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# Anthropology and the Practice of Entrepreneurship Research

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## ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE PRACTICE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP RESEARCH

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## INTRODUCTION

The anthropological and business school writings on entrepreneurship are much in need of bridging, and this essay is a strand across the chasm. The particular role of this strand will first be explained. Although the bridge is constructed of rope, and rickety, I quixotically assume that the theoretical and methodological battles are over, and tilt at different windmills. In doing so I make two assumptions. First, that the audience has some familiarity with apologies for qualitative and ethnographic research (e.g. Morgan & Smircich, 1980; Van Maanen, 1983). Second, that my recent interpretations of the anthropology of entrepreneurship (Stewart, 1987a, b), while admittedly obscure, need only be summarized for the purpose of this paper. That purpose is to argue that the case-based methodology of the anthropologist can generate "grounded theories" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) that contribute to entrepreneurial studies.

One purported contribution, the reader is forewarned, is my own grounded theory called "Running Hot". Running Hot is a mode of social organization that is highly conducive to ongoing entrepreneurship. Theories such as this, I believe, should be based on the creative use of a broad range of literatures from the business and social science disciplines. In order to demonstrate the use of anthropology, and to justify the claim that Running Hot is entrepreneurial, a sketch of the theory will be mapped against the anthropology of entrepreneurship.

The argument in capsule form is as follows: The practice of case-centered research aims for an up-close understanding which does the minimum of violence to the "natives'" perspectives. The research is opportunistic, and not hypothesis-driven. While it is "grounded" in an interaction with the natives, it develops a holistic image of the context that transcends the particularistic. Within limitations, it generalizes to a wider body of scholarship through a dialectic between site-based data and theory. This dialectic, as well as the fieldwork itself, calls for a familiarity with the crafts and the traditions of ethnography. These traditions include the use of a wide range of literatures. Some of these are anthropological, but the holism of the enquiry means that ethnographies on business should span other specialties. If

they do, they can give rise to a truly configurative theory, which will continue to feed back into the literatures. Running Hot, for example, feeds back with the argument that there are entrepreneurial modes of implementation. Such theories could therefore have implications for practice, teaching, and theory.

As all anthropologists "know", the history of their discipline demonstrates that one cannot understand complex social phenomena from an armchair. Accordingly, one must participate in the richness of everyday action. In business research, for example, access to unguarded organizational life is reserved for insiders. Only after the researcher is accepted as a "native", due perhaps to the urgency of events, is it possible to witness and to try to interpret the ambiguous social "reality".

At the beginning of a project of grounded research, just what it is that one wants to see revealed cannot be defined. One cannot say, "I want to go out and study the entrepreneurship of such-and-such firms that are known to be entrepreneurial". Up-close, they might prove not to be entrepreneurial, or to be much more significant for quite different reasons. The case sites, then, become base camps for interactive reflection. This analogy has two senses. First, preconceived or "etic" ideas are placed in parentheses in order to try to imagine "emic" knowledge; that is, to see the way things work from the natives' point of view. Second, the researcher proceeds with an iteration of many subtly changing expectations, but not with formal hypotheses. These two points are elaborated.

The initial priority of the emic is called for by the simplifications and other limitations in any etic model (Martin & Turner, 1986). Etic road maps can lead to hazardous travel, as I found upon arrival at my site (an auto parts plant). I arrived at the site, an initiate from the M.B.A. agony, and quickly found that the locals did not act the way I expected. I knew that textbook teachings are very selectively used, and thought myself far from a technocrat. But I set out to act as an industrial engineer, production records at the ready, calculator at hand.

The quick and dirty studies thus produced were not completely irrelevant. But their relevance aimed for the general manager's domain, since technocratic

changes in production could well have meant a strategic transition. By imposing on production my notions from outside, I tried to vault to a knowledge for which I was unprepared. First I had to understand production in the actors' own terms. This of course is a daunting task that could consume years.

Consultants' heuristics and scholarly models can shorten the process. However, they must be put in parentheses in order to start the dialectic by empathizing with the natives' views. If research is to "discover" theory, it must be creative, since hypothesis testing will ossify the process (Dalton, 1967; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Yin, 1984). The process is one of simultaneous analysis and fieldwork (Yin, 1984); that is, the data collection should itself be a process of learning. And since learning that which is novel cannot be controlled or predicted, the researcher, like the entrepreneur, is opportunistic and not the trustee of (scientific) resources (cf. Stevenson & Gumpert, 1985, March-April).

