives’, often interchangeably, we refer to a collection of individuals within a delimited group or groups that may be framed by a wide variety of network perspectives (social, spatial, cultural, etc.), share common beliefs, values, objectives, or adhere to behavioral constraints, have direct and many-sided relations and are often perceived through obligations of loyalty and reciprocity (Dasgupta, 1996; Granovetter, 1985; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006; Taylor, 1982).

to how collectives influence ventures stretch back to the early days of capitalism, when organizational theorists noted that communities have long buffered a wide range of ventures from dramatic exogenous events such as the Great Depression (Marquis et al., 2011a). Today collectives condition most organizational functions (for a review see O'Mahony and Lakhani, 2011) and can function as an organization form (Marquis et al., 2011a, 2011b; Ratten and Welpe, 2011). However, they are still arguably exogenous to the individual-venture nexus (cf. Davidsson, 2015 and Seelos et al., 2011), and, as a result, are often treated as peripheral rather than central in entrepreneurship theory and practice.

### 3. A working definition of prosociality at the collective level of analysis

Originally conceptualized by McDougall (1908) as 'tender emotions' arising from base human instincts, the study of prosociality can be traced to its roots in social psychology as a multi-level topic that "recognizes the diverse influences that promote actions for the benefit of others, considers the variety of ways it can be manifested, and explicates both the common and the unique processes that underlie prosocial acts across the different levels of analysis" (Penner et al., 2005, pg 366). Prosociality thus encompasses a broad conceptual space that includes intentions, motivations and actions by which a 'self' benefits 'others' (Bolino and Grant, 2016; Hoffman, 1988) without self-interested expectations (Michaelson et al., 2014). Prosocial motivations reflect one's desire to benefit others. Prosocial behaviors are specific enactments that cater to the welfare of other individuals, groups or organizations (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986). Prosocial impacts are the consequences, the positive difference one eventually makes in the lives of others, which may include rewards ultimately experienced by protagonists seeking to make a positive difference in the lives of others (Toumbourou, 2016).

Concepts like empathy, compassion, community, social justice, nurturance, protection, idealism, care, esteem, cooperation, altruism and sympathy fold under the prosocial category (Penner et al., 2005; Ruskin et al., 2016). Prosocial concepts operate at different levels of analysis. Organization scholars have already introduced multilevel accounts of care (Lawrence and Maitlis, 2012), helping (Grodal et al., 2015; Zoccola et al., 2011), forgiveness (Fehr and Gelfand, 2012), recovery (Lilius, 2012), pride (Kraemer et al., 2017), hope (De Mello et al., 2007; Winterich and Haws, 2011), gratitude (Fehr et al., 2017), and awe (Keltner and Haidt, 2010; Schwabenland, 2011).

Only a few of the vast family of prosociality concepts have thus far found their way to the entrepreneurship literature. Care (André and Pache, 2016; Bacq and Alt, 2018), empathy (Mair and Noboa, 2006) and compassion (Miller et al., 2012) have received the most attention thus far, accompanied by a recent surge of interest in well-being (Gamble, 2018; Shir, 2015; Wiklund et al., 2018; Uy et al., 2013). Individuals with socially- or environmentally-oriented ideologies and identities act on their beliefs (Besharov, 2014) and persist through obstacles (Cardon et al., 2012; Mueller et al., 2017), especially if they had walked the proverbial mile in the shoes of others (Shepherd and Williams, 2014; Williams and Shepherd, 2016). Benevolence (Mickiewicz et al., 2016) and generosity (Andersson et al., 2017) radically change the outcomes of economic transactions. Entrepreneurs' identities incorporate social and environmental goals beyond self-interest (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011; Sieger et al., 2016; Wry and York, 2017).

Until recently however in entrepreneurship scholarship, prosociality had been almost exclusively framed at the individual-venture nexus (i.e., caring entrepreneurs and caring enterprises, André and Pache, 2016), with rare extensions to founding or operating teams (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Powell and Baker, 2017; Smith and Besharov, 2017). This special issue focuses on collectives, offering new vistas of prosociality as emergent and endemic at higher levels of aggregation from neighborhoods to ecosystems (Canales, 2016; Khavul et al., 2013; McMullen, 2018; Plowman et al., 2007; Tolbert et al., 2011). Together, the empirical articles extend pivotal prosocial concepts, such as empathy (Batson and Powell, 2003), care (Rynes et al., 2012), and social identity (Fauchart and Gruber, 2011) from the individual to the collective level of analysis (Powell and Baker, 2014).

### 4. Summary of articles

Among the 36 submissions we originally received, several stood out owing to their unconventional treatment of opportunities as inherently and necessarily collective undertakings. This posed a challenge at first, since our existing theoretical toolkit was limited, and limiting. How might studying community initiatives or cross-sector collaborations meaningfully inform the individual-venture nexus? The 20 authors of the five accepted empirical papers embraced this challenge and surprised us with riveting insights on how communal property, communication and cooperation can unearth profitable opportunities from sheer purpose. Their inductive, multi-sided inquiry revealed unexpected levels of creativity, consistency and connectivity between individual entrepreneurs and a large, unconventional, and often rapidly growing number of alters. Their protagonists stretched far beyond typical stakeholders (Donaldson and Walsh, 2015; Nason et al., 2018) to include underdogs (Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017) as well as unexpected ones, such as accounting artefacts (André et al., 2018). Their protagonists were stuck in poorly operating commoditized systems of exchange (Peredo et al., 2018), or mired in material conflicts (Powell et al., 2018). Because of the many overlapping constraints and recurrent setbacks they collectively experienced, these protagonists had the insights, and the motivation, to iteratively inform, shift or update the individual-venture nexus.

