

Creating a community of difference in entrepreneurship scholarship

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This article argues for alternative forms of inquiry for exploring aspects of entrepreneurship scholarship that are often unseen, ignored or minimized. The label, ‘The European School of Entrepreneurship’, might serve as a useful rubric for identifying a community of scholars with tendencies towards the following: (1) an interest in the history of ideas that inform entrepreneurship scholarship, (2) a willingness to step outside of the entrepreneurship field, itself, to embrace a variety of ideas, particularly from philosophy and the humanities and (3) a concern for the ‘other’, so as to challenge the unspoken and often unrecognized ‘taken-for-granted’ aspects of what entrepreneurship is and what it might be. Such tendencies are fundamentally different by degree (rather than contrast) from current norms; yet, these tendencies can make a significant difference in current scholarly practice in entrepreneurship, as well as our understanding of entrepreneurial phenomenon.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; entrepreneurship studies; European School of Entrepreneurship

Introduction

This article does not intend to step into the muddled waters of defining the nature of entrepreneurship or entrepreneurship scholarship (cf. Davidsson 2003; Iversen, Jorgensen, and Malchow-Moller 2008; Sarasvathy and Venkataraman 2011; Shane 2012; Shane and Venkataraman 2000; Sorenson and Stuart 2008; Venkataraman et al. 2012; Welter 2011; Wiklund et al. 2011). This article does not argue for the establishment of a new type or kind of entrepreneurship scholarship. Rather, the goal of this article is to point out different ways that scholarship in the entrepreneurship field has been and might be approached. These ways are not suggested as ‘better’ than current ideas and methods; rather, they are different (by degree, rather than contrast). Such differences, I argue, can enhance entrepreneurship scholarship and practice and lead to important insights and results that might not be gained through more traditional ways.

I like the label ‘European School of Entrepreneurship’ as a rubric for identifying tendencies among entrepreneurship scholars to pursue different ways of understanding the phenomenon of entrepreneurship. As a tendency, rather than an attribute, all scholarship in entrepreneurship has characteristics of the ‘European School of Entrepreneurship’. Again, a particular scholarly activity is not ‘either/or’, but a blend of various ideas, methods and assumptions. Brandishing the ‘European School of Entrepreneurship’ label, then, is more to evoke a sensibility, flavour or style to inquiry into entrepreneurship. Think of the ‘European School of Entrepreneurship’ as a style of jazz.

It is important to read Davidsson’s (2013) article in this special issue. The points he makes are insightful and valid regarding how past and current scholarship in

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entrepreneurship might be viewed, and the various ways that certain normative ideas, methods and approaches have created the entrepreneurship field. I agree with his argument that the creation of a 'European School of Entrepreneurship' *school* is the 'wrong track' (Davidsson 2013) and that '*Researchers fostered in a European research culture are well-positioned to achieve high impact* (which is why they already are doing it to a considerable extent)'. My concern is with identifying the characteristics of a 'European research culture': What are the characteristics of the kinds of research that European scholars may be more likely to engage in that would have impact?

The remainder of this article explores that question. I suggest that there are three tendencies in the European research culture that are different (by degree) and that have impact: (1) an interest in the history of ideas that inform entrepreneurship scholarship, (2) a willingness to step outside of the entrepreneurship field, itself, to embrace a variety of ideas, particularly from philosophy and the humanities and (3) a concern for the 'other', so as to challenge the unspoken and often unrecognized 'taken-for-granted' aspects of what entrepreneurship is and what it might be. While there are advantages to pursuing these lines of inquiry, there are also significant challenges as well. These challenges are addressed and some thoughts are offered about the uses of difference to make a difference.

