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Sharon A. Alvarez (alvarez\_42@fisher.osu.edu)  
The Ohio State University

Jay B. Barney (jay.barney@business.utah.edu)  
University of Utah

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## A Narrative Perspective on Entrepreneurial Opportunities

There continues to be considerable interest in entrepreneurial processes, as evidenced in re-

cent reflection pieces in *AMR* (Shane, 2012; Venkataraman, Sarasvathy, Dew, & Forster, 2012). Of particular interest are questions about the sources of entrepreneurial opportunities. For instance, are entrepreneurial opportunities a result of a process of discovery or one of creation? Should we locate agency in specific individuals, or should we conceptualize entrepreneurs as part of a larger process where agency is distributed and emergent?

To address these questions, Shane (2012) distinguishes between “opportunities” and “business ideas” to account for both entrepreneurial failures and successes and to advance a notion of entrepreneurial agency emerging at the nexus of individuals and opportunities. Opportunities, for Shane, are objectively given, ones that individuals can seize by generating business ideas that are interpretations “of how to recombine resources in a way that allows pursuit of that opportunity” (Shane, 2012: 15). Venkataraman et al. (2012) take a different route, embracing Simon’s (1996) sciences of the artificial. Building on Davidson’s (2001) “tripod” consisting of interactions among objective, subjective, and intersubjective, the authors conceptualize entrepreneurial opportunities as being both “made” and “found” in and through such interactions.

We are sympathetic to the progressive shift in the conceptualization of entrepreneurial agency—from one that considers it to be located in specific individuals to one that considers it to be an outcome of an ecology of interactions between humans and artifacts. Yet there are unaddressed issues pertaining to the location of boundaries that are germane to entrepreneurial opportunities. Boundaries, after all, are not given but, rather, a key ontological variable constituting entrepreneurial agency.

As a way to address this issue and add to this dialogue, we propose a “narrative perspective” that is informed by actor-network theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 2005). Such a perspective subscribes to a relational ontology, one where what is “in” and what is “out” is not given but instead emerges in and through actions and interactions (Garud, Kumaraswamy, & Karnøe, 2010). An additional advantage of taking a narrative perspective is that it endogenizes time (Garud & Gehman, 2012), thereby allowing one to examine issues around temporal agency, a facet that Venkataraman et al. (2012) allude to in their re-

view but leave unexplored. Finally, a narrative perspective emphasizes “meaning making” (e.g., Bruner, 1990) as a core driver of the process and provides yet another vantage point on the nature and scope of entrepreneurial opportunities and agency.

### NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

We use the term *narrative perspective* to suggest a certain stance toward entrepreneurial agency germane to the issue of discovery and creation. Specifically, a narrative perspective considers agency as an emergent property of relational processes involving ongoing associations between humans and artifacts. Moreover, a narrative perspective considers the past, present, and future to be intertwined. And it is in the interaction between relational space and durational time that meaning making occurs. We briefly explicate such a perspective to suggest that entrepreneurial agency is distributed and emergent, as are entrepreneurial opportunities, and that both discovery and creation are involved in dynamic ways as an entrepreneurial journey unfolds.

### Relational Approach to Opportunities

A way to appreciate the value of a narrative perspective on opportunities is to contrast it with the positions offered by the “discovery” and “creation” perspectives (Alvarez & Barney, 2007). From a discovery perspective, opportunities are exogenously given (Shane, 2012), which alert individuals can seize (Kirzner, 1997). That is, there is a “context” out there that entrepreneurs tap into. In contrast, from a creation perspective, opportunities are endogenously generated through processes such as creative imagination (Lachmann, 1986) and effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001). That is, there is a “subtext” of creative energy that is the wellspring of entrepreneurial opportunities.

Both positions are important. Entrepreneurial aspirations (subtexts) are articulated within cultural contexts, and it is the combination of the two—subtexts and contexts—that generates the “texts” manifested in the form of entrepreneurial narratives (Bartel & Garud, 2003; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). However, in contrast to the discovery and creation perspectives, rather than treat the context as given or give primacy to the sub-

text as the source of opportunities, the narrative perspective views all three—text, context, and subtext—as constituent elements of distributed yet emergent agency. Context matters as it provides the basis for the subtext (the generative forces for action) to operate, which, in turn, produces new text—that is, the specific manifestation of an entrepreneurial journey (Bartel & Garud, 2003). And as the process unfolds, all three—text, subtext, and context—are transformed in dynamic ways.

Consequently, instead of conceptualizing agency as residing at different “levels,” the narrative perspective embraces a flat ontology (Latour, 2005). Actors are a part of an ecology of interactions between social and material elements (Callon, 1986) that forms the basis for entrepreneurial narratives. These narratives serve as the basis for (1) the constitution of identities (Czarniawska, 1997), (2) the coordination of activities with others (Garud & Gehman, 2012), (3) the creative imagination of a future that has yet to emerge (Brown, Rappert, Adam, & Webster, 2000), and (4) sensemaking of what has transpired (Weick, 1995). Viewed from such a relational ontology, opportunity spaces emerge as social and material elements become entangled (and disentangled), thereby dynamically enabling and constraining the agentic orientations and possibilities of those involved (Garud et al., 2010).