The researcher is also like the entrepreneur in seeking to make connections that are not yet made by the market or by preexisting disciplines. Moreover, the activities of mobilizing resources in order to seize opportunities are analogous. The researcher's new connections are not made only by reflection; they are made in interaction with informants. This is often a pedestrian matter of dialogue and trial and error. But so long as the researcher maintains credibility and financing, he or she can continue to collect primary (and secondary) data. That is, the everyday process calls for human skills and flexibility, as the researcher stalls for the time to build up an impression of the whole configuration.

This working knowledge is a precondition for the use of ideas that transcend the specifics of the case. It is a precondition for coping with a paradox in all case research; namely, that studies seem to be incommensurably situation-bound, and yet comparisons are made quite freely, even loosely, with a myriad cross-cultural examples. This apparent abandonment of rigor can only be managed by means of the practice of "constant comparison" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, chap. 5).

Constant comparison is an ongoing interchange, in which understanding accrues through the iterative comparison of the particular and the general. Constant comparison is similar to "pattern-matching" (Campbell, 1975), which becomes possible as the researcher develops an explanatory image for data. This image or "theory... generates predictions or expectations on dozens of other aspects of the culture" or situation (Campbell, 1975, pp. 181-182).

These expectations are then compared or matched with observations. The ethnographer can try out rival hypotheses, and seek out negative (disconfirming) instances, even within a "single" case (Becker, 1958; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The pretensions of ethnographic knowledge require the iterative comparison with higher-level theory. In Yin's words, case research is "generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes. In this sense, the case study does not represent a 'sample', and the investigator's goal is to expand and generalize theories" (Yin, 1984, pp. 21, 39). Therefore, constant comparison proceeds with ideas drawn from within a case, but also with ideas from experience and from scholarly writings. If the ethnographer did not bring to the field an "accumulated experience and knowledge", no sense could be made of a case (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 67). Bookish theories are not just unavoidable baggage in the "native view" of the researcher. They are collective and personal memories of countless prosaic trials and errors, which steer one away from commonsensical errors, and may inspire more fundamental questioning.

There is no use denying, however, that the case researcher's theories are tentative. Grounded research may aim to discover and not test; it may generalize to theories and not to populations. However, its capacity even to generate theory is limited by the grounding in a particular site. Running Hot is limited as a theory by the specifics of the research. The limited availability of useful comparisons makes it impossible fully to distinguish Running Hot from the details of the particular site. It is not only impossible to estimate the incidence of the phenomenon in various categories of organizations, it is impossible to determine which features are necessarily, or even most commonly, found in "Hot" organizations.

Resolution of this problem (even from the perspective of the generation of grounded theory) would require that one find a number of other cases with many similarities and certain dissimilarities with the site. Finding such sites for comparison can only be achieved with a tailor-made research design. Yin's strategy of "case replication research" (1984, pp. 39-40) was designed with this purpose, and is therefore recommended for follow-up research.

Yin argued that, since cases generalize not to populations, but to theories, investigators should not seek "representative" cases, but rather "replication" for further development of theory (1984, pp. 39-40). Replication research could generate more grounded

theory. For example, the reputational method could be used to locate firms "Running Hot", and thus resolve the problem that no other scholars can be expected to have shared one's most particular interests. Unlike grounded theory, replication work could, and in Yin's view should, begin with formal hypotheses. Hypothesizing about Running Hot would begin with the delimitation of the set of variables and values essential for the configuration. For such research it would be possible and advisable to plan a "case study protocol" (Yin, 1984, pp. 48-53, 64).

As the reader will have inferred, case study is a "craft" and not a science (Martin & Turner, 1986). Crafts take time. Time is needed to learn about ethnography, and the study of excellent cases is part of the apprenticeship. No shortcut suggests itself. Nor should this be surprising. Were a scholar to propose an "economic" theory of entrepreneurship, we would expect that the scholar had learned some economics. Time is similarly required for reading in ethnography. Apparently loose comparisons require a respect for the value of erudition. Time is required, then, to understand comparisons. Time is required simply to think, and rethink, on a case.

