FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (ICADE)

NAVIGATING INSTITUTIONAL COMPLEXITY: SOCIAL ENTERPRISES AS EMBEDDED AGENTS OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Arturo and Elga, for instilling in me the value of hard work and the courage to follow what I believe in.

To my dad especially—thank you for showing me how to do everything with love.

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Credit Author Statement

In the two papers included in this thesis—one already published and the other submitted to a journal—the author contributed to the following roles, as defined by the CRediT (Contributor Roles Taxonomy): Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, and Writing – Review & Editing.

Use of GenAI Statement

During the preparation of this disseration, I used chatpt in order to refine editing in English in some sections. After using this tool, I reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

ABSTRACT

This thesis makes an original contribution to the field of social entrepreneurship by exploring the transformative potential of social enterprises: how they navigate institutional complexity, mobilise power and influence systemic change within dominant business logics. Specifically, this thesis provides two interrelated outputs that contribute to broadening and enriching the understanding of the phenomenon of social entrepreneurship and its role in sustainability transitions by focusing on the embedded agency of social enterprises through the lenses of institutional and power theories.

First, a middle-range theoretical model is developed to give a multilevel account of the pathways through which social enterprises influence the business system. It identifies key mechanisms that enable social enterprises to exert transformative influence despite institutional constraints. This model was published in the journal Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions (Q1, IF 5.7).

Second, the work focuses on the multiple power dynamics at play in transformation processes from the perspective of social entrepreneurs. Based on in-depth and unstructured interviews, the study reveals practices at both intra and interpersonal levels that provide a detailed account of the innovative and transformative power exercised by the embedded agency of social entrepreneurship.

Through the theoretical and empirical exploration on how social enterprises navigate complexity by simultaneously disrupting, negotiating with, and conforming to dominant structures, the research calls for a reconceptualization of the transformative role of social enterprises, emphasizing the iterative and contested nature of institutional change.

This perspective enables a deeper understanding of how social enterprises can pursue transformative goals while strategically engaging with existing institutional constraints.

Key words: social enterprises, institutional complexity, institutional entrepreneurship, power, empowerment.

RESUMEN

Esta tesis realiza una contribución original al campo del emprendimiento social al explorar el potencial transformador de las empresas sociales: cómo navegan la complejidad institucional, movilizan el poder e influyen en el cambio sistémico dentro de las lógicas dominantes del mundo empresarial. En concreto, la tesis ofrece dos aportes interrelacionados que contribuyen a ampliar y enriquecer la comprensión del fenómeno del emprendimiento social y su papel en las transiciones hacia la sostenibilidad, centrándose en la agencia situada de las empresas sociales desde los enfoques de las teorías institucionales y del poder.

En primer lugar, se desarrolla un modelo teórico de alcance medio que proporciona una explicación multinivel de las trayectorias a través de las cuales las empresas sociales influyen en el sistema empresarial. Este modelo identifica los mecanismos clave que permiten a las empresas sociales ejercer una influencia transformadora a pesar de las restricciones institucionales. El modelo fue publicado en la revista *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* (Q1, IF 5.7).

En segundo lugar, el trabajo se centra en las múltiples dinámicas de poder que intervienen en los procesos de transformación desde la perspectiva de los emprendedores sociales. Basado en entrevistas en profundidad y no estructuradas, el estudio revela prácticas tanto a nivel intra como interpersonal que permiten comprender con detalle el poder innovador y transformador ejercido por la agencia situada del emprendimiento social.

A través de esta exploración teórica y empírica de cómo las empresas sociales navegan la complejidad, al mismo tiempo que interrumpen, negocian y se adaptan a las estructuras dominantes, la investigación propone una reconceptualización del papel transformador de las empresas sociales, destacando el carácter iterativo y disputado del cambio institucional.

Esta perspectiva permite una comprensión más profunda de cómo las empresas sociales pueden perseguir objetivos transformadores mientras se relacionan estratégicamente con las restricciones institucionales existentes.

Palabras clave: empresa social, complejidad institucional, emprendimiento institucional, poder, empoderamiento

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INTRODUCTION

A. Research Topic

The recent financial crisis, the growing recognition of global wealth disparity (Nicholls & Opal, 2005), and the escalating threats to Earth's vital systems due to human activity (Steffen et al., 2015) have intensified calls for a more ethical and socially inclusive form of capitalism (Dacin et al., 2011, p. 1204). In response, social enterprises have emerged as a strategic solution to address these challenges (Dacin et al., 2011; Dart, 2004; Alvord et al., 2002; Bansal et al., 2019; Hillman et al., 2018; Hörisch, 2015).

Despite ongoing debates about their precise definition (Klarin and Suseno, 2023; Dacin et al., 2010; Zahra et al.2009; Dacin et al., 2011; Teasdale 2012), most interpretations agree that social enterprises prioritize social missions over profit maximization (Wu et al, 2020; Saebi et al., 2019; Battilana et al., 2015; Doherty et al., 2014; Dacin et al., 2011; Mair & Martí, 2009; Pache & Santos, 2013). These organizations actively engage in tackling pressing social and environmental challenges (Ometto et al., 2019; Partzsch & Ziegler, 2011; Dey et al., 2016), positioning themselves as catalysts for social change (Alvord et al., 2002), drivers of institutional transformation (Nicholls, 2008), and vehicles for inclusive economic growth, particularly in subsistence markets (Ansari et al., 2012; Azmat et al., 2015). Additionally, social enterprises are recognized as mechanisms for poverty alleviation (Bloom, 2009; Ghauri et al., 2014; Alvord et al., 2004) and empowerment tools for marginalized groups, particularly women (Datt & Gailey, 2012).

Scholars increasingly conceptualize social entrepreneurship as a multilevel phenomenon, requiring engagement at multiple scales (Bruin & Shaw, 2013; Howaldt et al., 2024; Tracey et al., 2011; Vasquez-Delsolar & Merino, 2021; van Wijk et al., 2010). At the individual level, social entrepreneurs identify social issues and opportunities; at the organizational level, they develop innovative business models and form strategic collaborations; and at the macro level, they work toward embedding their values and practices within broader institutional systems (Tracey et al., 2011; Vasquez Delsolar & Merino, 2021). However, despite its inherently multilevel nature, research on social entrepreneurship has often been limited to a single level of analysis, which constrains deeper insights that could be achieved through a holistic, multi-layered perspective (Saebi et al., 2019).

A comprehensive way to understand social enterprises within this holistic perspective is to view them as active agents in challenging and reshaping dominant institutional logics—historically embedded frameworks of practices, values, beliefs, and rules that shape cognition, behavior, and decision-making (Thornton & Ocasio, 1999). By embedding a social mission at their core, social enterprises do not merely operate within existing systems but seek to redefine them. As such, they have the potential to play a transformational role (Pel et al., 2023; Moulaert et al., 2017; Hillman et al., 2018) within the business system—understood as the institutional configuration of actors, rules, norms, beliefs, and practices that collectively shape the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services (Vasquez Delsolar & Merino, 2021).

In this regard, several scholars (Amanatidou et al., 2024; Pel & Bauler, 2016; Vasquez-Delsolar & Merino, 2021, Witkamp et al., 2011) suggest that the social entrepreneurship field can be conceptualized as a niche towards a sustainable system. In sustainability transition research, a niche refers to a protected space where actors experiment with alternative logics, organizational forms, and governance models that deviate from dominant institutional prescriptions (Geels, 2002; 2020). These niches act as incubators for radical innovations, allowing novel practices to emerge and evolve in relative isolation from mainstream pressures. Under favorable conditions, these innovations can gain momentum, scale up, and challenge prevailing institutions, ultimately contributing to broader institutional and systemic transformation (Rip & Kemp, 1998).

For social enterprises to transition from a niche phenomenon to mainstream adoption, a critical question emerges: to what extent, and through what mechanism, can they effectively drive institutional change while simultaneously operating within the very structures they seek to transform? This paradox underscores the inherent tension between agency and structure, as social enterprises must navigate established institutional frameworks while striving to redefine them (Smith & Raven, 2012; Mair & Martí, 2006). Understanding this interplay is key to assessing their transformative potential in reshaping economic and social systems.

Addressing this question requires engaging with the concept of the paradox of embedded agency (Seo & Creed, 2002; Battilana et al., 2009), which challenges the assumption that actors—despite being deeply embedded in institutional structures—can still drive meaningful change. In this context, it is important to consider that social enterprises operate within institutional complexity, characterized by the coexistence of multiple, often contradictory, institutional logics within a given field (Greenwood et al., 2011). This complexity generates friction, as different logics impose competing demands and constraints, but it also opens pathways for innovation. By navigating these tensions, social enterprises can identify alternative possibilities, leverage resources from diverse institutional domains, and act as institutional entrepreneurs who strategically reconfigure existing structures to create new institutional arrangements (Battilana et al., 2009; Khan et al., 2007).

Building on this perspective, this thesis examines the institutional dynamics that shape social enterprises' actions, focusing on how they navigate complex environments to mobilize resources and establish new institutional logics, despite often being positioned as peripheral actors with limited institutional power (Doherty et al., 2014; Martí & Mair, 2009; Pel & Bauler, 2017; Pache & Santos, 2013;). Operating within institutional complexity, social enterprises engage with multiple, often contradictory logics, continuously balancing the need for legitimacy within dominant structures while striving to drive systemic change.

This tension reflects a central paradox of social entrepreneurship: while social enterprises emerge as innovators seeking to disrupt existing systems, they also interact with and adapt to dominant market structures. Rather than functioning as purely transformative or entirely conformist entities, they occupy a liminal space where they simultaneously contribute to systemic change while reinforcing elements of the prevailing business landscape (Pel et al., 2023).

This duality raises a critical question: Do social enterprises genuinely offer a viable alternative to dominant institutional logics, or do they inadvertently reinforce capitalist agendas? (Nicholls & Teasdale, 2017;Pel et al., 2023; Shaw & Bruin, 2013). Addressing this question requires moving beyond a simplistic binary of transformation versus reproduction (Pel et al., 2023) and engaging in a critical examination of the normative assumptions that underlie social entrepreneurship (Caibaja-Santana, 2014). By exploring the intricate ways in which social enterprises navigate, challenge, and accommodate institutional structures, this research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of their role in broader processes of institutional change.

Existing theoretical frameworks often oversimplify agency, failing to fully capture the interplay of constraints and enablers that shape actors' capacity for institutional transformation (Haxeltine et al., 2017). A more comprehensive, context-sensitive understanding of social entrepreneurship is needed (Haxeltine et al., 2017; Mair & Martí, 2006; Doherty et al., 2014;

Marques et al., 2018; Westley et al., 2017)—one that not only considers the dynamic relationship between structure and agency but also recognizes the ways in which social enterprises simultaneously challenge and adapt to existing systems. This requires particular attention to power dynamics, as power plays a fundamental role in enabling actors to mobilize people and resources or to access the means necessary to effect change (Benessiah & Eakin, 2018).

To advance this perspective, deeper theorization is required to understand the dynamic interactions between social innovation initiatives and broader processes of institutional and systemic change (Murray et al., 2010; Marques et al., 2018; Westley et al., 2017; Domanski et al., 2019; Smith & Raven, 2012; Pel et al., 2020). By shifting away from rigid dichotomies and engaging with the complexities of institutional transformation, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of how social enterprises operate within and against dominant institutional structures.

B. Research questions

To achieve the goal of deepening the understanding of the paradox of social entrepreneurship, this thesis addresses three research questions:

Research Question 1: What institutional dynamics shape the pathways of social enterprises toward transforming the business system?

Sustainability transitions scholars increasingly emphasize the need to transcend sector-specific analyses and instead interrogate the broader institutional logics that sustain unsustainable business practices (Avelino et al., 2024). Responding to this call, this thesis explores how social enterprises—often situated within and shaped by dominant capitalist logics—can nevertheless act to challenge, reinterpret, and reconfigure these very logics in pursuit of a more sustainable and inclusive business system.

This inquiry engages directly with the paradox of embedded agency: how actors embedded in existing institutions can initiate transformative institutional change. Rather than portraying social enterprises as autonomous disruptors, this study adopts a multilevel perspective that situates them within dynamic processes of institutional transformation. By linking micro-level entrepreneurial agency with macro-level structural evolution, the thesis aligns with and advances current debates in social entrepreneurship and sustainability transitions research (Klarin & Suseno, 2023; Pel et al., 2020; Avelino et al., 2019; Marques et al., 2018; Westley et al., 2017; Haxeltine et al., 2017; Pel et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the research aims to elucidate the institutional mechanisms—both enabling and constraining—that shape how social enterprises contribute to reconfiguring the business system. It sheds light on their capacity to act as embedded yet transformative agents within capitalist institutional frameworks.

Research question 2: How do social enterprises exert power while navigating institutional complexity in their transformative journey?

Much of the literature on social enterprises has traditionally been apolitical, often overlooking the contested and power-laden nature of institutional change (Avelino, 2017). Yet, transforming the capitalist business system entails more than the diffusion of innovative models—it requires a profound reconfiguration of entrenched power relations (Raj et al., 2024; Haxeltine et al., 2017).

In response, scholars have increasingly called for a power-sensitive lens in the analysis of innovation and social change (Swyngedouw, 2005; Voß et al., 2009; Moulaert et al., 2007; Meadowcroft, 2009; Avelino & Rotmans, 2009, 2011; Grin, 2012; Smith & Stirling, 2010; Kern, 2011). Nonetheless, sustainability transitions research has often conceptualized power in narrow, hierarchical terms—typically as top-down regulatory control wielded by dominant actors in a binary struggle between incumbents and challengers (Geels & Schot, 2007). More recent scholarship, however, has introduced a richer, more relational understanding of power that includes dispersed, horizontal, and productive forms of power (Avelino, 2017; Grin, 2012).

This thesis builds on these emerging perspectives to explore how social enterprises—embedded within, yet oriented toward transforming dominant institutional logics—navigate contested terrains of power. Rather than assuming a binary or one-dimensional view of power, it examines the diverse strategies through which these actors mobilize resources, forge alliances, resist pressures, and construct legitimacy across multiple institutional levels. By foregrounding the interplay of domination, resistance, and empowerment, this study seeks to illuminate how social enterprises negotiate and reshape power dynamics as they strive to reconfigure the capitalist business system from within.

Research Question 3: How can social enterprises navigate and transcend the dichotomy between challenging and adapting to institutional structures while driving systemic change?

Social enterprises are often framed as either radical disruptors challenging dominant capitalist structures or as passive adapters reinforcing neoliberal logics (Shaw & Bruin, 2013; Nicholls & Teasdale, 2017). However, this binary fails to capture the complex, strategic, and sometimes contradictory ways in which social enterprises engage with institutional structures (Pel et al., 2022). Rather than existing solely as challengers or adapters, social enterprises operate along a spectrum of institutional engagement, employing a mix of transgressive, disruptive, and adaptive strategies to navigate systemic barriers and drive social and environmental change.

This research explores how social enterprises manage the institutional complexity that they face, balancing disruption and compliance, resistance and accommodation, innovation and institutional legitimacy. By examining how they mobilize power, negotiate legitimacy, and leverage institutional pluralism, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of how social enterprises contribute to long-term systemic change without being confined to simplistic categorizations of challengers or adapters.

The following diagram illustrates the underlying logic and the interconnection of the research questions:

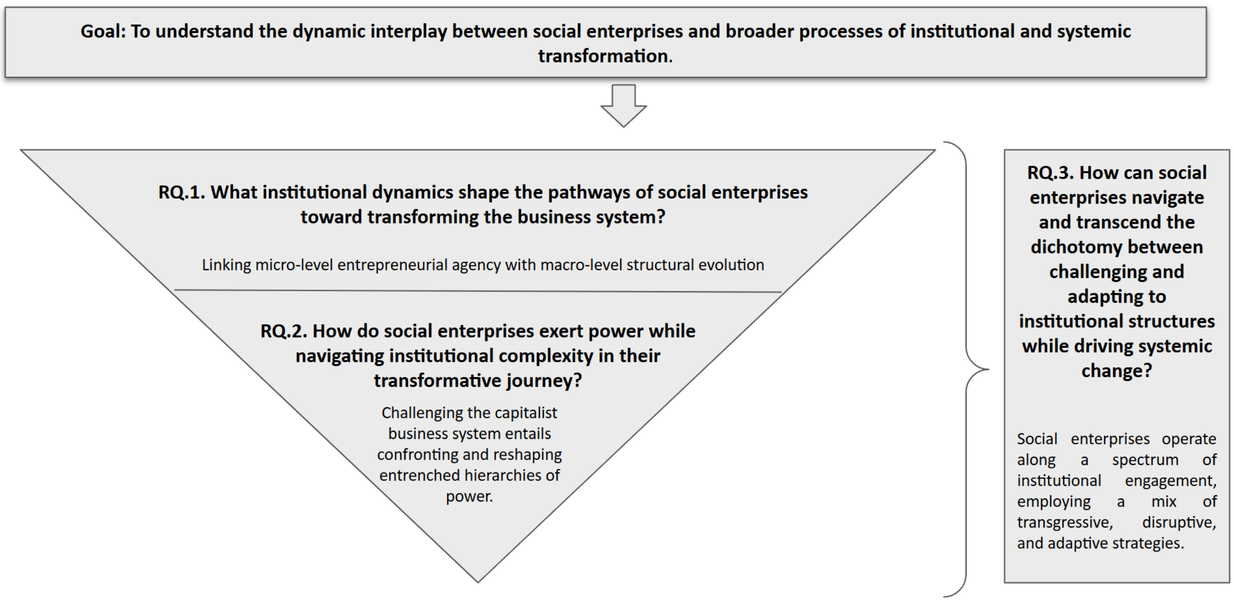

Figure 1: Goal and research questions

C. Research Outline and Structure

This thesis addresses the topic and research questions according to the following chart:

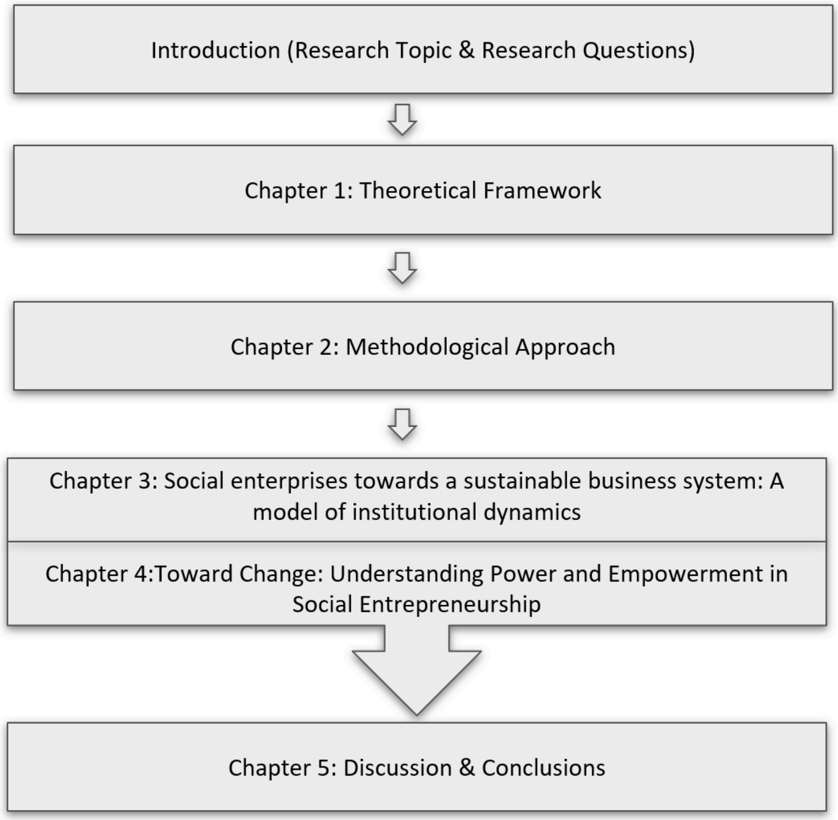

Figure 2: Chapter of the thesis

Chapter 1: Theoretical framework

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundation for understanding the research problem and guiding the analysis. It introduces key concepts, theories, and perspectives that structure this study. Specifically, this thesis draws on four interrelated theoretical perspectives:

- The Phenomenon of Social Entrepreneurship Beyond a Business Model Perspective, explore how social entrepreneurship contributes to reshaping norms, values, and systems, highlighting its potential for structural transformation within broader social and economic contexts.

- Social enterprises navigating institutional complexity and the dynamics of transformative change, draws on institutional logics theory to examine how social enterprises manage tensions between competing logics, such as capitalist business logic and social mission, within the business system.
- Social Enterprises as Institutional Entrepreneurs, drawing from institutional entrepreneurship theory, this part positions social enterprises as proactive actors who mobilize resources, build coalitions, and influence institutional structures to enable change from within.
- Social Enterprises as emerging actors in Sustainability Transitions, using frameworks such as the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) and Transformative Social Innovation (TSI), this section situates social enterprises within broader societal transitions, emphasizing their role in fostering systemic shifts toward sustainability and social justice.
- Power and Empowerment in social entrepreneurship disruptive dynamics, brings in relational and multidimensional conceptualizations of power to examine how non-dominant actors exert power within unequal and complex institutional settings. It also addresses the notion of empowerment as both a structural and agentic process, enabling marginalized actors to mobilize resources and enact change.
- Social Entrepreneurship as a Paradoxical Force, delves into the paradoxes inherent in social entrepreneurship. It explores the tension between transformation and institutional embeddedness, innovation and conformity, and short-term adaptation and long-term systemic change.

By integrating these perspectives, this chapter provides a comprehensive theoretical lens for analyzing how social enterprises are involve in systemic transformation.

Chapter 2: Methodological approach

This chapter defines the overarching strategy and philosophical orientation guiding this thesis. It encompasses the research paradigm, theoretical framework, and methods for data collection and analysis, ensuring coherence between the research questions, conceptual foundations, and empirical investigation. In this thesis, the methodological approach integrates a constructivist paradigm, a middle-range theorization, and an interpretative research strategy, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of how social enterprises navigate and attempt to transform institutional structures within the business system.

By integrating these methodological components, this study aims to articulate the institutional mechanisms and power dynamics shaping the agency of social entrepreneurs in their efforts to transform dominant business systems. This approach ensures both theoretical depth and empirical rigor, contributing to a nuanced understanding of institutional transformation in which social enterprises are involved.

Chapter 3: Social enterprises towards a sustainable business system: A model of institutional dynamics

This chapter presents the conceptual model developed to explain the institutional dynamics shaping the interaction between social enterprises and the business system. It introduces a middle-range theoretical framework, bridging insights from institutional entrepreneurship and sustainability transitions literature. This model provides a structured yet flexible foundation for analyzing the mechanisms through which social enterprises drive systemic transformation. By formulating a set of theoretical propositions, it establishes a framework for empirical examination, ensuring both analytical depth and practical relevance.

This chapter was published in the *Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions* journal, which is ranked Quartile 1 (Q1) in the Journal Citation Reports (JCR) in the categories of Environmental Science and Social Sciences. The journal has an impact factor of 5.7 (2023), underscoring its academic significance and contribution to the field.

Chapter 4: Toward Change: Understanding Power and Empowerment in Social Entrepreneurship

This chapter examines the transformational role of social enterprises by analyzing the power and empowerment dynamics they navigate within the business system. This work builds on two of the proposition set which is presented in the Chapter 3 (Vasquez-Delsolar & Merino, 2021) regarding power and resistance:

- P.9: The ability of social enterprises to transform the business regime depends on their capacity to perform both material and symbolic actions, leading to the exercise of transformative and constitutive power.

To investigate these dynamics, the study employs a hermeneutic interpretive approach as a methodological lens for analyzing power relations within transformative business system change. The findings reveal that power dynamics in social entrepreneurship can be classified into two key dimensions: (i) Reflexivity Dynamics – Encompassing emotional work and relational identity, which foster self-empowerment and drive social entrepreneurs to take action; and (ii) Instrumental Mechanisms – Strategies through which social entrepreneurs engage with and reshape the business system, including collaborative efforts, counter-traditional business practices, and innovation.

Through these processes, social entrepreneurs strategically contest dominant institutional norms and gain empowerment, exerting innovative and transformative power to drive systemic change.

This chapter has been submitted for publication to Social Enterprise Journal and it is under review.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

This last chapter discusses the findings of the previous studies (Chapter 4 and Chapter 5) and explores the contributions of the thesis. Includes the explanation of why this thesis offers a comprehensive, theory-driven, and empirically grounded exploration of how social enterprises navigate power dynamics and institutional complexity to drive systemic transformation. By developing a middle-range theoretical model, it advances the understanding of social enterprises as institutional entrepreneurs, bridging insights from institutional theory, sustainability transitions, and social innovation studies.

Through an interpretative analysis, this research deepens knowledge on how social enterprises exert power, integrate empowerment, and balance adaptation with transformation within the business system. Beyond academic contributions, the findings provide practical insights for a range of stakeholders—including policymakers, impact investors, commercial partners, and social enterprise networks—on how to create supportive governance structures that foster transformative change. By unpacking the institutional mechanisms and power dynamics shaping social enterprises' agency, this thesis helps inform the development of policies, investment strategies, and collaborative frameworks that enable social enterprises to operate effectively while driving systemic shifts. In doing so, it highlights their nuanced role in reshaping capitalist business structures toward more sustainable and inclusive models, moving beyond simplistic narratives of either reinforcing or completely disrupting dominant systems.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical foundations that inform this thesis's conceptualization of social entrepreneurship as a transformative force within institutional contexts. Rather than approaching social enterprises through a narrow business model lens, this chapter adopts a multidimensional and multilevel perspective that integrates insights from institutional theory, sustainability transitions, and power analysis. This approach allows a more nuanced understanding of how social enterprises operate within, against, and beyond established systems, shaped by competing logics, shifting power dynamics, and the interplay between structure and agency. Each section builds on the previous one to construct an integrated framework that accounts for the complexities of institutional change and the strategic positioning of social enterprises within that process.

The chapter unfolds in five interconnected sections. Section 1.1 problematizes dominant approaches to social entrepreneurship and introduces the need for a multilevel, processual perspective. Section 1.2 deepens this view by exploring how social enterprises navigate institutional complexity and challenge dominant logics. Section 1.3 frames social enterprises as institutional entrepreneurs and unpacks their capacity to mobilize resources and legitimacy to instigate change. Section 1.4 bridges this discussion with sustainability transitions theory, highlighting the multilevel systems within which social enterprises act as niche innovators and regime challengers. Section 1.5 introduces a power-sensitive lens that reframes social entrepreneurship as both a site of resistance and a locus of empowerment, essential for understanding how systemic transformation unfolds in contested institutional terrains. Finally, Section 1.6 positions social entrepreneurship between transformation and institutional capture which highlight the paradoxical nature of social enterprises**.** Together, these sections provide the conceptual seed for the empirical and analytical work that follows in later chapters.

1.1. The phenomenon of social entrepreneurship beyond a business model perspective

The academic discourse on social entrepreneurship remains conceptually fragmented, with ongoing debates about its boundaries and definitional clarity (Saebi et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2020; Zulfiqar et al., 2019). Despite these ambiguities, most definitions converge on the hybrid nature of social enterprises, which integrate a social mission with entrepreneurial ventures (Battilana & Dorado, 2020; Pache & Santos, 2013). Unlike traditional businesses, social enterprises prioritize social impact over private financial profit (Alvord et al., 2004; Bedi & Yadav, 2019; Azmat et al., 2015; Mair et al., 2012; Munshi, 2010; Narangajavana et al., 2016; Noruzi & Westover., 2011; Pless, 2012; Saebi et al., 2019; Santos, 2012; Zadek & Thake, 1997).

Academic interest in social entrepreneurship has surged, exploring various aspects such as the characteristics of social entrepreneurs (McMullen et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2021), the hybrid nature of social enterprises (Battilana & Lee, 2014; Battilana et al., 2015), and the business strategies and models they employ (George & Reed, 2016; Roy & Karna, 2015). Other studies examine the role of discourse and narratives in shaping social enterprises (Pel et al., 2020; Roundy, 2014; Ruebottom, 2013; Dey & Steyaert, 2006; Dey, 2006), their potential to challenge dominant systems (Shaw & Bruin, 2013; Newey, 2018), the dissemination of social enterprise practices across industries (Waldron et al., 2016; George & Reed, 2016), and the processes of value creation and dissemination (Hietschold et al., 2023; Sulphey & Alkahtani, 2017; Cherrier et al., 2018).

Although these studies contribute to understanding social entrepreneurship from various perspectives, they fail to offer a comprehensive, holistic overview of the field (Kannampuzha & Hockerts, 2019; Klarin & Suseno, 2022; Gupta et al., 2020; Saebi et al., 2019). Several authors (Dees & Anderson, 2007; Kannampuzha & Hockerts, 2019) suggest that social entrepreneurship is best understood as a collection of practices, processes, and behaviors that organizations can adopt to varying extents. In that account, future research on social entrepreneurship opportunities needs to go beyond the characteristics of the entrepreneur-opportunities exploitation link, and consider wider institutional and community dynamics (Wu et al., 2020)

In that regard, several authors (Klarin & Suseno, 2022; Saebi et al., 2019; Tracey et al., 2011) argue that social entrepreneurship is a complex, multi-dimensional, and multilevel phenomenon best studied at three interconnected levels —micro (individual), meso (organizational), and macro (institutional/policy). However, existing research tends to focus narrowly on one of these levels rather than integrating them, leading to fragmented conclusions and limiting the development of cohesive theories and policies that effectively support social entrepreneurship (Klarin & Suseno, 2022; Saebi et al., 2019).

Building on this perspective, recently several authors (Klarin & Suseno, 2022; Saebi et al., 2019) have proposed multi-level frameworks for social entrepreneurship research, categorizing studies into micro-, meso-, and macro-level analyses. One of their key conclusions is that future research should further explore the process stage at the micro- and macro-levels, as well as the connections between different levels and stages (Klarin & Suseno, 2022; Saebi et al., 2019).

