The quest to define ‘social enterprise’ is fraught with ambiguity (Jones & Keogh, 2006) and concerns regarding legitimacy (Reid & Griffith, 2006). While literature provides a range of definitions (Harding, 2004; Haugh, 2005; Jones & Keogh, 2006; Kerlin, 2006) and geographic and ideological distinctions may be discerned (Dart, 2004a; Harding, 2004; Kerlin, 2006; Thompson & Doherty, 2006), the closest any scholars come to consensus is the general agreement that no commonly accepted definition or consistent application of social enterprise is applied in scholarship (Dart, 2004b; Haugh, 2005; Jones & Keogh, 2006; OECD, 1999). Amid these contested and plural sense of definitions, Martin and Osberg (2007) caution that indiscriminate application of labels, such as ‘social entrepreneur’, risks undermining the significance and importance of the activities undertaken and value created.

In spite of, or perhaps even because of, this lack of consensus there is also a growing voice among scholars who purport the search for an ‘agreed’ definition is a luxury we can ill afford at present. The field of social enterprise, however defined, is growing rapidly; and a preoccupation with trying to contain this dynamic movement within a precise definition risks overlooking the wealth of activity currently taking place around us (Mair, 2007; Stablein, 2007). Faced with escalating need across society, practitioners have little time (or patience!) to be constrained by definitional wrangling, dissent or ambiguity. In increasing numbers organisations and individuals are getting on with the task at hand – creating social value. We propose a means through which to address the apparent conundrum is to realign our focus from ‘definition’ to ‘identity’. Thus, by moving beyond academic musing which try to demarcate boundaries in theoretical silos, value can be added to scholarship and practice by better understanding how and why organisations choose to identify themselves as social enterprises. Application of a social constructionist lens facilitates our understanding of the interactions, negotiations and shared processes of sensemaking which may shape an organisations’ identity (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007; Downing, 2005). Emerging areas such as social enterprise are a particularly salient environment in which to study organisation identity, as the process of identity formation may be particularly visible (Clegg et al., 2007). A focus on identity also paves the way to deeper understanding of a range of organisational behaviour issues such as legitimacy (Dart, 2004b), structure and strategy (Young, 2001).

Building on a review of identity as presented in scholarship, this paper presents our preliminary findings from a qualitative inquiry focused on Youthline, one of a small number of New Zealand organisations that choose to identify themselves as a social enterprise. Social enterprise in New Zealand is still very much in its infancy, so it is timely to consider how this concept may be manifest, and to what extent early adopters of the ‘social enterprise label’ may shape perceptions of social enterprise in New Zealand society. Thus, our research question seeks to consider what agendas do(es) the social construction of social enterprise serve? We begin to examine what significance, if any, this identity has for Youthline. We seek to understand why and how this identity has been created. Does Youthline see its SE identity as differentiating them from ‘traditional’ non profit organisations? If so, then how and to what effect?
References