Time is needed for learning about ethnographies since one cannot consult a tidy class of literature. One cannot do so for two reasons: complexity and holism. The internal comparisons of a case imply that there is really not just "one" case (Campbell, 1975). Complexity entails a mixed bag of ideas for comparison. A very mixed bag is called for, since ideas used for comparisons must be linked to the complexity of the case, and also transcend the case boundaries. They help to locate the case within its wider context, but other scholars cannot be expected to have shared case-specific concerns. No one other study will precisely match the context of a case. And the holism of ethnography means there are few clear-cut subfields. Studies are classified as "economic anthropology" or the "anthropology of entrepreneurship", but many could just as well be labelled "politics", "kinship", "ethnicity" and so on. The consequence is that the business researcher confronts a bewildering array of apparently esoteric studies. In response to this problem, the anthropological research on entrepreneurship must be "translated" for a business school audience. The author's attempt at translation will very briefly be sketched.

"Entrepreneurship is a form of human activity that involves seeing and making good on opportunities from which may be gained advantage and growth" (Stewart, 1987b, pp. 1-2). "Seeing" opportunities

requires the skills of vision and insight into market gaps and cultural boundaries. The prototypical model of success is the "bridging" of market (and other) "gaps" (Barth, 1967) 4. "Seizing" opportunities does not require ownership, but it does require deployment of resources. This is achieved through hard work and the development of social relationships. Social ties are nurtured by indebteding followers and partners, and merely by the culturally recognized enactment of entrepreneurial roles. This enactment includes a dynamic process of "disembedding", "re-embedding" and "embedding", in which the actor's tactics are based in and themselves affect the moral orders (e.g. ethnicity, kinship, industry standards). Entrepreneurship may thus be ambiguous in the terms of the moral order. However, many entrepreneurs are experts in their moral orders and may even be contrasted with models of cultural failure.

The anthropological image of entrepreneurship will be cited below, in a comparison with Running Hot, which is based less on anthropological than on management writings. Such a cross-fertilization between disciplines parallels the entrepreneur's own "bridging". However, the range of literatures relevant for complex cases is so broad as to jeopardize the efficiency of library-based comparisons (cf. Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 53). The wide range also raises questions about the bounding of research. How many literatures ought one to survey? How deeply into any field ought one to stray? One ceases to collect observations, or (in the present instance) studies, when the theoretical category is saturated; when it ceases to be developed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). But one cannot be confidently aware of saturation in an unfamiliar discipline.

Interdisciplinary requirements merely compound the problem of time consumption, since a great deal of time is required for a report that may well be dismissed as unique. But cases that bridge anthropology and business have the dubious advantage of bridging disciplines within business schools as well. All of the holistic business disciplines should be deployed. In the Running Hot study, I found that the most usable works were about evenly split between entrepreneurial studies (including anthropology), organization theory, and strategic management. This was perhaps to be expected, since these three areas all take a general management perspective.

The combination of ethnographic fieldwork and interdisciplinary literatures makes it possible to generate a truly "configurative" theory (Miller & Friesen, 1984). That is, it makes possible a richly multidimensional ideal type or categorization for

comparisons and generalizations. Running Hot is intended to be such a theory. It is outlined in the terms of the particular firm that I studied. 5

The firm, which I call PressinProd (or PP) is an OEM auto parts supplier. As such, it is highly dependent on customers that demand a high level of service in several dimensions (cost, flexibility, delivery reliability and quality). Far from seeking to avoid this dependence, PP's strategy is one of single-minded focus on meeting the customers' demands. The priority accorded the customer constituency raises the question of internal legitimacy. What is more, PP's approach relies upon the passionate involvement of low-level managers and technicians, and therefore requires a high level of legitimation.

PressinProd's approach to solving simultaneously the problems of stringent demands and internal legitimacy is Running Hot. Running Hot is one of two central metaphors, both of which evoke a great deal of the approach, that were used by the firm's founding manager. 6 The other is that the firm is a "soccer team." The GM "had been the captain of an international level team. As captain he had been responsible for rallying the players before their matches, so that they would be charged with adrenaline. More importantly, they would be able to make their plays, and sustain their teamwork, at speed, under pressure, with no time for planning or reflection...They should be aware of the primary goal of the game of relative success in meeting the OEMs' demands. To this end their efforts should be disciplined and focused. Efforts should also...be passionate. And as in elite athletics, employment might, as it were, play over their heads" (Stewart, 1987c, p. 35). Corollary concepts are focused on customers, focus on manufacturing, and focus on action.