Saebi et al. (2019) identify two key phases in the development of social enterprises: (1) the pre-formation stage, which involves designing a *de novo* hybrid business model to address a social purpose—either through a start-up or within an existing organization—and (2) the post-formation stage, where the enterprise begins to create social value through its operations. Building on this framework, Klarin and Suseno (2022) emphasize the role of institutional and precursor factors as antecedents that shape the context in which social enterprises emerge. They also highlight a process stage—closely related to the post-formation phase—during which social enterprises actively operate and generate outcomes. However, their literature review notes that this process stage remains underexplored, especially at the micro and macro levels, with existing research largely concentrated on meso-level aspects such as business model execution and strategy. Advancing this approach could help bridge existing gaps and offer a more integrated understanding of how social enterprises evolve, function, and create impact across multiple levels.

1.2. Social enterprises navigating institutional complexity and the dynamics of transformative change

By prioritizing social value over profit maximization, social enterprises challenge the long-standing dominance of profit-driven business models. Positioned as catalysts for transformative change, they actively experiment with alternative economic logics and governance models that emphasize inclusivity, resilience, and sustainability (Avelino et al., 2020; Cherrier et al., 2017).

This transformative potential is inherently relational, emerging not from isolated initiatives but from the broader social contexts in which these enterprises operate (Avelino et al., 2019; Di Domenico et al., 2010; Haugh & Talwar, 2016; Hota et al., 2019; Pel et al., 2023). Accordingly, the capacity of social enterprises to drive systemic change is fundamentally tied to their ability to reshape the institutional structures that govern economic and social interactions.

The institutional logics perspective offers a valuable framework for analyzing how social enterprises interact within broader social systems. Thornton and Ocasio (1999) define institutional logics as socially constructed patterns of values, norms, and practices that guide decision-making and organizational behavior. Originally introduced by Alford & Friedland (1985), this concept underscores how institutions are embedded within wider societal structures, where multiple—and often conflicting—logics coexist. These logics shape not only organizational behavior but also identity and legitimacy, influencing how organizations align with dominant societal expectations (Thornton et al., 2012; Suchman, 1995). As a result, many organizations conform to prevailing institutional logics to gain legitimacy and secure critical resources (Greenwood et al., 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Thornton et al. (2012) identify several societal orders—such as the family, religion, the state, professions, and the market—that structure the behavior of actors. Among these, market logic has become particularly dominant in contemporary business environments, prioritizing competition, commodification, and profit maximization as core principles (Aglietta & Rebérioux, 2005). Market logic influences how companies allocate resources, define success, and engage with stakeholders, reinforcing cost-cutting, market expansion, and innovation driven by profitability.

However, institutional logics are not static. They evolve in response to shifting societal values, technological change, and regulatory developments (Greenwood et al., 2011; Lounsbury et al., 2021; Thornton et al., 2012). Organizations embedded within institutional fields possess the capacity to instigate change by challenging entrenched norms and navigating the constraints imposed by dominant logics (Holm, 1995).

In recent years, tensions have intensified between traditional market logic and emerging alternative logics that emphasize sustainability, social responsibility, and collective well-being (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). Feola (2020) highlights how sustainability logic, centered on environmental protection and social equity, is increasingly contesting market-oriented business models. This shift is evident in the rise of social enterprises, CSR initiatives, and impact investing, all of which seek to balance financial performance with social and environmental goals (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Nicholls, 2010).

Research on institutional logics has shown that tensions and conflicts between logics can be drivers of institutional change, moving the field beyond earlier theories focused primarily on isomorphism (Lounsbury et al., 2021). Institutional change is understood as the transformation of dominant logics and can occur through mechanisms such as replacement, blending, and segregation (Thornton et al., 2012). Replacement involves the complete displacement of one logic by another, often triggered by power shifts, political movements, or external pressures that undermine the legitimacy of the prevailing logic. Blending, also referred to as hybridization, integrates elements from multiple logics to form new, hybrid frameworks. Segregation allows distinct logics to coexist within an organization or sector by maintaining spatial or temporal separation, thus minimizing conflict and increasing operational flexibility.

In addition to these core mechanisms, incremental processes such as accommodation and accretion also contribute to institutional change (Micelotta et al., 2017). Accommodation involves subtle modifications to existing frameworks, enabling organizations to incorporate new logics without radically altering their core structures. This often entails adjusting norms, rules, or routines to encourage innovation while preserving institutional stability. Accretion, by contrast, is a slow accumulation of small, incremental changes that eventually result in significant systemic transformation. These processes highlight the evolutionary nature of institutional change and underscore how major transformations often emerge gradually, rather than through abrupt disruptions.

While much of the scholarly literature has conceptualized institutional change as the result of competition within a field—typically involving a shift from one dominant logic to another (Hoffman, 1999; Greenwood et al., 2002)—a growing body of research highlights how many organizations operate at the intersection of multiple institutional logics. This phenomenon, known as institutional complexity, refers to the coexistence of incompatible prescriptions from different logics within the same organizational field (Greenwood et al., 2011). In such contexts, organizations face conflicting demands that not only present challenges but also open up opportunities for innovation (Greenwood et al., 2011; Kraatz & Block, 2008; Klingbeil et al., 2019).

Social enterprises are a prime example of actors navigating institutional complexity. They operate under the simultaneous influence of a market logic, which emphasizes financial performance, and a social logic, which prioritizes mission-driven outcomes (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Pache & Santos, 2013). Balancing these logics is often fraught with difficulty, as meeting the expectations of one audience may risk alienating another (Martin & Osber, 2015; Siegner et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2012). These tensions, however, can also be generative: they create spaces for social entrepreneurs to introduce novel practices, question entrenched norms, and develop alternative organizing models (Battilana et al., 2009; Mair & Martí, 2006).

The growing demand for socially responsible business practices within a predominantly profit-driven economic system provides fertile ground for such innovation (Nicholls, 2010; Pache & Santos, 2010; Seo & Creed, 2002). Yet, leveraging institutional contradictions for transformative purposes requires both strategic acumen and resourcefulness. Social entrepreneurs must skillfully navigate competing logics while maintaining the integrity of their social mission (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Santos, 2012; Tracey et al., 2011).

In this light, understanding how social entrepreneurs manage the coexistence of rival and often conflicting institutional logics becomes critical, not only for explaining institutional change, but also for identifying pathways toward a more inclusive and sustainable business system (Reay & Hinings, 2009).

1.3. Social Enterprises as Institutional Entrepreneurs

Individual or organizational actors who leverage resources to create or transform institutions are referred to as *institutional entrepreneurs* (DiMaggio, 1998; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006; Maguire et al., 2004). Social entrepreneurs and their organizations are widely recognized as a specific type of institutional entrepreneur, given their efforts to introduce social value within market-driven environments (Battilana et al., 2009; Mair & Marti, 2006; Pache & Chowdhury, 2012; Chatzichristos & Nagopoulos, 2021). A defining characteristic of institutional entrepreneurs is their capacity to integrate diverse institutional logics, fostering innovative solutions to complex societal challenges (Leca & Naccache, 2006; Garud et al., 2002).

Several authors (Tracey et al., 2011; Pel et al., 2023) have conceptualized social entrepreneurs as institutional entrepreneurs that challenge, and seek to transform, the institutionalized capitalist logics underpinning contemporary business systems. Their agency is not isolated or heroic but embedded in multi-level processes that will be discussed in Chapter 3.

However, the concept of institutional entrepreneurship has drawn criticism for potentially implying a disembedded form of agency, which contradicts institutional theory's emphasis on the constraining influence of social structures. This critique points to the risk of overlooking how institutional environments both enable and limit actors' capacities for change (Meyer, 2006; Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008; Micelotta et al., 2017). To reconcile this tension, often referred to as the *paradox of embedded agency,* scholars emphasize the importance of identifying structural conditions that allow actors to exercise agency within the very systems they aim to transform (Battilana & Leca, 2009).

According to Battilana et al. (2009), both field-level structural conditions and individual actor characteristics shape the likelihood of engaging in institutional entrepreneurship. Variations in institutional arrangements within a field can expose contradictions, prompting reflexivity and enabling the development of alternative practices. At the same time, an actor's social position, including their status, network ties, and access to resources, affects their capacity to enact change. Those in more advantageous positions are often better equipped to challenge and reshape institutional norms.

Institutional entrepreneurs must strategically align their actions with contextual realities, navigate political environments, and deploy narratives and symbols to generate support (Tracey et al., 2011). Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) conceptualize these purposive efforts as *institutional work*, intentional actions aimed at creating, maintaining, or disrupting institutions. Institutional work includes activities such as disconnecting rewards from entrenched practices via legal or regulatory means, disassociating moral legitimacy from dominant norms, and discrediting established assumptions to make room for new practices. Similarly, Battilana et al. (2009) stress the importance of articulating a vision for change, mobilizing stakeholders, and sustaining commitment through collective effort. Pacheco et al. (2010) extend this framework by identifying five strategies of institutional work: framing, theorizing, collaborating, lobbying, and negotiating.

Despite increasing interest in institutional work, the role of social enterprises in these processes remains relatively underexplored (Chandra, 2017; Dacin et al., 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Starnawska, 2017). Notable exceptions include Chandra's (2017) study of a Chinese social enterprise, which identified key discursive elements, such as problematization, empowerment, marketization, resource mobilization, and publicness, as central to driving institutional change. Similarly, Tracey et al. (2011), in their case study of Aspire, a UK-based social enterprise, outlined six forms of institutional work: problem framing, counterfactual thinking, building and theorizing organizational templates, connecting with macro-level discourses, and aligning with legitimate actors.

As previously discussed, social enterprises operate within contexts marked by institutional complexity, where competing logics often coexist. These logics, such as the tension between profit maximization and a social mission, reflect conflicting priorities that complicate the establishment of new values, beliefs, and practices (Purdy & Gray, 2009). The friction between dominant capitalist business logic and the hybrid logic embraced by social enterprises can constrain their potential for systemic change (Ruebottom, 2013; Sud et al., 2009) and restrict access to the resources necessary for long-term sustainability (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Greenwood et al., 2011; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). However, through ongoing interaction with their institutional environments, social enterprise actors develop creative capacities that allow them to navigate constraints, identify legitimate courses of action, and mobilize allies in support of transformative initiatives (Chatzichristos & Nagopoulos, 2021; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Greenwood et al., 2002).

Despite clear conceptual intersections between institutional complexity and institutional work, relatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the *practice* of engaging with institutional complexity itself (Jarzabkowski et al., 2009; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). Much of the literature tends to treat complexity as a backdrop rather than as a dynamic condition that actors must actively negotiate. Yet, for social enterprises, whose very existence is shaped by the interplay of conflicting logics such as market efficiency and social equity, working with institutional complexity is not just a contextual challenge but a core part of their strategic and operational reality. In this regard, Chapter 4 of this thesis adopts a multi-level perspective, encompassing the micro (individual agency and sensemaking), meso (organizational practices and stakeholder interactions), and macro (institutional structures and societal norms), to analyze how social entrepreneurs *navigate*, *resist*, and *reshape* the institutional environments they inhabit. By focusing on the lived, strategic, and often contested nature of this work, the chapter aims to shed light on how social entrepreneurs engage with complexity not as passive recipients of institutional pressures, but as active agents of change operating across multiple levels of influence.

1.4. Social enterprises as emerging actors in sustainability transitions

A defining feature of social enterprises is their innovative approach to mobilizing resources to address social challenges and drive sustainable transformation (Shaw and Bruin, 2013; Alvord et al., 2004). The study of social enterprises as institutional entrepreneurs is highly compatible with the study of sustainability transitions (Hoogstraaten et al., 2020), especially with the framework of the Multilevel perspective (MLP) (Geels, 2002), strategic niche management (Witkamp et al., 2011), and with the studies of transformative social innovation (TSI).

Institutional entrepreneurship studies and sustainability transitions research have in common the study of how actors change institutions (Hekkert & van den Hoed, 2017). Also, as was mentioned before, social entrepreneurship has a multilevel nature (Klarin & Suseno, 2022; Saebi et al., 2019; Tracey et al., 2011). In that context, within sustainability transition domains, the multilevel perspective (MLP) framework offers a valuable lens for analyzing how social enterprises navigate complex systems to drive systemic transformation (Rip & Kemp, 1998; Geels, 2002; Smith et al., 2010; Loorbach et al., 2017; Köhler et al., 2019). This framework conceptualizes societal change as a dynamic interplay between different levels of socio-technical systems, each with its characteristics, challenges, and opportunities. MLP delineates three analytical levels that collectively shape and influence the trajectory of systemic transformation. Niches represent protected spaces where radical innovations emerge and develop, shielded from the pressures and constraints of mainstream systems. Within these niches, actors can experiment with novel ideas, alternative business models, and innovative solutions to social challenges, often operating on the margins of dominant technological, economic, and institutional structures (Vähäkari et al., 2020). The niche level is crucial because it provides the flexibility and freedom necessary for actors to test and refine their approaches before scaling them up to broader societal contexts (Mitić-Radulović & Lalović, 2021). Several scholars argue that social entrepreneurship can be understood as a niche within this framework, entrepreneurs seek to challenge dominant logics, such as the capitalist business paradigm, and introduce alternative economic and organizational models (Pel & Bauler, 2017; Vasquez-Delsolar & Merino, 2021; Witkamp et al., 2021, Hillman et al., 2018).

Regimes constitute the dominant configurations of actors, rules, practices, and technologies that characterize established socio-economic systems (Rip & Kemp, 1998; Geels, 2002). These regimes are often resistant to change due to entrenched interests, path dependencies, and the stability provided by existing institutional arrangements (Radinger-Peer et al., 2021). However, regimes are not static; they are subject to internal tensions, contradictions, and external pressures that create windows of opportunity for transformative change (Hölsgens et al., 2018).

Social enterprises navigating interplaying with the regime encounter significant challenges, as they must contend with prevailing norms, regulatory frameworks, and competitive market forces that may not always align with their social mission. Social enterprises can leverage these tensions by introducing innovative practices that challenge existing paradigms and demonstrating the viability of alternative approaches (Didomenico et al., 2010; Garud et al., 2011).

Landscapes encompass broader societal trends, macro-level forces, and external pressures that influence both niches and regimes. These include economic crises, demographic shifts, technological advancements, environmental challenges, and cultural changes (Geels, 2019). Landscapes set the broader context within which social enterprises operate, often shaping the urgency and direction of their activities. For example, growing public awareness of social and environmental issues can create a favorable landscape for social enterprises, while economic downturns may present resource constraints but also stimulate innovative responses to pressing social needs (Wang et al., 2022). Landscapes encompass broader societal trends that exert external pressures on regimes, potentially creating windows of opportunity for change (Pel & Bauler, 2017).

According to the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) framework, transformative change occurs when innovations developed within protected niches align with tensions in the existing regime and broader landscape pressures, creating a confluence of forces that drive systemic shifts (Geels, 2002). While the MLP has traditionally been applied to socio-technical transitions (Geels, 2004), recent scholarship has expanded its scope to include social enterprises, by conceptualizing the business system itself as a regime—structured by dominant rules, norms, actors, and practices (Avelino & Wittmayer, 2016; Raven et al., 2012). Social enterprises, by actively navigating and influencing dynamics across niche, regime, and landscape levels, play a vital role in catalyzing transformation. Their efforts demonstrate that systemic change is not solely the product of top-down interventions but also emerges through grassroots innovation, adaptive agency, and collective action that unfolds across multiple levels of society (Geels, 2020; Ahmadov et al., 2023).

The MLP framework is particularly relevant for understanding social enterprises because it emphasizes the interconnectedness between micro-level innovations and macro-level structural transformations. It represents that systemic change is not linear, but a multilevel, multidimensional process shaped by feedback loops, actor networks, and shifting institutional contexts (Köhler et al., 2019), an approach increasingly echoed in social entrepreneurship research (Saebi et al., 2019; Klarin & Suseno, 2022). Addressing complex social and environmental challenges requires more than isolated organizational efforts; it demands structural shifts across political, economic, and cultural domains (Alvord et al., 2004). In this light, analytical frameworks that integrate multilevel, multi-actor, and multidimensional perspectives are essential to fully grasp the transformative potential of social enterprises (Köhler et al., 2019). Positioned at the intersection of economic and social systems, social enterprises embody the very type of change the MLP framework seeks to explain, acting as both products of and contributors to systemic transformation.

However, the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP) is not the only framework within sustainability transitions research that can be applied to the study of social entrepreneurship. In this regard, the emerging field of Transformative Social Innovation (TSI) (Pel et al., 2020; Avelino et al., 2019) offers a particularly relevant lens. TSI research examines how social innovations disrupt, modify, or replace entrenched institutional arrangements within specific social contexts (Haxeltine et al., 2016; Pel et al., 2020). Within this framework, social enterprises are conceptualized as agents of transformative change, actively envisioning and implementing new social configurations, relationships, and practices. By challenging dominant paradigms and fostering systemic change, they become key drivers of innovation at multiple levels (Pel et al., 2022; Alvord et al., 2002).

Importantly, transformative social innovation is not solely the product of individual actors. Rather, it emerges through evolving social relations and the redistribution of critical resources such as authority, legitimacy, and status (Pel et al., 2020; Micelotta et al., 2017). This relational view contrasts with much of the traditional social entrepreneurship literature, which has often portrayed social entrepreneurs as heroic, individual change-makers (Dacin & Tracey, 2011; Dey & Steyaert, 2016). A more holistic perspective acknowledges that social enterprises operate within broader social networks and institutional structures, where agency is both enabled and constrained by context. This reflects a form of situated agency—deeply embedded in specific circumstances and shaped by dynamic structural forces (Giddens, 1984; Haxeltine et al., 2017).

In line with this perspective, Avelino et al. (2019) propose a model of transformation that involves four interconnected “shades” of transformative change. The first is social innovation, which introduces new ideas, practices, or forms of organizing that respond to unmet social needs—such as microfinance and fair-trade models that empower marginalized communities through inclusive solutions. The second, system innovation, refers to structural changes within specific societal subsystems, for example, the rise of social finance instruments like impact investing that reshape how financial resources are allocated for social good. The third, game-changers, encompasses macro-level trends and developments—such as digital transformation and climate activism, that redefine societal norms and prompt social enterprises to innovate and adapt. Finally, narratives of change refer to the discourses and collective stories that shape how innovation is understood and pursued; social enterprises play an active role in advancing these narratives by using storytelling to advocate for sustainable practices like the circular economy, thereby influencing public perceptions and policy agendas. Each of these interrelated pathways contributes to challenging, reshaping, and potentially replacing dominant institutional logics, highlighting the transformative capacity of social enterprises to foster long-term systemic change.

1.5. Power and empowerment in social entrepreneurship disruptive dynamics

The concept of power plays a central role in understanding the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship, especially in contexts marked by institutional complexity and structural inequality. However, power has been theorized in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways, ranging from structural and deterministic views to relational, agentic, and emancipatory interpretations. These conceptualizations significantly influence how we understand empowerment, resistance, and the capacity for institutional change.

From a structural perspective, Foucault (1976) conceptualizes power not as a resource held by individuals or institutions, but as a diffuse and productive force embedded in discourse, shaping identities, knowledge, and social practices. Power circulates through systems and structures, reinforcing hierarchies and marginalizing certain actors and perspectives (Torfing, 2009). For social entrepreneurs, this implies that their efforts to innovate and drive social change are deeply shaped—and often constrained, by broader systemic forces such as market logic, regulatory regimes, and cultural norms. A common critique of this view is its tendency to downplay individual agency, framing power as something exercised through structures rather than actively wielded by actors (Foucault, 1980).

Challenging structural determinism, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) present a more dynamic understanding of power through their theory of strategic action fields. In this view, social fields are seen as arenas of contestation where various actors possessing distinct resources, interests, and positions—continually negotiate to shape the field's norms and rules. Power is conceptualized as relational, emerging through strategic actions, the building of alliances, and influence over outcomes (Greenwood et al., 2002; Wittmayer et al., 2015). This approach emphasizes that power is embedded in social relations and is fluid and evolving rather than fixed or top-down.

Building on this relational view, agency-centered perspectives (Lukes, 1974; Clegg, 1989) emphasize the capacity of individuals and organizations to act within—and against—structural constraints. Social entrepreneurs, in this view, exercise power through resource mobilization, coalition-building, and institutional entrepreneurship. While structures shape the boundaries of action, they do not determine it entirely. Actors can challenge and transform institutions through innovation, advocacy, and collective effort (Battilana, 2006; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Crucially, the distribution of power is not equal. Actors' positions within institutional fields shape their access to resources, legitimacy, and the capacity to navigate competing logics. Central actors, often embedded in dominant institutions, tend to reinforce existing power structures (Greenwood et al., 2002). Peripheral actors—such as many social enterprises—may have fewer resources but greater flexibility to challenge established norms (Leblebici et al., 1991). This highlights the relational and situated nature of agency, shaped by the interplay between structure and position.

The shifting and contested nature of power is particularly relevant in the field of social entrepreneurship, where innovation often emerges from the margins and is driven by collective rather than individual agency (Barnes, 2002; Raj et al., 2024; Avelino et al., 2024). Institutions are not just structures of control; they are also sites of contestation where actors mobilize to reshape rules and redistribute resources (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017).

In this context, different conceptualizations of power become useful. Pitkin (1972) distinguishes between "power over"—the capacity to dominate or control others—and "power to," which refers to the ability to act and effect change. Social enterprises often confront "power over" dynamics when dominant actors such as funders or regulators impose constraints on their autonomy, pressuring them to conform to market-driven logics. In contrast, "power to" emphasizes agency, creativity, and innovation. Social enterprises enact this form of power when they mobilize resources, develop alternative business models, and advocate for systemic change.

A third form, "power with," emphasizes collective agency and collaboration (Allen, 1999; Partzsch, 2015; Pansardi & Bindi, 2021). It highlights the importance of alliances, participatory governance, and co-creation with diverse stakeholders. Social enterprises often engage in this form of power when partnering with NGOs, communities, and ethical businesses to amplify impact and legitimacy—especially in contexts where institutional complexity and asymmetries make collaboration essential.

These power dynamics also unfold within the frameworks of sustainability transitions, particularly the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP). In the MLP, transformative change results from the interaction between niche innovations (e.g., social enterprises), regime-level structures (e.g., incumbent industries), and landscape-level pressures (e.g., climate change, economic crises) (Geels, 2002; Geels, 2020). However, critics argue that the MLP tends to privilege regime actors and hierarchical power relations, overlooking the horizontal, distributed, and contested nature of power in transition processes (Avelino, 2017; Pel & Bauler, 2017). As a response, scholars have called for integrating a more relational and horizontal understanding of power that emphasizes how actors interact with resources and institutions in situated and dynamic ways (Avelino, 2017; Grin, 2012).

From this more nuanced perspective, power is not simply about control or domination but about the capacity to reproduce, innovate, or transform social systems (Avelino, 2017). Reinforcive power sustains existing structures, innovative power generates new resources and ideas, and transformative power establishes new institutions and norms. These types of power are not mutually exclusive; the same actor may simultaneously engage in reinforcing some structures while transforming others. This highlights power's dynamic and multi-layered nature, exercised not just through authority but through influence, meaning-making, and resource reconfiguration.

Gaventa (2021) further expands the horizontal understanding of power by proposing a multidimensional model in which power operates across levels (local, national, global) and spaces (closed, invited, claimed), and manifests in visible, hidden, and invisible forms. For him, transformative change happens when actors engage across all these dimensions simultaneously linking grassroots mobilization with institutional engagement, connecting local struggles with global advocacy, and addressing not only formal barriers but also internalized beliefs and norms. Power, in this sense, is not just about what is done, but also about how, where, and with whom it is exercised.

This multidimensional view of power sets the stage for a deeper understanding of empowerment, which is often associated with the idea of “power to.” Empowerment, in this context, goes beyond personal agency or psychological readiness—it is a relational and structural process. It involves gaining access to resources, but also developing the capacity and opportunity to mobilize those resources effectively within existing power structures (Gaventa, 2021; Avelino, 2021). In other words, empowerment is not just about the individual's will to act, but about transforming the surrounding conditions that enable or constrain meaningful action. Particularly for actors in marginalized positions, empowerment entails engaging with—and sometimes disrupting—the very systems that distribute power unequally, thereby opening new pathways for agency and institutional change.

This framing aligns with Foucault’s later work on practices of freedom, which challenges the dichotomy between domination and resistance. Power, he argues, is not simply imposed; it must be assumed by the subject (Foucault, 2010). In this view, individuals are not merely subjected to power; they can actively shape their subjectivity and exercise freedom even within systems of constraint. As Dey & Steyaert (2014) suggest, social entrepreneurs may embrace certain managerial or entrepreneurial discourses not out of conformity, but as acts of strategic affirmation and self-fashioning aimed at expanding ethical possibilities.

In practice, social enterprises, especially those operating from marginalized or peripheral positions, employ a variety of political strategies and innovative practices to redistribute power, challenge hegemonic structures, and open up space for more inclusive and sustainable alternatives (Maguire et al., 2004). Yet despite its centrality to transformation, power remains an underutilized analytical lens in both sustainability transitions and transformative social innovation (Smith & Stirling, 2018; Scoones et al., 2015; Hess, 2013).

Recognizing complexity, multidimensionality, and relationality of power not only enhances our understanding of social enterprises as change agents but also reveals how they negotiate and reshape systems of influence. In doing so, they challenge the moral basis of a capitalist system that often prioritizes profit over equity, sustainability, and well-being (Dey et al., 2016; Burchell & Cook, 2013). As calls for alternative business models grow louder—models that serve not just shareholders but communities, workers, and the planet (World Economic Forum, 2023)—social enterprises emerge as crucial actors in redefining and redistributing power within the business system and beyond.

1.6. Social Entrepreneurship as a Paradoxical Force: Between Transformation and Institutional Capture

The transformative potential of social entrepreneurship can be explored through the lens of Transformative Social Innovation (TSI), a concept that captures the process of challenging, altering, or replacing dominant institutional arrangements within specific socio-material contexts (Pel et al., 2020). However, these processes unfold within a landscape of institutional complexity, where efforts to reshape the business system must navigate the persistent tension between institutional determinism and individual agency—a dilemma often referred to as the "paradox of embedded agency" (Holm, 1995). This paradox underscores the difficulty of driving systemic change from within institutional structures that simultaneously constrain and enable entrepreneurial action. As such, the role of social entrepreneurship is inherently paradoxical, both enabling and limited by the very systems it seeks to transform (Pel et al., 2020; Pel et al., 2023).

Building on this premise, Pel et al. (2023) outline a series of paradoxes that characterize the dynamics of TSI and shape the pathways of social enterprises. A central paradox is that of system reproduction: while aiming to disrupt dominant institutions, social enterprises may gradually become embedded within them, inadvertently reinforcing the status quo. As social enterprises gain legitimacy and scale, they often adapt to institutional expectations, risking absorption into the very systems they intended to challenge.

Another key tension is temporality, the need to address short-term operational demands while remaining committed to long-term transformative goals. This temporal tension can result in strategic compromises that prioritize immediate viability over radical innovation. A third paradox concerns reality construction, which refers to the interpretive and socially constructed nature of innovation. The transformative potential of social enterprises is continually shaped by institutional logics, stakeholder expectations, and dominant narratives, making innovation an inherently contested and negotiated process.

Importantly, Pel et al. (2023) argue that these paradoxes should not be viewed solely as obstacles. Instead, they are integral to the innovation process itself, demanding reflexive and adaptive strategies that allow social enterprises to balance conformity with disruption. This dynamic interplay between adaptation and resistance is essential to sustaining transformative ambitions in the face of structural constraints.

Yet, a growing concern in the literature is the risk of institutional capture, where social enterprises, in adapting to dominant business logics, experience mission drift or a dilution of their original values (Pel & Bauler, 2017; Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Besharov et al., 2012). This risk is particularly acute when established actors who embody dominant institutional logics co-opt the key activities of social enterprises, thereby steering them toward goals aligned with market efficiency, profitability, or competitiveness, rather than social transformation.

Transition studies recognize this process as a stabilization mechanism, whereby incumbent regimes seek to neutralize disruptive innovations through co-optation or absorption (Pel, 2016; Pel & Bauler, 2017). Social innovation, as Moulaert et al. (2013, p. 17) argue, “cannot be separated either from its social-cultural context or from its social-political context." In practice, this means that social enterprises operate in highly uneven terrain. Those with strong financial and political backing are often better equipped to scale their innovations and maintain autonomy, while resource-constrained actors are more vulnerable to institutional pressures (Santos, 2012; Zahra et al., 2009; Tracey & Jarvis, 2007).

A striking illustration of this phenomenon can be found in Pel and Bauler's (2017) case study of Flemish Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs). Created to foster social inclusion through employment, these organizations faced increasing pressure from market-oriented funding mechanisms that emphasized efficiency, output, and competitiveness. Over time, this exposure led to a subtle but profound shift in their organizational priorities—from social impact to economic performance. What began as an effort to challenge systemic exclusion gradually evolved into a model that aligned with dominant institutional logics, exemplifying the threat of capture and mission dilution.

Pel and Bauler's (2017) findings reveal the precarious positioning of social enterprises: situated in a grey zone where the need for legitimacy and survival often leads to incremental alignment with prevailing institutional norms. Even as they seek to drive systemic change, social enterprises must continuously negotiate the risks of being absorbed, neutralized, or redirected by the structures they aim to transform.

Consequently, social enterprises face a fundamental dilemma: how to scale transformative impact without being captured by dominant systems. This tension demands a critical awareness of the paradoxes inherent in institutional engagement and a commitment to strategic reflexivity. Only by navigating this balance can social enterprises maintain their disruptive edge while remaining resilient within complex institutional environments—*and avoid the risk of being co-opted* by the very systems they seek to transform

In sum, this chapter has outlined a comprehensive theoretical framework that positions social enterprises as embedded yet potentially transformative actors operating across micro, meso, and macro levels. By weaving together perspectives from institutional theory, sustainability transitions, and critical power analysis, it has highlighted the tensions, paradoxes, and possibilities that characterize the field of social entrepreneurship. This framework not only provides the analytical lenses necessary to interrogate how social enterprises navigate institutional complexity and influence systemic change, but also highlights the importance of agency, context, and relational dynamics in shaping their trajectories. The following chapters will build on these conceptual foundations to explore how these dynamics unfold in practice, offering an in-depth examination of social enterprises' strategies, challenges, and transformative potential within specific empirical settings.