Table 1 provides a summary of the five feature articles in terms of: their primary purpose; level of analysis; primary contribution; research implications; and policy & practice insights.

Peredo et al. (2018) offer compelling evidence that at different times and in different places, collectives have co-created opportunities by identifying the unmet needs of others – their eventual members. Distinct types of organizations such as social co-operatives, community land trusts, and community interest companies emancipated their members from a market system that did not favor them by offering: employment in ventures embedded in natural ecosystems; affordable housing; access to capital; inclusion;

**Table 1**  
Content and characteristics of the feature articles.

Authors	Primary purpose	Level of analysis	Primary contribution	Research implications	Policy & practice insights
Peredo, Haugh & McLean	To challenge and complement traditional theories of property rights by articulating and illustrating the concept of common property.	Community over time.	Offers a historical account of how communities create property rights that dignify their own needs and mobilize to defy property regimes that discount these needs.	Common property rights can honor the full spectrum of needs in a community and overcome the false choice between public and private property.	Property rights can be customized to different social needs, and implemented through many organizational forms, e.g. social cooperatives, land trusts and community interest companies.
Dentoni, Pascucci, Poldner & Gartner	To extend the literature on social identities to the community level by explaining how collective epiphanies change members' motivations, self-evaluations, and frames of reference.	Individual within community over time.	Observes how the heterogeneous and dispersed needs of community-based enterprises spark positive and negative epiphanies for their members.	Members' social identities are the result of, rather than the reason for, their community involvement. Their identities shift when individuals embrace collective epiphanies, and persist otherwise.	Extrapolates opportunity-thinking and doing to a broad range of communities, e.g. consumer cooperatives ranging from clean energy to organic food.
Powell, Hamann, Bitzer & Baker	To underscore the materiality of conflict among partners from different sectors and social strata when they voluntarily come together to remedy entrenched inequities.	Partners/projects within communities over time.	Shows how partners with different interests continuously redefine boundaries and reassign focal activities in order to develop trust, empathy, mutuality and pragmatic respect.	Undisclosed or misrepresented material interests upset provisional settlements.	Draws explicit attention to how prosocial posturing facilitates collaboration in the service of the greater good.
Moss, Renko, Block & Meyskens	To develop a linguistic account of prosociality, by showing that lenders are sensitive to the words entrepreneurs use to describe otherwise identical ventures.	Pitches to lenders nested within online community platforms and countries over time.	Reveals a lender preference for pure linguistic categories, and a robust bias against linguistic hybridization.	The choice of either/or vs. both linguistic categories influences funding success.	Reveals one downside of using hybrid language to pitch one's venture: doing so delays crowdfunding, even on explicitly hybrid platforms.

vocational training; and even mental health support services. Yet neither the services themselves, nor even the emancipation of hundreds of thousands of members, were the end goal. These communities pushed on, championing legislation that recognized their rights to choose how to own and operate shared resources such as land, labour and capital. They concluded that this serves the collective interest better than market-based exchanges. While some individuals could have benefitted from commodification and monetization, the collective overall did far better when everyone subscribed to the same principles and embraced common property as a means of elevating the interests of the community over the concerns of their members.

Dentoni et al. (2018) start with members' choice to voluntarily start and join self-organized cooperatives to produce, consume and ultimately leverage the fruits of their own labour into entrepreneurial ends instead of relying on market exchanges. They show that members discover the meaning of their choice through sequences of positive and negative epiphanies that were created via distributed experimentation. Rather than taking the easy way out, they labour their collective identity, sometimes resisting change and other times embracing it.

Powell et al. (2018) show how different collectives struggle with legacies of discrimination that pit their pursuit of happiness against the interests of much more powerful stakeholders, compressing the extraordinary social distance among partners. This study warns of entrenched material conflicts and shows that power asymmetries can lead to repeated breakdowns in cooperation. Then it defines and demonstrates a full suite of actions that spearhead and sustain prosociality – from speaking the whole truth to listening and accepting it as a means to provide a starting point for reconciliation to be realized as a necessary antecedent to cooperation and eventual joint entrepreneurial action.

Moss et al. (2018) suggest that audiences anticipate, and accelerate funding for, pure pitches that emphasize either the social or the economic value orientation of ventures. The findings from this study of international crowdfunding counter the intuitive expectation that hybrid language holds broad appeal. They also demonstrate the growing importance of online communities of alters that serve to compress social distance with important implications for prosocial signaling and legitimacy.

André et al. (2018) show that compromising accounts start and end with collective interpretation of specific artefacts (non-human alters). Artefacts are understood to be imperfect and impermanent (Garud et al., 2009). The aim is never to fully commit to a specific artefact, but merely use it as a provisional stepping stone as stakeholders try to converge on what social impact they are aiming for and cooperate on specific metrics to track it.