Metaphors such as these demonstrate opportunity recognition, since they express a way to meet an increasingly difficult market demand. But the opportunity must also be seized. Running Hot must be put on the market, and this requires the entrepreneurial skills of growth with limited resources. For example, plant and equipment are incrementally deployed, and leased as well as owned. More importantly, the "team" is developed by on-the-job training and the promotion of people from the shop floor. Only at the very top is thorough knowledge needed. Below, it is better to let people without the experience of "cold" approaches invent their own, home-spun procedures.

Self-developed procedures are remarkably successful, and they inculcate proprietary pride. Success in

working over one's head creates a tremendous "kick" and helps to explain the players' passionate involvement in the "game" of Running Hot. However, success is only possible on the basis of certain organizational foundations.

In general terms, the basis is a community of work with much sociability and little size. This community is created with an informal, nonunionized internal labor market (ILM). Such an ILM develops a plant-specific frame of reference for the game, and the network-based skills that make possible the mutual adjustment of the (nonprofessional) workforce. It also develops a high level of employee dependence upon the one employer. This dependence, in conjunction with both the "market discipline" (Clark, 1979) of close customer contact, and the skewing of technical competence to the apex, gives Running Hot its political character. This character is captured in two phrases; meritocratic autocracy, and the "politics of competence". This latter phrase indicates that virtually all organizational politics are concerned with the individual competences to Run Hot; that is, are channelled within the mission of the firm.

In short, Running Hot is in many ways typical of "managerial work", in that it is action-oriented, hectic, and pragmatic. However, it is distinguished above all for its passionate focus on the customer constituency and its success in legitimating this focus. Not surprisingly, then, the market has rewarded the firm with very fast growth and high profitability. This is one reason that this grounded theory feeds back into the general body of business knowledge. 7 Another is that it can be argued that Running Hot is an entrepreneurial form of managerial work. A very few writers have argued that entrepreneurial activity is not finished once a firm is past the initial startup phase (Carsrud, Olm, & Eddy, 1986, pp. 368-369; Mitton, 1985; see also Van de Ven et al., 1984). Others have begun to develop organization-level scales for measuring entrepreneurship (Covin & Slevin, 1986). However, it is seemingly iconoclastic to claim that the everyday activity of an auto parts plant is "entrepreneurial". PressinProd is part of a larger firm that is widely thought to be "entrepreneurial", but it is not what most people would think of as an internal corporate venture or an innovative and "intrapreneurial" site. It does, I believe, exemplify the ongoing implementation of entrepreneurship, if we take as our point of departure the anthropological literature. This comparison can most conveniently be demonstrated by the figure on the following page. Since this paper is about the research process, rather than the content of the anthropological literature or of Running Hot, the

figure may seem too concise.

This example of the use of anthropological approaches has three main implications for entrepreneurial studies. First, it proposes a form of social organization that is highly conducive to entrepreneurship and economic growth. Second, ethnography unravels the configuration in considerable detail (that is, in Stewart, 1987c), so that Running Hot is understandable, and therefore, more-or-less reproducible. Third, the configuration is worth reproducing, since it is financially successful. The anthropological concern with moral orders and moral ambiguities of entrepreneurship makes it possible also to argue that Running Hot is morally successful (see also Stewart, 1987b, c).

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Many arguments are borrowed with few if any changes from the methodological appendix (Four) in my dissertation (1987c). Similarly, the working papers (1987a, b) and the sketch of the anthropology of entrepreneurship were born in Appendix Two. These projects were encouraged and much improved thanks to a great many hours of discussion with Rein Peterson of York University (and latterly Babson College, and the National Centre for Management Research and Development).
2. The process is described in methodological works as a dialectic between the "idiographic" and the "nomothetic", and between the "emic" and the "etic". The idiographic and to a lesser extent the emic are associated with the particularities of "structural" or institutional explanations. The nomothetic and the etic are associated with the universality of "functional" explanations. The institutional is ultimately incommensurable; the functional, which is theoretical, is not.
3. It might be possible in such a study to overcome another problem of ethnographies, namely the sensitivity of insider information. In the Running Hot study, for example, it would be preferable to use much more financial information, since the financial goals of the major constituencies differ systematically, and the study places much emphasis on the internal legitimation of service to the powerful customers (which indirectly serves the interests of employees and investors; see Donaldson, 1984; Leblebici & Fiegenbaum, 1986).
4. References to anthropological works are in the working papers; space limits rule out full annotation in this paper.

