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Research practices in entrepreneurship

Problems of definition, description and meaning

Alistair R. Anderson and Marzena Starnawska

Abstract: *The dominant paradigm of entrepreneurship research practices, positivism, has brought about a fundamental paradox: researchers often try to analyse a phenomenon that cannot properly be defined. As a result, much entrepreneurship research is fragmentary and focuses narrowly on aspects of entrepreneurship. Nonetheless, there are very rich descriptive data on what people mean when they talk about 'enterprise'. The argument is developed that interpretative methodologies – new lenses for seeing entrepreneurship – such as social constructionism, are required to extend people's understanding. If the fragmentary positivistic approaches are imagined as pieces of a jigsaw, it can be seen how a social constructivist approach can provide an overview of how the pieces match, fit and come together. Following this way of thinking, the authors propose Giddens' s structuration as an orienting framework for these interpretative lenses.*

Keywords: *entrepreneurship research; positivism; interpretative methodologies; constructionism; Giddens' s structuration*

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This paper examines the nature of research practices in entrepreneurship and argues that the dominance of a positivistic paradigm may have resulted in fragmentary research that tends to look narrowly at aspects of entrepreneurship. We argue that part of this problem lies in the very richness, the diversity and the complexity of ways of being entrepreneurial. Entrepreneurship, in common with other unit ideas such as leadership, becomes an elusive concept. Thus, entrepreneurship has been described as an 'intellectual onion': when you start to peel it apart, you are left with nothing and come away in tears! Seen thus, entrepreneurship is broad and wide-ranging; the boundaries are fuzzy and may incorporate a number of disciplinary approaches. Bygrave (1989) made the same point, but cautioned that the discipline might be driven by borrowed theories and methods. This is problematic because (1989, p7) 'entrepreneurship begins with a disjointed, discontinuous, non-linear (and

usually unique) event that cannot be studied with methods developed for studying smooth, continuous and linear (and often repeatable) processes'. For us, this signals that fuzzy concepts such as entrepreneurship may not be entirely amenable to a positivistic approach. Consequently, we feel that the problem should also be of interest to researchers in other disciplines, because it serves as a source of examples of many *common difficulties* faced by researchers in general.

It has been suggested elsewhere (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Anderson, 2007) that one possible explanation lies in confusion about the most appropriate unit of analysis for developing explanatory theory. We often talk about entrepreneurship as the embodiment of those enterpris-

ing qualities and activities that we hold dear: change and development, so that we expect progress in the modernist sense, meaning that somehow tomorrow will be better than today. But entrepreneurship thus conceived is what Nisbet (1970) calls a very broad unit idea. It is both vague and elusive and at this level often defies definition. Yet the thematic power of the concept that embraces its capaciousness also masks its teleological qualities. This is why we so often hear the politicians appeal for more entrepreneurship: entrepreneurship appears as both a descriptor and an explanation. It presents a quasi-explanation and a demonstration, but drained of specificity and *a priori* true. This is an ideographic trap, which, as Bryman (1992, p 11) puts it, is 'a seductive but irritatingly intangible way of discussion'. Thus it appears that we need to define before we research a phenomenon. Bruyat and Julien (2001) arrive at a similar conclusion, suggesting that in the sense of Kuhn's (1970) paradigm, the community of researchers must share a view of what defines the paradigm.

However, we argue that this definitional issue is symptomatic rather than causal. Entrepreneurship, as severally conceived and broadly understood, is simply too broad to be constricted in a single, universal classification. An alternative is a broad, sweeping 'definition'; our own is 'the creation and extraction of value from an environment' (Anderson, 2000b), which, like other encompassing attempts, is so broad as to be almost undefined. It becomes less of a definition and more of a category of diverse behaviours. Where entrepreneurship researchers have developed their own specific definition, the results are studies, albeit useful, but only of very limited aspects of the phenomenon. Davidsson (2002) notes a paradox: if we limit research to something that can be defined by an outcome criterion, such as, say, a successful new business, we may miss some important parts of the process: for example, failure. For us, this definitional problem may be the result of starting at the wrong point. When a concept is fuzzy and open to varied interpretations, the whole notion of attempting to predetermine what is, or may be, involved – what should be counted, what aspects should be included, far less what is the dependent and what is the independent variable – seems to be the wrong order of things. The preliminary stage of entrepreneurial investigation can be argued to be to develop some appreciation of the phenomenon as a concept.