Self-interest, and its robust association with entrepreneurial orientation, resolve and results is widely celebrated in entrepreneurship. Yet, these authors find that at the individual level, prosociality is considered orthogonal to self-interest. Entrepreneurs can care as much or more about the plight of others without caring any less about their own goals or gains. At the collective level, the articles in this special issue conclude that the interests of egos and alters are not only compatible, but are often necessary to realizing the full potential of opportunities across the entire entrepreneurial process. One common takeaway among the featured articles was that painstaking effort is required to surface, let alone sustain, such joint benefits.

## 5. Bridging the social distance between egos and alters

Construal level theory (Liberman and Trope, 2008) helps make sense of social distance between egos and alters. This theory seeks to explain how changes in social distance can inform a wide range of social judgments. In brief, construal level theory posits that when things or events are far from the self, individuals focus on higher-level features and engage in more abstract processing. This overarching mechanism has received robust support in psychology and in organization studies (Weisenfeld et al., 2017). Two recent studies have brought construal theory to entrepreneurship, showing that entrepreneurs progress from abstract thinking about opportunities to concrete doing when considering their psychological distance to (a specific goal) starting up a new venture (Chen et al., 2018). Here we extend construal level theory to prosocial organizing by focusing specifically upon one of the four dimensions of psychological distance: social distance – or the perceived degree of similarity/dissimilarity of the entrepreneur (ego) from the important parties (alters) in the venture space (Trope and Liberman, 2010).

Social distance is one of four dimensions of psychological distance that can also vary from concrete to abstract (Trope and Liberman, 2010). It concerns the reflexivity around how egos may perceive themselves with regard to specific alters within the collective social space relevant to an opportunity. We have drawn on these notions to develop abductively the framework represented in Fig. 1. We started with the cumulative findings on core mechanisms in construal level theory, and then carefully analyzed all five empirical articles for the presence or absence of these mechanisms. Within a given collective, be it a consumption cooperative, a cross-sector partnership, or a social movement, paying attention to more distant alters (social distance) increased the abstractness of construal.

### 5.1. Mechanisms: consistency & creativity

We focus on two construal-level mechanisms that specify how the needs of human and non-human others can broaden the individual-venture nexus.

The first mechanism is *consistency* (Conway and Peetz, 2012; Ledgerwood et al., 2010): as entrepreneurs focus on high-level features of events and situations and process them more abstractly, their core values become more salient, making them more likely to behave in accordance with those values (Eyal et al., 2008). The effect is robust whether respondents are primed or select which values are important to them (Schmeichel and Vohs, 2009; Tensbrunsel et al., 2010). They also carry over from one situation to the next, and apply from perceptions to action (van Houwelingen et al., 2015). Consistency also applies beyond care and caregiving (Gilead and Liberman, 2014) to fairness/justice lenses (Ambrose and Schminke, 2009; Brebels et al., 2011; Mentovich et al., 2016).

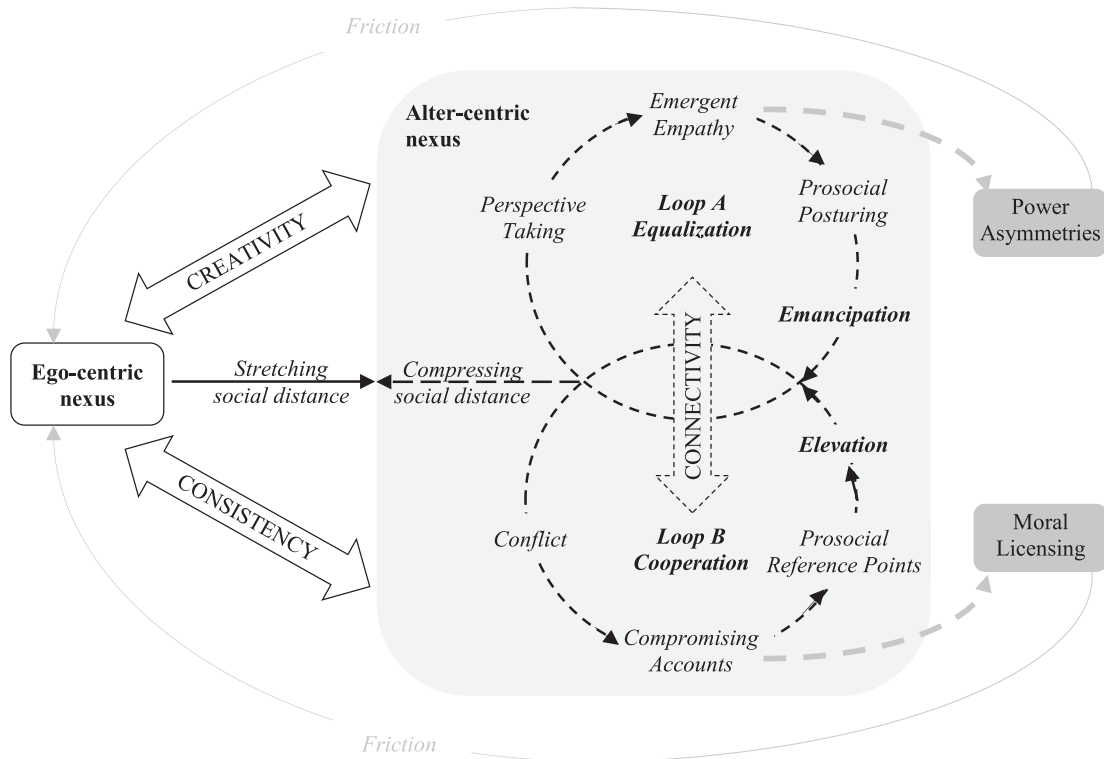


Fig. 1. Making room for alters at the ego-venture nexus.