Chapter 2: Methodological Approach

This chapter outlines the methodological approach of the thesis, which is rooted in a constructivist research paradigm. From this epistemological stance, two studies are carried out: 1) the development of a middle-range theory of a multilevel approach to social entrepreneurship transformation of the business system, derived from a narrative review of the institutional entrepreneurship and sustainability transitions literatures; and (2) a hermeneutic interpretive analysis of social entrepreneurs' discourses on how they make sense of the power dynamics underlying their transformational role in the business system.

By utilizing these complementary methodological approaches, we aim to articulate the institutional mechanisms and power dynamics shaping the agency of social entrepreneurs in their efforts to transform the dominant business system.

The chapter is structured as follows:

- Section 3.1: Research Paradigm: Explains the ontological and epistemological stance of the study.
- Section 3.2: Conceptual-Theoretical Model: Outlines the middle-range theorization approach, developed through theoretical propositions.
- Section 3.3: Empirical Research: Describes the research design, data collection, and analysis process.

2.1. Research Paradigm

This thesis is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is not an objective entity awaiting discovery but rather a socially constructed and experientially shaped phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). From an ontological perspective, social entrepreneurship is conceptualized as a dynamic, multi-dimensional construct shaped by the diverse perceptions, interactions, and social contexts of individuals. Rather than assuming a singular, fixed reality, this paradigm acknowledges the existence of multiple, fluid, and evolving realities that emerge through continuous social engagement and interpretation (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Aligned with this ontological stance, the study adopts an interpretivist epistemology, which asserts that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the researcher and participants rather than being objectively unearthed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994). This epistemological approach underscores the necessity of an interactive and reflexive inquiry into social entrepreneurship, wherein understanding is cultivated through dialogue, interpretation, and contextual analysis. Consequently, this research prioritizes subjective experiences, narratives, and meaning-making processes, recognizing that the conceptualization and practice of social entrepreneurship are inherently contingent upon the specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts in which they unfold.

In line with this interpretive stance, the researcher's positionality becomes an essential aspect of the knowledge production process. Sharing cultural and aspirational frameworks with many of the participants—particularly regarding the transformative potential of social entrepreneurship—my position is both embedded in the field and informed by a desire to challenge dominant business logics. To navigate this proximity, I engaged in a continuous process of reflexivity that critically reflected on my assumptions, created analytical distance, and became more aware of how my perspective shaped the interpretation of participants' narratives.

Drawing on Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy (2004), this approach recognizes that understanding is not achieved through neutrality or detachment, but through a *dialogical process* between the interpreter and the phenomenon. Rather than suppressing preconceptions, reflexivity makes them visible, allowing for a *fusion of horizons* in which meaning is co-constructed through interaction. As Laverty (2003) notes, this interpretive engagement does not undermine rigor but deepens it, situating understanding within the dynamic relationship between the researcher and the field.

2.2 Conceptual-Theoretical Model

The first phase of this research involved the development of a conceptual paper, published in the journal Environmental Innovation and Societal Transitions (included in the Chapter 3 of this thesis), which serves as the theoretical foundation for the thesis. Conceptual papers play a fundamental role in academic research by advancing theoretical understanding, synthesizing existing knowledge, and introducing innovative frameworks that inform empirical investigations (Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Establishing a clear and well-structured theoretical basis at this stage ensures coherence and depth, laying a strong foundation for subsequent empirical analysis.

This research aligns with Corley and Gioia's (2011) perspective on theoretical contribution, which asserts that meaningful theoretical advancements must demonstrate originality —whether through incremental refinement or revelatory insight— and utility, ensuring both scientific rigor and practical relevance. In line with this, the conceptual paper introduces a multi-level framework that theorizes the role of social enterprises as institutional entrepreneurs in transforming the business system —defined as the institutional configuration of actors, rules, norms, beliefs, and practices that shape the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services (Vásquez-Delsolar & Merino, 2021). By integrating insights from institutional theory, institutional entrepreneurship, and sustainability transitions research, this study refines existing theoretical perspectives (incremental insight) while also offering a novel way of understanding institutional transformation led by social enterprises (revelatory insight).

At the core of this model is the premise that social entrepreneurs actively seek to redefine business as an institution and challenge dominant logics, a process understood as institutional entrepreneurship (DiMaggio, 1988; Farla et al., 2012; Battilana et al., 2009; Chandra, 2017; Tracey et al., 2011). Institutional entrepreneurship, a key concept in neo-institutional theory, refers to the mobilization of resources to transform existing institutions or create new ones (DiMaggio, 1988; Farla et al., 2012; Battilana et al., 2009; Chandra, 2017).

Scholars have highlighted the complementarity between institutional entrepreneurship and transition studies, emphasizing their shared focus on how actors initiate institutional change (Hoogstraaten et al., 2020). Building on this intersection, this study develops a multi-level framework that situates social enterprises within institutional change processes occurring at three interrelated levels:

- Individual Level – Social entrepreneurs engage in cognitive sensemaking, emotions, and reflexivity to identify contradictions in dominant institutional logics and take action.
- Niche Level – Social enterprises mobilize networks and collective action to challenge and develop alternative business logics.
- Regime Level – Social enterprises seek legitimacy, navigate power structures, confront institutional resistance, and contribute to systemic transformation within the broader business system.

To develop this multi-level model, the study employs Middle-Range Theory (MRT), which bridges the gap between empirical research and theoretical abstraction. MRT is positioned between grand theories of social systems -which often lack specificity- and narrow case-based descriptions, which, while detailed, do not offer broad generalizability. Thus, MRT ensures that theoretical insights remain empirically grounded while maintaining conceptual clarity (Merton, 2007).

This approach is particularly well-suited for institutional change research, as it facilitates the integration of multiple theoretical perspectives across different analytical levels, ensuring both scientific rigor and practical applicability. Specifically, MRT strengthens this study in the following ways:

- Bridging Multiple Theoretical Perspectives: MRT allowed me to integrate institutional entrepreneurship, cognition, reflexivity, emotions, social movements, legitimacy-seeking, power, and resistance, creating a comprehensive yet structured approach to understanding institutional change.
- Enhancing Scientific and Practical Utility: MRT ensures scientific utility by developing testable theoretical propositions, while also maintaining practical relevance by offering insights for policymakers, social entrepreneurs, and sustainability advocates (Merton, 1968; Bunge, 1997).
- Ensuring Generalizability and Empirical Testability: By offering a structured theoretical model, MRT can be applied across diverse empirical contexts, allowing future research to test and refine the proposed relationships using both qualitative and quantitative methods.
- Capturing Multi-Level Institutional Dynamics: MRT operates between abstract theory and empirical observations, making it particularly well-suited for explaining institutional transformation. It connects individual agency, collective mobilization, and systemic power dynamics, offering a multi-level perspective on how institutional change unfolds within sustainability transitions.

Following Cornelissen’s (2017) perspective on proposition-based theorizing, this conceptual paper employs a structured set of theoretical propositions to articulate causal relationships and contingencies within the proposed multi-level model of social enterprises in sustainability transitions. Propositions serve as theoretical guideposts, defining key relationships between constructs across different levels of analysis.

By structuring the model around theoretical propositions, this study ensures that the conceptual framework remains scientifically rigorous and empirically testable, thereby facilitating future research on sustainability transitions and institutional entrepreneurship. A well-developed theoretical framework should not only synthesize existing insights but also address underlying tensions and contradictions within the literature (Van de Ven, 1989). At the same time, strong theoretical contributions emphasize commonalities and build coherence to enhance conceptual clarity (Cropanzano, 2009).

Building on these principles, the proposed multi-level conceptual framework unifies fragmented theoretical perspectives, offering a structured explanation of how social enterprises drive institutional change within the business system. Chapter 3 of this thesis provides a detailed discussion of this conceptual model, examining the dynamics through which social enterprises engage in business system transformation.

2.3. Empirical Research

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the role of power dynamics in transformative processes (Geels, 2014; Grin et al., 2011; Hoffman, 2013; Raj et al., 2022). While these studies have advanced understanding of power in sustainability transitions, much of the literature remains conceptual or focused on meso-level socio-technical systems, often overlooking how power relations intersect with capitalist business logics (Avelino et al., 2024; Kashwan et al., 2018). Despite growing recognition of power as a central force in institutional transformation, empirical research that explicitly examines transformative change through a power relations lens remains limited (Raj et al., 2024).

To address this gap, this study draws on a key proposition developed in the conceptual model introduced earlier:

> *The ability of social enterprises to drive transformation within the business regime depends on their capacity to perform both material and symbolic actions, leading to the exercise of transformative and constitutive power* (Vasquez-Delsolar & Merino, 2021):

To explore these manifestations of power, the study adopts an interpretative approach—specifically, hermeneutics—as a methodological lens. Hermeneutics centers on the interpretation of experience and meaning, using an iterative process to reconstruct participants' perspectives, motivations, and institutional contexts (Schwandt, 2000). By moving between participants' narratives and their broader sociopolitical settings, this approach offers a deeper understanding of how power is enacted, negotiated, and contested.

A central feature of this interpretive framework is the hermeneutic circle, a concept shaped by key thinkers in hermeneutic philosophy. It describes the recursive movement between the parts and the whole of a text or phenomenon, through which understanding unfolds. Interpretation is always informed by prior assumptions that are reshaped through the interpretive process. Meaning, in this view, emerges not from objective detachment but through a historically and linguistically situated dialogue between the interpreter and the interpreted. This evolving encounter, often described as a fusion of horizons, highlights the relational nature of understanding (Schleiermacher, 1998; Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 2004).

Aligned with this perspective, Alvesson (2003) emphasizes that interpretation in qualitative research is not about revealing a single truth but about navigating layered and context-dependent meanings. He advocates for a reflexive approach that considers how researchers' frameworks, positionalities, and use of language shape the knowledge produced.

Reflexivity thus becomes a critical element of the hermeneutic process, prompting researchers to continuously engage with and question their interpretive practices.

In this study, the hermeneutic circle informed the analysis of how individual interview narratives relate to broader themes, especially those concerning business system transformation. Rather than seeking fixed or objective explanations of power, the research focuses on how participants construct and assign meaning to their experiences within institutional contexts (Schwandt, 1994; Laverty, 2003).

Empirically, the study is based on twelve open-ended interviews conducted with founders and leaders of social enterprises in Latin America (Peru, Colombia, Mexico) and Spain. These interviews followed a conversational, semi-structured format, allowing participants to express their experiences in their own words. While the conversations were guided by thematic prompts—such as roles in system transformation, strategies for exerting power, and interactions with dominant institutions—participants were free to steer the discussion toward what they found most relevant.

This dialogical approach is consistent with the hermeneutic tradition, which emphasizes co-constructing meaning through interaction (Schwandt, 1994). The open and reflective format fostered rich engagement with participants' meaning-making processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), with the aim not to interpret from an external position, but to understand how actors themselves experience and interpret institutional transformation and power (Turner & Krizek, 2006).

To analyze the data, the study employed reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2017, 2019). This method supports the inductive identification of themes emerging from the data without relying on pre-established categories. Particularly suited to interpretative qualitative research, it offers a robust framework for exploring how meaning and power are constructed and contested in context.

Following Braun & Clarke’s (2025) guidelines, the analysis proceeded through the following stages:

- Familiarization: Immersion in the data to gain a holistic understanding of participants' narratives
- Coding: Development of labels to capture significant elements, including both first-order and second-order codes.
- Generating initial themes: Clustering codes into preliminary thematic patterns.
- Reviewing and refining themes: Assessing consistency and coherence across the dataset.
- Defining and naming themes: Clarifying the scope and significance of each theme.

A key strength of this approach lies in its recognition that meaning is fluid, contextual, and co-constructed. This is particularly important in the study of business system transformations, where power relations are continuously shifting and renegotiated. By exploring how social entrepreneurs conceptualize, navigate, and challenge dominant institutional structures, the study offers deeper insight into how power is exercised, resisted, or reconfigured.

A full discussion of the empirical findings and resulting analytical model is presented in Chapter 4, where we examine how social entrepreneurs interpret, respond to, and potentially reshape institutional power structures. These findings contribute both empirical depth and theoretical innovation to the study of power in sustainability transitions, highlighting the dynamic interplay between agency and structure in processes of transformative change.

Chapter 3

Social enterprises towards a sustainable business system: A model of institutional dynamics

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3.1. Introduction

Sustainability transitions research acknowledges business actors to be central in shaping transitions (Geels, 2019; Ko¨hler et al., 2019). Both incumbents and newcomers play a critical role in accelerating (or slowing down) transitions by creating and diffusing (or hindering) technological or business model innovations, making new markets and industries, and influencing institutional change (Berggren et al., 2015; Geels and Verhees, 2011; Planko, 2016; Sarasini and Linder, 2018; Van Mossel et al., 2018).

The interest on interpreting the dynamics of transition from institutional lenses is growing, highlighting the interplay between actors and institutions in transitions (Fuenfschilling and Binz, 2018; Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014; Kohler et al., 2019; Loorbach et al., 2017). The socio-institutional approach to business actors has addressed how they contribute to shape their environments through different mechanisms, such as discourse and framing, policy lobbying or network collaboration building (Planko et al., 2016; Rosenbloom et al., 2016). Furthermore, transition scholars have paid particular attention to the role of social innovators challenging the institutionalized practices, routines, beliefs, norms, or discourses upheld by incumbents (Loorbach et al., 2017), where the issue of the legitimacy and public support of firms and business models (Bohnsack et al., 2016; Geels and Veerhes, 2011; Markard et al., 2016) have been central. The work on grassroot and community-based initiatives has also contributed to enrich the socio-political dimension of business agency in sustainability transitions. See, for instance, the discussion by Loorbach et al. (2020) on innovations that emerge organically within society, as transformative business models or organizational forms beyond specific technologies; and the emphasis on transitions based on grassroot and community-based social innovations as a matter of democracy (Smith and Stirling, 2018).

However, the institutional view of business actors in transitions has dominantly focused on specific organizations or networks operating in a particular sector, while hardly acknowledging the perspective of business as an institution itself. For Giddens (1984), institutions "by definition are the more enduring features of social life", giving the institutionalized features of social systems “solidity across time and space” (p.132). Thus, institutions and their normative, regulative and cognitive pillars (Scott, 1995) transcend con- crete organizations, sectors and situations. Adopting a macro-perspective of business as an institutionalized logic is of particular interest for sustainability transition research, since the field asks ‘big picture questions’ (Kohler et al., 2019, p.4) concerning large-scale and long-term societal change (Loorbach et al., 2017). In this sense, addressing the agency of business actors would require an embedded-agency approach that locates practices of individual actors in broader structures (Thornton et al., 2012), i.e., ‘the big picture’ of neoliberal capitalist organizing system, which shapes values, beliefs, practices and norms of business actors.

Nevertheless, as Feola (2020) contends, sustainability transitions research “has failed to engage with any significant analyses or critiques of capitalism (…); [it] has essentially taken capitalism for granted” (p. 241–242). In this sense, the institutionalized business logic of the capitalist enterprise has been largely absent in transition studies, since it appears to be implicitly understood as a given factor at the landscape level. The branch of sustainability transitions research working on business model innovation has produced rich discussions on business contributions to sustainability transitions mainly through the creation of new technologies, industries and markets, thus rethinking business in light of broader societal change (Boons et al., 2013; Loorbach and Wijsman, 2013; Proka et al., 2018; Stubbs and Cocklin, 2008). However, little attention has been paid to capitalism as a force structuring societal and market conditions. Some exceptions stand out, such as the work by Longhurst et al. (2016) on alternative economic narratives to neoliberalism in urban sustainability transitions; or the work by Avelino et al. (2015) on transformative innovations and new economies, in which they study new forms of economic organization in sustainability transitions that are challenging the dominant capitalist form.

Still, the focus on the institutionalized capitalist business logic is scant. This is surprising, given that this logic may be understood as a dominant regime itself at the root causes of the current socio-ecological crises (Feola, 2020), which in turn are the central driving force for the emergence of the mentioned business model innovations. This dominant logic follows a particular doctrine, i.e., shareholder primacy, which legitimates shareholder control of companies. It makes the firm an object of ownership, leading to the sys- tematic search for profit and growth to respond to the imposition of the constraining criteria of financial returns (Aglietta and Rebe´rioux, 2005; Ferreras, 2017; Stubbs and Cocklin, 2008). Those prescriptions have arguably resulted in unsustainable systems of production and consumption that tend to exhaust the ecological and social bases for its own reproduction (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Steffen et al., 2015).

Building on this concern, as well as on the growing interest on the role of industry actors as key players in large-scale sustainability transitions (Farla et al., 2012; Kohler et al., 2019; Rosenbloom et al., 2016), we focus on the agency of a particular business actor: the social enterprise (SE). As mentioned, scholars in transition studies have paid increasing attention to the agency of firms and other industry actors in sustainability transitions (Berggren et al., 2015; Farla et al., 2012; Ko¨hler et al., 2019; Rosenbloom et al., 2016). However, the role of non-dominant and non-state-based actors, like SEs, is still under-researched (Geels, 2019; Seyfang and Smith, 2007). A key differentiator of SEs is the primacy of a social mission or the intention to create social and environmental value (Teasdale, 2012); Zahra et al. 2009), in contrast with the profit-oriented prevailing business logic. From the perspective of the business model framework, the transformative potential of SEs would be defined by three features, according to Proka et al. (2018): a broad value orientation beyond monetization; a broad stakeholder network beyond the focus on customers; and a broad ambition to shape context beyond the interest on survival and economic success (p. 20–21). Thus, the agency of SEs to transform institutionalized business logics might be considered key to bring about large-scale transformations through their social innovations (Battilana et al., 2009; Chandra, 2017; Dacin et al., 2011; Mair and Martí, 2006). An example of the positioning of SEs disrupting the business system, is the recent call of the World Economic Forum (2021) for governments, corporations, investors, and other intermediaries, to unlock the power of SEs to transform diverse sectors towards more inclusive and sustainable ones, given the transformative experiences of hundreds of SEs around the world. As such, SEs have been pointed out as key actors for the recovery of economies during COVID 19's crisis.

Against this background, the aim of this work is to disentangle the institutional mechanisms at work in the agency of those SEs that are engaged in challenging and transforming institutionalized business logics, modelled by capitalism and neoclassical economic views, into new visions underpinned by sustainability principles. We acknowledge that the definition of SE is not universal, and the type of organizations that may be labelled as SE is very diverse. Yet, a common theme is the relevance of their social mission in the business model definition (Alvord et al., 2004; Azmat et al., 2015; Dacin et al., 2010; Santos, 2012). Thus, our approach to SEs goes beyond specific organizations, since we particularly focus on their attempt (when it happens) to transform dominant business logic, though involving different degrees of intentionality.

For that purpose, we propose a conceptual model built upon a narrative review of literature (Paré et al., 2015) of previous research on institutional approaches to the process of regime shift in sustainability transitions. Since those SEs would seek to transform the business as institution and the dominant logics that construct it, the processes involved may be understood as institutional entrepreneurship (Farla et al., 2012; Battilana et al., 2009; Chandra, 2017), a central concept in neo institutional theory referring to the process of mobilizing resources to transform existing institutions or to create new ones (DiMaggio, 1988). Moreover, Hoogstraaten et al. (2020), in their recent review on institutional entrepreneurship, argue that it provides a theoretical complement to transition studies, since both literatures focus on how actors change institutions. In this sense, the authors conclude about the convenience to further explore the intersection between institutional entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship literatures to theoretically ground sustainability transitions.

Following this line of thought, our proposal intends to be a middle-range theorization endeavor, since the institutional entrepreneurship dynamics explained is circumscribed to the agency of SEs seeking to transform institutionalized logics in the business system, rather than to encompass more general transformative dynamics in sustainability transitions. Middle-range theories deal with delimited aspects of social phenomena with the goal to guide empirical inquiry (Merton, 1968), being "intermediate to general theories of social systems (…) and to those detailed orderly descriptions of particulars that are not generalized at all" (p, 39). Thus, the institutional mechanisms on the agency of SEs that we derive from the literature review are articulated through a set of explanatory propositions that permit empirical examination (see the works by Haxeltine et al., 2017, and Pel et al., 2020 on the process of building middle-range theory of transformative social innovation).

Specifically, we build the framework and propositions from an integrative and multi-level approach (based on Tracey et al., 2011, together with recent contributions to institutional approaches to sustainability transitions, by Geels, 2020 and Hoogstraaten et al., 2020), to present the interactions that take place at three spaces: inside the individual, inside the niche, and at the interplay between the niche and the regime level of the business system. Underlying this multi-level process, we position ourselves on a vision of SEs distant from the isolated individual hero or the hyper-muscular change agent, to acknowledge the complexities involved in an agency that is distributed and embedded in broader patterns of beliefs, social relations and practices (Battilana et al., 2009; Haxeltine et al., 2017; Pel et al., 2020).

The unit of analysis to what our theorization refers to is the business system, i.e., the institutional configuration of actors, rules, norms, beliefs and practices involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of products and services. We draw on a socio-institutional approach (Loorbach et al.,2017) to define the system in transition in our framework, since it is built from the perspective of business as an institution (like education, health or labor systems). In contrast, socio-technical systems, much more commonly adopted in transition studies, are defined by a dominant technology in a sector (e.g. water, energy, mobility systems) (see Geels, 2019). The capitalist business logic, as argued above, would be highly institutionalized in the business system, thus configuring the dominant business regime by becoming the “natural” form of understanding and organizing the whole process of production, distribution, and consumption (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Marttila, 2013).

Within the business system, the social entrepreneurship niche would be the space where actors deviate from dominant business logic and attempt to institutionalize a new set of beliefs, values, and practices, aside from those which are prevailing in the business system (Battilana and Dorado, 2010) Dorado, 2013; Pache and Chowdhury, 2012; Tracey et al., 2011). From a perspective of agency as distributed (Pel et al., 2020), in the social entrepreneurship niche, SEs (together with a constellation of other actors such as financiers, incubators, accelerators, and educators, for instance), would perform processes of experimentation, learning, construction of social networks and promotion of positive expectations, building momentum for institutional change (Kemp et al., 1998).

In sum, the insights provided by our framework on the institutional mechanisms involved in the agency of SEs in the transition of the business system, make a double contribution to transition studies. First, by deepening the theoretical anchoring of the field via institutional approaches, as claimed by sustainability transitions research agendas (Fuensfschilling and Trufer, 2014; Ko¨hler et al., 2019). We draw on the concepts of institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurship to define the business regime as an institutionalized logic and SEs as institutional entrepreneurs, thus contributing to explain the embedded agency of SEs in the process of institutional change of the business regime. By doing so, we join the conversations on the macro versus the micro dilemma (Kohler et al.2019; Farla et al., 2012; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008), since we bridge both the macro perspective (institutional capitalist business logics) and the micro processes (agency of SEs) that shape transition dynamics. Complementarily, this contribution helps to move the research in the field of social entrepreneurship from a dominant limited business perspective towards institutional (Bull, 2008) and multilevel (Saebi et al., 2019; Tracey et al., 2011) ones.

Second, by adopting the perspective of business as an institutionalized logic, beyond and above specific organizations and sectors, we acknowledge the broader structures of neoliberal capitalist system. These structural conditions are at the root cause of sustain- ability transitions.

However, they have been largely assumed rather than explicitly stated in transition studies (Feola, 2020), accepting the capitalist system only as a 'constraining structure' (using Giddean terms), or as a factor of the landscape. In contrast, in social change processes, "structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling" (Giddens, 1984, p. 25), what implies that the agency of actor groups in sustainability transitions cannot be separated from the principles of generation and structuring of their practices. Therefore, our focus on the agency of those SEs that seek to transform the capitalist business logics provides an opportunity to advance the understanding of the institutional processes of large societal changes in sustainable transitions taking the 'big-picture' perspective that the nature of transitions studies demand (Feola, 2020; (Ko¨hler et al., 2019)Ko¨hler, 2019).

In the remainder of this paper, we first provide the elements of the neo institutional theory in which we draw this paper: institutional entrepreneurship and institutional logics. The second section is devoted to our proposal of the three-level framework aimed at unfolding the institutional mechanisms involved in the transformation of the business regime with a focus on the agency of SEs, including a real-world example of a social enterprise to illustrate the model proposed in this paper. As such, we propose an illustration of a Colombian social enterprise called Heincke, whose purpose is revolutionizing agriculture, supporting and investing in an inclusive value chain that links small panela producers with large international markets. Finally, the implications and future research agenda derived from our proposal are discussed.

3.2. Institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurship in sustainability transition

The core notion behind sustainability transitions research is that disruptive systemic changes take place in the dominant order in a societal subsystem (Loorbach et al., 2017). The most used framework to understand the shift from unsustainable systems to sustainable ones is the multilevel perspective (MLP) (Fischer and Newig, 2016; Geels, 2019; Smith et al., 2010), which argues that changes occur in the "socio-technical regimes" (Geels, 2011; Rip and Kemp, 1998), i.e., the stable configuration of a system around a technology (Geels, 2011; Ko¨hler et al., 2019). As such, regimes are dynamic social structures that are well established because they are constantly reproduced, shaping actors' perceptions of problems and guiding their agency (Augenstein and Palzkill, 2016).

Despite that the regime leads to path dependency and involves lock-in mechanisms (Grin et al., 2010; Ko¨hler et al., 2019: Loorbach et al., 2017; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013; Smith and Raven, 2012), changes in the system happen. According to the MLP, those changes depend on two other developments: regime interactions with changing external factors, preferences, and pressures from the broader exogenous context (landscape), as well as regime interactions with emerging novelties, innovations, and alternatives (niches) (Geels, 2002). On the one hand, changes in the landscape impose destabilizing pressure (e.g., environmental crisis) on regimes, providing the appropriate context for actors to undergo radical innovations at the niche level. On the other, niches enact the protective spaces for path-breaking innovations, as poor performance and uncertainty are accepted inside them (Smith and Raven 2012).

While in regimes the communities of interacting groups and the rules that coordinate action are large and stable, for niches, they are smaller and unstable, the rules are "in the making" (Geels and Schot 2007, p. 402), and given its short time of existence, they do not have dense networks with a strong background (Raven et al., 2012). On that account, the strategic niche management (SNM) approach (Kemp et al., 1998, Geels and Raven, 2006) has addressed the niche formation processes. SNM literature argues that alignment among actors' visions and expectations, networking activities, and learning processes are needed so that niche innovations may emerge (Kemp et al., 1998).

MLP and SNM frameworks have been extensively used to explain transitions in socio-technical systems (Geels, 2019). However, the study of sustainability transitions also requires other approaches to the notion of systems in transition, as the socio-ecological and the socio-institutional ones (Loorbach et al., 2017). Regarding socio-institutional systems, (van Raak, 2016)depicts that even without a technology entry-point, the stabilized configuration of cultures, structures and practices within a system represent a regime. Thus, the socio-institutional perspective emphasizes issues of legitimacy and power, discourses, regulations and norms, considering systems such as health, education, finance and democracy (Loorbach et al., 2017). In this sense, we use the socio-institutional perspective, as argued above, together with the MLP and SNM's approaches, to delimit the business system as the configuration of cultures, structures and practices developed by business actors.

The study of sustainability transitions from institutional lenses is particularly productive (Fuenfschilling, and Truffer, 2014; Hogstraaten et al., 2020; Geels, 2020), since they may be conceptualized as the shift from a highly structured socio-institutional configuration to a new one (Fuenfschilling and Truffer, 2014). From this assumption, two central constructs of institutional theory undergo our conceptual proposal, aiming to explain the institutional dynamics in the sustainability transition of the business system with a focus on the agency of SEs: institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurship.

The notion of institutional logics was introduced by Alford and Friedland (1985) to refer to the material and symbolic constructions that help to explain the interactions between societal structures, organizations and individual behavior. Thus, institutional logics importantly frame "actors' choices or sensemaking, the vocabulary they use to motivate action and their sense of self and identity… establishing core principles for organizing activities and channeling interests" (Thornton et al., 2012: 77). For the purpose of our study, institutional business logic refers to the prevailing logic in the business system, shaping values, cognitions and behaviours by the orientation towards profit-maximization and primacy of shareholder value (Witkamp et al., 2011), as posited above.

The institutional logics approach bridges the macro perspective of institution and the microprocesses of action, without assuming organizational isomorphism even in highly institutionalized fields (D'Aunno et al., 1991). Therefore, it positions actors as capable to influence their context (Giddens, 1984; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008). From this perspective, SEs

(as well as other actors) could carry out disruptive actions that deviate from the institutionalized business logic. As a result, the social entrepreneurship niche might potentially
1) be a source of synergistic reforms to be absorbed by the dominant institutional logic; 2) compete with the institutional logic and even displace it; 3) coexist with the dominant logic without changing it fundamentally; or 4) expand to fill a void caused by a regime collapse (Geels and Schot, 2010). Therefore, the emergence of a new institutional logic might "leads to an erosion of dominant structures" (Fuenfschilling, and Truffer, 2014 p. 776).

Consequently, it can be argued that downward influences are not deterministic, and actors can interpret them and perform action according to those interpretations (Geels, 2020). Therefore, sustainability transitions involve actors and social groups who enact different kinds of agency (Ko¨hler et al., 2019; Hogstraaten et al., 2020). In institutional studies that agency is comprised in the concept of institutional entrepreneurship (Di Maggio, 1988), which entails institutional entrepreneurs who combine elements of established institutional logics, practices and organizational forms to transform an institutional system (Garud et al., 2002); Tracey et al., 2010). Institutional literature has pointed out the ability of interested actors that use key resources and some forms of power to transform their institutional context (Greenwood et al., 2002; Holm, 1995; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). In this sense, Geels (2020) identifies three elements of agency that need to be considered in sustainability transitions research: 1) Characteristics of individual actors, such as routines, capabilities, goals, interests, positions, and interpretations; 2) the socially coordinated collective actions, which might play a prominent role in the transition process; and 3) the cultural, socioeconomic, and regulatory contexts that shape both individual and collective agency.