This is not a trivial problem because the notions of entrepreneurship, small business and innovation have gained so much purchase in both the academic literature and in policy that they seem to have gained a life of their own. Furthermore, as Grant and Perren (2002) have argued, the boundaries of entrepreneurship, as

practice or as a research domain, blur into one another. Styhre (2005) claims that entrepreneurship is becoming one of the key concepts in management thinking, and is thought to be capable of dealing with a variety of social and managerial problems. Indeed, Murphy *et al* (2006) argue, perhaps with some hyperbole, for the importance of entrepreneurship when they demonstrate that before entrepreneurship, from the fall of Rome until the eighteenth century, there was virtually no increase in per capita wealth generation. But after that period of stagnation, in the West per capita wealth generation rose by 20% in the 1700s; 200% in the 1800s and 740% in the 1900s. So entrepreneurship has clearly both contemporary and historical importance. However, when we turn to consider what is actually meant by entrepreneurship, we find that there is an enormous diversity in definitions and in the ways that people understand and use the notion of entrepreneurship (McElwee *et al*, 2006). In their review article, Low and MacMillan (1988) note six diverse research specifications while looking back on the contributions and drawbacks of entrepreneurship research. It could be argued that the different levels of analysis, purposes, focuses, theoretical perspectives and time approaches that have been employed in the contemporary field of entrepreneurship research so far, represent the struggle for grasping the entrepreneurship phenomenon. All these levels create many combinations, resulting in different research methods and a multiplication of narrow perspectives. This also creates the problem of many different sorts of research outcomes and makes it difficult to grasp the nature of entrepreneurship. Researchers operationalize it in very different ways, which are expressed in particular, but fragmentary, themes, aspects and subjects. The argument of this paper is that the diversity of ways of being entrepreneurial and the diversity of ways that people understand entrepreneurship (Anderson and Smith, 2007) call for a reassessment of how we conceptualize entrepreneurship.

The essence of this argument is that, as Bennett (2006), following Sexton and Bowman (1984), suggests, entrepreneurship means different things to different people. This implies that a universal definition may be impossible. Moreover, since the range of ways of being entrepreneurial is diverse and probably contingent on circumstances, there may not even be a possibility of an encompassing definition. Yet in contrast to the restrictions associated with defining it, we are very aware of the rich sources of how people *describe* entrepreneurship and what it means to them (Cope, 2005). These sources, narratives, myths, metaphors,

phenomenological enquiry and discourse (Ogbor, 2000) somehow seem to capture both the diversity of ways of being entrepreneurial and the underlying meanings (McElwee, 2008) about how entrepreneurship is enacted

(Fletcher, 2006). In this way, they reach beyond the narrow confines of definition and positivism; they help overcome the problems of diversity in entrepreneurship by tapping into what people mean by entrepreneurship. Our argument is that we should consider developing and using a social constructionist lens to engage with these rich data sources.

The research problematics and research practices

Murray Low (2001), reviewing progress in entrepreneurship research, proposed that the discipline should remain adolescent. He explains that we draw on a range of diverse disciplines and, following Gartner (1985), that these disciplines bring with them their own concepts and terms of reference, but that the boundaries of the entrepreneurship field remain vague. In contrast, Bruyat and Julien (2001) consider that the field is to a large extent formed, but nonetheless, despair that our boundaries are still fuzzy. In this way, we see that entrepreneurship has a plurality of topics and a diversity of disciplinary approaches. Indeed, Shane and Venkataraman (2000) describe it as a broad label under which a 'hodgepodge' is housed. In suggesting that tighter boundaries might make the domain of entrepreneurship more viable as a discipline in its own right, Busenitz *et al* (2003) conclude that entrepreneurship, as a domain, must develop its capability to probe interesting and important issues from a solid foundation of entrepreneurship theory. Low (2001, p 23) notes that entrepreneurship research remains so broad that 'it necessitates a multi-disciplinary, multi-method effort'.