Such abstraction requires a trade-off of the flexibility benefits of proximate construals. Attention to lower-level features and concrete thinking about these details allows individuals “to act in line with their immediate goals, coordinate actions with others around them, and interact effectively with their local environment” (Ledgerwood et al., 2010). While flexibility is functional in the here-and-now, facilitating communication towards socially-shared viewpoints, consistency allows decision-makers to stay true and enact their core values and ideals over the long haul. Several of the articles in this special issue, especially Dentoni et al. (2018) and Powell et al. (2018), show how individuals forgo some of the proximal benefits of flexibility and pursue instead the distal benefits of consistency.

The second mechanism is *creativity*. Insight and foresight improve with psychological distance (Förster et al., 2004). People certainly know more about near than distant situations. However, proximate construals focus attentions on cons rather than pros, and means rather than ends (Rim et al., 2013). Distant construals afford more abstract processing: decision-makers use broader social categories (Nussbaum et al., 2003) and focus on global traits that are easier to transfer across domains. Although they have less to work with, distant construals make it more likely to find ways out of impasse or arrive at aha experiences (Förster et al., 2004). One of the key explanations is causal thinking: distant construals make causes more central to the meaning of events (Rim et al., 2013). This helps people cope better with adverse events, because individuals can focus on dealing with the underlying causes. The argument that the necessity of others can be the mother of invention (Grant and Berry, 2011) is well-accepted by prosocial scholars across disciplines, and comes to the fore in this issue, especially in Peredo et al. (2018) and André et al. (2018).

Because alters are socially distant from the ego, taking others' viewpoints into account can increase both consistency and creativity (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). However, these gains are contingent on how entrepreneurs draw others in as they develop their opportunities over time.

### 6. Stretching vs. compressing the nexus

Leveraging these abductive insights, we went back to the five empirical articles to more fully specify how the creativity and/or consistency mechanisms informed and influenced the individual-venture nexus. We induced two processes that progressively shifted attention either from ego towards alters (stretching the individual-venture nexus), or from alters towards ego (compressing the community-venture nexus). We refer to these two processes as loops to underscore their recursive nature. Loop A explains how egos progressively cultivate their care and concern for alters. Loop B describes how alters accommodate the concerns of the ego, underscoring that they are both part of a greater whole (Muñoz and Dimov, 2015) and subordinate to greater forces they can only understand and tackle jointly.

Although these two loops are not the only plausible ways in which social distance may influence prediction, evaluation, and behavior (Soderberg et al., 2015; Weisenfed et al., 2017), they are readily apparent in all five featured articles, notwithstanding the



differences in the contexts and timeframes each of them studies, and the divergent disciplinary lenses they apply. The stretching and compressing loops may recur over years or centuries. They unfold across different socio-political regimes from post-world war II Italy and post-Apartheid South Africa, to contemporary Netherlands, Spain, Germany, the UK, Canada and the US. Moss et al. (2018) compare 60 different countries. Dentoni et al. (2018) contrast 27 initiatives across five countries. André et al. (2018) follow the entire life-span of a Bangladesh-French joint venture. Thus, the abducted framework appears robust to both time and space contingencies.

### 6.1. Loop A: equalization

Loop A complements earlier arguments on entrepreneurship as emancipation at the individual level (Rindova et al., 2009) by showing how multiple alters come to be treated with care, compassion, respect, and gratitude as egos take successive steps to fully understand their plight and possible contributions (Plowman et al., 2007). It clarifies that empathy is an emergent accomplishment that applies to all members of the collective rather than isolated exchanges (Peredo et al., 2018). This loop is robust to trial and error learning – indeed, creativity depends on both positive and negative epiphanies (Dentoni et al., 2018).

It breaks down, however, when actors choose to behave selfishly, taking one-sided action. One critical theoretical contingency to construal is power, because power asymmetries objectify social targets (Gruenfeld et al., 2008). Powell et al. (2018) note that power asymmetries come with multiple warning signs, from silo-ing and stalling the conversation, to disrespecting and defecting – and thus can be anticipated, or even avoided.

### 6.2. Loop B: elevation

Loop B extends more recent arguments on entrepreneurship as elevation (Newbert, 2018; Sarkar et al., 2018). Elevation is often associated with morality (Mårtensson, 2017; Van Bavel et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2017). It can also operate through spirituality, philosophy, even memories and traditions (Gamble and Beer, 2017; Colbourne, 2017). Some communities co-exist for generations, millennia even, in symbiotic relationship with their eco-systems; others create new eco-systems from scratch (Autio et al., 2018).

