

EDITORIAL

Challenging the myths of entrepreneurship?

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Entrepreneurship studies started out as a young field, one where a mix of economists, psychologists, geographers and the occasional anthropologist came together to study the wonder and weirdness that is entrepreneurship, in a wide range of fashions and with few a priori assumptions to hold it back. Today, some of this eclecticism lives on in the field, but at the same time we have seen that the field has matured and its popularity has led to the field becoming increasingly institutionalized – and thereby beset by an increasing number of assumptions, even myths. Consequently, this special issue queries some of the assumptions and potential myths that flourish in the field, inquiring critically into the constitution of entrepreneurship as a field of research – all in order to develop the same. Without occasions where a field can question even its most deeply held beliefs, we are at risk of becoming ideologically rather than analytically constituted, which is why we in this special issue wanted to create a space for the kind of critical yet creative play that e.g. Sarasvathy (2004) has encourages the field to engage with.

Keywords: entrepreneurship studies; myths; critique; assumptions

Introduction

There was a time, once upon a time, when entrepreneurship could be referred to as a ‘young’ discipline, an open and inquisitive field with few boundaries to hinder inquiry. There was a time, once, when the field might have best been described with terms such as ‘developing’, ‘emerging’ and ‘promising’. Such terms all lay claim to a state of being where traditionalism, dogmatism and conservative thought have not yet managed to establish themselves, and these kinds of notions are often central in establishing the identity and self-image of a field, which is why many a field rally around them. The question is whether such claims still hold true for the field of entrepreneurship studies? Where Shane and Venkatamaran (2000) famously laid out the promise of the field, we might today start asking about the way in which even a promising young mind can become set in its ways, and what happens when a field is no longer emerging but quite established.

The issue that we here wish to explore is not the potential of the field of entrepreneurship, rich as this might be, but the assumptions that the same is holding to. As Kuhn (1962) so adroitly showed and Polanyi (1944) so elegantly argued, every scientific field will become enamored with a set of assumptions about the phenomena it focuses on – a setting of the ways or an establishing of paradigms. Partly this is natural, as a science needs a foundation to build upon, but such foundations can also be a hindrance, blinding the field to alternatives and new paths. It does not take much in the way of argument to

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state that this goes for entrepreneurship studies as well. In this field, we are continuously seeing a number of claims presented as absolute fact, and at times these claims seem to have become so accepted that they become tenets of an ideology rather than tenets of science (cf. Rehn 2008). This happens not because the field wishes to limit itself, but rather because scholars tend to become invested in specific claims about the world, specific assumptions held to be universally true. We have currently seen this play out in a dramatic fashion in economics, where universal truths once espoused by neo-classicists have come under ever-increasing scrutiny. The interesting notion, however, is not whether some economist or other was wrong or right, but the process through which an assumption is elevated to the level of universal truth.

We have at times referred to this as the ‘first line’-problem, referring to the practice of opening a paper with a claim that is seen as unproblematically true and thus supporting the arguments that follow. Such opening gambits are common within the social sciences as a kind of scene-setting apparatus, and the reader is often supposed to agree with them without pondering them all that much. This is of course how an assumption solidifies into fact, and it is also the manner in which myths are created. Because by making a supposedly self-evident statement over and over one can – over time – establish it as being so foundational to the field that questioning the same becomes tantamount to questioning the field itself, not to mention questioning those established within it. As a result, the ‘first lines’, those opening gambits that do not so much set a scene as they pledge allegiance to a field.

‘Entrepreneurship has been identified as a key driver of economic growth.’

‘High growth entrepreneurship is one of the most central issues for a healthy economy.’

‘Social entrepreneurs make significant and diverse contributions to their communities and societies.’

‘Minority entrepreneurs adopt an identity that is formed by their specific minority status.’

Statements such as these can highlight both the assumptions that a field holds on to and, further, the reaction (or, more precisely, non-reaction) we have to them is telling, as it indicates what has become established as dogma in the field. However, for any scientific field to progress, it is important that it is able to look at even its most valued assumptions and subject these to critical scrutiny. This is the impetus of this special issue.