But this multidisciplinary approach brings its own problems of specificity and one-dimensional views that do not seem to fit broadly conceived entrepreneurship. Schumpeter (1934, p 85), an economist, talks of entrepreneurs having 'the capacity of seeing things in a way which afterwards proves to be true, even if it cannot be established at the moment'. So one reason that entrepreneurship is so elusive to explain is that it is a transformative condition. When we talk of entrepreneurship, we treat it as a noun, an objective thing; when we talk of entrepreneurs, we treat them as in a state of being – *she is an entrepreneur*. Neither of these is a true or accurate account. Entrepreneurship is a process of creating, not a thing in itself. If pressed to reify it, it may be said to be a condition, a state of economic creativeness. For entrepreneurs, our habitual reification is doubly misleading. Being an entrepreneur is an ephem-

eral event: one can only *entreprendre* temporarily, when actually creating or changing a business. When we talk of entrepreneurship, we usually mean the process of becoming, thinking, planning, conspiring, doing the

things that may lead to entrepreneurship. In consequence, it seems reasonable to claim that entrepreneurship, as we use the term, is the performance of the process of becoming (Anderson, 2005). But becoming is not fixed in time or space: the aspiration may have germinated in childhood; the idea may have resulted from a fleeting thought, and gathering the physical, mental resources and courage may have taken half a lifetime. To appreciate entrepreneurship, we need to acclaim or criticize it as a processual performance (Anderson, 2005). So entrepreneurship as a performance of becoming is transitive, transitory and ephemeral.

Moreover, Johannisson (2002) points out how entrepreneurship is associated with anomalies and irrationality. As he comments, entrepreneurial venturing is reflected in the multiple social constructions in which individual and collective forces interplay. These constructs, our understandings of the phenomenon, are complex (Drakopoulou Dodd and Anderson, 2001); they are but a synthesis of the entrepreneurial self and circumstance (Anderson, 2000a), so for us, this use of a microscope, the fragmentation by discipline, by topic area and neglecting context and circumstance, is too atomistic. It denies us the opportunity to see a bigger, macroscopic picture of how the components may come together to form what we can know as entrepreneurship.

Having set out the problem in theory and in research practice, or at least as how we see the problematics, we now turn to offer some solutions. First, by looking at definitions and descriptions to make the argument that the conceptualizing of entrepreneurship is a better starting point than definition for studying entrepreneurship, we briefly examine how a concept is different from a definition to try to show how, in its abstraction, it is more general but conversely more precise in terms of meaning. This leads us to make the case for sometimes setting aside the functionalist approaches to entrepreneurship because they are too narrow, too restricting and may, because of this, actually miss the very notion of entrepreneurship. McElwee (2008, p 136) sees the same problem, but expresses it differently; he is interested in what is 'missing' in the transition from a farmer to an entrepreneur. To explain our argument, we briefly review some advances and changes in how the study of entrepreneurship has emerged. We thus argue for the benefits of an interpretative approach. Turning to examine some studies that have employed

interpretative lenses, we hope to demonstrate the value of such methods.