But before going further some caveats. This article grew out of a conference presentation given at the Newcastle School of Business workshop: 'Building Capacity in the New "European" School of Entrepreneurship', which was organized and hosted by Simon Down. I wish you could have been there, as the experience of the workshop was far different than what you see here. You missed the 'Let us break these bonds asunder' – interpretive sign-language break dance; the beginnings of a 'European School of Entrepreneurship' manifesto – the 'Entrefesto'; a time to write short–short stories that might be interpreted entrepreneurially; and the irony of theses as faeces – may you find a pony here. Those were the topics of my presentation and, it was, from my point of view, one of the least innovative and least interesting of the lot. The conversation among colleagues, in person, is and will be, different from what occurs in journals; yet, it is in these conversations that the genesis of important ideas eventually become the residue of articles in journals (Reader and Watkins 2006). This article is neither a summary of my presentation at the workshop nor a synthesis of my experience among colleagues at the workshop nor a comprehensive review of the papers in this current issue. Rather, it is, given those experiences, my sense of what the 'European School of Entrepreneurship' is or might become.

Second, what I call for others to do in the 'European School of Entrepreneurship' I fail to do here. My hope for an article that comprehensively grasps the wide range of scholarship in entrepreneurship that reflects aspects of the 'European School of Entrepreneurship' does not occur here. This article is more of a cartoon of what I would want the fresco to be, it is an outline and not the vivid mural that I imagine. The article lacks a significant number of important citations and authors that could serve as exemplars of scholarship to represent aspects of the 'European School of Entrepreneurship'. So, as you read this, in all likelihood, your article is missing. My apologies. The 'European School' points in a particular direction for scholarship; it is not a destination that I, or any one, arrive at.

What follows then are some illustrations of some of the perceptions that I have of the nature of entrepreneurship scholarship that are formulated from my experiences. As such, they are examples rather narrow in scope, which, I suggest, might serve as indicators of broader issues in the field of entrepreneurship scholarship, where a 'European School of Entrepreneurship' might be shown to have some value. They could easily be dismissed as 'pet peeves', but I hope that one might see beyond these specific examples to the more generalizable ideas.

The past matters

Where do the ideas come from that inform our current thoughts and actions as entrepreneurship scholars? How far back into the past should one reach to grasp prior insights that might be germane to our present understanding of entrepreneurship?

I am very intrigued with the pattern of citations that scholars offer as the foundation for their arguments (Gartner, Davidsson, and Zahra 2006). I tend to value a more thorough and comprehensive exploration of aspects of entrepreneurship and have labelled this approach as the ‘critical mess theory’ (Gartner 2006). I believe that an orientation towards an inclusive ‘more than’ recognition of prior scholarship often provides nuanced insights that focused literature reviews often lack. I believe scholars steeped in the European tradition are more likely to appreciate and act on this ‘more than’ perspective. For example, here is a topic in which the European School approach to recognize past scholarship might provide better insights into the nature of entrepreneurship, i.e opportunity.

Shane and Venkataraman’s (2000) most cited article of the last decade in the *Academy of Management Review* (Shane 2012; Venkataraman et al. 2012) has, I believe, become an important talisman for grasping aspects of the nature of entrepreneurship. What I have found puzzling in subsequent developments of their idea of ‘opportunity’ as the critical essence of entrepreneurship has been the narrowness of exploring various prior conceptualizations. Invariably, in literature reviews that focus on opportunity, citations of prior scholarship tend towards Kirzner’s (1973, 1979) ideas of what opportunities are and how they are discovered (Alvarez and Barney 2007; Buenstorf 2007; Casson and Wadeson 2007; Companys and McMullen 2007; Cornelissen and Clarke 2010; Dimov 2011; Eckhardt and Shane 2003; Gaglio and Katz 2001; Hansen, Shrader, and Monllor 2011; Klein 2008; McMullen, Plummer, and Acs 2007; Mitchell, Mitchell, and Smith 2008; Plummer, Hayne, and Godesiabois 2007; Sarason, Dean, and Dillard 2006; Shepherd, McMullen, and Jennings 2007; Zahara 2008). While this is all fine and good, such a narrow focus has missed other ways of understanding what opportunities are. There have been two other approaches to conceptualizing and studying opportunities, which have been largely ignored: the ‘Dutton view’ that focuses on strategic issue identification (Dutton 1990; Dutton and Duncan 1987; Dutton, Fahey, and Narayanan 1983; Dutton and Jackson 1987; Dutton, Stumpf, and Wagner 1990; Dutton, Walton, and Abrahamson 1989; Gartner, Shaver, and Liao 2008; Gooding and Kinicki 1995; Highhouse, Mohammed, and Joffman 2002; Highhouse and Paese 1996; Highhouse, Paese, and Leatherberry 1996; Highhouse and Yuce 1996; Jackson and Dutton 1988; Mohammed and Billings 2002; Smith 1995) and the ‘Stevenson view’ that considers opportunities in the context of feasibility (Stevenson 1983; Stevenson and Gumpert 1985; Stevenson and Jarillo 1990).