5. For reasons noted above, it is impossible fully to distinguish Running Hot from the site-based ethnography. Therefore, this discussion begs the question and addresses the configuration as found at the site. This summary is based on Stewart (1987c, chaps. 1-8).

6. The metaphor "Running Hot" most narrowly referred to very high capacity use, in a job-lot plant with an extraordinary number of sources of operational complexities. This reference seems to suggest an orientation to internal efficiency rather than external effectiveness, and PP does aim for its own system goals of profit and growth. However, capacity use can better be interpreted as a proxy for sustained flows and short lead times, which are externally (service) oriented goals. (The metaphor is also used in ambulance work, Metz, 1981. There are a curious number of similarities between PP and the medical service.)

7. Churchill & Lewis (1986, pp. 339, 358) advocated the comparison of entrepreneurial case concepts with the body of "general management theory". In the parent study there are many such comparisons (e.g., with Mintzberg's theory of life cycles and power configurations. I argued that he insufficiently considered the role of entrepreneurial choice, and overstated the forces for bureaucratization.

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Table 9-2: An Entrepreneurial Power Configuration

RUNNING HOT (at PressinProd)	ENTREPRENEURSHIP
<p><u>Environment:</u> Tough external demands, and external dependence; but opportunity to bridge gaps in labor markets in env't of skills scarcity.</p>	<p>Opportunity structure (Glade, 1967) may seem poor, but gaps in markets are bridgeable (Barth, 1967).</p>
<p><u>Perception of environmental opportunity:</u> Metaphoric opportunity recognition: A "soccer team", "Running Hot". There is a chance for large market share increase as fewer firms can meet the demands.</p>	<p>Skills include knowledge of both "sides", foresight, and astute timing. Entre'p is opportunity-driven (as in Stevenson &amp; Gumpert, 1985, Mar.-Apr.), and</p>
<p><u>Opportunistic orientation to growth:</u> Success of approach: fast growth, high profitability,</p>	<p>seeks growth and profit, liberally defined.</p>
<p><u>Moral ambiguity:</u> enables win-win legitimation of customer constituency priority. However, moral ambiguities result from givenness of the mission, from employee dependence, and immigrant/refugee workforce:</p>	<p>This may mean disembedding, and moral ambiguity, but possibly embeddedness in an entrepreneurial culture (e.g., moral and tactical dimensions of ethnicity and kinship).</p>
<p><u>Mobilization and organizational activity:</u> Development of informal ILM, part of it embedded in entre'l cultures. Creation of Hot frame by ILM: Internalizing the standardization of skills for mutual accomm'n:</p>	<p>Possible creation of a frame for subculture or a following by the indebted of others.</p>
<p><u>without regard for pre-existing resources:</u> Social ties developed; not capital deployed (networking) Nonsegmentalism, helped by small size in work network. small size, organic structure Dev't of ILM parallels incremental add'ns to P&amp;E: just enough resources and skills externally acquired.</p>	<p>The network is holistic (see also Kanter, 1985). Deployment, not ownership: not resource-driven.</p>
<p><u>Growth with limited resources is therefore possible:</u> Employees are "above their heads"; are promoted from shop floor, and develop their own methods. They focus on customers and on everyday operations, and on action.</p>	<p>Opportunity-not-resource bias translates to being above heads &gt; growth. Entrepreneurship is thus an enactment, not role, which</p>
<p><u>Thus generating passion in ongoing activity:</u> Despite long hours and hard work, Running Hot becomes a game that generates interest, partly since it is their own game, And plant politics center on the competence to play the game (leading to individual-collective tensions). For these reasons the game is passionately played.</p>	<p>often means long, hard hours compensated by being admitted as a player into games that one accepts as one's own, partly due to the foils of culturally defined failure (e.g. Rubbish Men). For these reasons, games such as the Big Men game are passionately played.</p>