We have entitled this special issue ‘The Myths of Entrepreneurship?’ in order to encourage prospective authors to look with a critical eye on the assumptions and potential myths that flourish in the field. The strive here is not to trash or criticize entrepreneurship studies as a field, but rather to examine its foundations – in order to strengthen the same. As any field of inquiry will be marked by politics and the desire for legitimacy – i.e. agreeing with the powers that be – there is always a risk that a field will gravitate towards a set of dogmas, and this special issue strives to be a space where researchers in entrepreneurship can voice their dissent and be free to criticize even the most hallowed beliefs of the field. In other words, we are calling for contributions that take on the ‘myths’ of entrepreneurship – regardless of which these are. Where Shane (2008) wanted to highlight *Illusions of Entrepreneurship*, this issue wants to go further and inquire critically into the constitution of entrepreneurship as a field of research – in order to develop the same. To put it somewhat differently, Sarasvathy (2004) addressed this by encouraging us to engage in ‘creative play’ as to the questions we ask, and we here wish to extend this to a creative engagement with the assumptions such questions are built on.

Myths, what myths?

It would be quite impossible to isolate and model all the potential ways in which myths can emerge in a field such as entrepreneurship studies; so any attempt at creating a framework will be a tentative one. This said, there are some issues that can guide us in this, some questions to start from, and here we might be helped by that classic advice on the art of writing journalism: ‘*Who, what, when, where, why and how?*’ In other words, myths may evolve around ‘Who?’, i.e. the character (or group of characters) that are engaged in entrepreneurship, and around ‘What?’, i.e. the kinds of actions that we opt to refer to as being entrepreneurial. In addition, we may have myths developing around the ‘When?’ of entrepreneurship, i.e. the temporal context of the same, and around the ‘Where?’, i.e. the assumptions surrounding the regional and geographical context(s) of, for example, start-ups. That the ‘How?’ of entrepreneurship is mythologized should be obvious to anyone who has picked up any one of the plethora of business books that claim to hold the secret of entrepreneurship and the one true way of how to engage with the same.

This, however, does not even begin to cover all the bases. As entrepreneurship is not necessarily tied to solitary individuals, we must also consider myths regarding teams in entrepreneurial ventures, the entrepreneurial organization as a whole and the institutional context within which this is placed – both on a micro-, meso- and macro-level. To this latter level comes the issue of things such as the ‘triple helix’, not to mention the field of economic policy. The mythologizing in this latter field has obviously been discussed in detail both in the literature and in public discourse, but there should still be fertile grounds for more questioning of entrenched assumptions.

If there is one type of potential myth that both define the field and highlights the problem of the same, it is the question of what effects entrepreneurship engenders in the environment it exists in. The assumptions should be well-known to everybody, including those who have only a passing interest in the subject: entrepreneurship is assumed to be a powerful force of good in society, generating value, stimulating the economy, driving technological and societal progress, and creating jobs in the process. Questioning any one of these may seem either like the worst kind of scholastics or as proof positive that the questioner is suffering from as-of-yet undiagnosed issues. At the same time, these kinds of meta-assumptions – assumptions that position the field in a wider economic and political context – in a manner of speaking actually define the concept more acutely than its internal definition does.

For could we even talk sensibly about entrepreneurship if it was not a stimulant for the economy, if it did not drive progress and if it was not the creator of value and jobs? These are not merely assumptions; they represent definitional statements without which our entire understanding of what entrepreneurship is would risk becoming meaningless. In this sense, entrepreneurship may never be able to be fully disengaged from some such assumptions, as what we would be left with is a concept so alien to the contemporary understanding of it as to be something wholly other. Or?

The fact is that the modern fascination with issues such as intrapreneurship and social entrepreneurship (to mention only two variations) highlights a move away from certain of these meta-assumptions – at least those with a hard emphasis on profits and the market economy. This move has thus done much to give us a broader, less assumption-bound perspective on entrepreneurship, but also highlights yet another issue with the mythologization of concepts. Entrepreneurship is, as we have tried to show, a concept that has gone through many changes, developed greatly during the last 50 odd years, and achieved an exceptionally important place both in contemporary academia and in modern

public discourse. Thus, we should not be surprised as many in the field are hard at work extending the usage of the concept into new fields, or that the powers and dynamics that are seen as constitutional for entrepreneurship are seen as solutions to an ever-widening series of problems.

Challenging myths might seem to be part and parcel of these kinds of moves, but herein lies an additional complexity. As myths are challenged, and through this the field of entrepreneurship is extended into more and more fields, there is a risk that we are also emptying out the concept, watering it down by making it into an exceptionally general ‘dynamic’ that can then be referred to in almost any context. We can already hear calls for an often ill-defined ‘entrepreneurialism’ in fields as far apart as education, health care, politics and the arts, and while we in no way wish to disparage the impetus and the aims of such calls, they run the risk of making the concept so general as to become almost meaningless – shorthand for any kind of positive change or attempt thereof.