Definitions, descriptions and meanings

Cunningham and Lischeron (1991) note how the election of the appropriate basis for defining and

understanding the entrepreneurial person creates a challenging problem for academic researchers. There is thus generally no accepted definition or model of what the entrepreneur is or does. At one level, there does not seem to be a problem: we have a category of people who carry out specific functions, broadly labelled 'enterprise', so what they do can be labelled 'entrepreneurship'. The problem arises when we ask what precisely is this range of functions, because these are variously interpreted. Indeed, Parkinson and Howorth (2008) recently argued that the only consensus seems to be about what entrepreneurship is not: a static entity that is the preserve of elite individuals with special personality traits or characteristics. Instead, a multifaceted, dynamic understanding of entrepreneurship is emerging that presents challenges to research, breaks with functionalist positivism and calls for constant review of epistemological and ontological presumptions (Fletcher, 2006). Of course, it is possible to argue that this does not really matter. From a practical point of view, all we need to know is not what 'it is', but rather to know what it does and how it works. So we may thus please ourselves in defining or delimiting what it is that we are examining. Yet a primary requirement of most academic research is to define the subject being considered: we are entreated always to 'cover our flanks' with a definition; to fail to do so is academically reckless. It leaves our arguments open to criticisms of imprecision and looseness of thought. But in spite of this shibboleth, more than two decades of concentrated endeavour have failed to produce a universally acceptable definition of entrepreneurship.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Bygrave and Hofer (1991) stated that scholars had been unable to agree on the definition of 'entrepreneur'. They proposed a new focus on the nature and characteristics of entrepreneurial process, a much wider operationalization beyond who an entrepreneur was and what an entrepreneur did. Gartner (1989) listed 24 disparate definitions, which were characterized by diversity and variety, rather than by unity or agreement, and he had already claimed that there was no universal definition (1988). Morris (1998) provided 77 definitions of entrepreneurship. Davidsson (2003) confirmed this confusion, seeing three perspectives on entrepreneurship as a scholarly domain, societal phenomena and teaching the subject. Goss (1991, p 29) claimed that, 'It would be charitable to describe the approach of researchers to this problem as cavalier. The result is, on one hand, an almost total lack of consistency between definitions, and, on the other hand, an overwhelming reliance on arbitrary one dimensional concepts.' This may be necessary because of the variety of ways of being

entrepreneurial, but as Venkataraman (1997, p 120) put it, 'although numerous definitions have been offered from time to time, none have prevailed. Scholars have traditionally tried to define the field in terms of the "entrepreneur" or what the "entrepreneur does" and because there are fundamentally different conceptions and interpretations of the concept of entrepreneur and the entrepreneurial role, consensus on a definition of the field in terms of the entrepreneur is perhaps an impossibility.' Perhaps most worrying from a research practice perspective (Grant and Perren, 2002) is that most researchers are too busy with the practical issues, and often obscure the assumptions and values that are smuggled into the process (Gartner, 2001; Cope, 2005; McElwee, 2008).

Defining entrepreneurship is, however, difficult for a number of reasons. As discussed earlier, Johannisson (2002) points out how entrepreneurship is associated with anomalies and irrationality – thus we might expect it to arise in unanticipated ways and in unexpected places. Furthermore, from some perspectives, what entrepreneurs do does not always follow an entirely rational path. But such apparent irrationality presents almost an antithesis of definition. Loasby (2005) puts this rather well, citing David Hume and dismissing rationality in entrepreneurship, stating that no kind of reasoning can give rise to a new idea! In trying to deal with these issues, Gartner's (1985) seminal paper, which contributed greatly to the shift in entrepreneurial conceptualizing away from the individual, proposed a processual framework for describing the phenomenon of new venture creation. This combined four elements: the individual, the organization that he or she creates, the environment that he or she operates in and the process by which the venture is created. These broader, non- or less functionalist approaches seem to be able to capture what Styhre (2005) describes as the entrepreneurial self, as established in an ambiguous and inherently fluid, yet fixed, subject position. 'Thus the imaginary and the symbolic of the entrepreneurial subject becomes one of the axial imaginaries of management thinking.' (2005, p 170)