For actors to perform institutional change, they need to find certain conditions in the context (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008; Bat- tilana et al., 2009, Greenwood et al., 2011). Battilana et al. (2009) focus on the heterogeneity of the context as an invitation to act, and they propose two types of enabling conditions. First, field characteristics that are related to institutional logics, because the existence of diverse logics (i.e., business logic and social enterprise logic) brings about institutional discrepancy that may allow actors for greater freedom to develop new alternatives. SEs exposed to conflicting institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011), potentially contradictory goals and demands from very different stakeholders (Ebrahim et al., 2014; Siegner et al., 2018), diverse social and cultural norms (Cherrier et al., 2018), and incompatible values and identities (Doherty et al., 2014; Mitra et al., 2018), will act in a niche where they can experiment and depart from prevailing institutional prescriptions.

Second, the position of actors in the field brings them different points of view (which are shaped by institutional logics) regarding the context, and it provides them with resources to perform disrupting behavior. The prevailing roots of actors in the field “may privilege some actors, some identities, some strategies, some spatial and temporal horizons, some actions over others” (Jessop, 2001: 1223). Therefore, depending on their positions in the system (e.g., central, peripheral, middle, Geels, 2020), actors might perform different kinds of action. This does not mean that marginalized or peripheral actors (as SEs are usually considered) cannot play a role in institutional change, but rather that they will probably have a more subtle and sometimes unnoticed role (Mair and Marti, 2006).

Moreover, as SE actors are constrained by the dominant logic in the regime, deviation from institutionalized modes of organizing may impose costs to innovators, either economically, cognitively or socially (Phillips et al., 2000). Accordingly, institutional entre- preneurship involves dealing with the tension between institutional determinism and agency. This is often referred to as the paradox of embedded agency: “If actors are embedded in an institutional field and subject to regulative, normative and cognitive processes that structure their cognitions, define their interests and produce their identities, how are they able to envision new practices and then subsequently get others to adopt them?” (Garud et al., 2007 p. 961). It portrays the role of actors who perform disruptive action, not as result of automatic cognition. but of a reflexive and self-controlled thinking, acknowledging institutions as social constructions and, as such, subject to transformation (Lawrence et al., 2009).

Regarding how actors perform disruptive action to transform the business system, institutional scholarship introduces the notion of institutional work, defined as “the purposive action that leads to creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006, p. 216). On that account, Tracey et al. (2011) depict that SEs lead institutional work at three different levels. First, at the micro-level, because entrepreneurs perform two types of institutional work to recognize opportunities: problem framing and counterfactual thinking. Second, at the meso-level, entrepreneurs lead institutional work like building and theorizing a new organizational template that combines divergent institutional logics. Third, at the macro level, entrepreneurs connect with macro level discourses and highly legitimated actors in the business system, in their attempt to link with the society’s broad accepted discourses and behaviors accepted. This multilevel approach resembles the multilevel dimension of transformative change proposed by MLP in the transition literature. Hence, institutional work also helps to explain the institutional dynamics led by SEs in their path to transform the business system towards a more sustainable one.

In sum, the institutional entrepreneurship approach offers an appropriate framework to explain the interplay between the agency of the SEs actors in the niche, who enact a disruptive institutional logic, and the dominant logic in the regime in the process of transition of the business system.

3.3. Institutional dynamics in the transition of the business regime to sustainability. Towards a multilevel integrative framework

As explained above, the institutional dynamics involved in the potential sustainability transitions of the business system may be depicted as a process that takes place at three levels. At the individual level, reflexivity, entrepreneurial mindset and emotions drive the emergence of institutional entrepreneurship. At the meso level, the collective action of SEs and other actors is represented by the institutional work related to building the vision of the problems and the change needed, drawing together actors to learn together, and making that vision reality. Finally, at the macro level the dynamics of legitimacy, power and resistance between niche actors and regime actors guide the potential transformation of the business system. We articulate that process through a set of propositions, as summarized in Table 1.

Level	**Propositions**
Inside the individual	P.1. Reflexivity enhances the possibilities of social entrepreneurs to identify contradictions and problems in the business regime as a necessary condition to come up with transformative ideas. P.2. Entrepreneurial mindset positively influences social entrepreneurs' ability to deal with conflicting business logics by favouring the development of alternative visions and practices to the institutionalized business logics. P.3. Emotions trigger the engagement of social entrepreneurs in the institutional work involved in transforming or disrupting the business regime.
Inside the niche	P.4. Social enterprises ignite institutional change in the business regime by collectively building a shared vision about the dysfunctions of the business system and theorizing the congruent transformative change. P.5. The collective action of social enterprises is influenced by their capacity to identify potential (antagonists) allies, and to work for (de) mobilizing them. P.6. The presence of formal and/or informal spaces for interaction influence the dissemination of new logics and

	practices in the business regime through facilitating connection, cooperation, resilience, and access to resources. P.7. Collective learning (through formal and informal processes) allows social enterprises to get resources to perform disruptive institutional change.
Niche-regime interplay	P.8. The type of legitimation work carried out by social enterprises shapes the patterns of interaction between actors in the social entrepreneurship niche and the business regime. P.9. The agency of social enterprises to transform the business regime depends on their capacity to perform material and symbolic actions leading to both transformative and constitutive power. P.10. The degree and types of resistance taking place in the interplay between the social entrepreneurship niche and the business regime shape the pathways of transition (e.g., transformation, co-existence, capture)

Table 1: Propositions about the agency of social enterprises in the institutional dynamics of the sustainability transition in the business system.

Those propositions are derived from our narrative review of literature on institutional approaches (specifically institutional logics and institutional entrepreneurship) that shape processes of regime shift in sustainability transitions, as mentioned above. They summarize how the agency of SEs (as business actors seeking to transform dominant business logics) may influence the transition of the business system. The articulation of these multilevel cause-effects relationships through a propositional style allows for further empirical examination, thus acting as a bridge between theory development and empirical research (Cornelissen, 2017; Pel et al., 2020).

In what follows, we first develop the arguments that are captured by the propositions at the three levels. Then, we offer a real-world example that may help illustrate our proposed conceptual model of the institutional dynamics involved in business logics trans- formation through the case of the SE Heincke. Operating in the sugar cane industry, Heincke follows a social mission to support and empower Colombian farmers cultivating natural and organic products for international markets; a mission symbolized by their slogan “Agricultural revolution”.

3. 3.1. Inside the individual: Personal characteristics initiating institutional change

The attempts by SEs to transform the business system are not without tension, mainly due to the ‘paradox of embedded agency’ and the existence of diverse institutional logics in the business system, as explained above (Pache and Santos, 2013; Tracey et al., 2010). Hence, social entrepreneurship may be a resource-demanding and risky endeavor (Dorado, 2013). However, actors are “knowledgeable and enabled" (Battilana, 2004, p.14) and, as such, they also recognize opportunities to act in line with different conditions of the context (Battilana et al., 2009; Emirbayer and Mische, 1998). Moreover, individual characteristics play a relevant role in sus- tainability transitions (Geels, 2020), while individual actor-focused perspectives are scarce in the field (Upham et al., 2020).

We argue that three inner characteristics of social entrepreneurs are drivers to action: awareness of the enabling conditions provided by the business system (proposition 1); appropriate cognitive abilities to implement certain practices (proposition 2); accordingly, the emotional disposition to engage with socio-environmental problems in the context and with the existing opportunities (proposition 3). Once these elements are in place, the individual dimensions of the seeds of institutional change are sown.

a. Awareness: reflexivity

The sociologist perspective of reflexivity conceptualizes it as a mediating mechanism between the structural conditions of the individuals' context and the subjective interpretation and action grounded on their ultimate concerns (Archer, 2007)().

Reflexive awareness is a central requirement to engage in the work of maintaining, creating, and disrupting institutions (Lawrence et al., 2013; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). According to Suddaby et al. (2016), reflexivity arises because of the interplay between actors' social skills and their social position. Social skills are represented by knowledge and expertise about the context where actors are embedded (Fligstein, 1997), while their awareness is influenced by the social position that they occupy in the field (i.e., the regime) (Battilana, 2006).

Reflexivity is an individual characteristic that is determined by intelligence, personality, and social learning gained through life experiences that are influenced by macro-institutional elements existing in the regime (Suddaby et al., 2016). Therefore, entrepre- neurs' social skills might increase the likelihood that they develop awareness of contradictions in the business regime because interplay with other actors who enact different institutional logics can generate innovative thinking aimed at finding solutions (Cherrier et al., 2018; Smets et al., 2012).

Proposition 1. Reflexivity enhances the possibilities of social entrepreneurs to identify contradictions and problems in the business regime as a necessary condition to come up with transformative ideas.

b. Cognition: Entrepreneurial mindset

Institutional change disrupting the business regime requires social innovators at the niche level, not only to have reflexive awareness to identify and interpret social problems, but also to recognize them as an opportunity, envisioning an unusual approach to solve these problems. Thus, counterfactual thinking, i.e., 'mental representations of alternatives to past factual events' (Roese and Morrison, 2005:16) is a key element of the entrepreneurial mindset that allows social entrepreneurs to understand problems and solutions to complex issues from alternative perspectives so that institutional disruption can occur (Tracey et al., 2011). Expectations are also related to counterfactual thinking because, as Batel et al. (2016) suggest, the probability of agents to act increases if they believe their actions will have desirable consequences. Previous research on entrepreneurial mindset, i.e., ‘the ability to sense, act, and mobilize under certain conditions” (Haynie et al. 2010: 217), posits that different cognitive capabilities influence entrepreneurial processes and outcomes (McGrath and MacMillan, 2000; Mitchell et al., 2013; Shane, 2000), including the way in which social entrepreneurs deals with divergent institutional logics (Pache and Chowdhury, 2012; Z˙ ur and Naumann, 2018). Thus, attributes conforming to the entrepreneurial mindset, such as metacognition, cognitive adaptability, heuristic-based decision logic, or goal orientation (Zur and Naumann, 2018), determines the capacity of social entrepreneurs to act as institutional entrepreneurs in their search to handle competing business logics, to resist, or to reconfigure the dominant business logic in the regime.

Proposition 2. Entrepreneurial mindset positively influences social entrepreneurs’ ability to deal with conflicting business logics by favouring the development of alternative visions and practices to the institutionalized business logics.

c. Emotion: Commitment to institutional change

The affective dimension of social entrepreneurs is acknowledged as an essential element of institutional dynamics, since emotions influence cognitions, beliefs, and moral judgements (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Zietsma and Toubiana (2018) are adamant: "emotions constitute institutions, and institutions, in turn, constitute people through their emotional commitment to institutions." (p. 429). Since emotions connect human beings and to the context around them (Goodwin et al., 2013), social entrepreneurs’ emotions influence the meaning that they attribute to the business regime and allow them to connect with others to disrupt it.

Specifically, moral emotions may play a significant role in social entrepreneurs' engagement with transforming business institutions towards sustainability. Moral emotions are defined by Haidt (2003) as 'those emotions that are linked to the interests or welfare either of society as a whole or at least of persons other than the judge or agent' (p. 853). As the author argues, what makes emotions moral is that they go beyond the interests of the self. In this sense, social entrepreneurship has been regarded as a compassionate response to unmet social needs (see the theoretical development on compassion and social enterprise by Miller et al., 2012) Therefore, inasmuch as the logic of SEs is based on collective interest and social change seeking to fight injustice or alleviate suffering, it can be argued that feeling moral emotions (e.g., compassion, anger, guilt, shame or gratitude; see the typology by Haidt, 2003) is a strong driver for individuals to engage with the activity carried out by SEs and with the institutional work directed to changing the business regime.

Proposition 3. Emotions trigger the engagement of social entrepreneurs in the institutional work involved in transforming or disrupting the business regime.

3.3.2. Inside the niche: collective action grounding transformation

Beyond the characteristics of individuals involved in the process of institutional entrepreneurship, coordinated and institutionalized actions by social groups (whether formally organized or loosely defined) have also a prominent role on large-scale changes, as sustainability transitions are (Geels, 2020). There is no consensus among sustainability transition scholars regarding whether the path to sustainability transition is dominantly based on collective action or on the presence of key actors (Fischer and Newig, 2016). However, actors involved in transition processes do not work in isolation (Jørgensen, 2012; Farla et al., 2012). Moreover, institutional theory recognizes inter-organizational relationships as part of the dynamics of institutional change, and especially, it identifies collaboration as a source of new meanings, rules, and practices (Phillips et al., 2000).

In addition, scholarship on transformative innovation increases this phenomenon as a distributed agency “across ‘webs’ or ‘networks’ of social and material relations” (Pel et al., 2020). Similarly, the focus on social entrepreneurship as a collective endeavor of both similar and diverse actors is gaining ground in the field (Montgomery et al., 2012). From this collective approach, it can be argued that to create momentum, SEs are involved in four types of dynamics: building and sharing a common vision and theorizing the required change (proposition 5); the mobilization of actors and resources to put that vision into practice (proposition 6); the interactive spaces where agents in the niche learn and the experience and practice the process of institutional change (proposition 7).

a. Visioning and theorizing change

Developing collective visions and maintaining realistic and achievable expectations are part of the emergence of a niche (Geels, 2011; Hoogstraaten et al., 2020; Kemp et al., 1998; Schot and Geels, 2008). Visioning allows actors to find alternative futures and to define fundamental values that they want to realize (Loorbach et al., 2017).

However, actors in the niche might have many different competing visions and a high level of uncertainty (Loorbach et al., 2017). Therefore, the collective efforts of institutional entrepreneurship to transform the dominant business logics accordingly imply the development of a shared vision concerning sustainability problems, failures in the business regime and the need for systemic change (Loorbach et al., 2017).

On that account, institutional change begins with a phase of pre-institutionalization, where organizations innovate independently, seeking solutions in their near context (Greenwood et al., 2002). However, when those organizations want to extend the adoption of new institutional arrangements, they provide other actors with standard and legitimate schemas and interpretations (Mena and Suddaby, 2016; Strang and Meyer, 1993) that allow them to represent themselves externally (Greenwood et al., 2002).

Thus, the process of theorization whereby failures are conceptualized and linked to potential solutions is a key stage in institutional transformation (Greenwood et al., 2002). Theorizing the expected change implies elaborating a chain of causes and effects (Green- wood et al., 2002), thus framing current failures and providing justification for the innovations oriented to be a solution (Tolbert and Zucker, 2012). As a result, these innovations may involve the replacement of traditional beliefs and practices at the regime level, as well as the establishment of new actor roles that better fit the new institutional arrangements (Mena and Suddaby, 2016).

Proposition 4. Social enterprises ignite institutional change in the business regime by collectively building a shared vision about the dys- functions of the business system and theorizing the congruent transformative change.

b. Mobilizing actors towards institutional change

As part of the process of institutional disruption, actors attempt to perform activities to mobilize potential adherents to the desired change and to demobilize antagonists (Battilana et al., 2009; Benford and Snow, 2000). The use of discourse has a prominent role in mobilizing allies, reducing contradictions among them, and emphasizing the failures of the current regime that opens the way to a new shared vision (Greenwood et al., 2002; Levy and Scully, 2007). Rhetorical strategies are also crucial to gain acceptance and support from actors to mobilize the necessary resources to implement divergent change (Battilana et al., 2009).

Given that mobilization also entails strong cohesion among individuals, actors might build some structure and processes oriented to maintain goals and identities over time (Geels, 2020). Therefore, the construction of the social entrepreneurship niche depends on the capacity of the actors in the niche to mobilize others in the creation of new arrangements that have the potential to be institutionalized (van Wijk et al., 2019). Those arrangements, as ‘proto-institutions’ (Lawrence et al., 2002), are practices in the making. Even though they are not fully institutionalized at the regime level, they represent a central step in the process of institutional change.

Proposition 5. The collective action of social enterprises is influenced by their capacity to identify potential (antagonists) allies, and to work for (de)mobilizing them.

c. Building interactive spaces to facilitate change

The collective dimension of institutional entrepreneurship is reinforced by the creation of spaces to facilitate interactions and provide resources for acting. Thus, network building is an important dynamic for this purpose (Schot and Geels, 2008). The literature in organizational studies has also named these networks interactive spaces that function as collective vehicles for actors' engagement and mobilization (Rao et al., 2000; van Wijk et al., 2019). As such, these spaces would favor the process of experimentation required to adapt and transform dominant cultures, logics, and practices (Loorbach et al., 2017).

In this sense, Ometto et al. (2019) distinguish between two types of interactive spaces needed to bring about institutional change. 'Spaces of negotiation' facilitate the discussion and creation of common stances among actors in the organization. Complementaryally, 'herding spaces' connect actors with the wider movement (of collective institutional entrepreneurship) of which they are a part, providing a constant reminder of the ideological purpose of the movement and the means to implement it (Ometto et al., 2019).

Considering that interactive spaces might be formal (i.e., formal social movement associations) or informal (i.e., friendship network) (Rao et al., 2000), we argue that the disruption of the business regime entails SEs to build alliances that result in interactive spaces, both negotiation and herding. Since the expansion of some SEs might have effects on the business regime, the dissemination of SEs' practices also depends on their capacity for resilience in the face of an environment that is mostly unfavorable to them (Pel and Bauler, 2017). Therefore, SEs would develop resilience through the cooperation of actors endowed with the necessary skills, knowledge, and experience.

Proposition 6. The presence of formal and/or informal spaces for interaction influence the dissemination of new logics and practices in the business regime through facilitating connection, cooperation, resilience, and access to resources.

d. Collective learning in the process of institutional change

Favoured by the previous processes, collective learning, as ‘taken-as-shared meanings are constructed and acted upon by the group’ (Kilgore, 1999: 191), may take place inside the niche in multiple dimensions (e.g., market, cultural meanings, technical, societal, regulations) (Schot and Geels, 2008). Learning is acknowledged as a source of institutional entrepreneurship and institutional change (Haunschild and Chandler, 2008; Smets et al., 2012). Moreover, the collective dimension of learning is crucial for leveraging resources, knowledge, and expertise that can pave the way for systemic innovations and institutional transformation (Montgomery et al., 2012). This collective learning is not necessarily, or not always, formalized since learning-by-doing processes become central, especially when actors lack the resources for developing formal learning processes, as evidenced by Seyfang and Longhurst (2013) in the case of community currencies.

Furthermore, learning processes in niches might be first-order but also second-order learning (Hegger et al., 2007). First-order learning refers to insights that are incorporated into innovative solutions to specific problems, while second-order learning might carry out a paradigm shift. In the SEs niche, both types of knowledge would be present through the collaboration between actors in sharing and confronting their different knowledge on social innovation for systemic problems and the transformation of the business regime.

Proposition 7. Collective learning (through formal and informal processes) allows social enterprises to get resources to perform disruptive institutional change.

3.3.3. Niche-regime interplay: between alignment and transformation

The diffusion of logics and practices enacted by the SE niche will be facilitated through the interaction and collaboration with actors who enact the dominant institutional logic (Phillips et al., 2000). However, actors in the business regime are dominantly guided by a divergent institutionalized logic, with profit maximization and shareholder primacy as the main drivers. Therefore, a shift in the business regime is not an easy endeavor, since the stable structure commonly involves path dependency (Ko¨hler et al., 2019; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013) and resistance to change (Ingram, 2015).

For the SE niche to disrupt the business regime, external pressures are needed to destabilize it, providing windows of opportunity for actors (Geels and Schot, 2010), e.g., the call to action for business actors (together with governments and civil society) coming from the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2015). However, despite the progress made in the field of sus- tainable management, the dominant business logics and practices guided by profit growth, financial returns and coercive competence, are in deep contradiction with the pressing logics of social justice, ethics of care. and the earth well-functioning (Dyllick and Muff, 2016; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Steffen et al., 2015).

Consequently, the controversies around the existence of conflicting institutional logics would offer the enabling conditions for SEs to move from the niche to the regime and to institutionalize a business logic for the common good (i.e., social entrepreneurship logic). However, the business regime still might absorb and capture niche attempts to perturb its stability (Pel, 2016) performing strategies of resistance, such as acquisitions of niche organizations or manipulation of regulatory processes to make their interests prevail (Hess, 2016). Next, we present the three main institutional dynamics driving the interplay between the social entrepreneurship niche and the business regime: legitimacy seeking (proposition 8), power struggles (proposition 9), and institutional resistance (proposition 10). In each of them, we refer to the possibility of being captured by the business regime.

a. Legitimacy seeking

Given that SEs enact a logic that deviates from the dominant one in the business regime, SEs navigate institutional complexity (Greenwood et al., 2002), needing to address conflicting demands and goals (D'Aunno et al., 1991; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Hence, the emerging niche of social entrepreneurship struggles to acquire legitimacy, i.e., "a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are socially desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574).

Legitimacy is not a static attribute of organizations, but the result of a building process that is in permanent fluctuation (Hybels, 1995). Thus, the construction of legitimacy involves strategic action by which SEs aim to manipulate external prescriptions rather than simply conforming to them (Gawer and Phillips, 2013; Lamin and Zaheer, 2012; Maguire and Hardy, 2006; Pache and Santos, 2013). These strategies may be substantive, such as the construction of partnerships with regime organizations that can provide legitimacy (Kumar and Das, 2007), or a more symbolic rhetorical action aimed at persuading stakeholders concerning a hybrid notion of social enterprise that integrates two institutional logics (Ruebottom, 2013).

Those strategies are performed as part of a legitimation work, i.e., "the purposeful effort of the legitimacy seeker to avoid certain issues and to secure other aspects which are essential to the conferrer of legitimacy" (Rueede and Kreutzer, 2015, p. 54), which may include the legitimation of collective identity (Gawer and Phillips, 2013), values (Nicolopoulou et al., 2015) and practices (Battilana et al., 2009); and roles (Mena and Suddaby, 2016; Rao et al., 2003).

In summary, the actions performed by SEs to gain legitimacy in the face of different regime actors imply strategic manipulation of external constituents exploiting the contradictions in the regime. However, they also might involve failure in the process of institu- tional change, which is represented by the capture of SE principles by one or more of the potential legitimacy conferrers. The capture of SE implies the assimilation of SEs as regular businesses (Pel and Bauler, 2017). As such, potential capture by the business regime would imply that SEs do not actually pursue a new institutional setting of goals and values.

Proposition 8. The type of legitimation work carried out by social enterprises shapes the patterns of interaction between actors in the social entrepreneurship niche and the business regime.

b. Power dynamics

Institutional change and the corresponding work in search for legitimacy in the interplay between the niche and the regime in- volves underlying power dynamics and relationships (Avelino and Rotmans, 2009; Avelino and Wittmayer, 2016). Therefore, the interplay between social entrepreneurship niche and the business regime might be considered a political representation (Pel, 2016), where powerful and powerless actors are enforcing different strategies to make prevalent their interests, insofar as power is considered a consequence of the relationships among actors in a system (Clegg, 1989) rather than "something an actor can have, hold or keep in reserve" (Lawrence, 2008: 174).

Hence, the configuration of actors, structures, and practices prevailing in the business regime is a result of those power dynamics (Fligstein, 1997; Lawrence, 2008; Nicholls, 2010; Seo and Creed, 2002). For instance, under neoliberal capitalist conditions, formal authority and control of critical resources are usually in the hands of actors who are embedded in the dominant business logic and are attempting to maintain the status quo because it confers certain privileges on them. Therefore, those actors are in a better position to exert power over SEs, which are considered marginal actors (Martí and Mair, 2009) that are trying to manipulate institutions to change power structures and deliver their interests.

Consequently, a question arises regarding how SEs might exert power to embed proto institutions (Lawrence et al., 2002) into the dominant business system. In this sense, Avelino and Rotmans (2009) introduce the notion of 'transformative power' as the ability to create new institutions and structures. They stress that an actor who changes institutions in a specific context (e.g., inside the niche) is exercising power even though it does not become institutionalized in the broader context. In this sense, Maguire et al. (2004) argue that institutional entrepreneurs that are not in dominant positions exercise power in different ways, such as bringing diverse stake- holders with relevant resources to create institutions, leveraging political and discourse skills to disseminate new practices, and including new practices attached to existing routines in the regime.

However, to transform the business system, the capacity to influence the distribution of resources (i.e., 'constitutive power') (Avelino and Rotmans, 2009) is also performed by SEs. Developing constitutive power is a challenging process because actors in the dominant regime set the political agenda, leaving aside the interests of powerless groups and exercising what Lawrence (2008) calls hidden power (i.e., a representation of systemic power that disciplines actors by the domination of their beliefs and behaviours).

In that respect, Martí and Mair (2009) stress that it is unlikely that SEs can mobilize resources to penalize or dissociate moral foundations. However, they can disrupt cultural beliefs because the "agency of the powerless is present in more subtle, hidden forms of institutional work. It is an agency that is not so much about new ways of doing things or initiating change but is more one of enlightenment and emancipation." (Martí and Mair, 2009: 97). For instance, the implementation of contrary practices is argued to undermine assumptions and beliefs, redistributing power in the regime. Furthermore, Pel (2016) suggests that one way in which transformation occurs is when actors introduce apparently inoffensive innovations that enact latent transformative substances. The author uses the "trojan horse" as a metaphor in which the capture of the niche (i.e., the horse) allows innovators to introduce hidden innovative institutions (i.e., the hidden soldiers inside the horse) into the regime (i.e., Troy). Consequently, the niche exerts power on the regime using a tactic that is possible to deploy only during and after the process of capture (Pel, 2016).

Proposition 9. The agency of social enterprises to transform the business regime depends on their capacity to perform material and symbolic actions leading to both transformative and constitutive power.

c. Institutional Resistance

‘‘Where there is power there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power’’ (Foucault, 1978: 95). Drawing on this Foucauldian view of power beyond something owed by the powerful over the powerless, the third element identified to influence institutional dynamics in the interplay between the social entrepreneurship niche and the business regime is institutional resistance. Resistance may come either from social innovators in the niche resisting the dominant logics represented by incumbents in the business regime or from incumbents resisting attempts by social innovators to influence and change business values and practices (Clegg, 1989; Lawrence, 2008).

Regarding actors who performs disruptive change, Lounsbury (2007) suggest that the exposition to competing logics, which un- derlies the performance of social enterprises, is used by actors as a basis for institutional resistance. Therefore, SEs face conflicting institutional demands, because the demand based on profit and shareholder primacy competes with a demand based on uncovered social needs and the common good as the ultimate goal of the enterprise. Scott (1990) explores how the powerless actors exert resistance, and as such depict, is not so much about new ways of doing things but is more an art of enlightenment and emancipation. SEs make explicit or implicit their resistance to the for-profit logic in their communication activities, in the use of the discourse or when they attempt to influence regulation.

Actors in the business regime might resist institutional agency from social innovators insomuch as they perceive that the logic and practices enacted by SE do not serve their interests. Thus, resistance strategies will involve refusal and defiance but also an indirect subversion of the aims and effects of the new institutional setting (Lawrence, 2008). Maguire and Hardy (2009) introduce the notion of defensive institutional work to explain this type of dynamic, which they define as “the purposive action of individuals and organi- zations aimed at countering disruptive institutional work” (p. 169). It includes discourse and texts that dispute the problematization enacted by disruptors to preserve the existing institutional pillars and practices (Maguire and Hardy, 2009). In that respect, institutional resistance would act beyond the lock-in mechanisms of stability, with actors in the regime not only resisting actively through discursive strategies but also by controlling strategic resources and capabilities (Geels, 2014).

SEs in these power relationships may not only fail to transform the dominant business logic, but also to end up being subservient to capitalism by treating the symptoms of capitalism instead of root causes, thus sending the message that solutions to socio-ecological problems are simply a matter of appropriate management (Calas et al., 2009).

In sum, the degree and type of resistance taking place in the interplay between the SE niche and the business regime determine the potential for institutional change.

Proposition 10. The degree and types of resistance taking place in the interplay between the social entrepreneurship niche and the business regime shape the pathways of transition (e.g., transformation, co-existence, capture)

3.3.4. The agency of a SE transforming institutional business logics: Heincke and the agricultural revolution in the panela industry.

The production of panela (jaggery or non-centrifuged sugar) is one of the most important economic activities in Colombia (Bejarano, 2015) and, as such, one of the principal sources of employment and income for rural families in the country (Ordoñez Díaz and Rueda-Quiñonez, 2017)Its production extends to 28 of the 32 Colombian provinces (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, 2019), making the country the second-largest producer of panela worldwide, after India (Gutiérrez-Mosquera et al., 2018) However, traditional production involves great physical effort and considerable risk to workers health, in addition to harmful effects to the environment (pollution of water sources, changes in atmospheric quality, etc.) (Ordoñez Díaz and Rueda-Quiñonez, 2017)

In that context Heincke founded a company that attempts to increase incomes and improve the quality of life of small farmers in Colombia. Heincke's business model is dedicated to selling organic panela (from small Colombian producers) to international su- permarkets and global customers, balancing the benefits and costs between the different constituents in the panela value chain. As Fernando Heincke, co-founder of the company, contends, "social enterprises, like Heincke, go beyond the purchase and sales of products; instead, they build a model that changes paradigms" (F. Heincke, personal communication, Julio 8, 2020; El Tiempo, 2019). Following that direction, Heincke promotes an agricultural revolution based on technological innovation, equity among actors in the value chain, direct support to small farmers, and organic production (F. Heincke, personal communication, Julio 8, 2020; Heincke, 2021). The transformational dynamics of such a revolution illustrates the theoretical model proposed in this paper. Thus, in what follows we explain the three-level institutional dynamics in which the SE Heincke is involved, with a focus on its agency as an institutional entrepreneur seeking to change the dominant business logics in the panela industry1.