One caveat to elevation is moral licensing (Blanken et al., 2015; Clot et al., 2018): acts of giving such as donations or voluntarism, for example, can be followed by selfish “taking” (Clot et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2017). Only three of the five feature articles make some note of moral licensing (André et al., 2018; Dentoni et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2018), and only do so at the periphery of their models, perhaps because such acts may have been rather hard to catch.

### 6.3. Intersection

The overlap between the equalization loop A and the cooperation loop B can be substantial. Powell et al. (2018) describe how cross-sector partners can purposefully harness their significant social distance to combine creativity and consistency. André et al. (2018) show how insiders and outsiders are brought together by accounting artefacts, iteratively building and demolishing imperfect accounts of their social impact. Wry and Haugh (2018) reinforce the insights from these two papers by explaining how anticipating the full causal chain of impact helps multiple alters reconsider the roles they play in a given venture.

In other cases, the overlap is minimal. Both prosocial reference points and posturing can be carefully managed through communication (Moss et al., 2018). While these resulting alter-centric opportunities may not tell the whole truth (Dey and Mason, 2018), let alone influence internal practices, they can provide sufficient connectivity between egos and alters to make social and environmental goals possible (Pacheco et al., 2010) and compatible.

Table 2 illustrates the two loops and their intersection for the five featured articles.

## 7. Limitations

Our proposed framework suggests that there are optimal levels of prosociality for different collectives. While some stretching can be beneficial, compressing can help ensure the continued viability of specific opportunities.

There can be too little, or too much of a good thing. The proverbial ‘road to hell’ could counterintuitively be paved by cases of extreme or excessive prosociality that burn out well-intended entrepreneurs. Meeting others' needs can take a significant toll on one's own goals, and well-being (Berman et al., 2013). Recent studies of entrepreneurship as an occupation and/or career shows that prosociality can be an imposition, which hinders one's dreams and hurts the bottom line (Jennings et al., 2016; McKague et al., 2015; Slade Shantz et al., 2018).

There are notable dark sides to prosociality as well (Bolino and Grant, 2016), and predictable ways in which it can malfunction within a capitalist market system. One significant caveat to prosociality refers to in-group affiliation, and preferential care and concern for kin. Such discrimination could deepen social fault lines, especially among privileged and marginalized actors, and can fuel deep-seated conflicts that pit the wellbeing of some against that of others.

Bringing the bright side of prosociality to the fore does not imply that ego-centric endeavours are asocial, let alone antisocial (Crane, 2013; Obschonka et al., 2013). But some may be. We ought not turn a blind eye to instances of uncouth or uncaring entrepreneurship, and extreme cases of psychopathic or sociopathic tendencies (Akhtar et al., 2014).

**Table 2**  
The alter-centric nexus: implications for prosocial entrepreneurial intentions, motivations and actions.

Authors	Theoretical tension	Nexus		Framework	Prosocial implications for entrepreneurs		Takeaway	
		Ego-centric	Alter-centric		Intentions	Motivations		Actions
Peredo, Haugh & McLean	Communities as wholes are not best-served by putting profits first because doing so commodifies shared assets and curtails other potential uses.	“Not based on individual gain or advantage”; limited profit making allowed in some cases.	Seeking and safeguarding human welfare: “urgent needs call for prosocial response.”	<p>Loop A <i>Dissolving the divide of (dis)advantage</i></p> <p>Loop B <i>Diminishment of the individual self &amp; magnification of the collective needs.</i></p>	Decommodification of exchanges: “concentrating the factors of money, labor and land on prosocial outcomes in ways that standard market forces do not.”	Developing a primary instrument to deliver social benefits previously treated as externalities (health, hunger, homelessness)	Common property can better balance purpose and profit at the collective level of analysis than either private or public property.	
Dentoni, Pascucci, Poldner & Gartner	Belonging to a community enables individuals to disengage from existing primitives and experiment with radical alternatives (self-production to self-consumption).	Individuals learn who they like and what they contribute to collectives.	“Helping known and unknown others without expecting any benefits back”.	<p>Loop A <i>Sudden, surprising (epiphanies).</i></p> <p>Loop B <i>Joint interpretations trigger social identity shift or persistence.</i></p>	Claiming/gaining independence from markets primarily motivated by profit.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discovering and developing workarounds help promote and preserve purpose.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Building new resource complementarities;</li> <li>2. Taking up new tasks;</li> <li>3. Convincing and inspiring others;</li> <li>4. Becoming aware of the complexities of organizing;</li> <li>5. Engaging with new stakeholders.</li> </ol>	Non-entrepreneurial collectives can become community-based enterprises through distributed experimentation that generate ‘aha moments’.
Powell, Hamann, Bitzer & Baker	<i>Inequality</i> Cognitive and ideological divides are tethered to fundamental material differences and therefore cannot be resolved without revealing and reconciling conflicts in material interests.	One-sided moves (excluding, defecting, silencing, silo-ing, stalling, calling out, convenience, instrumentality).	Trade-offs in life chances (the welfare of some comes at the cost of harming others).	<p>Loop A <i>Surfacing others’ interests, suspending power asymmetries and avoiding selfish departures</i></p> <p>Loop B <i>Partners subsume their interests to the greater good of the collective.</i></p>	Putting oneself in the others’ shoes; signaling respect for others and the desire to work together.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Conflicting material interests precede, contextualize and outlast attempts to work together to pursue prosocial efforts.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Joint focal activities</li> <li>2. Boundary management (recruiting missing voices, diversity enhancement, turnover management, recruiting critics);</li> <li>3. Prosocial posturing (mutual celebrations, pragmatic respect, emerging empathy, trusting)</li> </ol>	The emergence and effectiveness of prosocial ventures hinges on relevant stakeholders explicitly enacting material conflicts rather than avoiding them.
Moss, Renko, Block & Meyskens	<i>Categorization</i> Prototypical linguistic features can be used to accelerate external support.	External actors prefer pure language, even when internal practices are hybrid.	Loans change lives by linking individual lenders to disadvantaged entrepreneurs.	<p>Loop A →→→ Loop B <i>Word choices calibrate social distance among key stakeholders.</i></p>	Separating what entrepreneurs do internally from what they tell externally.	Hybrid ventures can be pitched with either social or economic words (or both).	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Pure pitches get funded before hybrid pitches even on hybrid platforms.</li> </ol>	Entrepreneurs choose linguistic categories that only imperfectly match what they actually do to stretch social distance to alters: signaling
André, Cho & Laine	<i>Reference Points</i> Metrics are essential enablers, delineating what impact is, to whom, and why.	Stakeholders’ ex-ante expectations diverge due to different values and evaluative principles.	Impact is neither static nor predetermined at start-up, but deliberately co-created as multiple parties iteratively redefine metrics and meanings.	<p>Loop A <i>Actions, prime novel insights into wicked social dilemmas</i></p> <p>Loop B <i>Shared values yield provisional, prosocial reference points.</i></p>	Connecting what an organization does with the evaluation of its social performance.	Introducing and monitoring new metrics together helps multiple stakeholders rethink what impact they ought to pursue.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Accounts help organizations make sense of their social performance by:</li> <li>1. Making things visible;</li> <li>2. Providing space for interpretation;</li> <li>3. Facilitating discussion.</li> </ol>	Imperfect accounts help ventures to iteratively align their internal activities and external impact.