A consideration of relationality reinforces the fact that opportunities emerge through a recombination of social and material elements. Many scholars have established this proposition—in economics (e.g., Schumpeter [1942], who drew attention to “recombination”), psychology (e.g., Koestler [1964], who introduced the notion of “bisociation”), sociology (e.g., Hargadon [2003], who established the importance of “brokers”), entrepreneurship (e.g., Baker, Miner, & Eesley [2003] and Garud & Karnøe [2003], who explored processes such as “bricolage” and “improvisation”), and the social studies of science (e.g., Callon [1986] and Latour [2005], who offered the notion of “translation”). This recombination proposition suggests that any act of creation is simultaneously an act of discovery, and vice versa. We discover existing ideas to create others. Or, symmetrically, we creatively imagine new ideas, leading to a discovery of what is possible.

### Temporal Approach to Opportunities

Yet another way of reconciling discovery with creation is to endogenize the notion of time. As a starting point, it is important to note that entrepreneurial narratives extend over a period of time (Schumpeter, 1942). That is, besides speculating about what is happening at any given moment in time (Boje, 2008), entrepreneurial narratives make it possible for actors to look back into the past to make sense of what transpired (Weick, 1995) and reach into the future to project what the venture would like to accomplish (van Lente, 2000).

Such temporal "distention" (Ricoeur, 1984) holds several implications for the notion of opportunities. First, no new idea emerges full-blown and ready for implementation. It requires time and effort to take any idea from conception to reality, and the process is never linear. There are false starts and dead ends, ups and downs, and "backing and forthing" as an entrepreneurial journey unfolds (Garud & Gehman, 2012; Van de Ven, Polley, Garud, & Venkataraman, 1999). Such nonlinear dynamics are not necessarily detrimental, to the extent that entrepreneurs live in the "thick of time" (Garud & Gehman, 2012)—that is, they cultivate a temporal orientation that at any moment allows them to look forward and backward in time to generate "options value" from initiatives. Specifically, entrepreneurs who cultivate a broader temporal perspective can generate assets in real time for the future and can then go back to these assets (even those that were abandoned) as and when they become valuable. As is evident, both discovery and creation are involved.

Second, an ability to go back and forth derives from a perspective on time that is not readily evident in the vernacular use of the term *narrative*. Instead of confining us to a chronological view, Ricoeur (1984) suggests that a narrative implicates a different notion of time, one where the past, present, and future are intertwined. Specifically, attention in the present is forged by recollections of the past and anticipations of the future. From such a perspective, the creative imagination of entrepreneurs about the future shapes what facets of the past they choose to "discover" and mobilize (Garud et al., 2010). Symmetrically, the reverse is also true. How an entrepreneur looks at the past may change the nature of the opportunities that he or she con-

ceptualizes unfolding into the future. Embracing such a perspective on time further blurs the distinction between discovery and creation.

### Meaning Making and Opportunities

The interaction between the relational and temporal dimensions of narratives generates meaning—as, for instance, in the infusion of a "pet rock" with value. Such meaning making contrasts with information processing associated with the discovery perspective, or *ex nihilo* imagination associated with the creation school. Instead, meaning making involves the definition of an opportunity as entrepreneurs "plot" sets of social and material elements from the past, present, and future into a comprehensible narrative. As Gabriel notes, "Story-work involves the transformation of everyday experience into meaningful stories. In doing so, the storytellers neither accept nor reject 'reality.' Instead they seek to mould it, shape it, and infuse it with meaning" (2000: 41).

Moreover, as we discussed earlier, meaning making is not objectively given or subjectively constructed but, rather, part of an ongoing relational process. It emerges in and through interactions between actors and artifacts that become entangled with one another. Actors who become involved have their own narratives to offer, depending upon their recollections of past experiences and their future aspirations. They each try to shape unfolding processes, in particular directions by framing a venture from their own vantage points. Ventures and opportunities sit at the intersection of such distributed efforts, and it is in the interactions between the different frames that a venture progresses over time.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, a narrative perspective suggests that discovery and creation are both part of entrepreneurial opportunities. It also suggests that entrepreneurial journeys are dynamic processes requiring continual adjustments by actors. Entrepreneurial agency is evident in the distributed efforts of involved actors to navigate such unfolding processes, who narrate and renarrate their journeys given the possibilities that emerge, the futures they can conceptualize, and the pasts that they recollect.

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Raghu Garud (rgarud@psu.edu)  
 Pennsylvania State University

Antonio Paco Giuliani (agiulia2@uic.edu)  
 University of Illinois at Chicago

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## Response to the Commentaries: The Individual-Opportunity (IO) Nexus Integrates Objective and Subjective Aspects of Entrepreneurship

Shane's 2012 article, "Reflections on the 2010 AMR Decade Award: Delivering on the Promise of Entrepreneurship As a Field of Research," was a reflection on the field of entrepreneurship in the decade following the publication of Shane and Venkataraman's 2000 article, "The Promise of Entrepreneurship As a Field of Research." This retrospective has stimulated the dialogue commentaries by Alvarez and Barney (2013) and Garud and Giuliani (2013). Collectively, the two

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