First, at the individual level, reflexivity allows Fernando Heincke to recognize that panela, unlike coffee (the main agricultural product in Colombia), which is produced by seasons, requires sugarcane to be grown along the year, thus generating employment throughout the whole year (El Colombiano, 2020). However, small farmers sell panela to commercial intermediaries, who have the negotiation power to establish the price according to their interests. The awareness of this problem in the business regime drives Fernando and his partner, Maria Paula, to think of ways to change the situation (El Tiempo, 2019). [P.1]

Their entrepreneurial mindset allows them to conceive a different approach, contrary to the traditional Colombian thinking, which identifies panela as the product for the poor. As such, they started the business with the idea to do "something extraordinary from the ordinary" (El Colombiano, 2020). The company has established partnerships with 15 producer associations reaching around 50–55 small producers in each of them and providing them with training, education, technology, and financial facilities. Heincke wanted to transform the conventional model that uses intermediaries in the value chain by bringing about a direct relationship between producers and big retailers in the international market. Currently, Heincke's panela is sold worldwide, being Spain, United Kingdom, United States, and Asia its principal markets (El Tiempo, 2019). [P.2]

Finally, emotions play a role in the actions taken by Heincke's founders. For Fernando Heincke, this is his second company in the panela sector. The first one was Maria Panela, a company focused on the sales of panela-based beverages that went bankrupt after three years of operation due to a wrong market approach and to internal disputes among shareholders regarding the balance between profits and social and environmental impacts. Such experience leveraged several emotions (sadness, disgust, frustration) in Fernando that led him to establish another company (i.e., Heincke) where he and Maria Paula Guerrero (his wife) could portray their values and ways to see the world without the restrictions imposed by shareholders with divergent values, beliefs and mindsets (F. Heincke, personal communication, Julio 8, 2020. [P.3]

Second, at the niche level, Heincke is very active in the Sistema B movement. As such, the company enact the principles of Sistema B: "the company pursues new economic genetics that allows values and ethics to inspire collective solutions for social and environmental challenges" (Heincke, 2021). Heincke is an active member of the Colombian chapter of Sistema B, that brings together companies certified as B Corps (i.e., a stamp that identifies the companies that operate under the prescriptions of the movement), as well as relevant business actors. Through its participation in the chapter, the company finds a formal interactive space where it can co-create the main postures and prescriptions of the movement in the country [P.6]. Simultaneously, inside the chapter, actors actively encourage each other to commit to the purpose of the movement and to monitor its performance.

Besides, the participation of the company in the chapter also allows it to have a shared vision with other actors [P.4], which in- volves builds a new economy in which success and financial benefits include social and environmental well-being (Sistema B, 2021). Heincke is also engaged in learning processes through the opportunity to participate at the B Academy [P.7], where certified companies interact with the academy, to reflect on the movement's progress, to measure the impact generated, and to learn from that, promoting good practices and improving those aspects where there are gaps (Academia B, 2021).

On that account, we might argue that active engagement of Heincke in a global movement, as Sistema B, points out that the company pursues transformative change performing collective dynamics as visioning [P.4], participating in interactive spaces [P.6], and pursuing collective learning [P.7], as our theoretical model proposes.

In addition, Heincke attempts to mobilize actors [P.5], involving a collaboration dynamic in which the company identifies potential allies to enhance collective transformative action. An example is the current partnership established with Fundacio´n ANDI (i.e., a non- profit organization representative of the business sector's interests, whose primary purpose is to expand and promote an entrepre- neurial culture based upon human dignity, political democracy, social justice, private property, and liberty); Fedepanela (i.e., a union of panela producers aimed to promote the improvement of the standard of living of all producers who work in the panela sector, making this activity competitive and profitable); and Factor clave (i.e., a company focused on the improvement of actor's competencies in industrial value chains). These collaborations attempt to improve the competencies of small panela producers, strengthening their soft skills, which will allow them to manage their fields strategically, and create a better future for themselves (F. Heincke, personal communication, July 8, 2020). This mobilization portrays the institutional work performed by Heincke engaging in col- laborations that are not common in the business system, bringing along actors who are not traditionally embarked on these kinds of initiatives.

Third, at the interplay between the social enterprise niche and the actors in the business regime, SEs interact with regime actors who do not share the same values and beliefs. Both in his first company (i.e., Maria Panela), as in the current one (i.e., Heincke), Fernando had to deal with shareholders and potential investors enacting an institutional logic that was different from his own principles. Those actors operate under the traditional logic, which “is very much about doing things that, although they are intelligent financially, go against the values of social enterprises” (F.Heincke, personal communication, Julio 8, 2020)

Therefore, Heincke carries out legitimation work when it undertakes to adapt itself to the demands of business regime actors. This adaptation becomes evident when they accept to have a lower margin than that of the companies in the panela sector, where the dominant business logic is marked by intense competition and pricing (and cost) pressures, rather than by socio-ecological quality throughout the value chain. In this sense, Fernando argues: “I could make more money and scale faster by doing bad practices, buying low but selling high and having a large margin in the middle” (F. Heincke, personal communication, July 8, 2020). According to Heincke (2020), this situation emerges because the social and environmental impact is not a differential in consumer decision making. Thus, the company invests in social and environmental issues while having competitive prices. Hence, Heincke’s lower margin represents the legitimation of its practices allowing them to position as a transformative agent in front of actors who enact dominant institutional logic [P.8]

Such a position focused on socio-ecological conditions of panela value chain instead of profits, reflects also dynamics of power and resistance. They are visible when Heincke struggles with potential investors or potential partners that are not aligned with the company in terms of priorities, management approach, and strategies to address social and environmental challenges throughout the value chain. These dynamics arise when companies attempt to exert transformative power [P.9]. Thus, Heincke brings about practices like the investment in training of small farmers, the complete support of farmer’s organic certification, and the provision of technology to improve small farmer’s productivity while paying higher prices than the competition. Fernando argues that those investments allow to show that SEs are capable of transforming institutions (i.e., new practices that address social and environmental problems) while growing as a business and being successful in the market (F.Heincke, personal communication, July 8, 2020).

Heincke also exerts constitutive power [P.9] when they perform practices that redistribute the power in the business system, supporting its transformation. For example, in his first company, Fernando found himself having restrictions from some shareholders who demanded that "peasants should be paid after 120 days because according to their beliefs, that is how companies should work". Despite that, he decided to pay peasants on a weekly basis, incorporating a new practice that undermines the beliefs of regime actors in the panela industry (F.Heincke, personal communication, July 8, 2020).

In addition, Heincke resists institutional pressures from business regime actors [P.10] when they are not available to receive any kind of external investment. As Fernando depicts regarding his experience with external investors in his first company, "I invited people that I liked, that I thought were successful and that had the money to invest. However, that was a mistake because they were traditional investors who did not share the vision, values, and company goals. It costed me dearly because those beliefs are the ones that prevailed in the decision-making process, especially when the business was struggling".

Fernando and Maria Paula have received offers from investors who want to support the growth of Heincke. They analyze those proposals carefully because they do not want to involve new shareholders that do not prioritize impact over financial return. Thus, Heincke has rejected several investor's offers. However, the company has received support from investors as Bancolombia, the major financial institution in Colombia. Bancolombia is also a B-Corp and, as such, they share beliefs about the system which make the negotiation process smooth. Fernando contends that "Bancolombia is committed to Heincke's vision, because they have provided us with the appropriate financial instrument that we need to grow, demanding a financial return that protects our purpose and values." (F. Heincke, personal communication, July 8, 2020).

As a final remark, Fernando feels that capture from the business regime (i.e., assimilation of social enterprises as regular businesses) underlies those dynamics, and that the temptation to deviate from the original mission of the company is always present. However, “it is a matter of conviction, of the leadership team having very clear the values and goals of the organization, knowing that the company must be good at doing business while excelling in the delivery of social impact results. Because if one of the two fails, then the project fails” (F.Heincke, personal communication, July 8, 2020).

3.4. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to expand and enrich the understanding of the institutional dynamics of the sustainability transition in the business regime, with a focus on the agency of SEs. In doing so, we have addressed the transformational role that SEs play in the institutionalized capitalist business logic. Despite the growing interest of sustainability transitions research on the role of business actors in shaping transitions, it has hardly addressed the capitalist and neoclassical economic logics that structure the conditions in which business actors operate; logics dominantly understood as a given factor from the landscape (Feola, 2020).

We have explicitly addressed this concern by focusing on the transition of the business system, defined as the institutional configuration that shapes actors’ sensemaking and behaviours, and where the capitalist business logic is prevailing. Specifically, we have proposed a conceptual framework based on the literature review on institutional entrepreneurship and sustainability transitions, integrating three-level mechanisms operated by SEs in institutional transformation towards sustainability transition: the micro level of individuals driving social transformation; the meso level of SEs acting collectively with the motivation to transform the business regime; and the macro level interactions among the SE niche and the incumbent actors in the business regime. To facilitate further empirical examination of the framework, we have articulated it in a set of propositions.

Several theoretical and empirical implications derive from our proposal, suggesting a future research agenda. First, concerning the individual level, we point out elements that trigger institutional entrepreneurship in social entrepreneurs, beyond the pro-social personal characteristics (i.e., sympathy, and compassion), commonly stressed by SE literature because of their role in the probability of individuals to engage in social entrepreneurship (Saebi et al., 2019). Specifically, reflexivity, entrepreneurial mindset, and emotions are identified from our review as the main drivers of institutional transformation at the micro-level. Some previous research has already explored these elements in relation to institutional change (for instance, reflexivity by Suddaby et al., 2016 and Cherrier et al., 2018; entrepreneurial mindset by Ż ur and Naumann, 2018; expectations by Upham et al., 2019). However, sustainability transitions scholarship has scarcely addressed the socio-psychological approaches of the agency of actors in transitions (see Upham et al., 2020 on this claim).

In this sense, our proposal accounts for the relevance of the individual actor-focused perspectives of institutional change, especially regarding the emotional dimension of actors, given that emotions influence cognitions, beliefs, and moral judgements (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), and that expectations reflect beliefs on one desired scenario or depictions of the future (van Lente, 2012). Thus, emotions and expectations can regulate the reproduction of practices and the establishment of routines in the formation of the niche and regime formation (Gill and Borrow, 2018; Upham et al., 2019). For instance, the fear of being captured, might guide the behavior of social entrepreneurs in the process of dealing with an environment in which they have a lack of alignment. In sum, transition scholarship (even from an institutional perspective) has paid little attention to these psychological constructs (and others in the emotional spectrum), which merit further exploration. In particular, empirical studies might explore why some individuals bring about emotions and expectations to commit to institutional change in sustainability transitions while others do not.

Second, at the meso level, we situate the agentic action of SEs in the process of building a niche as a protected space where in- novators can deviate from institutional prescriptions. Such a building process requires the construction of a strong network of actors who may envision the desired change, mobilize others accordingly, and learn collectively about those experiences. However, this process is challenging for innovations that come from community action (as the social entrepreneurship field may be considered) instead of mainstream business actors (Seyfang and Longhurst, 2013), since the construction of consensus relies on individuals with different backgrounds and understandings regarding what needs to be changed and how to change it. Therefore, future studies might empirically examine from socio-psychological approaches how collaboration and participation develop at the niche level, with a special focus on the challenges at the intra- and inter-organizational level (Upham et al., 2020).

Third, at the interplay between the social entrepreneurship niche and the business regime, we identified power and resistance as the key factors shaping the dynamics of interaction. In this sense, SEs have been traditionally defined as powerless actors with limited capacity to change institutional settings. This assumption suggests that, since the business regime is dominant, it is the most powerful configuration of actors, structures and practices (Avelino and Rotmans, 2009). However, this does not necessarily imply that the regime exercises power over niches, given that SEs may exercise a different kind of power, such as innovative and transformative power (Avelino and Rotmans, 2009). Positioning power in its creative and transformational role invites further research on the micropolitics of niche-regime interactions, as part of the growing interest in transition research to move the field beyond the dichotomous approach to niches and regimes ((Hess, 2016); Ko¨hler et al., 2019). Thus, future empirical studies might test the variety of interactions and strategies performed based on legitimacy, resistance, and power struggles, as identified in our framework, and how actors experience those struggles both individually and collectively.

Specifically, research might try to unveil the mechanisms and processes underlying the institutional capture of the niche from the fixed structures in the business system. Capture is identified in our framework as a possible pathway in the institutional entrepreneurship efforts by SEs in the niche, when their transformative action is limited by the incumbents' deployment of activities to absorb innovations that threaten the status quo (Pel and Bauler, 2017). Thus, capture might occur as a result of power struggles (e.g., when SEs prioritize financial goals in the face of investor demands), legitimacy seeking (e.g., when they decline to pursue a social mission because they need to be legitimate according to a corporate client), and resistance (e.g., when their activities to transform industry standards are resisted by actors from the business regime).

A fourth implication for future research concerns the scope of the framework we present. It is limited to the multi-level factors influencing the dynamics of transition in the business regime. However, the model does not address the possible outcomes or pathways of the institutional entrepreneurship attempt of SEs to produce the shift of regime. Thus, empirical studies might test the multi-level components of our framework to showcase different pathways in the transition of the dominant capitalist business logic, possibly drawing on the general patterns suggested by de Haan and Rotmans (2011) to shape the transition road (i.e., top-down change, bottom-up change, internally induced change).

Finally, the proposed framework and propositions might benefit from their empirical examination on specific fields and sectors, since the way in which the dominant business logic shapes beliefs, norms, routines, and practices may considerably vary, due to differences in industry-specific and market-specific factors. For instance, factors related to consumer or industrial products and markets, to the role of the State in the provision of goods, or to the degree in which the industry is an essential one. An additional factor of diversity comes from the geographical scope (Fuenfschilling and Binz, 2018), where the cultural, social, and political dimension may introduce a wide diversity of macro and micro experiences in the transition to sustainability of the business system.

Chapter 4

Toward Change: Understanding Power and Empowerment in Social Entrepreneurship

4.1 Introduction

Social enterprises are organizations that develop business-driven responses to pressing social and environmental challenges (Ometto et al., 2019; Partzsch & Ziegler, 2011; Dey et al., 2016). By combining social missions with entrepreneurial activity, they are often described as hybrid organizations—entities that straddle the boundaries between profit-making and mission-driven logics (Battilana & Dorado, 2020; Pache & Santos, 2013). This hybridity not only sets social enterprises apart but also positions them as potential agents of systemic change, capable of addressing some of the structural harms associated with capitalist modes of production and exchange (Bansal et al., 2019; Hillman et al., 2018; Hörisch, 2015). In this sense, social enterprises possess the potential to transform institutional arrangements by challenging, reshaping, or even supplanting dominant institutions (Haxeltine et al., 2017; Pel et al., 2020).

To understand the context in which social enterprises operate, it is important to consider the traditional business system. This system—comprising the actors, rules, norms, beliefs, and practices that shape production, distribution, and consumption—embodies those dominant institutions (Vasquez-Delsolar and Merino, 2021). This system, grounded in principles such as profit maximization and shareholder primacy (Ferreras, 2017), enacts the dominant institutional logic that social enterprises seek to redefine. Through business models that prioritize social and environmental outcomes, social enterprises attempt to reconfigure the values underpinning business activities.

Yet, the path to transformation is anything but straightforward. Social enterprises frequently face conflicting institutional demands, exposing them to institutional complexity—defined as the presence of competing and often incompatible logics within the same environment (Greenwood et al., 2011, p. 318; Pache & Santos, 2013). Navigating such complexity inevitably involves engagement with deeply embedded power dynamics (Haxeltine et al., 2017; Pel et al., 2023; Vasquez-Delsolar & Merino, 2021).

The relationship between institutional complexity and power is both recursive and foundational, reflecting how actors continuously shape and are shaped by the institutional structures in which they operate (Greenwood et al., 2011; Lawrence & Suddaby, 2009). For marginalized or non-dominant actors such as social enterprises, institutional complexity is not an exception but a structural feature of their operating environment. Rather than resolving contradictions, these actors often draw strategically from multiple logics to create hybrid models, secure legitimacy, and mobilize resources across institutional boundaries (Battilana & Dorado, 2010; Tracey et al., 2011). This strategic engagement with complexity becomes a source of agency, allowing social enterprises to exert influence within contested spaces and subtly transform the institutions in which they are embedded.

Crucially, transformation implies more than organizational adaptation; it involves reconfiguring social relations, which is inherently tied to shifting power structures (Avelino et al., 2024). Given the intricate and persistent nature of today's systemic challenges, it is essential to explore how social enterprises seek to resist, reinterpret, or reconfigure the institutional and power structures that define the capitalist business system (Avelino et al., 2019).

At the heart of these dynamics lies a paradox: while social enterprises often aim to disrupt the status quo, they must also operate within its very structures. As such, the processes of transformative social innovation are often ambivalent and contradictory. Initiatives may embody emancipatory ambitions and transformative agency (Westley et al., 2017), yet simultaneously replicate or accommodate dominant norms and institutional frameworks (Pel et al., 2023). This ambivalence reflects a condition of distributed power—a context in which influence is diffused across a diverse array of actors, including grassroots movements, civil society, public institutions, and individual entrepreneurs, rather than being centralized or unidirectional (Pel & Bauler, 2014; Cipolla et al., 2017; Phillips et al., 2000), thus, power circulates through a web of interactions, negotiations, and collaborations across institutional boundaries (Phillips et al., 2000). Theorists continue to debate how power is exercised, resisted, and embedded in structures and relationships (Gaventa, 2006; Hayward & Lukes, 2008). While recent scholarship has sought to integrate power into discussions of socio-technical and institutional transformation (Geels, 2014; Grin et al., 2010; Hoffman, 2013), these discussions often remain abstract or overlook how power specifically relates to the capitalist logic underpinning business systems (Avelino et al., 2024; Kashwan et al., 2018). Moreover, despite a growing interest in power, empirical analyses that explicitly explore transformational change in power terms remain limited (Raj et al., 2024).

An equally important concept in this context is empowerment, increasingly understood as a process through which groups gain greater control over their environments and futures (Christens, 2019, p. 14). Avelino (2017) adds to this by defining empowerment as "the process through which actors gain the capacity to mobilize resources and institutions to achieve a goal" (p. 512). This understanding expands empowerment beyond individual psychology, highlighting its relational and institutional embeddedness. Indeed, the institutional complexity that social enterprises face may act as a catalyst for empowerment, compelling them to innovate, adapt, and mobilize in the face of diverse and often conflicting expectations (Battilana et al., 2009; Micelotta et al., 2017).

In light of these considerations, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the power and empowerment dynamics that social enterprises encounter as they engage with the institutional logics of the capitalist business system. In doing so, it challenges assumptions about the inherently transformative nature of social innovation. One critical concern is the tendency to frame social innovation as an inherently normative and instrumental solution to social problems—an orientation rooted in the problem-solving paradigms of social entrepreneurship and public policy. As Caijaba-Santana (2014) cautions, this instrumental framing risks committing a teleological fallacy: assuming that observed results necessarily reflect intentional or emancipatory aims. Rather than reproducing such deterministic views, this study seeks to foreground the contested, negotiated, and meaning-rich nature of transformation. It centers the interpretive practices of social entrepreneurs as they navigate the complex and uneven terrain of institutional change. This research, therefore, explores how these actors make sense of power relations —not through binary lenses of domination versus disruption— but as dynamic and often contradictory processes embedded in real-world institutional constraints.

To that end, this study adopts an interpretive approach, engaging directly with the discourses of social entrepreneurs. By examining how entrepreneurs articulate and reflect on their experiences within complex institutional settings, we aim to uncover the meanings they assign to their encounters with power and institutional resistance. This dialogical engagement allows for a deeper understanding of how social entrepreneurs interpret, internalize, and strategically respond to institutional complexity.

As a result of our analysis, we identify two distinct yet interrelated dimensions of transformational engagement. The first, which we term reflexivity dynamics, emphasizes the role of emotional labor and relational identity in motivating action—that is, the internal processes of self-empowerment. The second, instrumental strategies, focuses on how entrepreneurs interact externally with institutional structures, exercising what Avelino (2017) terms innovative power (the capacity to generate new resources) and transformative power (the capacity to build new institutions or alter existing ones). These strategic responses include collaboration, counter-hegemonic practices, and the tactical reappropriation of dominant structures.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section 4.2 provides a conceptual framework for understanding power and empowerment within the interplay between social entrepreneurship and the business system. Section 4.3 outlines the interpretive methodology used to analyze interviews with twelve social entrepreneurs based in Spain and Latin America. Section 4.4 presents the findings, categorizing them into internal and external dimensions of the transformational processes. Finally, the conclusion discusses the contributions of this research to scholarship on social entrepreneurship and transformative social innovation, highlighting the implications for both theory and practice.

4. 2. Theoretical framework

4. 2.1. Social enterprises: navigating power dynamics in a context of institutional complexity

Social enterprises operate within environments characterized by institutional complexity, where multiple, and often conflicting, institutional logics coexist and interact (Greenwood et al., 2011). These logics—such as market rationality, civic values, and public governance—structure the norms, beliefs, and rules that guide action. For social enterprises, navigating such complexity is not simply a matter of strategic adaptation, but an inherently political process that involves the negotiation of power dynamics across overlapping institutional fields.

Within this context, power has been conceptualized in two foundational ways. First, as articulated by Michel Foucault (1980), power is understood as a diffuse force that circulates through discourse, norms, and practices. It is not possessed by individuals or institutions, but exercised relationally—embedded in the very fabric of everyday social interactions. Individuals are shaped by power while simultaneously becoming its vehicles. In contrast, Anthony Giddens' (1984) structuration theory situates power within the concept of agency, framing it as the capacity to act within and upon structures. Here, power is inherently dual: it is both a constraint and an enabler, as actors reproduce or transform the structures through which they operate.

This dual conceptual foundation informs more contemporary distinctions in power theory. A central debate concerns three relational modes of power: power-over, power-to, and power-with (Gaventa, 2021; Avelino, 2017, 2021). *Power-over* refers to domination or the ability of one actor to constrain another. *Power-to* captures the capacity for action—particularly the agency to pursue goals. *Power-with* emphasizes collective agency and solidarity, highlighting how actors can act jointly to influence outcomes (Allen, 1999). While these distinctions were initially rooted in ontological debates (Pitkin, 1972), they have since evolved into analytically distinct concepts that enrich our understanding of transformation processes (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021).

Göhler (2009) proposes a more integrative understanding of power as the medium through which social relations shape fields of action. This perspective bridges the structure-agency divide by framing power as relational and embedded. It aligns with Lukes’ (1974) three-dimensional view of power, which includes decision-making power, non-decision-making power (the exclusion of issues from the agenda), and ideological power (which shapes beliefs and desires). Clegg’s (2002) three circuits of power further extend this approach, distinguishing between episodic power (micro-level actions), dispositional power (meso-level rules), and systemic power (macro-level institutions). These frameworks together reveal how actors exercise power within—and are shaped by—multi-level institutional arrangements.

In sustainability transition studies, power is increasingly recognized as a constitutive dimension of agency. Avelino and Rotmans (2009) define power as the capacity of actors to mobilize resources in pursuit of specific goals, noting that different expressions of power emerge depending on the types of resources actors can access—whether material, human, technological, or symbolic. Building on this, Avelino (2017) proposes a typology particularly relevant to institutional change: *reinforcive power*, the capacity to sustain existing institutions; *innovative power*, the ability to develop new resources or practices; and *transformative power*, the potential to reconfigure institutional arrangements altogether. This perspective highlights that transformation is not reducible to disruption alone, but involves layered forms of power that often coexist in dynamic tension.

Allen’s (2005) typology further refines the relational nature of power. She distinguishes between action-theoretical power, rooted in individual agency; constitutive power, emerging from interactions between human and non-human actors (such as technologies); and systemic power, which derives from the broader logics and dynamics of social systems. These dimensions underscore that power is not simply held, but enacted through situated relationships and contextual forces. As Raj et al. (2022) argue, power circulates through networks of actors and structures, embedded in social arrangements rather than isolated within fixed entities.

This relational understanding unsettles static conceptions of who holds power. Avelino and Wittmayer (2016) critique binary distinctions between dominant incumbents and powerless challengers, emphasizing instead that actors express power differently based on their position, strategies, and resource configurations. Gaventa (2021) similarly observes that actors traditionally perceived as marginal can exercise agency through diverse tactics—from resisting at the margins or occupying invited spaces to challenging dominant discourses and constructing prefigurative alternatives.

These dynamics are especially relevant to the study of social enterprises. While often considered peripheral to mainstream systems of power, social enterprises may nonetheless exert transformative influence by advancing alternative practices and narratives that align with—or subtly subvert—dominant institutional logics. Pel (2017) describes such processes as "Trojan horses": innovations that appear to comply with existing structures while quietly embedding transformative possibilities. In this way, institutional change often occurs not through direct confrontation, but through strategic engagement with contradictions internal to the system.

Pel and Bauler (2017) argue that successful transformations frequently rely on endogenous renewal—on leveraging tensions already present within institutional systems—rather than entirely external disruption. In this context, social enterprises may simultaneously reproduce and resist the capitalist business logics they inhabit, a tension captured in the “system reproduction paradox” (Pel et al., 2023). This dynamic echoes the “paradox of embedded agency” articulated by Seo and Creed (2002), which highlights the challenge of initiating institutional change while being embedded within the very structures one seeks to transform.

Such paradoxes are not evidence of inconsistency or failure, but rather illustrate the complexity of power in politically contested environments. Even seemingly aligned innovations may operate within what Pel (2017) calls “discursive gray zones,” where transformation is negotiated ambiguously, and often incrementally. This resonates with broader perspectives on political change, which emphasize that institutional transformation rarely proceeds in a linear or transparent fashion (Rip, 2006; Smith & Stirling, 2007; Walker & Shove, 2007).

Understanding the transformative role of social enterprises thus requires moving beyond normative assumptions about power and disruption. It involves attending to the multiple forms, levels, and expressions of power—from reinforcement to resistance, from domination to collaboration—within institutional environments shaped by complexity, contradiction, and negotiation.

4.2.2. Dimensions of empowerment in the transformational process of social innovation

When discussing societal transformation, the concept of empowerment becomes central, particularly for social entrepreneurs who must believe in their capacity to effect meaningful change. This belief is rooted in a sense of purpose, competence, and the conviction that one’s actions can generate tangible impact (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). For social entrepreneurs operating from non-dominant positions within the broader business system, empowerment is about addressing inequalities in their ability to challenge the status quo. It involves a shift from a perceived incapacity to initiate change toward a growing sense of capability and influence (Haugh & Talwar, 2016).

In this regard, Smith and Woodworth (2012) emphasize the importance of self-efficacy, defined as “a belief in one’s ability to effect positive social change” (p. 393), as a prerequisite for sustained engagement and performance in the creation of social value. This view closely aligns with Conger and Kanungo’s (1988) understanding of empowerment as an enabling process that fosters motivation and commitment by cultivating a sense of personal efficacy. However, these early conceptualizations focus primarily on individual fulfillment and psychological readiness, often neglecting the influence of structural and institutional factors (Cornwall, 2018). As Batliwala (2007), Christens (2019), and Gaventa (2021) argue, definitions of empowerment that omit the role of power and context risk depoliticizing the concept and overlooking its transformational potential.

A more comprehensive perspective is offered by Rappaport (1987), who conceptualizes empowerment as encompassing both a psychological sense of personal control and a concern with broader structures of social influence, political power, and legal rights. This dual orientation aligns closely with the concept of institutional complexity, which refers to the presence of multiple, often contradictory, institutional logics within a given environment. Understanding the role that empowerment plays in the transformative efforts of social entrepreneurs thus requires attention to how institutional complexity shapes their capacity to act. This includes both their individual dispositions and the broader institutional settings in which their agency is situated (Lounsbury & Boxenbaum, 2013).

Institutional complexity, by its very nature, generates power asymmetries. As actors navigate conflicting logics, values, and expectations, their ability to construct meaning, gain legitimacy, and enact change is unequally distributed. Those in dominant positions are better equipped to define which institutional logics are recognized and prioritized, while marginalized actors often face constraints related to access, visibility, and influence (Christens, 2012; Greenwood et al., 2011; Avelino, 2017). Thus, institutional complexity not only reveals pluralism but also exposes deeply embedded inequalities in power distribution across organizational and societal contexts.

Within this terrain, Gaventa (2021) makes a compelling case for integrating power and empowerment within a single analytical frame. He defines empowerment as “a process through which relatively powerless groups develop a sense of power within, and the capacity for power with others, in order to challenge the power over their lives, and gain the power to determine their own futures, guided by their vision of a different world" (p. 5). This definition situates empowerment not as an isolated psychological phenomenon, but as a relational and political process that unfolds within broader structures of domination and resistance.

This dynamic understanding of empowerment is widely echoed in the literature (Kieffer, 1984; Avelino, 2017; Raj et al., 2022). Avelino (2017) emphasizes that empowerment involves gaining the capacity to mobilize resources and institutions in pursuit of specific goals, including access to strategic assets, the development of mobilization strategies, and the willingness to take action. Raj et al. (2022) further expand this view by framing empowerment as a dynamic and productive process marked by active reflection, discursive contestation, and transformation across epistemological, cultural, and identity-related dimensions. Rather than a static state, empowerment is understood as an ongoing negotiation with structures of power.

Importantly, the empowerment process is not purely rational or strategic; it is deeply shaped by emotional experiences, particularly in contexts marked by institutional complexity. As individuals confront contradictions between institutional expectations and personal values, they often experience strong emotions—such as frustration, indignation, uncertainty, or hope—which shape how they interpret their position and potential for change. These affective responses are not peripheral but central to the empowerment process, influencing how individuals internalize structural conditions and how they respond to them (Jasper, 2011; Avelino, 2017). In this sense, empowerment involves a continual emotional negotiation with complexity, where emotions act as both interpretive filters and motivational drivers for agency (Melucci, 1996; Raj et al., 2022).