## 8. Contribution

Bridging the gap between egos and alters ensures that the efforts of the many, rather than the few, accelerate the co-creation of alternative primitives. These include new preferences (Sarasvathy, 2004) and new structures (Smith and Besharov, 2017) that seek to overcome the dark sides of capitalism and open new means and ends towards shared ingenuity and prosperity (Plowman et al., 2007).

By articulating how social distance makes opportunities prosocial, we hope this framework broadens two important areas of research. First, prosociality matters most to those who have been systematically excluded or exploited (Powell et al., 2018). By relaxing the individual-venture nexus, we welcome previously under-represented others to the entrepreneurial table (Fletcher, 2006). Because social distance lies at the core of theories of class and gender divides, the loops begin to explain how individual entrepreneurs can mobilize socially distant others so that together they can tackle endemic inequality and discrimination (Neville et al., 2018; Newbert, 2018). There is a growing appetite for appreciating underdogs (George and Bock, 2012; Miller and Le Breton-Miller, 2017) and emancipating them through entrepreneurship (Goswami et al., 2018; Rindova et al., 2009; Tobias et al., 2013). While significant barriers remain (Bruton et al., 2013; Neville et al., 2018; Wosu Griffin and Olabisi, 2018), the quest is decidedly on (Shepherd, 2015), and well worth our collective while (Newbert, 2018; Sarkar et al., 2018).

Second, formalizing and measuring the role of the ‘other’ in entrepreneurship scholarship is long overdue, and lags behind a mainstream shift towards addressing grand challenges and social breakthroughs (George et al., 2016). Our framework underscores that the nexus often reflects the work of many, not the few. Non-traditional, even non-entrepreneurial alters can profoundly shape the course of their communities and economies over time (Fletcher, 2006). While relevant stakeholders might not compensate entrepreneurs financially, at least at first (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Smith and Besharov, 2017), their insights and their values create worlds of possibility (Sarasvathy et al., 2003), legitimacy (Suchman, 1995) and corridors towards new types of markets (Sarasvathy, 2004).

The prolific literature on opportunities has largely, albeit not exclusively, associated one opportunity with one actor. Table 3 surveys the main foci in the entrepreneurship literature.

Appreciating that opportunities are not exclusively ego-centric but allow at least some input from alters, allow us to explicitly model ‘social distance’ as part of the nexus. Once we make room for relevant others, the logically next question concerns their role. This can range from minimal, i.e. helping individuals recognize dispersed opportunities (Sarasvathy and Kotha, 2001) or providing third-person examples (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006) that increase confidence and dispel doubt (Shepherd et al., 2007). To pivotal: others can determine what qualifies as an opportunity, even before it might become so (Chen et al., 2018; Davidsson, 2015).