We are making the argument that entrepreneurship research is not well suited to a deductive approach: context, contingency, irrationality, flexibility, opportunism and even luck play too great a role in enterprise. Thus it may be less appropriate to try to grasp the phenomenon by deduction alone and it may be more profitable to employ an inductive lens. Moving to more recent work that attempts to capture the richness of entrepreneurial description by inductive methods, some recent work (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005) explored

how the 'serious' press portrayed entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs were described as heroes, saviours, warriors, sometimes eulogizing, often praising, but sometimes more cautious, yet always bringing out the richness of

meaning that could be associated with being enterprising. Atherton (2004) explained how media presentations communicated values to show aspects of entrepreneurship as a state – what he called being an entrepreneur, and behavioural aspects – being entrepreneurial. Rae (2000) worked within a social constructionist paradigm and used a narrative methodology, which he described as aiming to understand entrepreneurial practices in a cultural context through the use of language, narrative and discourse. In so doing, he made a conscious move away from the entitative approach, which seeks to define, measure and categorize entrepreneurial activity, and towards an interpretive approach to social enquiry, which aims to generate insight and understanding and useful rather than definitive theory. Another good example of this approach is Down's work (2006), in which he shows how narratives about identity help shape what it means to be entrepreneurial.

What we recognize in these alternative approaches is a shift from defining to new ways of conceiving. But of course, describing, conceptualizing and defining are not the same thing. In describing something, we talk about its qualities. For example, Hjorth and Steyaert (2003) describe entrepreneurship as the tactical invention of new practices that change styles of living. Whilst this description allows us to visualize splendidly the scale and scope of enterprise, it fails to tell us with any precision what it is that entrepreneurs actually do. In trying to tap into this aspect, we have also recently seen an expansion of entrepreneurial studies that employ and analyse metaphors; and a metaphor is precisely a description. A metaphor describes something unfamiliar in terms of something that is familiar: in this way, it draws out critical qualities of the phenomenon being considered. Metaphors play an important processual role in how we think and learn about phenomena. Of all the entrepreneurial descriptors, metaphor is the most vivid: in explaining one thing in terms of another, attributes are produced and expectations developed (de Koning and Drakopoulou-Dodd, 2002). This sense-making role is particularly important for entrepreneurship because of the inherent problems of defining entrepreneurship. We can detect some distinctive themes in these alternative interpretative paradigms. Entrepreneurial identity, as an example, seems to be important (Warren, 2004) at two different levels: first, regarding the generalized entrepreneurial identity – what it means to be considered as an entrepreneur; how entrepreneurs, their roles and their attributes are synthesized into the public conception of

entrepreneurs. Here, metaphor and myth may conjoin to build up a picture of what it means to be an entrepreneur. These data can reveal the objective qualities that are ascribed to that group of people who are deemed to be entrepreneurial. This may be seen as a sense-making

aspect (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2001). Second, the subjective identity that is created by the entrepreneurs themselves is important: the unique and idiosyncratic production by which we can tell entrepreneurs from other entrepreneurs; and the identification of self. Moreover, in recognizing how they achieve this, we can also begin to understand how entrepreneurs create frames of meaning for themselves (Warren and Anderson, 2006), the sense-giving aspect. Particularly useful insights are generated about the nature and process of becoming an entrepreneur in this type of work. Moreover, in comparing these two aspects of entrepreneurial identity, we can begin to understand how culture impacts on entrepreneurial activity.

In recent years, entrepreneurship theory has also taken a processual turn. By that, we mean that we have come to recognize that entrepreneurship is a process activity and that to understand it, we need understand the process over time. In this way, precursors such as cognition can be seen to shape process. The process itself also involves others, so aspects such as networking, social capital and interaction in general can be seen as part of the process (Jack *et al*, 2008). Then we can see more clearly how and why entrepreneurial outcomes are achieved. Employing a social constructionist lens has advantages in understanding this process of concept formation because it highlights the need to understand lived experiences in their social and cultural context (Berger and Luckman, 1966). In other words, it allows us to go beyond the immediate, to reach out and see context, contingency and, importantly, the socio-economic setting. This is useful in developing rich concepts because for authors such as Goss (2005), entrepreneurship is a social function, and Steyaert and Katz (2004) believe it should be studied as a social phenomenon. Gergen (1985) proposed that social constructionism explicated the processes involved in people understanding and explaining the world in which they lived. Indeed, Steyaert (2003) has said that entrepreneurship is the creation of a living world. Chell and Pittaway (1998) describe the way that we develop a set of personal 'labels' to give us meanings and thus, as Martin and Sugerman (1996) explain, we accumulate symbolic and relational tools. Indeed, for entrepreneurship, Goss (2005, p 215) talks about 'drawing others in' to create