In this manner, myths are not merely mistaken beliefs, but something far more complex. Rather, they should be understood as narratives, ways of talking about a field and as parts of how a field acquires an identity. Rather than seeming them as pathologies, we should understand them as necessary steps in establishing the grand narrative of a field, even when we are aware of the need to continuously dismantle the same myths. Myths are the stories a field tells itself, and they are both productive – in that they enable us to delimit an issue in order to inquire into it without taking the whole messy complexity of the world into question – and destructive, both useful and hindrances. A field needs its myths, just as it needs its mythbusters.

Of myths and methods

Somewhat simplistically put, a field needs to look through its own core assumptions from time to time in order to ensure that these still hold. In doing so, the objective researcher will question everything, even the things that seem self-evidently true, not in order to conduct an exercise in irrationality, but rather to continuously ensure that the foundation still holds. A version of this very approach was famously championed by Paul Feyerabend in his often misunderstood *Against Method* (1975), in which he argued that scientists must, from time to time, be epistemological anarchists prepared to go against what is seen as accepted method in its time. By following only the existent paradigm, a researcher can obviously still build knowledge, but science will sooner or later reach a *cul-de-sac* where a tearing asunder of assumptions is necessitated. Some of the anarchists and revolutionaries have done exactly, which are of course well-known – Galileo rejecting the heliocentric worldview, Planck and Bohr (among many others) opening our eyes to quantum mechanics, Gödel’s incompleteness theorem changing how we think about mathematics, Foucault (1961, 1966, 1969) challenging notions of history, power and even modern man, and so on.

What is important to note is that all such revolutions started from looking at science as it stood, and asking insightful questions about its foundations. In many cases, this came down to asking pointed questions about the very terms being used. Schrödinger asked what we might really mean by an ‘observation’ in the quantum field, Gödel (1931) was interested in the notion of ‘proof’, Wittgenstein (1953/2001) changed philosophy by asking what we thought ‘language’ meant, and so on. As scholars, we often operate with terms that, while unproblematic in everyday language, contain remarkable philosophical problems. Accepting them as unproblematic can be an efficient, pragmatic way to go about one’s business, but at the same time this can lead to what Wittgenstein called an

'enchantment', a state where our day-to-day understanding of words makes it impossible for us to see the complex games of language that make meaning possible.

Consider, for instance, the word 'growth'. Many in the field of both entrepreneurship studies and entrepreneurship policy are, if the expression is allowed, quite enamored by this; something which has led to a fascination with high-growth companies and the potential for companies to achieve such growth. But what *is* growth? In the natural world, the notion is fairly but not completely easy to define. Growth is the quantitative expansion of an animal or plant over its lifecycle – we say that a human 'grows' as s/he gets taller. We sometimes also factor in total mass, although more often with babies than with middle-aged men, and only very rarely with grown (*sic*) women. But what is easy to state about a young boy or an ear of corn is not necessarily as easy with a company, particularly not a young one. Is it total turnover? Sales? Headcount? Valuation? All of the above, measured through a complex algorithm?

Obviously and somewhat unproblematically, it depends on the method adopted. We can all agree that a method is needed, and once a method is in place, using the same method gives distinctive advantages, not least when it comes to comparability. It is thus not surprising that specific approaches to understanding, for example, growth first become noted, then adopted, then discussed and then entrenched. But what happens after the entrenchment? As institutional theory (see e.g. Scott 1995; Smart, Feldman, and Ethington 2000) has shown time and time again, such entrenchments are complex wholes and can over time become closed systems, supported by those invested in them.

It is at such points that critique and questioning, even seemingly illogical such, are needed in order to further a field. As assumptions become entrenched, buffered by shared methods and accepted vernacular, they also become more and more bound up in their foundational assumptions, at times to the point where any attack on these are shooed away with a 'clearly this person doesn't understand our methodology', 'such an approach isn't pragmatic' or any number of belittling phrases. Still, it is in the nature of scientific progress that older systems of thought will, sooner or later, be questioned and even overthrown.