## 9. Research extensions by invited editorials

In addition to the five featured papers, this special issue includes two invited editorials, by authors who have written prolifically on specific facets of prosociality throughout their academic careers. They dialogued with: we the editors; the other authors in the special issue; and the growing community of inquiry on the topic – thrice. We created a first interface between the teams working on invited editorials and the 14 papers initially invited to resubmit at the April 2017 symposium we hosted at the Ivey Business School with SSHRC and institutional support (Ivey Business School, Jake Jabs College of Business & Entrepreneurship, and Paul J. Hill School of Business). These two invited editorials take us on a journey across levels of analysis, tilting our focus from the individual who stars in most of our theories (Busenitz et al., 2014) to the ecosystems they impact (in)directly (Autio et al., 2018). They deepen and broaden what we already know about prosocial venturing and change the questions we may ask next.

Wry and Haugh repurpose the logic model employed by most development organizations to sensitize entrepreneurs to the different levels at which they impact others. They explain how looking ahead, and factoring the desired impact one wishes to have, changes what they consider feasible in the here-and-now (see also Chen et al., 2018 and Tumasjan et al., 2013). Their contribution dovetails with recent studies in the entrepreneurship field (Gamble and Beer, 2017; Molecke and Pinske, 2017) and in sister disciplines (Donaldson and Walsh, 2015; George et al., 2016) that put impact first, rather than last. Paying attention to the upside and downside of organizational actions ought not be an afterthought. Wry and Haugh (2018) show how the world one wants can be anticipated by the opportunities one begins with (Tobias et al., 2013; Sarasvathy, 2004).

McMullen offers a thought experiment about how evolutionary biology can inform hybridization and reflects on the (un)anticipated consequences for entrepreneurial ecosystems, dovetailing nicely with our collective extension of the individual – opportunity space. We see great potential in embracing an evolutionary analog as the next chapter for research on hybrid organizations, especially in unfamiliar and under-studied contexts that deserve our keen attention. These include indigenous communities (Colbourne, 2017; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006), and communities living in tight interdependence with vulnerable ecosystems. Some communities are subject to recurrent earthquakes, floods and fires (Muñoz et al., 2018b; Shepherd and Williams, 2014; Williams and Shepherd, 2016; Williams et al., 2017), or the oppressive legacy of hegemonic policies (Moroz and Gordon, 2018) yet find ingenious ways to regenerate their economies after each disaster (Branzei et al., 2017).

The evolutionary biology analog introduced by McMullen (2018) is potentially generative in revealing interconnections that have remained hidden thus far. The most immediate opportunity their contribution proffers is an embedded view of hybrids – not as independent entities, but rather as interdependent ones, both enmeshed in, and adapting to, complex and evolving ecosystems (Autio et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2018). They are not sufficient solutions, but rather necessary and imperfect steps forward as part of an ongoing selection among pragmatic experiments taking place in parallel (Ferraro et al., 2015).

Prior research on hybrids (Battilana and Lee, 2014) has been focused predominantly inward, into their standalone functions and dysfunctions (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014). We are just beginning to preview how hybrids interface with their complex and

**Table 3**  
From the ego to the alter-centric nexus.

	Ego-centric nexus	Alter-centric nexus
Objective	Shane (2003:18)	Sarasvathy (2004:7), Sarasvathy (2001), Sarasvathy and Kotha (2001)
Subjective	Wood & McKinley, (2010:66)	Arenius, Engel, & Klyver (2017: 90); Lichtenstein et al. (2007); Metzger and King (2015)
First- vs. third-person	Busenitz et al. (2003); Busenitz et al. (2014: 10, 13); Short et al. (2010),	McMullen and Shepherd (2006); Sarasvathy et al. (2003); Shepherd et al. (2007)
Construal level	Chen et al. (2018); Tumasjan et al. (2013); Hallam et al. (2015); Rindova et al. (2009)	Davidson (2015: 680, 683); Korsgaard (2013); Ma et al. (2011); Muñoz and Dimov (2015); Pacheco et al. (2010); Suddaby et al. (2015)
Appropriate embedded action	Dimov (2007); Lerner et al. (2018); Jennings et al. (2013)	Anderson and Warren (2011); Crawford, Dimov, & McKelvey (2016: 603); Dimov (2010: 57-62); Fletcher (2006: 421); Mezias & Kuperman (2000: 209)
“World” Makers or Takers	Casson (1982); Shane & Venkataraman, (2000: 220)	Sarasvathy (2004); Wood and Williams (2014)
	<p>A situation in which a person can create a new means-ends framework for recombining resources that the entrepreneur believes will yield a profit. Opportunity production proceeds through several stages, including conceptualization of an opportunity idea by an entrepreneur, objectification of that idea, and enactment of the opportunity into a new venture.</p> <p>Entrepreneurship unfolds at the intersections of opportunities and individuals/teams and mode of organizing.</p> <p>“Within-author”: individual-venture nexus varies over time and space, real vs. imagined, from abstract thinking to concrete doing.</p> <p>Ex-ante, reasoned, deliberate action is only one of several pathways to opportunity. Individual action is embedded within different levels and types of communities (local &amp; regional, industry &amp; sector; national &amp; transnational).</p> <p>Situations in which new goods, services, raw materials, and organization methods can be introduced and sold at greater than their cost of production. Ideas in pursuit of imagination.</p>	<p>Opportunities themselves are objective phenomena that are <b>not known to all parties at all times</b>.</p> <p>no particular gestation activities are necessary. Furthermore, only a low number of gestation activities is necessary for reaching initial profits at 24 months.</p> <p>no particular gestation activities are necessary. Furthermore, only a low number of gestation activities is necessary for reaching initial profits at 24 months.</p> <p>No particular set of actions is necessary; entrepreneurs “perform” idiosyncratic and complex configurations of activities, which vary <b>depending on their specific contexts and the heterogeneity of actors involved</b>.</p> <p>The so-called opportunity is constructed through a process of effectual interaction with stakeholders. Entrepreneurs iterate between confidence and doubt <b>depending on others’ observable models &amp; feedback</b>.</p> <p>“Out there”: <b>other actors and non-actors are essential “external enablers”</b>, Profound influence of social and historical context in constraining the perceptual apparatus of entrepreneurs and delimiting the range of opportunities available to them. Counterbalancing role of reflexivity, operating at both individual and collective levels.</p> <p>Individuals exist as part of larger collectives. <b>Opportunity formation is relationally and communally constituted</b>. Any would-be entrepreneurs “can do it”. “Every single entrepreneur interweaves personal aspirations and social context. Once opportunity has been made obvious to us, it is impossible to look at the past and not see it there.” Not single-person insights, but recombinations of collective and individual identity: what attributes and actions are deemed desirable in specific communities.</p> <p>Entrepreneurial opportunity has to be the <b>opportunity to create the primitives that other sciences take as given</b> (preferences, demand functions, competitive landscapes and socio-political institutions). New means-ends relationships.</p>