the momentum necessary for new combinations to become embedded in social practices. Citing Schumpeter (1934, p 91), he notes, 'wants must be taken with reference to the group which the individual thinks of in his course of action'. Goss's reading of Schumpeter leads him to conclude that it is the social process of doing and influencing others that constitutes entrepreneurial leadership. Johannisson (2002) puts it more boldly: for him, entrepreneurship is where the interplay of internal and external forces creates a future.

Thus, given that entrepreneurship has a transformative quality (Hjorth, Johanssen and Svengren, 2004), Fletcher (2003) and Johannisson (1990) have all shown how entrepreneurs create new products in relationships with others – teams, networks and communities – we may also have to consider that opportunities, as part of the entrepreneurial effort, may be entrepreneurially constructed using signs and symbols as relational artefacts that can be experienced in the narratives that communicate entrepreneurship. Narratives (Sarbin and Kitsuse, 1994) are shaped and reflected by the narrator's perspectives in using language symbolically (Hoskin and Green, 1999). Downing (2005) shows how narratives co-produce the identity of the self and the organization. Thorpe *et al* (2006) see entrepreneurial opportunities not just as a matter of personal insight, but as judgments coupled with an individual's cumulative experience and his or her communities through language. Accordingly, we propose that such theoretical lenses as social constructionism, engaging as sociorelational and exploratory language and narratives, allow us to examine the power of entrepreneurial agency and perceptual construction at both an individual level and within the fullness of the social context. Seen through the social constructionist lens, entrepreneurship is not a 'thing'; it is a way of being. It is shaped by context; it is processual; it often exists at the boundaries, is usually at the confluence of many factors, and projects into the future.

This call for a broader approach for understanding, rather than the narrow focus in trying to measure entrepreneurship, has not gone unheeded. Another fine example is Cope's (2005) strong case for a phenomenological appreciation of entrepreneurship. He argues that phenomenological inquiry can help in dealing with the subjective 'lived experience', by exploring what people experience and how it is that they experience it. Underlying this view is the notion of capturing the process of interpretation and thus capturing meaning. As researchers, we can easily see how this lens of interpretation allows us to glimpse, if not capture, the meaning for respondents – the contents and perhaps most significantly how these combine in the

entrepreneurial process. It is worth noting how we as researchers are also part of the world that is constructed (McElwee, 2008). Fragments become melded; circumstances become context; singularities flow into events so that the interplay becomes process, and all blend and dissolve into what Gartner and Birley (2002) call the coherent story of the nature of entrepreneurship as it is experienced.

What these interpretative studies attempt is to describe the meanings – social, individual and processual – that underpin entrepreneurship. By tapping into meanings, we can begin to appreciate, even develop a meaningful concept of what is understood to signify entrepreneurship. We can avoid some of the pitfalls that lie in the veritable confusions of diverse or fragmented definitions. This is because defining, in contrast, is much more restrictive: by defining, we are engaged in limiting the phenomenon under investigation. More open and qualitative approaches are more likely to reach into exploring the things that we do not yet know and, importantly, the things that we want and need to know about entrepreneurship. Thus, even if we can identify the key variables in entrepreneurship (and this itself is very problematic), we are unlikely to be able to generalize beyond specific instances without a broader conceptualization. Hjorth (2004) suggests that entrepreneurship studies are influenced by management theories in that the problematization of concepts is rare. Gibb (1987) also proposed that the lack of clarity regarding the entrepreneurial concept had damaging consequences. For us, the issue is that all functionalist approaches are rooted in positivism and all positivistic approaches are themselves rooted in significant ontological and epistemological assumptions about the nature of knowledge and how we can acquire such knowledge. Briefly, positivism assumes that there is an objective reality out there, and that this objective reality is governed by 'natural rules'. The role of the researcher is simply to discover these rules systematically. Yet as we have seen, what people mean when they talk about entrepreneurship and what people do when they enact it, seem to contradict this way of seeing the world. For example, entrepreneurship need not follow conventional 'rational' lines: for instance, Schumpeter's 'creative destructor' requires the replacement of a current reality with an imagined future. This is neither rational nor rule-following. Similarly, Keynes (1936, p 161) recognized the role of what he called 'animal spirits'. He claimed that investment decisions were not grounded in reason, but were irrational and subject to irrational forces, and not as the outcome of a weighted average of quantitative benefits multiplied by quantitative probabilities. As Shackle puts it, the entrepreneur creates opportunity