When it comes to the issue of growth, the importance of the same (see e.g. Wennekers and Thurik 1999; Delmar, Davidsson, and Gartner 2003) has become so widely accepted as to seem self-evident. Yet, at the same time and in the wake of the financial crisis, public discourse has started questioning the primacy of growth and the manner in which this is measured, to the point where the very desirability of growth has been questioned (see e.g. Jackson 2011). In such a situation, should not entrepreneurship studies too look to the concept of growth, celebrated since at least Schumpeter (1911)? In this issue, Niklas Kiviluoto goes some way towards doing specifically this, inquiring into whether growth truly is an indicator of firm success. This obviously does not address all the myths surrounding growth as a function and phenomenon in entrepreneurship and the economy, but it represents the kind of engagement we need to bring into the field so as not to merely accept growth as a given good.

Something similar could then be said and asked of any number of concepts, ideas and assumptions in our field, including but not limited to what we think we know about entrepreneurs themselves, their modes of thinking and ways of acting, the functioning of the organizations built by them (individually and in groups) and not least what all this does to the economy and society into which these are embedded. The question, in a manner, is not whether such questions should be asked and such critiques should be deployed, but what might be stopping them.

On institutional fields and resistance

As previously intimated, part of the answer lies in the very make-up of entrepreneurship studies as an institutional field (cf. Lawrence and Phillips 2004). From having once been a relatively young and even marginalized field, entrepreneurship studies today hold considerable sway. Within both economics and business studies, entrepreneurship is identified as a critically important field for both economic development and growth, and within the contemporary university, entrepreneurship is often seen as a key strategic field. As an academic field, entrepreneurship has a number of high-profile conferences, top-ranked journals and even the occasional academic superstar. Professors of entrepreneurship are often afforded a great deal of respect, not to mention considerable funding and support, all stemming from the contemporary view that the development of new ventures is critically important and potentially very lucrative.

In other words, entrepreneurship studies are far from powerless as a field, and one might even say that the field is heavily invested in itself. Such a claim should not be seen as a critique, but as a statement of fact regarding the structures of positions, funding and support that contemporary entrepreneurship studies enjoy. This said, a vested structure of this kind will also gravitate towards an upholding of such structures. Ph.D. students are accepted into already adopted programmes with already set courses and literatures. Post-docs battle over being accepted into specific schools and tenure-track positions. A limited set of journals and conferences become accepted as the gold standards, and being accepted into these becomes critically important for young scholars – who often start playing ‘horses for courses’, i.e. adapting their work more towards acceptance in the field than for critiquing the same.

This is in line with much of the criticism that as of late has been directed towards the business school in general (see e.g. Mintzberg 2004; Khurana 2010), where the main thrust of the argument has been that business scholars are often more interested in sticking to their frameworks and models rather than adapting to the world around them, and hire and promote those who are best at continuing lines of thought rather than those who would be most likely to challenge the same. Within the field of entrepreneurship studies, commentators have further criticized the field for being too myopic (e.g. Bygrave 2007), too fragmented (Anderson, Dodd, and Jack 2012) and not to mention the oft-raised issue whether the field is more interested in evermore complex and refined theories of how entrepreneurship might work or the issues that tend to confront practicing entrepreneurs (where the elegantly refined quantitative modeling popular in many of the top journals give little to no guidance).

What this boils down to is that this field of ours, this *cosa nostra*, needs to look not only to developing that which we already know, and enlisting people into these endeavours who are prepared to stick to the already established path (if with increasingly large data-sets and more detailed quantitative analyses), but also to actively bring in those who would challenge this very structure. Contemporary entrepreneurship studies started as a mongrel of sorts, a mix where economists, psychologists, geographers and the occasional anthropologist came together to study the wonder and weirdness that is entrepreneurship. Part of this eclecticism lives on in the field, but at the same time we have seen that the popularity of the same has led to chairs, tenure-track positions, Ph.D., graduate and even undergraduate programmes in entrepreneurship – in other words all the trappings of an institutionalized field.

While this does not necessarily mean that such programmes and established structures create and uphold a mythology, they create a fertile ground for assumptions to take hold

and replicate through teaching and self-selection. Much as has been said about the business school in general, such often insular worlds can become self-serving and self-sustaining, which is why it is important for the field to also develop strategies for the kind of creative play Sarasvathy (2004) has called for. In part, this could be done by letting in a more heterogeneous group of people and viewpoints into the discussion, collaborating more over disciplinary lines and not getting too caught up in what is today considered the most 'important' issues in the field – not least since, as Williams and Nadin (this issue) argue, this may well hide the majority of actual cases.