continuously evolving human (Smith and Besharov, 2017) and non-human (Muñoz and Dimov, 2015; Muñoz and Cohen, 2018; Whiteman et al., 2013) ‘habitats’. Yet prosocial exemplars have been shown to slowly but surely transform their habitats (Mair et al., 2012; Mair et al., 2016; Plowman et al., 2007).

Several other scholars have recently brought forth an increasingly prosocial side of collective organizing (Markman et al., 2016; Suddaby et al., 2018), from hybrid structures that deliberately straddled profit and purpose (McMullen, 2018; Battilana et al., 2017), to alternative business forms and functions (Davis, 2013). By drawing attention to the parallels between the evolution of species and that of organizations, McMullen (2018) encourages us to articulate what ventures are and what they can do for society and the natural environment when opportunities are deliberately aimed, albeit even if at broad targets. The sprawl of sharing economies around the world also affords benefit or dangerous mutations, and vice-versa (Thompson et al., 2018).

The focus on hybridity and impact that distinguishes this special issue reflects the critical mass of research in 2016, when the special issue was approved and announced. Significant strides have since been made in mapping the role of institutions in enabling or hindering prosociality across different levels of analysis (Autio et al., 2018; Suddaby et al., 2018). A separate cluster of papers has already spoken to the dark and the bright side of prosociality by taking a closer look at entrepreneurial processes that hinder, rather than help, in the aftermath of disasters (Williams et al., 2017). At the time of writing, a cousin special issue on the bright side of well-being is forthcoming in *JBV*.

## 10. Concluding thoughts

We began working on the double special issue in 2016, thanks to the leap of faith of two editors in chief, Dean Shepherd and Jeff McMullen, each a prolific champion of prosociality in their own work. The 36 submissions we originally received foreshadowed the explosion of interest that since materialized in multiple special issues of the *Journal of Business Venturing*, the *Journal of Management Studies*, and the *Academy of Management Journal*, as well as single special issues of the *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* and the *Academy of Management Discoveries*. There is little doubt that prosociality is taking organization studies by storm, and we feel extremely fortunate to have been part of stretching our scholarly selves towards different disciplines and non-traditional definitions of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial action. Three special issues in the *Journal of Business Venturing* (Moroz et al., 2018), the *Journal of Management Studies* (Suddaby et al., 2018) and the *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* (Autio et al., 2018), all published earlier this year, galvanize a growing community of inquiry. The annual themes of the academy also call attention to prosocial organizing, fast-forwarding from the 2010 theme “dare to care” to the 2018 focus on “improving lives” (Stephan et al., 2016).

The five articles, and the two editorials, brought together in this special issue invite us all to travel across disciplines, topics and theories and be more adventurous in trying out new tools. We invite our readers along in a shared quest to uncover new connections between this double special issue we guest edited, and conversations proliferating in adjacent disciplines and communities of inquiry. If, as we have argued, entrepreneurs stand to benefit from the higher hanging fruit fostered by social distance, so surely can entrepreneurship scholars.

Adding a collective lens on prosociality unearths numerous possibilities – to imagine and enact alternative economies (Peredo et al., 2018), to choose the difference one makes (André et al., 2018; Molecke and Pinske, 2017), to better others (Powell et al., 2018), and let everyone better themselves (Moss et al., 2018). In this manner we seek to peel back the nature of opportunities to expose layers unseen, rarely contemplated or not yet interpreted to further our understanding of what is significant to the entrepreneurial process (Moroz and Hindle, 2012). The contributors to this special issue make a strong case that much is possible at the collective level that might not be so purely at the individual-venture nexus (Davidsson, 2015). Although some may still see egos and alters as extremes rather than ends of a social distance continuum, we articulate and illustrate how communities can help entrepreneurs create the nexus they all need and want.

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