In parallel, identity, particularly relational identity, plays a foundational role in how individuals experience and enact empowerment. Relational identity refers to the self-concept formed through meaningful, role-based relationships within a social system (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Drawing on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), individuals locate themselves within broader social categories, such as organizations or causes, providing a sense of belonging and legitimacy. Identity is neither singular nor static; it is multiple, performative, and continually shaped through interaction and context (Stets & Serpe, 2013; Janssen et al., 2022). As Breedveld (2024) argues, identity is constructed and provisional, meaning that changes in identity can shape not only personal motivations but also the broader cultures and practices involved in transformational processes. As such, relational identity does not merely accompany empowerment; it actively conditions how individuals perceive structural constraints, define their roles, and mobilize their agency within complex institutional terrains.

In conclusion, empowerment in the context of social entrepreneurship cannot be reduced to a psychological trait or an individual disposition. Rather, it must be understood as a multidimensional process that unfolds at the intersection of identity, emotion, institutional complexity, and power. Social entrepreneurs develop empowerment not only through internal beliefs and motivations but also through how they emotionally engage with structural contradictions and position themselves within shifting institutional and relational contexts. Empowerment, then, is an evolving journey—one shaped by how actors feel, who they believe they are, and how they navigate the layered power dynamics of the systems they seek to transform.

4. 3. Methods

4. 3.1. Research paradigm

We adopt a qualitative research approach grounded in a relativist, constructivist ontology, which holds that objective reality is not fixed but socially constructed through human experience (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative inquiry begins with a set of philosophical assumptions and relies on interpretive frameworks to explore how individuals or groups make sense of complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2013). From this perspective, reality is understood as multiple and subjective, shaped by individuals as they interact with and interpret the world around them (Krauss, 2005). Given that meaning is not discovered but socially constructed (Gioia, 1996), this study seeks to explore how social entrepreneurs interpret and make sense of their transformational experiences within the business system. Our aim is to understand the interpretive processes through which these actors navigate institutional complexity and power dynamics in pursuit of social change.

In line with this ontological and epistemological stance, our research adopts an interpretive approach, more specifically hermeneutics, understood as the discipline of interpreting texts by empathically engaging with the experience, motivations, and socio-institutional contexts of the speaker (Tracey, 2013; Schwandt, 2000). Hermeneutic interpretation is fundamentally circular, requiring a continuous movement between the individual parts of a text and the whole from which they derive meaning (Schwandt, 2000). This process, referred to as the hermeneutic circle, underpins our analysis of interviews with social enterprise founders. We interpret the dynamic relationship between their specific statements and broader themes related to institutional transformation.

Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) emphasize the importance of this circularity in interpretive work, arguing that understanding emerges not from isolated observations but through a reflexive engagement with the interdependence of parts and wholes. The researcher's pre-understandings are not brackets to be removed, but resources that inform and evolve through this iterative process. As such, hermeneutics does not aim to explain an external, objective reality, but to interpret and understand lived experience from the perspective of those experiencing it, with meaning—rather than causality—at the core (Schwandt, 1994; Turner & Krizek, 2006).

We apply the hermeneutic circle to interpret the dynamic relationship between individual statements made by interviewees (founders of social enterprises) and the broader themes that emerged across the interviews, particularly regarding the transformation of the business system. This iterative process of moving back and forth between specific narratives and overarching patterns enabled us to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how social entrepreneurs interpret their involvement in transformational processes. Our analytical approach draws inspiration from Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2009) reflexive hermeneutics, Gioia et al.'s (2013) systematic inductive approach to meaning-making, and Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, each of which emphasizes the centrality of interpretation in qualitative inquiry.

In this context, we engage in a dialogical process with the participants' discourses, seeking to uncover the meanings they attribute to their experiences of navigating power dynamics within institutional complexity. Consequently, the unit of analysis in this study is not the individuals themselves, but rather their discursive constructions—the ways in which they narrate, frame, and make sense of their transformative roles.

Social entrepreneurs operate in a space where they must reconcile divergent expectations and logics. In managing businesses that pursue both economic and social goals, they engage with a variety of stakeholders: clients, investors, beneficiaries, and supporters, each of whom may represent competing sources of pressure or support. Given these layered interactions, the hermeneutic method proved fruitful in helping us unpack the meanings entrepreneurs attach to their lived experiences and strategic positioning.

Through this dialogue, we seek to interpret their discourses, which we understand, following Hajer (1995), as "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorizations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (p. 44). By centering these discourses, our analysis highlights how social entrepreneurs construct meaning in relation to power and institutional transformation.

In summary, our methodological approach is grounded in a constructivist and interpretive paradigm that prioritizes understanding over explanation, and subjectivity over objectivity. By employing hermeneutics and engaging deeply with participants' discourses, we seek to uncover how social entrepreneurs construct meaning in relation to the power dynamics and institutional contradictions they navigate. This approach allows us to capture the complexity, ambiguity, and emotional depth of their transformational experiences, offering insight into how agency is exercised and interpreted within multifaceted institutional environments. In doing so, we aim to contribute not only to the understanding of social entrepreneurship, but also to broader discussions on transformation, power, and meaning-making in contexts marked by institutional complexity.

Building on this interpretive foundation, the following subsection outlines our data collection and analysis process, detailing how we engaged with participants' narratives to uncover the meanings they attribute to their lived experiences.

4. 3.2. Data collection

Data for this study were gathered through open, in-depth interviews conducted in a conversational style, allowing participants to narrate their experiences in their own words and on their own terms. This approach is aligned with the study's interpretive and hermeneutic orientation, which prioritizes dialogue, subjectivity, and the co-construction of meaning between researcher and participant (Schwandt, 2000; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Rather than following a rigid question structure, interviews unfolded organically as dynamic conversations, with the researcher adopting a facilitative role—posing open-ended prompts, following the participant's lead, and exploring emerging themes as they surfaced.

The choice of conversational interviews was guided by the belief that understanding complex and situated experiences—such as those involved in social entrepreneurship and institutional transformation—requires creating space for reflection, spontaneity, and narrative depth (Kvale et al., 2009). This method supports the hermeneutic aim of interpreting how individuals make meaning in context, and allows participants to frame their realities in their own conceptual and emotional language.

Interviews were conducted with 12 social entrepreneurs based in Spain and Latin America (Peru, Colombia and Mexico), all of whom are founders or co-founders of social enterprises that pursue both social and economic goals. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, aiming for diversity in sector, organizational scale, and institutional context.

As is consistent with the hermeneutic tradition, the interview process was non-linear and iterative. Early conversations informed the direction of later interviews, and interpretive insights developed during data collection influenced follow-up questions and areas of focus. This evolving, reflexive engagement reflects the logic of the hermeneutic circle, wherein understanding emerges through a continuous movement between parts and whole.

The selection of social enterprises for this study was guided by three key criteria: (1) each organization had a minimum of three years of continuous operation at the time of the interview; (2) its business model demonstrated a transformational role within a particular industry sector or within society more broadly; and (3) its social impact was explicitly oriented toward addressing the needs of disadvantaged or marginalized groups. The opening section of each interview was used to verify that these conditions were met, ensuring that participants could speak from the perspective of ventures with a degree of maturity, embeddedness, and demonstrated impact. For transparency and contextual understanding, an anonymized overview of the participating social enterprises—including sector, geographic location, and social focus—is presented in **Table 2.**

Participants were recruited through the snowball sampling method, a purposive strategy commonly used in qualitative research to access hard-to-reach or specialized populations (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). The process began with a set of initial contacts—social enterprises identified by active ecosystem stakeholders (such as incubators, networks, and funders) as successfully combining social impact with business performance. These initial participants were then asked to refer to others in their network who met the study's criteria and could offer relevant insights. This method enabled access to trusted, well-positioned actors within the social enterprise field, while also helping to build rapport and credibility with subsequent participants. Snowball sampling was particularly suitable for this study given the relational nature of many social enterprise ecosystems, where peer recommendations play a key role in establishing legitimacy and trust.

Numbe r	Interview	Gender	Social enterprise' sector	Country of origin
1	Pedro	Male	Agro-industry	Spain
2	Maria	Female	Sustainable fashion	Peru
3	Julian	Male	Agriculture	Peru
4	Alejandro	Male	Agriculture	Colombia
5	Sofia	Female	Gastronomy	Mexico
6	Carlos	Male	Reforestation	Peru
7	Fernanda	Female	Sustainable tourism	Peru
8	Tomas	Male	Circular economy	Peru
9	Javier	Male	Hospitality	Spain
10	Carla	Female	Sustainable tourism	Mexico
11	Juan	Male	Agriculture	Colombia

12	Victor	Male	Sustainable Fishery	Peru, Chile

Table 2: Description of social entrepreneurs interviewed.

Given that participants were based in different parts of the world, all interviews were conducted online. Despite the virtual format, we were able to create a supportive and open environment conducive to conversational-style interviews, each lasting approximately 40 to 60 minutes. Prior to each interview, participants received a detailed informed consent form outlining the scope and purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. This form also explained that the interviews would be audio-recorded and clarified how their data would be handled.

To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information was removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were used throughout the analysis. Although the study has not yet been published, we are fully committed to maintaining participant anonymity in any future publications or presentations. All recordings, transcripts, and notes have been securely stored in password-protected and encrypted digital files, accessible only to the researcher. These ethical procedures were designed to protect the privacy, dignity, and rights of participants, and were implemented in accordance with current data protection regulations and standards for ethical qualitative research.

Although the interviews followed an open and conversational format, we prepared a flexible interview guide in advance to ensure that key themes were explored. The guide included broad prompts designed to encourage participants to share their experiences, reflections, and interpretations related to how they interact with the business system—understood here as the network of actors, norms, regulations, and dominant beliefs that constitute institutional logic. Rather than following a rigid script, the questions served as entry points for dialogue, allowing the conversation to unfold naturally according to each participant's perspective. Care was taken to ensure that none of the questions were invasive or framed in a way that could cause emotional discomfort or psychological harm. Our aim was to create a setting in which participants felt free and safe to articulate their experiences without pressure, thereby supporting the interpretive depth and ethical integrity of the research process.

4. 3.3. Data Analysis

To explore the interpretive processes of social entrepreneurs, we employed reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun & Clarke (2012, 2025). This method offers a flexible yet systematic approach for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2017). Rather than applying a rigid coding framework or relying on predefined categories, reflexive thematic analysis allows themes inductively through deep engagement with the data. This is especially valuable in constructivist and interpretive research, where meaning is understood to be context-dependent and co-constructed between researcher and participant.

Reflexive thematic analysis is particularly well suited to this study's aim of examining how social entrepreneurs make sense of their experiences within complex institutional environments. It emphasizes the importance of the researcher's active role in interpreting data, acknowledging that insights are shaped by the interaction between the data, the researcher's theoretical positioning, and reflexive engagement throughout the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2025).

The analysis proceeded through several iterative phases: initial immersion in the data through repeated readings of transcripts; generation of initial codes informed by both semantic and latent meanings; construction of preliminary themes through the grouping and re-grouping of codes; and ongoing refinement to ensure internal coherence and distinction across themes. Throughout this process, we engaged in reflexive memoing, revisiting our assumptions and interpretive lens in line with our hermeneutic framework. This iterative and flexible engagement allowed us to capture both individual nuances and broader discursive patterns in how participants narrated their roles in institutional transformation. Examples of the first-order codes that emerged during the initial phase of analysis are presented in Annex 1. These codes reflect participants' own language and experiences, and were developed through close engagement with the interview transcripts. Following this stage, we moved to a second-order analysis, aimed at identifying more abstract concepts that could help explain how interviewees interpret and navigate power dynamics within the business system. This involved an iterative process of comparing and grouping related first-order codes, enabling us to uncover deeper patterns of meaning and thematic relationships (Gioia et al., 2012). The resulting second-order themes, presented in Annex 2, represent a more conceptual level of analysis, where initial categories were refined and collapsed into broader themes that capture participants' meaning-making processes.

After identifying these second-order themes, we transitioned from a purely inductive approach to an abductive logic of inquiry, integrating both the emergent empirical insights and relevant theoretical frameworks. This abductive phase allowed us to revisit the data through the lens of existing scholarship on power, empowerment, and institutional complexity, thereby enhancing the theoretical depth and explanatory power of our findings. This methodological shift enabled us to better address the research question and provide a nuanced understanding of how social entrepreneurs construct meaning around the power relations and empowerment dynamics they encounter in their efforts to transform the business system.

The Figure 3 presents the data structure developed through the analytical process, following the methodology proposed by Gioia et al. (2013). This structure illustrates how first-order codes, derived from participants' own language and narratives, were progressively organized into second-order themes and ultimately distilled into aggregate theoretical dimensions. These dimensions reflect the underlying processes by which social entrepreneurs interpret their roles, navigate institutional complexity, and exercise agency through the negotiation and exertion of power dynamics. The visual model reflects the iterative, inductive-abductive approach employed in this research, showing how individual experiences, such as emotional labor, relational identity work, and counter-hegemonic practice, connect to broader patterns of reflexivity, empowerment, collaborative strategies, and institutional transformation. The data structure not only reinforces the richness and depth of the empirical material but also provides the foundation for the theoretical contributions discussed in the subsequent sections.

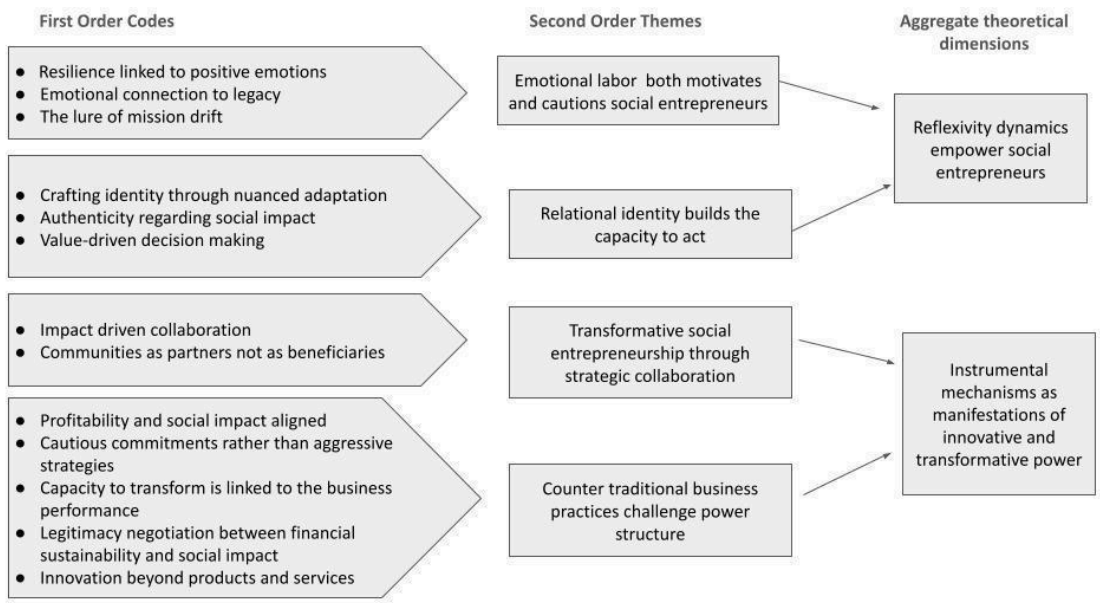

Figure 3: Data structure

4.4. Findings: Characteristic elements of power and empowerment of social entrepreneur's transformational dynamics

During the interviews, our objective was to explore how social entrepreneurs interpret their efforts to transform the business system. To this end, we analyzed their discourses through the lens of power, focusing on how power is exercised, negotiated, and experienced in their interactions with conventional market structures and institutional logics.

Consequently, we sought to identify the key elements that shape how social entrepreneurs make sense of the power dynamics they navigate. Our findings suggest that these dynamics can be understood through two interconnected dimensions: reflexivity dynamics, which relate to internal meaning-making and identity work; and instrumental mechanisms, which involve strategic action and the exercise of power within external systems and relationships.

Reflexivity dynamics refer to the internal and relational processes that enable and empower social entrepreneurs to critically reflect on the discrepancies in their environment, their position on it, and adapt their strategies to navigate institutional complexity. These dynamics include emotional work, which shapes how entrepreneurs interpret and navigate institutional complexity, as well as a relational identity construction that diverges from the norms of the traditional capitalist company.

In contrast, instrumental mechanisms encompass external strategic actions that shape the interplay between social enterprises and the business system. These mechanisms include the creation of new resources and the modification of institutional prescriptions within the business system while maintaining their legitimacy in front of diverse stakeholders. In this sense, we identify these mechanisms as manifestations of two forms of power: innovative power—the capacity of actors to create new resources—and transformative power—the capacity of actors to challenge, alter, and replace existing structures and institutions (Avelino and Rotmans, 2009).

As we will analyze below, these manifestations emerge as a consequence of social enterprises' interactions with market pressures, investor expectations, and resource dependencies, all of which shape the structure of power relations within the business system.

4.1. Reflexivity dynamics: Emotional work and relational Identity as drivers of empowerment

Discrepancies with the institutional environment, particularly in the form of conflicting expectations, norms, and values, emerged as a recurring theme in participants' narratives. Many social entrepreneurs described ongoing tensions between their social missions and the prevailing logics of the market. For instance, Pedro highlighted the misalignment between sustainability objectives and consumer behavior, stating:

> *The market still doesn't fully value social efforts or commitments to environmental sustainability, as there is still a strong preference for the lowest price.* (Pedro)

Similarly, Julian emphasized the communicative challenge of articulating the value of social and environmental contributions:

> *The consumer market may still undervalue our social and environmental commitments, with a stronger focus on lower prices. Essentially, the main challenge for our environmental and social work is to communicate its benefits more effectively. (*Julian)

Beyond market dynamics, participants also pointed to financial pressures, particularly those arising from dominant investment logics. Alejandro, for instance, questioned the profit-maximization ethos that underpins traditional investment practices:

> B*ecause, in reality, investors get involved solely and exclusively to make money, right? Not me. That's not what motivates me. I know that talent drives capital and that, eventually, if you do positive things, there should be some kind of compensation.* (Alejandro)

This statement reflects more than a critique of conventional financial priorities—it reveals an identity distinction. Social entrepreneurs like Alejandro position themselves in contrast to traditional investors, embracing a different set of values and motivations. Their narratives signal a deliberate distancing from the dominant investor identity, emphasizing purpose, relational commitment, and long-term societal value over short-term financial gain.

Our interviews reveal that social entrepreneurs perceive their ability to navigate the aforementioned tensions as being significantly shaped by emotional experiences, both positive and negative, as well as by the construction of a relational identity. These elements emerge through their ongoing interactions with the business system and appear to play a pivotal role in shaping their decision-making processes and sense of agency. The following section presents the key findings derived from the interpretive analysis of the interviews, highlighting how participants make sense of power dynamics and institutional complexity in their transformative efforts.

4.1.1. Emotional Work

Emotions play a critical role in shaping how individuals interact with their environments, enabling them to navigate complex social and political systems effectively (Goodwin et al., 2013). They influence cognition, beliefs, and moral judgment (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), while also acting as catalysts for disruption (Toubiana & Zietsma, 2017) and contributing to the development of new frameworks at the intersection of diverse fields (Fan & Zietsma, 2017). In the narratives of the social entrepreneurs we interviewed, a dual emotional landscape emerges—reflecting the tension between remaining faithful to their core social missions and the allure of pursuing faster, more financially rewarding paths. On one hand, positive emotions such as gratitude, hope, optimism, and inspiration bolster resilience and deepen commitment to long-term social impact. On the other hand, negative emotions—including anxiety, frustration, and self-doubt—surface in response to pressures that risk diverting them from their mission. Together, these contrasting emotional experiences create a dynamic interplay that both motivates and cautions social entrepreneurs, helping them maintain balance in their pursuit of transformative change. In the following section, we delve deeper into how these tensions are articulated in their discourses.

a. Gratitude as a seed of empowerment

Gratitude appears as a foundational emotion that both motivates and empowers social entrepreneurs to act. Gratitude is present in Pedro's message. He founded his social enterprise driven by nostalgia for his family memories in a small town where his grandparents once lived:

> *...My brother spoke to me about doing something in Oliete-our grandparents' town- to keep it from disappearing…….there was this feeling of unrest, of watching so many childhood memories in my hometown go by, and thinking that in the future, those experiences wouldn't be possible. That's what pushed me to take on this adventure.* (Pedro)

For him, gratitude is not merely an acknowledgment of past blessings; it becomes a compelling force that drives him to safeguard his cultural legacy and revitalize a community in danger of disappearing.

Similarly, gratitude sentiment is reflected in Maria's story:

> *...I believe life has provided me with valuable opportunities. Running my own business enabled me to fund my education, grow personally, and achieve financial independence. This, in turn, became my way of giving back to society, which I now see as my purpose…*(María)

María's story emphasizes that life has bestowed upon her valuable opportunities, such as funding her education and achieving financial independence through her own business endeavors. This deep-seated gratitude has evolved into a sense of duty to give back to society.

For María, her personal growth is inseparable from her commitment to social impact—her gratitude serves as a bridge between individual empowerment and collective responsibility.

Together, these narratives illustrate that gratitude, far from being a passive sentiment, acts as a dynamic force that empowers social entrepreneurs, contributing to a supportive environment where challenges are seen as opportunities for growth rather than setbacks. It fuels their actions, informs their identity, and inspires them to make meaningful changes in the society. By acknowledging the blessings they have received, both Pedro and María channel their gratitude into purposeful actions that contribute to addressing society challenges.

b. Emotional Resilience

The resilient spirit of social entrepreneurs is vividly illustrated through the metaphors they employ to describe their ventures. Their resilience appears to be driven by positive emotional experiences such as hope, optimism, and inspiration. In this context, resilience is not merely the capacity to withstand adversity; it also involves sustaining motivation, creativity, and commitment through a durable sense of purpose.

Alejandro, for instance, refers to his enterprise as a “marriage project,” while Pedro likens his work to a “long-distance race.” These metaphors frame entrepreneurship as a journey characterized by endurance, adaptability, and emotional investment. Such expressions indicate that their efforts are not exclusively transactional or market-driven; rather, they reflect an ongoing, mission-oriented dedication to fostering opportunity and enabling long-term societal transformation—particularly with future generations in mind.

This legacy-oriented perspective is echoed in Julián’s reflection:

> *Our business is about understanding that we are not just making coffee; we are creating opportunities for development… understanding that the coffee producers*

> *are not just delivering a product but they are giving us all their effort, passion, and the challenge of securing a better future for their children.* (Julián)

These reflections are deeply intertwined with optimism, which, as Southwick and Charney (2018) argue, enhances creativity and individuals' capacity to navigate adversity. Within this framework, optimism functions as a strategic resource—supporting problem-solving, strengthening perseverance, and empowering entrepreneurs to adapt to institutional constraints and volatile market conditions. Importantly, this optimistic orientation is often anchored in a long-term vision and a strong sense of intergenerational responsibility.

Alejandro expresses this clearly:

> *I hope that my children and grandchildren will see the results of the work we are doing today.* (Alejandro)

Such statements point to an emotional and personal investment rooted in a profound sense of legacy. This legacy not only shapes their goals but also underpins their capacity for resilience. For many, the aspiration to create something meaningful and enduring—whether for their families, communities, or future generations—serves as a powerful motivational anchor. Julián similarly grounds his entrepreneurial commitment in a place-based identity and a sense of moral obligation:

> *How can I help create better living conditions for the community I come from? So I can focus my efforts there.* (Julián)

These narratives demonstrate that legacy is not simply symbolic; it acts as a pragmatic driver of resilience, enabling social entrepreneurs to maintain focus and commitment amid resource limitations, value tensions, and institutional resistance.

This sense of purpose is particularly salient among those who approach social entrepreneurship as a vocation. Their narratives reflect a persistent determination to challenge dominant market assumptions and reconfigure prevailing norms. As Víctor explains:

> *The ones who build social enterprises out of vocation, we are stubborn in our vision. I think, I go, and I do it—because I have to… in the end, if there's a market, I don't set up barriers for myself—I work to reach that barrier and go beyond it.* (Víctor)

Indeed, the rigidities of traditional business systems often serve as catalysts for empowerment. Entrepreneurs guided by a clear sense of vocation channel their resilience and optimism into strategic innovation, using it to navigate institutional pressures and articulate alternative pathways aligned with their transformative objectives.

In sum, the narratives of these social entrepreneurs suggest that hope and optimism are not passive emotional states but active, generative forces. They enable agency, inspire innovation, and sustain long-term social engagement. By cultivating a legacy-oriented mindset and drawing on emotional resources such as resilience and optimism, social entrepreneurs are able to resist dominant institutional logics and envision more inclusive and sustainable futures.

c. Temptation as anticipatory delight:

Emotions are not always positive, and in their decision-making processes, social entrepreneurs often confront emotionally charged tensions—particularly the temptation to deviate from their core social mission in pursuit of more lucrative or scalable business strategies. This temptation may be accompanied by *anticipatory delight*, a concept described by Hughes (2002, p. 94) as the sense of pleasure experienced in anticipation of a future event or action. It involves imagining or expecting the satisfaction that will come from a desired outcome, creating a sense of eagerness or excitement well before the event actually unfolds.

While such emotional anticipation can initially be energizing and motivating, it can also lead social entrepreneurs into complex ethical dilemmas. The imagined rewards—financial gain, market recognition, investor approval—may clash with the values and long-term commitments that define their social purpose. In this way, *anticipatory delight* functions as a double-edged sword: it may fuel ambition, but also test moral boundaries.

Alejandro illustrates this tension when reflecting on his sector:

> *In my sector, you could make more money and scale faster by engaging in bad practices—buying cheap, selling high, and capturing a large margin in between. That approach would definitely be more successful in the short term.* (Alejandro)

Here, the prospect of success is clearly linked to a path that contradicts the ethical and environmental standards he seeks to uphold. Similarly, Carla's experience reveals how financial opportunities can conflict with organizational identity:

> *In fact, there are several potential clients who simply aren't the right fit for us—they're not our target audience. While working with them could bring in more revenue, it would mean compromising who we are. We've definitely encountered situations like that.* (Carla)

Sofía shares a parallel challenge, noting that not all potential clients value the social mission of her enterprise. As she puts it:

> *Dilemmas are always present when choosing the right client for us.* (Sofía)

These dilemmas are not limited to client relationships; they also surface in interactions with investors. As Juan explains:

> *There are also pressures from investors who ask us to shift away from our social focus.* (Juan)

Even operational choices can pose similar challenges. Alejandro acknowledges the constant pull of conventional business practices in agriculture, despite their environmental costs:

> *The temptation to operate like most agricultural companies, even if it harms the environment, is always there.* (Alejandro)

These narratives reveal that the emotional landscape of social entrepreneurship is marked by a persistent negotiation between short-term gains and long-term values. The emotion of *anticipatory delight*—typically associated with positive feelings—can mask the ethical consequences of pursuing actions misaligned with the organization's mission. When future rewards are vivid and emotionally salient, the pressure to compromise can intensify, making it harder to resist market incentives or investor expectations that conflict with social impact goals.

The experiences shared by María, Alejandro, Carla, Sofía, and Juan highlight the complex interplay of emotion and decision-making in the practice of social entrepreneurship. The allure of immediate opportunity—whether in the form of profit, growth, or prestige—must be weighed against the potential erosion of purpose and values. In navigating these tensions, social entrepreneurs demonstrate not only ethical awareness but also emotional discipline, reinforcing the role of emotion as a core component of mission-driven resilience and strategic integrity.

4.1.2 Relational identity

Our analysis reveals that social entrepreneurs construct an interpretation of identity that is deeply intertwined with their roles within the business system. This identity formation not only strengthens their confidence in navigating institutional complexities but also positions them as agents of systemic transformation. Their narratives portray social enterprises as embodiments of values and practices that depart from traditional capitalist models, reinforcing a collective sense of purpose and distinction.

Fernanda, an entrepreneur in the community tourism sector, highlights this divergence:

> *Traditional tourism companies seek to copy rather than collaborate; their main goal is to minimize costs.* (Fernanda)

Her observation underscores how social enterprises intentionally distance themselves from conventional business models, placing greater emphasis on collaboration over competition and long-term impact over short-term efficiency. This sentiment is echoed by Sofía, who reflects on her transition from the corporate world to leading a social enterprise:

> *The ability to place social and environmental impact at the core of the business model was an impossible endeavor within the confines of a large corporation.* (Sofía)

Sofía’s experience illustrates how a relational identity rooted in core values becomes foundational for constructing business models that prioritize social objectives over profit maximization.

Víctor reinforces this point by contrasting the risk-taking nature of social enterprises with the cautiousness of traditional firms:

> *By assuming such risks, our approach diverges from the risk-averse stance of traditional companies.* (Víctor)

His reflection highlights how a values-driven identity not only supports entrepreneurial boldness but also fosters innovation in the face of uncertainty. By embracing risk in service of impact, social entrepreneurs actively challenge dominant business norms and reimagine what success entails.

For María, the hybrid nature of social enterprises is a source of autonomy and empowerment:

> *The basis of the traditional company is different (i.e., maximize profitability) and it is difficult to change. However, social entrepreneurs like me can control our own*

business decisions and maintain the authenticity of the impact we want to achieve. (María)

Her perspective underscores that identity in social entrepreneurship is not merely about differentiation, but also about maintaining agency over decisions and protecting the mission's integrity. A deep commitment to social change is embedded within the enterprise's core values and operations. This authenticity, as reflected in the narratives and data, builds trust among stakeholders by demonstrating that social impact efforts are genuinely intended to drive meaningful change.