Research practices in entrepreneurship

from his imagination (1979, p 26), 'the creation of his own thought'. In these several ways, the unconventional, the unexpected and the unanticipated emerge as an entrepreneurial platform to create the future of tomorrow.

But positivism requires that, *a priori*, we must define what we are going to study, we must first understand the research problem, delineate it as a research question and then operationalize it as a series of questions designed to measure the existence, extent or scope of the phenomenon under study. This seems a difficult, perhaps even

perverse, way to approach a topic that we know we cannot define very well. As Cunningham and Lischeron (1991) have noted, the entrepreneurial literature abounds with definitional criteria ranging from creativity and innovation to personal traits such as appearance and style. It is thus unsurprising that positivistic research findings are often characterized by presenting only fragmented aspects of entrepreneurship – most vivid of which is the enduring fascination with entrepreneurial personality traits. From a positivistic perspective, the role of research is to search for regularities; in comparison, the role of subjective research is to describe and understand. Most entrepreneurship research is done within a positivistic ideology (Grant and Perren, 2002). We seek averages and typical processes, but entrepreneurship is usually atypical, a departure from norms. It is discontinuous, non-linear and usually unique (Bygrave, 1989). Moreover, when we explore the attempts made to understand entrepreneurship through particular disciplines, such as economics or psychology, we find huge gaps. Schumpeter (1934, p 76) puts it well, discussing equilibrium, ‘for the entrepreneur ... he has no function of a special kind, he simply does not exist’. In turn, Casson (2003) points out why there is no economic theory of the entrepreneur: it is because of the extreme assumptions of the functionalist paradigm – first, that everyone has free access to all the required information; second, that economic laws refer to aggregates. As Baumol (1983, p 30) succinctly notes, ‘how can one analyze or teach acts whose nature is not yet known and whose effectiveness relies to a considerable degree on the difficulty others have in foreseeing them?’ The argument developed here is that this is not simply a methodological lapse, but is a product of the width, utility and convenience of the concept. It may also reflect the diversity that is the essential nature of entrepreneurship.

At the very least, to develop a sound conceptualization, we need to be able to combine context and action. We need a theoretical orientation that broadens our unit of understanding, so that studies, whether theoretical or empirical, are grounded in a shared understanding. Thus we propose that an organizing theory, such as structuration, is needed to take account of both agent and structure. Structuration is a useful theoretical framework for viewing entrepreneurship as a field of research and as a societal phenomenon. Structuration (Giddens, 1984) shows how agents are not atomistic, but operate in a structure, and thus leads us to appreciate aspects other than the individualistic focus in entrepreneurship research. As

Zimmer and Aldrich (1987) suggest, economic behaviour, especially entrepreneurial behaviour, does not occur in a vacuum, but is embedded in a social context (Gartner, 1985). That is

why entrepreneurship is a highly contextual phenomenon. The context is not an abstract surrounding but a concrete environment (Hjorth and Johannisson, 1997). As mentioned before, an agency profile, a focus on entrepreneurial traits, is too incomplete for discussing the phenomenon. Entrepreneurship is situationally not just psychologically determined, and it is an even more challenging task to try to conceptualize and categorize situations themselves. Yet we follow Herron and Sapienza’s (1992) argument that no coming together of situational variables can create an entrepreneurial event if an individual is not considered. The view that the entrepreneur and his/her context must come together suggests that entrepreneurship might be created within certain circumstances. For example, it could be learnt, inherited within a family business (Bloodgood, Sapienza and Carsrud, 1995) or it could be an outcome of an industrial trust milieu. Thus structure and agency combine entrepreneurially.