Our small nudge (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) in all this is this special issue, in which we have attempted to collect a number of challenges to the institutionalized assumption in the field, partly as a path towards new types of engagements, but maybe more importantly as a way of showing that the field can still be one of engaged debate and heterodox viewpoints, beyond the institutional matrix. In a sense, the papers herein can be seen as a form of resistance against the assumedly benign structure of the field (cf. Fleming and Spicer 2007), a resistance that might be necessary for it not to ossify. The papers all address a myth of entrepreneurship, one that is often uncritically accepted, and thus they do not merely bring in a new nugget of knowledge, but instead strive to open up a new discussion, one where our current knowledge can be extended and deepened in sometimes surprising ways. As a consequence of this, we have not treated these papers as anything like a final word, but rather as one more invitation, an invitation for more myth busting, more challenges and more critique, for there are many more myths to challenge.

Mythbusters, Inc.: the papers

When we sent out our call for papers that were prepared to and interested in challenging the myths of entrepreneurship, we had little to no idea of how many submissions we would receive. In the end, we were blessed with a large and diverse selection of papers, most of which were of a very high quality. In the review process, the selection was culled down to the four papers we in the end decided to publish in this special issue. In this process, we were forced to reject a number of highly interesting analyses of myths in matters such as entrepreneurial failure and social entrepreneurship, but were also fortunate to be able to pick out four papers who approach myths of entrepreneurship in very different manners.

Our first paper, by Colin Williams and Sara Nadin, the very notion of the entrepreneur as a hero and as a figurehead of contemporary capitalism is called into question. In what is sure to be a paper to provoke debate, the authors argue that the manner in which the category 'entrepreneur' is commonly defined creates a selection mechanism that obscures rather than highlights, and that this has important effects on how we represent entrepreneurs. Using a data-set from the rural West of England, the authors show that engagements in the informal economy and in what they define as social entrepreneurship is in fact more prevalent than those in the formal market economy, and that the entrepreneur as capitalist agent could be seen as representing the minority case of entrepreneurship rather than as its defining actor. This obviously poses a very general question to the field: How do we draw the lines, and should the lived practice of entrepreneurs be seen as more important than the iconic representations we often work with?

Our second paper, by Karen Verduijn and Caroline Essers, deconstructs 'the gendered and ethnicized politics of entrepreneurship' in order to highlight what happens when female ethnic minority entrepreneurs are faced with specific master narratives regarding entrepreneurship. By analysing how they negotiate and resist such presuppositions and translate them into their own practice, the authors point out that myths are not merely

problematic assumptions, but also affect the practice of entrepreneurship. Further, they show that this can become particularly acute in situations where there is a power-difference between the master narrative and minority entrepreneurs, and that an ideology of entrepreneurialism can create negative associations despite its very best intentions. In the context of this special issue, the key takeaway may be the realization that what for one group is a self-evident and productive manner of enhancing entrepreneurialism can by another group be read in a far less positive manner.

Our third paper, by Niklas Kiviluoto, deals with a key issue in entrepreneurship: Is growth good? More specifically, the paper deals with the issue whether a measure of growth, e.g. sales growth, can be correlated to more general success criteria for a company. The assumption obviously is that it can, to the point where the pursuit of market share, or any other general growth metric, has been seen as the *sine qua non* of start-up success. This is one of those assumed findings from academic research that has become an entrenched truth within some segments of business, and often dictates the manner in which, for example, a venture capitalist approaches a new venture and its business plan. What Kiviluoto shows in his article is that this is not necessarily an assumption that holds more generally, and that there is need for more research to study the opposite case – where growth might actually hamper an entrepreneurial company. In this manner, the study of the myths of entrepreneurship might also have measurable effects for practicing companies, who may be structuring their business models and strategies around flawed assumptions.

Our fourth and final paper is written by Ayantunji Gbadamosi, Sanya Ojo and Sonny Nwankwo which focuses on the myths surrounding informal and illegal enterprises. In their paper, the authors study immigrant Africans in the UK and the manner in which these engage with entrepreneurship. More specifically, they engage with the kind of entrepreneurship that exists either in the grey zones of the law or explicitly outside the same, arguing that our understanding of entrepreneurship should not be limited by simplistic moralizations. Even though they do not condone illegal activities, they show through their rich data-set that the field should pay heed to the multitude of illicit or borderline illicit activities that entrepreneurs, particularly marginalized such, may need to employ in order to survive. By doing so, they also show that the field still has much work ahead of it, much to explore and much to learn – if it agrees to dispense with some of its myths.

Taken together, these four papers form our special issue. They question assumptions, they ask questions and they challenge, and, hopefully, the field of entrepreneurship studies is a little better for it.

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