Similarly, Carla articulates the broader implications of this evolving business identity:

> *Social enterprises are gaining momentum because we strive to balance the economy with well-being. It's a bit of an evolution of capitalism. So, we are not an NGO—we are for-profit—but what drives us, what gives us purpose, is not just making money, but truly creating well-being.* (Carla)

Her statement reinforces the idea that identity is instrumental in redefining success to encompass both financial sustainability and societal well-being. While social entrepreneurs clearly differentiate themselves from conventional businesses, they also recognize the necessity of financial viability. Pedro captures this balance succinctly:

> *The mission goes first, but profitability has to be there because otherwise, it is nonsense.* (Pedro)

This recognition reflects that financial viability is not only a pragmatic necessity but also a strategic enabler of long-term impact. Alejandro expands this argument by emphasizing the importance of scale:

> *My main conclusion is that if you want to generate social transformation, you have to be big. You can't be small because the impact will be minimal. To achieve massive change, you need to grow and be successful. The business itself must succeed and make an impact; otherwise, you won't be able to transform yourself, your family, or your community.* (Alejandro)

His perspective links identity directly to the ambition of scaling impact, underscoring that growth and mission are not contradictory, but mutually reinforcing. Social enterprises, then, shape identity through a nuanced balance of ideals and pragmatism, adapting to system complexities while evolving gradually over time. How they respond to challenges and leverage opportunities—while remaining true to their values—continually reinforces and reshapes their identity.

Carlos offers a broader reflection on this redefinition of business purpose:

> *Traditional companies are fundamentally focused on achieving economic profitability. That is, 90% of the effort is directed toward that goal—maximizing margins, increasing sales, reducing costs, and ensuring the highest possible net profit in the end… In contrast, a social enterprise, beyond the numbers, seeks to achieve something of greater significance. It has other goals that are difficult to explain and measure, but in the end, they add up to something far greater than any financial figure.* (Carlos)

His perspective suggests that identity in social enterprises is not only about standing apart, but also about transforming the very meaning of value creation in the business ecosystem. By placing purpose at the center, social entrepreneurs offer an alternative narrative about what business can, and should, achieve.

These narratives illustrate the emergence of what may be described as a *relational identity*. Relational identity refers to the meaning individuals derive from the roles they occupy in relation to others within a social system (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Aron et al., 1991; Chen et al., 2013). Unlike individual or collective identity, which focuses on personal or group characteristics, relational identity is shaped by interdependence and enacted through role-based interactions (Janssen et al., 2022). For social entrepreneurs, identity is not formed in isolation, but in relation to investors, clients, beneficiaries, and peers across and beyond the business field.

By cultivating an identity that explicitly challenges traditional business logic, social entrepreneurs position their organizations as transformative actors, those capable of reconciling financial viability with deep social impact. This shared purpose enables them to navigate power dynamics, resist institutional pressures, and advocate for a more inclusive, values-driven economy.

In this sense, identity is *performative*, constructed through the presentation of self in social contexts (Goffman, 1959; Butler, 1988; Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). As Janssen et al. (2022) argue, identity is dynamic, often marked by internal tensions, and shaped by the uncertainties of transitional environments. Our findings support this view: identity construction among social entrepreneurs is an ongoing, adaptive process—defined through contrast with traditional firms and refined through continuous interaction with evolving social and institutional demands.

By defining themselves in opposition to dominant business practices, social entrepreneurs not only craft distinct identities but also engage in a continual process of balancing economic imperatives with social ideals. This ability to navigate competing demands reveals the resilience of their collective identity—and its pivotal role in shaping a more inclusive and socially conscious business landscape.

4.2. Instrumental Mechanisms: Collaborative strategies and Counter Traditional Business Practices as manifestations of innovative and transformative power

The social entrepreneurs interviewed consistently emphasized their commitment to fostering meaningful collaboration with a diverse array of stakeholders. These partnerships are not merely transactional but are intentionally cultivated as strategic mechanisms for navigating the complexities of the business system. By exploring alternative modes of working together, social entrepreneurs seek to redistribute resources and reconfigure relationships of power and value. Their efforts extend beyond conventional collaboration, aiming instead to promote and implement counter-business practices that challenge traditional, profit-centric business logic.

This theme underscores the transformative potential of strategic partnerships, not as vehicles for co-branding or resource pooling alone, but as dynamic engines of innovation and systemic change. These collaborations enable social enterprises to integrate social impact with business growth in ways that actively reshape dominant power structures. Rather than conforming to hierarchical, market-driven strategies, social entrepreneurs harness alternative business models to redistribute power more equitably and amplify the voices of marginalized actors.

By defying established norms, social enterprises pursue a form of growth that is not only balanced but also disruptive, challenging the very foundations of the conventional business system. This approach fosters a more inclusive and resilient path to prosperity, where success is redefined not solely by financial outcomes, but by the meaningful, lasting transformation of the communities and ecosystems they engage with.

The following section presents an interpretive analysis of these interviews, examining how social entrepreneurs make sense of their experiences and leverage instrumental mechanisms—such as collaboration and counter business practices.

4.2.1. Collaborative strategies

The social entrepreneurs interviewed emphasized that their partnerships are not simply intended to improve operational efficiency or financial performance. Instead, they are deliberately designed to generate social impact and challenge conventional business logic. Strategic collaborations emerge as vital mechanisms for driving transformational change and innovation across both social and business domains. Rather than functioning as traditional resource-sharing arrangements, these partnerships are platforms for reimagining value creation, shifting power dynamics, and advancing long-term sustainability.

Carlos, an entrepreneur in the reforestation sector, highlighted the centrality of forming alliances with local communities:

> *Being perceived as part of the community fosters trust, which strengthens our position both in the business and the market.* (Carlos)

This sentiment was echoed by Julian, who emphasized the collaborative nature of his supply chain:

> *We view business as a collaborative effort. We recognize that our key partners in the supply chain must generate value alongside us to ensure the sustainability of our enterprise.* (Julian)

Partnerships often extend well beyond the immediate value chain. Juan, for instance, described a corporate foundation as a mission-aligned partner:

Fundación Bancolombia aligns with our company's vision and values, providing critical funding and support for our growth plans. (Juan)

Carla added a broader perspective on systemic impact:

We work with 45 rural cooperatives, and our value chain also includes small transport operators, tour guides, and boutique hotels. While rural communities are extremely important to us, we also generate significant collaboration with these other providers, supporting the growth of an alternative, non-mass tourism industry. (Carla)

In some cases, collaboration is aimed not only at strengthening internal operations but at collective advocacy and policy influence. Javier, from the Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs) association in Spain, shared:

We have joined forces with other WISEs to build an association whose primary mission is to advocate at the national level… Our efforts focus on driving regulatory development, securing grant frameworks, and influencing public policies. A key priority is advancing market reserve policies for public procurement. (Javier)

Such examples demonstrate how collaboration extends to shaping institutional environments and opening spaces for alternative economic logics.

However, partnerships—especially those involving dominant corporate actors—require careful negotiation to avoid cooptation or mission drift. Pedro described a case in which his organization maintained its purpose in the face of corporate pressure:

The corporation aimed to involve local communities in the project to boost its reputation. The most straightforward approach would have been to hire men for the open positions. However, we recognized that our purpose was different. We

> *believed that retaining the female population was crucial, so we prioritized creating employment opportunities for women—a strategy the corporation embraced. And that's where the magic began. (* Pedro)

This case illustrates how mission-driven negotiation can transform potentially extractive partnerships into opportunities for authentic impact. By treating communities not as passive beneficiaries but as co-creators, social entrepreneurs foster empowerment, shared ownership, and long-term resilience. As Carlos put it:

> *We are clear that communities need to sit at the same table with us, and we are also clear that their influence on the business is very significant... so, what we do as a strategy is help them a bit beyond the business. They are not just suppliers; we have a loyalty strategy to ensure that this chain does not break. (*Carlos)

These examples reveal how collaboration is used as a strategic tool to assert agency and navigate hidden power dynamics. In environments shaped by structural inequalities and hierarchical business norms, collaboration becomes a form of resistance. It enables social entrepreneurs to challenge extractive practices, build inclusive alternatives, and exercise what Gaventa (2005) refers to as power within “claimed spaces”—contexts that social actors shape and occupy on their own terms.

Juan, a Colombian entrepreneur in the agriculture sector, illustrated this ethos through his enterprise’s “wagon methodology”:

> *We have developed a collaboration framework we call the ‘wagon methodology.’ Essentially, our company acts as the locomotive, driving processes that integrate various actors, represented as individual wagons. The stations along the journey serve as checkpoints to assess results across social, environmental, and other dimensions.* (Juan)

This metaphor captures both the operational structure and the political vision of collaboration—not merely as coordination, but as a process of aligning diverse actors around transformative goals. María echoed this transformational dimension in describing her fashion enterprise:

> *The company's expansion directly contributes to the social project's growth by involving women in the production chain. This is uncommon in the fashion industry, where companies often aim to minimize payments along the value chain.* (María)

Through collaboration, social entrepreneurs are not only building more ethical business models—they are also reclaiming agency over the means and ends of economic activity. As Juan summarized:

> *We need to create a model that enables paradigm shifts, generates value, and allows us to do things differently. This can only happen when a company actively engages in collaborative work with diverse partners.* (Juan)

In this light, collaborative strategies embody what Avelino and Rotmans (2009) call *innovative power*—the ability to reconfigure resources and institutions in ways that support new, more inclusive systems. Crucially, collaboration also provides a platform for what Kashwan et al. (2019) term *"cooptation from below."* This concept flips the usual understanding of cooptation: instead of being absorbed or neutralized by more powerful actors, social entrepreneurs strategically leverage relationships with them to advance their own agendas.

By engaging selectively and on their own terms, they repurpose dominant actors' resources—such as funding, legitimacy, or distribution networks—to further their social missions. In doing so, they subtly subvert conventional power structures from within. Rather than resisting the system outright, they infiltrate and redirect it toward inclusive ends.

In sum, collaborative strategies allow social entrepreneurs to navigate structural constraints, protect their mission, and amplify their influence. Far from being merely supportive tactics, these alliances are central to how social enterprises drive systemic transformation—mobilizing relationships as instruments of innovation, negotiation, and social change.

4.2.2. Counter traditional business practices

This theme captures how social enterprises deliberately challenge and reshape dominant power structures by integrating social impact into business growth strategies. Rather than adhering to profit-centric models that reinforce traditional hierarchies, social entrepreneurs adopt alternative approaches that redistribute power more equitably across their value chains and ecosystems. In doing so, they disrupt conventional business norms and forge more resilient, inclusive pathways to prosperity—where success is defined not solely by financial performance but by the tangible transformation of the communities they serve.

A central dimension of these reflections is the broader institutional context in which social enterprises operate. These organizations navigate what institutional theorists refer to as *institutional complexity*—contexts where competing logics coexist and often collide (Greenwood et al., 2011). While social enterprises aim to blend purpose with profit, many actors in the business ecosystem still prioritize short-term gains, efficiency, and conventional performance metrics. Juan, for example, acknowledged the pressure to compromise impact goals in order to satisfy investor demands:

> *There are also pressures from investors who ask us to shift away from our social focus.* (Juan)

Despite these tensions, social entrepreneurs assert their agency in nuanced ways. Rather than passively accepting dominant expectations, they engage in adaptive strategies—negotiating their position while staying rooted in their mission. Juan described his company's vision using a compelling metaphor:

> *Everything our company does is aimed at transforming the sector. My metaphor is that we want to be a lighthouse, illuminating something positive and functional amidst stories and narratives that portray us as poor, that this sector is hopeless, and that 'my father did things this way, so we continue doing them the same.' In other words, it's about breaking free from that mindset.* (Juan)

His words underscore the aspirational quality of social entrepreneurship—a desire to challenge entrenched beliefs and redefine what is possible. Other entrepreneurs also shared how they face friction when their hybrid logic clashes with traditional expectations. Alejandro reflected on feedback from investors:

> *The feedback we received from investors was that we hadn't been ambitious enough with our numbers. Essentially, they expected us to aim for becoming multimillionaires in no time, right? This underscores a significant challenge for social enterprises... I genuinely believe the system needs to evolve.* (Alejandro)

For many, the goal is not to reject capitalism entirely, but to recalibrate it—integrating equity, sustainability, and purpose alongside profitability. Pedro offered a clear contrast between dominant financial models and the approaches pursued by social enterprises:

> *We are companies that break away from the norms of the financial market. While the financial sector often focuses on immediate returns and rigid parameters, as a social enterprise, we embrace distinct approaches to both our actions and measures of success.* (Pedro)

This deliberate redefinition of success reflects what Avelino and Rotmans (2009) describe as *transformative power*—the ability not just to resist dominant systems, but to reimagine and reconstruct them. Social entrepreneurs channel this power through innovative practices and hybrid models. Victor, for example, explained how his enterprise combines capacity building with a financially sustainable structure:

> *The social business includes training and empowering the fishermen... However, the same cash flow cannot cover all expenses, so we need to apply an innovative hybrid model.* (Victor)

Alejandro reinforced the importance of alliances and alternative practices:

> *Simply buying and selling a product is not enough to create impact; it is necessary to form alliances that allow for changing paradigms, generating value, and doing things differently.* (Alejandro)

Transformation, however, does not always unfold through radical disruption. Many entrepreneurs described change as a gradual and strategic process. Javier reflected on this incremental approach:

> *Society progresses, and this allows us to gradually incorporate the principles we hold within our company. It's about implementing them little by little, but always keeping in mind the rules of the market.* (Javier)

For others, transformation is closely tied to scale and influence. María, working in the sustainable fashion sector, emphasized the symbolic and emotional power of her industry:

> *Sustainable fashion—and fashion in general—holds immense global power, not only economically but also emotionally... I want to harness and channel that power appropriately to positively impact women.* (María)

Alejandro echoed this idea, highlighting how scale is essential for deepening impact:

> *If you want to generate social transformation, you have to be big. You can't be small because the impact will be minimal… The business itself must succeed and make an impact; otherwise, you won't be able to transform yourself, your family, or your community.* (Alejandro)

These reflections reveal the double bind that social enterprises often face. To gain influence and legitimacy, they must demonstrate business performance. Yet, when financial results falter, it is not only the enterprise's viability that is questioned—but the legitimacy of the entire social enterprise model. As Javier put it:

> *When the company starts incurring losses, things begin to be questioned—not so much the social project itself, but the overall sustainability of the initiative, which in turn calls into question the validity of the social enterprise model as a legitimate tool.* (Javier)

This dual burden, achieving both financial sustainability and social impact, requires careful navigation. Maria spoke to this balancing act when tailoring her message to different audiences:

> *We are a social enterprise, but we constantly tailor our message to our audience. For example, when we pitch to shopping centers, we back our approach with robust sales projections. When engaging with social organizations, sales take a back seat—what really matters is conveying the impact we're creating.* (María)

Others described deliberate decisions to grow slowly and cautiously, rather than compromising their mission. Carlos explained:

> *We would have had opportunities to grow much faster, to the detriment of the impact. However, we decided to go slow and make cautious commitments.* (Carlos)

Pedro added a similar perspective:

> *I believe that a social enterprise should be understood as a long-distance race. We are not tech companies; we operate somewhat counter to the norms of the financial market... we must exercise a great deal of patience.* (Pedro)

This patient, values-driven approach also extends to investor selection. Juan reflected on how he came to value alignment over capital availability:

> *I thought any financial source could serve as an investor, but I realized that alignment in shared values and purpose is essential... Some investors ask us to step away from the social sphere.* (Juan)

Taken together, these accounts illustrate the nuanced agency of social entrepreneurs operating in complex systems. Their strategic decisions, about growth, partnerships, and messaging, demonstrate how they resist pressures for rapid returns while staying focused on long-term impact. They operate in what Pel and Bauler (2014) describe as *"grey zones"* of social innovation: ambiguous spaces where institutional boundaries are blurred, and where established rules are questioned but not entirely rejected.

Grey zones emerge in contexts where social entrepreneurs cannot rely exclusively on either conventional business practices or traditional nonprofit approaches. Instead, they must craft hybrid strategies—combining elements from different logics, adapting language, reframing value, and creating legitimacy in multiple arenas simultaneously. These zones are marked by ambiguity, negotiation, and constant recalibration, where actors navigate institutional contradictions without the guidance of fixed models or roadmaps.

In these spaces, innovation does not arise from breaking cleanly with the system, but from working within its contradictions, *bending* norms, *translating* expectations, and slowly expanding what is considered acceptable or desirable. For example, tailoring messages to different audiences, as María described, or selectively engaging with value-aligned investors, as

Juan emphasized, are not signs of inconsistency but strategic moves within these hybrid terrains. Entrepreneurs are not abandoning their values; they are learning to speak multiple institutional languages in order to protect and advance their mission.

Grey zones are also characterized by their experimental nature. Social enterprises test new models, adapt governance structures, and iterate solutions with incomplete information and uncertain outcomes. They are constantly balancing tensions—between growth and integrity, social impact and financial viability, institutional legitimacy and grassroots credibility. These trade-offs are not resolved once and for all but are revisited over time as the context shifts and the organization evolves.

In this sense, grey zones are both a challenge and an opportunity. They require high degrees of reflexivity, creativity, and political awareness, but they also offer a space for *institutional work* (Lawrence et al., 2009), where actors can gradually reshape the norms, structures, and expectations of the systems they inhabit. Within these zones, social entrepreneurs become not just adaptive leaders, but institutional innovators, transforming the landscape from within by operating at its contested edges.

Ultimately, by navigating these grey zones, social entrepreneurs demonstrate that transformation is not always loud or immediate. It often unfolds through quiet, persistent actions that stretch the boundaries of what is possible, redrawing the lines of legitimacy, power, and success one strategic decision at a time.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This study explores how social entrepreneurs navigate the complex power dynamics and processes of empowerment that shape their work. Power is approached as a fundamental component of agency—defined as the capacity to mobilize people and resources, or to access the means necessary to achieve specific goals (O'Hara & Clement, 2018). Through this lens, the analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of how social entrepreneurs engage with institutional complexity, experience transformational processes, and challenge the conventional binary that positions social enterprises as either reinforcing or disrupting the status quo.

Our findings indicate that power dynamics in social entrepreneurship can be categorized into reflexivity dynamics and instrumental mechanisms, both of which are elements of the enterprise's capacity for transformation. Through emotional work, relational identity, collaborative strategies, and counter-traditional business practices, social entrepreneurs strategically engage with and contest dominant institutional prescriptions, exerting empowerment, innovation, and transformative power. This demonstrates that while social enterprises may encounter structural limitations, they possess the agency to reshape power relations by mobilizing resources, reframing market expectations, and building legitimacy across stakeholder networks (Dey & Steyaert, 2014).

Ultimately, the intersection of institutional complexity and existing power asymmetries functions as both a constraint and an enabler, influencing the challenges social entrepreneurs face while simultaneously presenting new opportunities for strategic action. Our findings suggest that social entrepreneurs are not merely passive participants within dominant power structures. While structural constraints may exist, social entrepreneurs can exercise agency by strategically appropriating and reconfiguring power relations. Understanding these alternative forms of power is critical to advancing both theoretical perspectives and practical applications within the fields of social entrepreneurship and transformative social change.

This section examines the theoretical and practical implications of our findings, contributing to the broader discourse on power, institutional complexity, and transformative social innovation.

Theoretical implications: Rethinking empowerment and power dynamics in social entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship has long been recognized as a catalyst for broader social change (Acs et al., 2013; Alvord et al., 2004; Mair et al., 2012a, b; Mair and Martí, 2009; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006). In contrast to traditional business models that prioritize profit maximization and shareholder value, social enterprises challenge, redefine, and transform market dynamics by adopting alternative practices (Avelino & Rotmans, 2009; Pel et al., 2023). Despite the growing body of research on social entrepreneurship, there is still limited understanding of the precise mechanisms through which these enterprises drive systemic change (Haugh and Talwar, 2016).

A critical aspect of understanding this process lies in exploring how social enterprises navigate and disrupt the institutional prescriptions that define the dominant business system, especially in contexts characterized by institutional complexity, where conflicting prescriptions emerge from multiple institutional logics (Greenwood et al., 2011). This exploration necessitates a deeper understanding of the power dynamics that influence social enterprises' operations (Dey and Steyaert, 2014), particularly in relation to capitalism's business logic (Avelino et al., 2024; Kashwan et al., 2018).

One way to examine power in social entrepreneurship is through the lens of “power to”, the ability to act, which is closely related to the notion of empowerment (Gaventa, 2021). Empowerment, as a process, refers to the capacity of actors to mobilize resources to achieve specific goals. This process involves two key elements: (1) gaining access to resources and (2) developing the capacity and willingness to mobilize these resources effectively (Avelino et al., 2019). As such, empowerment is not only about personal fulfillment; it requires access to external resources and the ability to influence and mobilize them within one’s environment.

This understanding of empowerment aligns with neo-institutional theory, which suggests that competing institutional logics can act not only as constraints but also as enabling forces for societal change and the creation of new pathways (Schneiberg & Lounsbury, 2008). By leveraging institutional complexity, social entrepreneurs might develop new forms of power relations that facilitate transformative change. In that account, our findings indicate that emotional work and relational identity are fundamental to leveraging that capacity to act facing the challenges in the interplay within the business system.

Emotional work plays a dual role in social entrepreneurship: it fosters resilience in the face of adversity while simultaneously serving as a motivational force to challenge dominant structures. Among the emotions shaping this process, gratitude emerges as a powerful enabler of resilience, reinforcing a sense of collective responsibility and strengthening commitment to social transformation. By reframing personal experiences as opportunities for meaningful engagement, gratitude fosters pro-social behaviors, deepening an individual's dedication to advancing social change (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). The ability to reinterpret challenges as purpose-driven contributions empowers individuals to persevere despite structural constraints.

Similarly, hope and optimism provide the long-term vision necessary to sustain efforts in volatile and unpredictable environments. Hope, in particular, has been identified as a psychological resource that fuels perseverance and strategic risk-taking among entrepreneurs, equipping them with the emotional endurance required to navigate uncertain conditions (Nabi et al., 2017). When framed as a legacy for future generations, these emotions serve as powerful catalysts for sustained engagement in transformative missions, inspiring individuals to persist in their pursuit of systemic change.

Beyond resilience and motivation, emotions also introduce ethical dilemmas that require strategic navigation. Temptation and anticipatory delight, though often overlooked in empowerment studies, present complex challenges in decision-making. The tension between rapid financial growth and long-term social impact creates a nuanced landscape where maintaining mission alignment while ensuring financial viability becomes an ongoing struggle. The ability to channel emotions into entrepreneurial efforts is thus essential, aligning with research that highlights emotions as socially constructed and deeply embedded in power dynamics (Moisander et al., 2016; Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010). In this context, emotions are not merely internal states but integral forces that shape strategic choices, influence engagement with institutional structures, and ultimately drive the transformational capacity of social enterprises.

Beyond emotional work, relational identity plays a critical role in positioning within the broader business system. Rather than merely adopting an alternative business identity, social enterprises construct their identity in direct contrast to conventional capitalist models because it is shaped by interactions with institutional structures (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). This performative process enables them to differentiate themselves from mainstream businesses, reinforcing the legitimacy of alternative models, while simultaneously navigating institutional complexity. Furthermore, strengthening collective agency through shared values fosters a sense of belonging within networks, allowing these enterprises to counter dominant narratives about economic success and legitimacy (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; White, 1992).

By framing identity in relation to dominant institutions, social enterprises negotiate the boundaries between path-dependency and transformation, continuously adapting to a shifting power landscape. As transitions to new practices occur, new identities emerge (Vesala and Vesala, 2010). Given the nascent role of identity in transitions research, further exploration of its significance in social transitions is warranted (Schulte et al., 2021; Sovacool et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the concept of “power over” refers to the control that one actor may have over others, often in the context of dominance and influence. When considering "power over," the business system is understood as an entrenched system of practices, rules, and institutions shaped by power struggles, vested interests, and the exercise of authority (Geels & Schot, 2007; Avelino, 2009). In this framework, incumbent regimes, representing the institutional structures of existing systems (Kohler et al., 2019), and emerging niches, spaces where new actors, like social entrepreneurs, develop alternatives (Rip and Kemp, 1998), engage in ongoing negotiations of power. Their interactions shape the trajectory of social transformation.

However, this traditional, vertical view of power tends to position social entrepreneurs as marginal actors (i.e. niche actors) whose influence is inherently limited by prevailing power structures. But are social entrepreneurs truly powerless, or powerless in relation to whom?

Some scholars argue that this vertical perspective, where power is concentrated within dominant regimes, fails to capture the complexity of social change (Grin, 2012; Avelino, 2017). Institutional transformation may occur not merely through direct confrontation, but by strategically navigating and playing into the power dynamics across multiple layers (Grin, 2011). Avelino (2017) suggests that power can also be understood horizontally, focusing on how actors engage with resources, structures, and systems in diverse ways.

To those ways we call instrumental mechanisms which emerge as key strategies for reshaping institutional landscapes, and as a way to exert some kind of “power over”. As such, power operates through both structural and agency-driven processes, shaping how social enterprises engage with dominant institutions, negotiate legitimacy, and forge pathways for systemic transformation.

One of those instrumental mechanisms is collaborative strategies, which plays a crucial role in this process, facilitating access to resources, fostering partnerships, and enabling the co-creation of alternative business models that challenge prevailing norms. Partnerships serve as mechanisms for redistributing power, integrating marginalized groups into value chains, and redefining industry standards. This dynamic aligns with the concept of innovative power, which refers to the capacity of actors to generate new resources and introduce novel solutions that disrupt existing paradigms (Avelino, 2017).

Social enterprises also actively challenge conventional capitalist imperatives by prioritizing long-term social impact over short-term financial gains. Strategies such as slow and sustainable growth, value-aligned investments, and alternative governance structures illustrate how dominant financial logics are redefined while ensuring organizational sustainability. These counter-traditional business practices embody transformative power, which refers to the capacity to not only resist but fundamentally alter institutional structures and create new configurations of power and governance (Avelino, 2017; Stirling, 2014). By rejecting mainstream financialization, resisting extracting market practices, and embedding social and environmental priorities into their governance frameworks, social enterprises disrupt entrenched power asymmetries and challenge the status quo.

By enacting these counter traditional business practices social entrepreneurs provide tangible examples of how business can operate beyond conventional capitalist norms. Rather than directly confronting dominant institutions in a zero-sum struggle, social enterprises might execute a co-optation from below (Li & Wang, 2020), strategically engaging with existing structures while embedding alternative values within them. This incremental but persistent engagement reflects a nuanced understanding of power as both constraint and opportunity, where transformation unfolds not through abrupt rupture but through sustained, deliberate efforts that reshape institutions from within (Pel et al., 2020; Stirling, 2014). Through this interplay of power relations, social enterprises demonstrate that systemic change might arise not from a single act of resistance, but from sustained engagement, adaptation, and negotiation within institutional structures.

As such, our study concurs with the notion of instead of associating “power over” exclusively with more powerful actors and “power to” exclusively with the subordinate actors, they are different components with the portfolio of power that all actors and agencies may simultaneously deploy in various combination (Kashwan et al., 2018; Avelino et al,, 2019).

The interplay between social entrepreneurship and the broader business system reflects dispersed and grassroots-driven dynamics of change rather than large-scale ideological shifts (Scoones et al., 2019). Our findings further challenge the assumption that social enterprises must either conform to or reject existing systems. Instead, they strategically navigate institutional complexity, legitimizing their practices while simultaneously working to transform dominant logics. This supports the view that social innovation occurs “through the system” rather than against it (Pel et al., 2020).

This study contributes to the calls for unpacking power relations in relation to capitalism business logic (Avelino et al., 2024; Kashwan et al., 2018), by examining how institutional complexity is navigated, it deepens the understanding of how power and empowerment shape social change. In that account, one of the key strengths of power-aware research is that it moves often-hidden issues, dynamics and structures from the black box of ‘context’ into the analytical frame (Kashwan et al., 2018). In doing so, it also underscores the need for a more nuanced perspective on transition processes, revealing what needs to change for transitions to progress and providing insight into how change can be supported and driven.

Navigating Complexity: Practical Insights for Strengthening the Social Enterprise Ecosystem

The findings of this study reveal a complex and evolving landscape in which social enterprises navigate institutional barriers while striving for systemic change. For policymakers, this underscores the importance of recognizing the structural challenges that often hinder the growth and legitimacy of these enterprises. Rather than forcing them into rigid legal categories that do not reflect their dual economic and social missions, regulatory frameworks should be designed to accommodate hybrid business models and impact-driven financing mechanisms. By doing so, policies can create a more enabling environment where these enterprises can thrive without sacrificing their core values.

For investors, the study highlights a critical need to rethink traditional financial return models. The prevailing focus on short-term profitability often places undue pressure on social enterprises, forcing them to compromise their long-term transformative potential in favor of immediate financial gains. A shift in investment strategies—one that prioritizes patient capital and recognizes the value of social impact beyond financial metrics—could provide the stability that these enterprises need to drive meaningful change. If investors recalibrate their expectations and align them with the time horizons of transformational processes, they can become key enablers of sustainable innovation.

At the heart of these dynamics, social enterprises themselves must continue to cultivate strategies that reinforce their legitimacy and resilience. By leveraging relational identity and collaborative networks, they can strengthen their ability to navigate institutional complexity. The ability to articulate a distinct identity—not only as an alternative to mainstream business models but as an integral part of an evolving economic paradigm—remains crucial. Through partnerships, advocacy, and strategic engagement with multiple stakeholders, they can enhance their influence and reshape the systems within which they operate.

Ultimately, recognizing the paradoxes inherent in transformative entrepreneurship is essential for all actors involved. Policymakers, investors, and practitioners must move beyond binary frameworks that position social enterprises as either conformists or disruptors. Instead, they should acknowledge the fluid and strategic ways in which these enterprises operate—working within existing structures while simultaneously pushing their boundaries. By embracing this complexity, stakeholders can contribute to a business ecosystem that is not only more inclusive and sustainable but also more attuned to the evolving nature of social change.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusions

This research contributes to the growing body of literature on social entrepreneurship, sustainability transitions, and institutional change by offering a nuanced understanding of how social enterprises navigate, challenge, and engage with institutional structures. By examining the role of social enterprises through the lenses of institutional logics, institutional entrepreneurship, and power studies, the research reveals how social enterprises operate within complex, multi-level institutional environments where they simultaneously disrupt, negotiate with, and conform to dominant structures (Battilana et al., 2009; Pache & Santos, 2013; Avelino et al., 2020).