An agent (individual or collective) uses and recreates his or her context and is also influenced by it. The recurring interactions between the agent and structure (rules and resources), their coming together, allow us to accept that the structure in which entrepreneurs operate is continually changing and acquiring a new meaning. In this sense, it is dynamic and therefore difficult to grasp. Giddens defines the structure as comprising both resources and rules. These two are exploited by interacting individuals (Giddens, 1984). Resources help actors (entrepreneurs) in their activity. These may be tangible (resources) or intangible ones (eg skills, know-how, know-who). They represent a variety of circumstances (variety in terms of diversity and interpretation) leading to a variety of outcomes. Another important part of the structure is constituted by rules. Rules comprise written and unwritten institutions of making things work, and accepting this point lets us see how such a broad phenomenon as entrepreneurship is likely to emerge in a variety of environments (Jack and Anderson, 2002). This provides us with an understanding that entrepreneurship research might produce different results if approached by using different criteria for agents, taking different units of analysis or even time frames. Each agent not only acts upon his or her context in a specific manner, but also transforms the context, ie rules and resources, giving the structure a new meaning, which may be interpreted and presented in a different way. Moreover, behavioural

Research practices in entrepreneurship

approaches to entrepreneurship fit well into the structuration framework, because they acknowledge cognition. Such theories shift us away from an overly positivistic way of thinking about entrepreneurship because they assume that individuals do not have a perfect knowledge of the world around them, so they have to select information and interpret it,

and see the world in a different way (Taylor, 1998). A structuration approach enables us to understand entrepreneurship as an interactional phenomenon, showing how an entrepreneur (agent) interacts with a structure (context), reshaping the structure and at the same time being influenced by its diversity (resources and rules). As a framing or orienting theory, it has much to offer in capturing the dynamics of context, contingency and the entrepreneurial agent in process.

Conclusions

At one level, our argument is theoretical, ie that we need a richer, fuller conceptualization on which to base our empirical studies. But it also has, we believe, important implications for research practices. Grant and Perren (2002), Cope (2005), Gan *et al* (2004) and McElwee and Atherton (2005) have all noted how the gatekeepers of entrepreneurial research, the editors and reviewers of journals all seem to favour a positivistic approach. Gan *et al* (2004) showed how over 66% of all published articles in prestigious entrepreneurship journals employed a positivistic approach. These gatekeepers, perhaps relying on the well accepted and established nature of positivistic studies, have the ability to influence not only what is published, but what is researched and how it is researched. Thus they can determine the paradigm of what is deemed acceptable research practice. But if they rely too much upon the tried and tested, and if this tried and tested paradigm does not seem to be progressive, perhaps it may be time to review our research paradigm?

We have tried to make a case for a broader approach in the research practices of entrepreneurship. In essence, we have argued that positivism produces too narrow a perspective. Dealing only with attributes, characteristics and elements that are sufficiently tangible to be operationalized and measured has resulted in a fragmentation of what we know about entrepreneurship. Positivism necessarily creates a one-dimensional view, which is atomistic and consequently loses much of the richness and idiosyncrasy that characterizes the more comprehensive picture of what we mean by entrepreneurship. This is not to say that positivism has not produced meaningful advances in formalizing our knowledge of enterprise. On the contrary, the scientific method, as in all sciences, has produced robust knowledge about aspects of being enterprising. Our plea is that we also need a robust, complementary, parallel, interpretative approach – one that is capable of synthesizing knowledge, of joining the myriad dots that comprise entrepreneurship, and of presenting the

big picture, the framework into which the pieces of the jigsaw fit.

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