The study demonstrates that social enterprises are neither purely disruptive nor fully conformist; instead, they operate within a fluid spectrum of institutional engagement, balancing innovation, adaptation, and negotiation (Haxeltine et al., 2017). As such, this study calls for a reimagining of social enterprise in its transformational role, moving beyond binary categorizations of transformation vs. reproduction and instead embracing the fluid, contested, and iterative nature of institutional change. By doing so, it offers a pathway for understanding how social enterprises can maintain their transformative ambitions while strategically engaging with the structures that constrain them. These contributions are showed in the Figure 04:

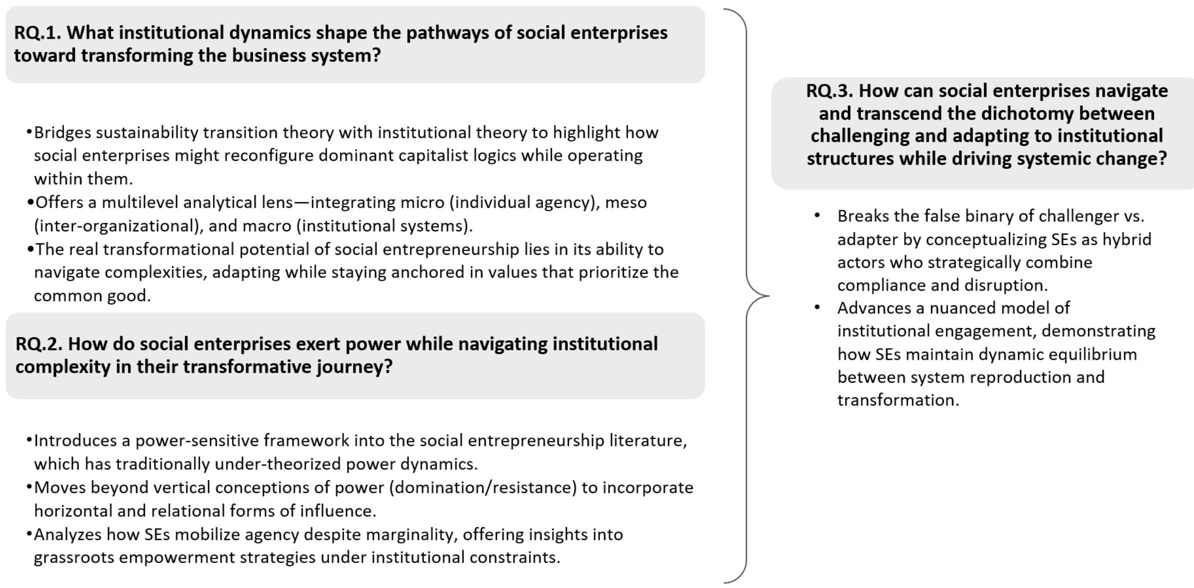

Figure 4. Summary of thesis's contributions

This chapter is structured as follows: it revisits the research questions and key findings, then discusses the theoretical and practical contributions, followed by limitations and directions for future research.

5.1 Revisiting Research Questions and Key Findings

This thesis sets out to explore the institutional dynamics, power relations, and strategic tensions that shape how social enterprises navigate, resist, and potentially transform dominant business systems. Drawing on a middle-range theoretical model and an interpretative analysis of empirical data, the study addressed three interconnected research questions. This section synthesizes the key findings from Chapters 3 and 4 in relation to each question.

RQ1: What institutional dynamics shape the pathways of social enterprises toward transforming the business system?

The model presented in chapter 3 captures the duality of constraint and agency by framing social enterprises as institutional entrepreneurs that operate across three interconnected levels, each shaping and being shaped by institutional dynamics.

The multilevel model of institutional change through social entrepreneurship offers a comprehensive understanding of how transformation unfolds by examining the interplay between individuals, collective action, and systemic structures. It starts at the individual level, where social entrepreneurs possess reflexivity, cognitive abilities, and emotional dispositions that enable them to perceive contradictions in the dominant business regime, envision alternative solutions, and commit themselves morally to social and environmental causes. These personal characteristics are the seeds of change, as they empower individuals to act despite institutional constraints, positioning them as institutional entrepreneurs capable of challenging established norms and logics.

However, individual action alone is not sufficient for large-scale transformation. Within the niche, collective efforts become essential. Here, social entrepreneurs work together to articulate shared visions and theorize systemic change, mobilize actors and resources, create formal and informal spaces for collaboration, and engage in continuous learning. These interactions within the niche allow experimentation, the refinement of new practices, and the development of coherent narratives that justify the need for transformation. The niche becomes a protected space where new ideas can evolve without immediate suppression from the dominant system. Through processes of alignment and coalition-building, collective agency strengthens the resilience of alternative logics and enhances the capacity for institutional embedding.

As these new practices and visions mature, the niche increasingly interfaces with the business regime. This relationship is characterized by tension and negotiation, as social entrepreneurs seek legitimacy from dominant actors while navigating power asymmetries and institutional resistance. The pursuit of legitimacy can involve both symbolic and substantive strategies, yet carries the risk of capture or co-optation, where social enterprises are assimilated into the dominant regime without altering its fundamental values. Power dynamics come into play, as social enterprises, often marginalized in terms of formal authority, rely on discursive strategies, alliance-building, and “transformative power” to influence prevailing structures. The regime may respond with defensive institutional work, using its resources and normative authority to resist, delay, or dilute change.

The outcome of this dynamic interplay is not fixed. Depending on how legitimacy is negotiated, how power is exercised, and how resistance is encountered or overcome, institutional change may follow different trajectories. It might result in genuine systemic transformation, the coexistence of competing logics, or the capture of niche innovations by the regime, neutralizing their transformative potential. This model highlights that institutional change is an emergent, contested, and non-linear process. It is driven by the agency of individuals and collectives, yet shaped by the structural forces and vested interests embedded in the business system (i.e. the regime). The real transformational potential of social entrepreneurship lies in its ability to navigate these complexities, adapting while staying anchored in values that prioritize the common good.

RQ2: How do social enterprises exert power while navigating institutional complexity in their transformative journey?

In Chapter 4, this thesis shows how social enterprises experience empowerment and exert power within complex institutional landscapes through a dual mechanism composed of *reflexivity dynamics* and *instrumental strategies*. Reflexivity dynamics represent the internal, relational, and emotional processes that allow social entrepreneurs to critically engage with institutional contradictions and adapt their strategies in value-aligned ways. Emotional work, such as the experience of gratitude, hope, and anticipatory delight, plays a foundational role in shaping their resilience and moral grounding. These emotions not only help entrepreneurs to persist through challenges but also inform ethical decision-making amid financial and strategic tensions. At the same time, social entrepreneurs construct a *relational identity* in contrast to conventional capitalist firms. This identity, grounded in shared values and purpose, serves as both a unifying force and a position of differentiation, allowing social enterprises to legitimize themselves as alternative yet credible market actors. By defining who they are about traditional business norms, they assert agency and build the ideological infrastructure needed for transformation.

Instrumental strategies, on the other hand, involve the strategic actions through which social enterprises navigate market pressures and resource constraints. These include forging *collaborative alliances* across sectors and communities to redistribute resources, build legitimacy, and influence institutional arrangements. Rather than acting in isolation, social enterprises create "claimed spaces" through these partnerships that allow them to co-create alternatives to dominant business practices. Additionally, they implement *counter-traditional business practices*—such as pursuing patient growth, resisting non-aligned investors, and embedding impact-driven metrics into their governance models. These practices reflect a rejection of short-termism and an intentional redefinition of business success.

Through these combined efforts, social enterprises mobilize different *forms of empowerment and power*. Empowerment (or "power to") emerges from emotional resilience and identity work that sustains their mission under pressure. Innovative power is expressed in their capacity to create new resources, networks, and models that challenge traditional norms. Transformative power is exercised when they alter institutional rules and reshape broader expectations of business legitimacy. Lastly, they navigate power over by strategically engaging dominant actors and using their own influence to resist capture or dilution of their mission.

In essence, social enterprises do not simply resist the dominant business system: they strategically interact with it. They operate not as marginal players outside the system but as embedded agents who work through, within, and around institutional constraints to promote systemic change. Their power is not rooted in dominance but in adaptability, value-driven innovation, and collective action that incrementally reshapes the business landscape toward more inclusive and sustainable models.

RQ3: How can social enterprises navigate and transcend the dichotomy between challenging and adapting to institutional structures while driving systemic change?

As demonstrated throughout Chapters 3 and 4, social enterprises operate not at the extremes but within a spectrum of institutional engagement, where transformation and adaptation coexist in dynamic, often paradoxical, ways.

Rather than acting solely as system antagonists or institutional conformists, social enterprises engage in reflexive institutional entrepreneurship, strategically navigating contradictions between legitimacy and resistance, innovation and survival. Their actions are shaped by institutional complexity, requiring them to continuously calibrate between aligning with dominant norms (to gain access, legitimacy, and resources) and contesting those same norms through counter-hegemonic practices, narrative reframing, and symbolic resistance. This liminal positioning allows social enterprises to “bend the system” from within, often subtly and strategically, which is more reflective of the messy, iterative nature of systemic transformation.

However, this situation raises a further question: how can we meaningfully differentiate social enterprises that merely adapt to dominant logics from those that genuinely drive institutional transformation?

Based on the findings and theoretical framework developed in this thesis, five interrelated dimensions can help distinguish transformative from non-transformative social enterprises:

- Institutional Engagement: Transformative social enterprises challenge and seek to reconfigure the underlying logics of the dominant system, questioning principles such as profit maximization of shareholder primacy. Non-transformative SEs, in contrast, accept and operate within these dominant logics, often using a social mission as a secondary or symbolic element.
- Reflexivity and Value Hybridity: Transformative social enterprises exhibit high degrees of reflexivity, consciously navigating institutional contradictions and employing hybrid strategies to blend social and economic values. Non-transformative social enterprises might demonstrate lower reflexivity, aligning more closely with dominant market values without critical engagement.
- Forms of Power Exercised: Social enterprises with transformative potential leverage a combination of innovative and transformative power, thus engaging in collaboration, experimentation, and practices that challenge dominant norms to drive institutional change. In contrast, non-transformative enterprises tend to rely predominantly on instrumental power, often becoming captured by hegemonic forces through negotiation processes that constrain their autonomy and dilute their transformative aims.
- Niche-Regime Relationship: Transformative social enterprises cultivate protected spaces for experimentation, operating as institutional niches that enable systemic alternatives to incubate. Non-transformative social enterprises often aim for regime compatibility, aligning with corporate or policy frameworks without seeking to reconfigure them.

5.2. Theoretical Contributions

This thesis contributes to three major scholarly fields: institutional theory, sustainability transitions, and social entrepreneurship/social innovation studies. It begins by developing a conceptual model that integrates insights from institutional entrepreneurship, sustainability transitions, and power theory, offering a framework for understanding the role of social enterprises in systemic change.

This model is then empirically elaborated and refined through an interpretive, constructivist analysis of how social enterprises operate within and against dominant business logics. The research highlights the dual modalities of power through which social enterprises enact agency: *reflexivity dynamics*, linked to empowerment, identity, and emotions, and *instrumental mechanisms*, associated with strategic action and systemic influence. These findings offer a context-sensitive theoretical contribution that explains how peripheral actors mobilize resources, construct legitimacy, and influence institutional configurations from within.

Taken together, the conceptual synthesis and empirical analysis allow the thesis to offer the following theoretical contributions:

a. Reimagining Institutional Entrepreneurship: Navigating Contradictions through Reflexive Agency

This thesis provides grounded insights into how social enterprises navigate institutional complexity, illustrating how they balance the pursuit of legitimacy with the imperative to challenge dominant logics, often occupying a liminal space between adaptation and disruption. It extends the concept of institutional entrepreneurship by introducing reflexive institutional agency: a form of agency that is not only strategic but also emotional, relational, and identity-driven. Whereas traditional models tend to depict institutional entrepreneurs as rational actors who exploit windows of opportunity (DiMaggio, 1988; Battilana et al., 2009), this research foregrounds the role of affective institutional work (Katila et al., 2019), meaning-making (Voronov & Vince, 2012), and identity work (Creed et al., 2010; Ruebottom & Auster, 2018) in processes of institutional change.

By integrating these dimensions, the study responds to growing calls to emotionalize institutional theory and to acknowledge the psychological and symbolic labor actors engage in as they contest and reshape dominant logics (Voronov & Weber, 2016; Hampel et al., 2017). In doing so, it also engages with the paradox of embedded agency, demonstrating how institutional contradictions can serve as catalysts for reflexivity and reconfiguration (Seo & Creed, 2002; Hardy & Maguire, 2017). These contradictions create openings for actors to identify cracks in dominant systems and mobilize creative, collective forms of agency that expand the space for institutional transformation.

b. Expanding the Lens: From Hybrid Business Models to Systemic Engagement

Despite a growing body of research, the field of social entrepreneurship continues to grapple with persistent theoretical fragmentation. Several comprehensive literature reviews (Klarin & Suseno, 2022; Saebi et al., 2019; Gupta et al., 2020) underscore enduring conceptual ambiguity and an overemphasis on meso-level organizational features, particularly business models, at the expense of more dynamic, integrative, and multilevel analyses. Scholars have critiqued the field's dominant focus on hybrid business models and organizational strategies, warning that this orientation risks reducing social entrepreneurship to a technical or instrumental endeavor (Saebi et al., 2019; Klarin & Suseno, 2022).

In response, this thesis conceptualizes social entrepreneurship as a dynamic and evolving process, characterized by ongoing negotiation, adaptation, and institutional engagement. Drawing on insights from institutional entrepreneurship and sustainability transitions literature, it develops a model of social enterprises as active agents in institutional dynamics, illuminating the mechanisms and tensions involved in the pursuit of systemic transformation. Rather than privileging organizational form or structural hybridity, the thesis frames social entrepreneurship as a form of institutional agency, deeply embedded within complex systems and shaped by cultural, political, and normative structures. It emphasizes how social enterprises engage in institutional work, navigate power relations, and contribute to normative reconfigurations, thereby advancing a more nuanced and transformative understanding of social entrepreneurship.

Although there is increasing recognition that social entrepreneurship is a multilevel phenomenon (Tracey et al., 2011; Saebi et al., 2019), yet few studies have integrated all three levels into a coherent analytical framework. This thesis addresses this gap by adopting a multi-level perspective that links the micro-level (identity formation and reflexivity of social entrepreneurs), meso-level (organizational practices and strategic collaboration), and macro-level (institutional logics and systemic change). In doing so, it contributes to a more holistic and context-sensitive understanding of how social enterprises operate within, and respond to, dominant institutional configurations.

While existing research continues to emphasize meso-level concerns, such as business model design and strategic scaling, there is a growing call for deeper theorization at both the micro and macro levels (Klarin & Suseno, 2022). This research contributes by unpacking micro-level dynamics of reflexivity and empowerment, as well as exploring power and institutional strategies that shape how social enterprises attempt to influence and reconfigure systemic norms and values during the process of transformation.

Finally, while social enterprises are often celebrated as natural disruptors of capitalist systems, scholars increasingly warn against assuming their inherent transformative capacity (Shaw & Bruin, 2013; Newey, 2018). This thesis advances a more critical and differentiated perspective, proposing a spectrum of institutional engagement that distinguishes between transformative, adaptive, and reproductive roles. It interrogates the conditions under which social enterprises can drive systemic change, and conversely, when they risk reinforcing the very institutional logics they seek to challenge.

c. **Enriching the actor-oriented lens in sustainability transitions**

Sustainability transitions research has made important strides in understanding how socio-technical systems evolve, stabilize, and change. Yet, a recurring critique of this field is its limited theorization of agency, particularly about non-state, non-dominant actors such as businesses and civil society organizations. Dominant frameworks, especially the Multi-Level Perspective (MLP), have been instrumental in conceptualizing systemic pressures and regime-level stability. However, they tend to privilege structural analysis over actor-driven dynamics, often overlooking how transformation is initiated, negotiated, and sustained by individuals and organizations embedded within these systems (Augenstein & Palzkill, 2015; Geels, 2019; Markard et al., 2012).

This thesis directly addresses this gap by integrating an actor-oriented lens into sustainability transitions theory. Building on institutional entrepreneurship literature (DiMaggio, 1988; Battilana et al., 2009), it conceptualizes social enterprises as embedded agents who engage in complex forms of institutional work by mobilizing resources, constructing legitimacy, and introducing new value propositions. As institutional entrepreneurs, defined as actors who initiate and actively participate in the transformation of existing institutions or the creation of new ones (DiMaggio, 1988), social enterprises operate not from the margins but as influential agents capable of disrupting, reshaping, or generating alternative institutional logics within the broader business system. In doing so, the thesis expands the prevailing understanding of agency in transitions, which has traditionally centered on state actors, policymakers, and incumbent firms.

In addition, this thesis extends the MLP by introducing a social-institutional dimension to niche-regime interactions. It reconceptualizes social enterprises not merely as incubators of technological or market-based alternatives, but as institutional niches, spaces where new norms, values, and practices are cultivated and embedded. These actors do not only innovate in terms of products or services but also actively reconfigure what is seen as legitimate, rational, or desirable within economic systems. The thesis thus shifts the analytical focus from structural positioning to the relational, emotional, and narrative practices through which social enterprises exercise influence.

Moreover, this thesis argues that sustainability transitions cannot be fully understood without engaging with the underlying institutional logics that sustain unsustainable systems. Much of the existing research has focused on sector-specific innovation, particularly in energy, food, and mobility systems, while paying limited attention to the deep-rooted configurations of meaning, value, and legitimacy that shape socio-economic behavior (Feola et al., 2020; Avelino et al., 2024). This thesis contributes to filling this gap by framing social enterprises as actors that embody hybrid institutional logics, combining elements of market rationality with social and ecological missions. Their hybrid nature enables them to navigate institutional complexity while pushing for normative change, offering a model of transformation that is both embedded and disruptive.

Finally, the thesis develops an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that brings together institutional logics, institutional entrepreneurship, and power theory to offer a more comprehensive view of sustainability transitions. This integrated approach foregrounds the interplay between economic, political, and social forces and challenges reductionist narratives that locate transformation solely in technological advancement or policy intervention. By emphasizing that sustainability transitions are deeply shaped by contested struggles over legitimacy, identity, and institutional meaning, the research contributes to a more realistic and actionable understanding of systemic change.

In sum, this thesis extends sustainability transitions theory by centering agency, power, and institutional complexity as core elements of systemic transformation. It highlights the critical role of social enterprises not as marginal actors but as central participants in the unfolding dynamics of change:actors who work from within to subtly and strategically reshape the logics that govern our economic and social systems.

d. Advancing Power and Empowerment Theories in Sustainability Transitions

This thesis makes a significant contribution to the study of power in sustainability transitions by offering a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of how social enterprises exert influence within institutional environments. While power is increasingly acknowledged as central to transition processes, existing frameworks continue to emphasize regulatory, hierarchical, or resource-based conceptions, often portraying power as something exercised vertically by dominant incumbents or through direct resistance by challengers (Avelino, 2017; Geels & Schot, 2007). These binary perspectives tend to overlook more subtle, situated, and relational dynamics of power enacted by non-dominant actors.

Building on the work of Avelino and Rotmans (2009), this thesis draws on a multi-dimensional conceptualization of power, including instrumental, constitutive, and transformative forms, and applies it to the empirical realities of social enterprise. The research demonstrates how social enterprises rarely engage in overt confrontation. Instead, they navigate institutional complexity through indirect strategies such as collaboration, discourse, emotional labor, and hybrid value creation. These mechanisms illustrate how power is exercised not through domination or resistance, but through the gradual redirection of norms, legitimacy, and meaning within institutional fields.

A key theoretical insight emerging from this study is the identification of reflexive empowerment as a form of agency. This includes the internal, emotional, and identity-based processes through which social entrepreneurs build self-awareness, moral resolve, and collective purpose. These reflexive dynamics are particularly important in sustaining long-term efforts toward transformation, especially when operating under institutional constraints. In highlighting these often-overlooked dimensions, the thesis contributes an affective layer to power theory, addressing calls to incorporate emotional and symbolic practices into analyses of institutional agency (Voronov & Vince, 2012).

The research also contributes to a horizontal and context-sensitive understanding of power, showing how influence is generated through strategic alignment, legitimacy-building, and boundary-spanning. Social enterprises are conceptualized as institutional brokers, i.e.,actors who operate at the interface of dominant and alternative logics, and who facilitate change through negotiation, symbolic disruption, and narrative construction. Their ability to leverage existing institutional mechanisms, without fully conforming to or resisting them, challenges the assumption that system change requires direct confrontation or regime overthrow.

Additionally, the thesis introduces the idea that empowerment and influence emerge not solely from resource accumulation, but from the ability to navigate competing logics, engage diverse actors, and reshape institutional expectations. Social enterprises use hybrid positioning not as a compromise, but as a platform for creating new forms of legitimacy and redefining what is possible or acceptable within the business system.

In sum, this thesis contributes to power and empowerment theory by expanding the conceptual vocabulary through which we understand institutional influence in transition contexts. It highlights how non-dominant actors, particularly social enterprises, exercise complex, situated forms of agency that are relational, affective, and gradual, yet capable of supporting meaningful systemic change.

e. Reframing co-optation and institutional mediation in sustainability transitions

A central theoretical contribution lies in the development of the concept of co-optation from below. Whereas institutional theories often emphasize the risks of co-optation from above, in which dominant actors neutralize alternatives by subsuming them into existing capitalist frameworks (Nicholls & Teasdale, 2017; Pel & Bauler, 2017), this thesis highlights how social enterprises can engage in strategic appropriation of dominant mechanisms. Co-optation from below involves deliberately leveraging established structures (e.g., markets, procurement systems, consumer trends) to insert alternative logics and values. Rather than conforming to the logic of efficiency or profitability, social enterprises use these structures to redirect capital, shift norms, and normalize social impact criteria within mainstream economic fields.

This insight addresses a theoretical blind spot in both institutional theory and sustainability transitions research. Much of the literature tends to dichotomize systemic actors as either transformative outsiders or captured insiders, thereby obscuring the complex iterative positioning of hybrid actors such as social enterprises. By articulating the interplay between co-optation risk and institutional engagement, this thesis reframes social enterprises not as outliers or exceptions, but as embedded actors participating in the co-evolution of institutional logics. Their power lies not in rejecting systems outright but in strategically negotiating with them by using the tools of the dominant order to subvert, stretch, and reconfigure its norms over time.

Moreover, this perspective advances theoretical debates by challenging techno-centric or policy-driven models of sustainability transitions. While technological and regulatory innovations remain important, they are insufficient without a corresponding shift in the underlying institutional logics that shape economic behavior and governance structures (Avelino et al., 2024). Social enterprises, by practicing and institutionalizing hybrid logics that combine profit and purpose, offer a lived experiment in value reconfiguration. Theoretical models of transition must therefore account for the slow, embedded, and discursive forms of institutional work that social enterprises perform.

Finally, by conceptualizing social enterprises as institutional mediators, the thesis contributes to a more non-binary and dynamic understanding of institutional transformation. Rather than seeing transformation as a rupture between old and new systems, this model emphasizes pathway creation through iteration, negotiation, and hybridization. It highlights the relational and recursive nature of change, in which actors continually balance legitimacy, resistance, and adaptation while creating micro-shifts that, over time, might accumulate into broader systemic transformations.

5.3. Practical Implications

Beyond its theoretical and empirical value, this thesis offers several practical contributions for a broad range of stakeholders involved in shaping, supporting, or regulating the field of social entrepreneurship. By unpacking the mechanisms through which social enterprises exert power, navigate institutional complexity, and pursue systemic transformation, the research provides actionable insights into how different actors can better foster environments where social enterprises can thrive as agents of institutional change.

For policymakers, the findings suggest the importance of designing flexible and supportive institutional frameworks that recognize the hybrid nature of social enterprises. Rather than imposing rigid definitions or narrowly focusing on measurable outcomes, policy instruments should allow for experimentation, contextual adaptation, and pluralistic forms of value creation. Enabling policies might include the creation of legal forms suited to hybrid missions, access to alternative finance mechanisms, and the protection of spaces for institutional innovation, i.e., what sustainability transitions literature refers to as “niches.” Recognizing the constitutive role of power and reflexivity in transformation, policymakers should also avoid overly technocratic or top-down models and instead promote participatory governance, peer learning, and multi-actor collaboration.

For impact investors and funding organizations, the thesis highlights the need to move beyond standardized metrics and outcome-based assessments. Social enterprises that engage in transformative work often pursue non-linear, context-specific paths that resist easy quantification. Investors committed to supporting systemic change must adopt more holistic and qualitative evaluation frameworks that consider the enterprise’s institutional positioning, reflexive strategies, and engagement with multiple logics. In particular, funders should be attentive to the risks of co-optation, and avoid incentivizing superficial forms of social impact that reinforce dominant institutional structures. Instead, investment strategies should focus on empowerment, resilience, and long-term field-building.

For intermediaries, networks, and ecosystem builders, the research emphasizes the value of fostering relational spaces where social entrepreneurs can engage in collective reflection, navigate complexity, and build shared narratives. Empowerment does not occur in isolation but emerges through supportive relationships, emotional work, and identity work. Networks that facilitate peer support, co-learning, and access to alternative institutional resources can play a crucial role in enabling social enterprises to sustain their transformative intent while navigating legitimacy pressures. Moreover, ecosystem actors should work toward creating protective environments that shield emerging models from premature market or regulatory pressures, allowing innovation to mature before facing systemic constraints.

Finally, for social enterprise practitioners, this thesis provides a language and framework to better understand and articulate their strategic positioning. It invites practitioners to see value in the complexity they navigate and to embrace reflexivity as a key component of institutional entrepreneurship. By making sense of their practices not just as business tactics but as acts of resistance, alignment, and negotiation, practitioners can become more intentional in balancing adaptation with transformation. The thesis also offers a framework to assess their own role within broader systemic dynamics, thus helping them ask not just what they are changing, but how they are positioned concerning the institutional structures they seek to transform.

In sum, this research contributes to the growing field of practice-oriented institutional theory by offering tools, insights, and vocabulary for actors working at the intersection of enterprise and systemic change. By translating complex theoretical constructs into practical implications, it supports the development of more enabling environments, supportive infrastructures, and reflexive strategies that can help social enterprises move from isolated innovation toward sustained institutional transformation.

5.4. Limitations and Future Research

While this thesis provides valuable theoretical and empirical insights into the role of social enterprises as institutional entrepreneurs within complex systems, it is important to recognize its limitations and identify potential directions for future research. These limitations do not undermine the validity of the findings but rather help define the boundaries of the study and open new avenues for scholarly inquiry.

A first limitation of this thesis lies in its partial engagement with context-specific variables in the analysis. While the research draws on empirical material from a particular socio-institutional setting, it does not systematically examine how local dynamics, actor configurations, or policy environments may shape the meaning-making processes of the social entrepreneurs under study. As a result, the analysis may understate how variations in cultural, regulatory, or political contexts influence how social enterprises navigate institutional complexity or exercise transformative agency. Future research would benefit from incorporating greater contextual sensitivity, enabling a more nuanced understanding of how institutional dynamics and power relations unfold across diverse settings.

Secondly, the interpretive methodology adopted in this research prioritizes depth over breadth. The choice of a hermeneutic and constructivist approach enabled a nuanced exploration of meaning-making processes, identity formation, and reflexivity among social entrepreneurs. However, this approach necessarily limits the possibility of generalization and does not allow for the identification of statistically representative patterns across the broader field. While this methodological decision was deliberate and aligned with the study's aims, it also restricts the ability to assess the prevalence or frequency of the mechanisms identified.

Importantly, the goal of this research is not universal generalizability, but rather analytical transferability, as advocated by Gioia et al. (2013). The emphasis lies in producing rich, context-sensitive insights that may resonate across similar settings, rather than in establishing universally applicable laws.

Temporal limitations also warrant attention. This study captures a moment in time, offering a cross-sectional analysis of institutional engagement and power dynamics. Yet institutional change processes —and the evolution of social enterprises within them— are inherently dynamic and non-linear. Without a longitudinal perspective, it remains difficult to fully assess how social enterprises adapt, sustain, or shift their strategies over time, particularly in response to changes in the broader institutional environment.

Furthermore, the research focused predominantly on cases that exhibit some level of institutional engagement or transformational ambition. This analytical focus may inadvertently underrepresent social enterprises that struggle, fail, or become co-opted by dominant systems. As such, the findings reflect the trajectories of organizations already navigating the complex balance between legitimacy and transformation, rather than offering a comprehensive account of all possible outcomes within the field.

These limitations, however, open several promising directions for future research. Comparative and cross-cultural studies could enrich the existing findings by highlighting how social enterprises operate under divergent institutional conditions. Such studies could help surface new forms of power, resistance, or adaptation that remain invisible in the present context. Longitudinal research would also be particularly valuable in tracing the development of social enterprises over time, shedding light on the conditions under which transformative capacity is strengthened, weakened, or lost.

In addition, future research could benefit from the integration of mixed or quantitative methods to complement interpretative insights with broader empirical validation. Surveys, social network analysis, or comparative case studies might help assess how widespread the identified power mechanisms and institutional strategies are across different sectors or ecosystems. There is also a pressing need for deeper inquiry into failed or captured social enterprises, i.e.,those that are absorbed by the system they sought to challenge. Such studies could help identify the tipping points where transformative intent is diluted or redirected.

Finally, future research could explore how policy frameworks, impact investment practices, and collaborative infrastructures influence the emergence and sustainability of transformative social enterprises. The relationship between enabling ecosystems and institutional agency deserves closer attention, particularly as governments and funders increasingly turn to social entrepreneurship as a solution to structural challenges. Understanding how different forms of support shape or constrain the potential for systemic transformation remains a crucial task for both scholars and practitioners.

In acknowledging these limitations and charting directions for further inquiry, this thesis contributes to a growing conversation about the possibilities and boundaries of social entrepreneurship in driving institutional change. It is hoped that future work will continue to build on and challenge these findings, deepening our collective understanding of how transformative change can be enacted from within complex and often resistant systems.

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