Given the rather rich and nuanced ways that these two views have been proffered, I will, here, only hint that these two lines of research offer considerable evidence and insight into what opportunities are and how they emerge. Take for instance, early research on opportunities found in Jackson and Dutton (1988). Their study provides a map of 56 issue attributes that are either consistent or discrepant with the labels of opportunity and threat. Issue characteristics that are clearly associated with opportunities are ‘positive, may gain, won’t lose, resolution is likely, have the means to resolve the issue, have autonomy to act, have a choice whether to act, and feeling qualified’ (Jackson and Dutton 1988, 375). Issue characteristics that are clearly associated with threats are ‘may lose and won’t gain, personal loss from acting on the issue is likely, others constrain actions, negative and feeling under qualified’ (Jackson and Dutton 1988, 375). Opportunities, then, from their research findings are:

... positive issues. There is a high potential for gain without loss and successful resolution of such issues is considered likely; feelings of control are likely to be high because resources are available for resolving the issue; in addition, respondents associated opportunities with feelings of being qualified, having autonomy to take action, and having the freedom to decide whether to act. (Jackson and Dutton 1988, 375–376)

This perspective has been developed and refined through over 20 years of research (see Dutton citations above). Yet, this research stream simply does not show up in the references in opportunity scholarship in the entrepreneurship literature [except in Dimov (2007) and Wood and McKinley (2010)].

Describing opportunities as positive situations that are controllable is similar to Stevenson and Gumpert's (1985, 86) opportunity definition that 'to be an entrepreneurial opportunity, a prospect must meet two tests: it must represent a desirable future state, involving growth or at least change; and the individual must believe it is possible to reach that state' and to Stevenson and Jarillo's (1990, 23) subsequent reinterpretation:

Opportunity is defined here as a future situation which is deemed desirable and feasible. Thus, opportunity is a relativistic concept; opportunities vary among individuals and for individuals over time, because individuals have different desires and they perceive themselves with different capabilities. Desires vary with current position and future expectations. Capabilities vary depending upon innate skills, training and the competitive environment. Perceptions of both desires and capabilities are only loosely connected to reality.

I believe our insights into the nature of opportunity are less nuanced and complex by not recognizing these two prior research streams. And I sense that current scholarship on opportunity appears to be 'reinventing the wheel' rather than building on what others have already done. What is most surprising about the failure to recognize these two views of opportunity is that they both come out of the strategic management literature, an area of scholarship that Baker and Pollock (2007) suggest subsumes the field of entrepreneurship.

The 'European School of Entrepreneurship' approach would be less a-historical in its exploration of a particular topic in the entrepreneurship field. It would tend to include a more comprehensive exploration of past scholarship, even if these efforts might be somewhat tangential. While there may be the hazard of regressing towards the earliest known authors and works (e.g. Confucius, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the 'Code of Hammurabi'), I do think it is worth the effort to conduct, at minimum, word searches using the *Social Science Citation Index* and some cursory effort to see whether there might be some relevant research and theory offered by scholars within the past 50 years (Herbert and Link 2006). Isn't that what 're-search' means: go back and look?

Larger Voices Calling (Stills, Curtis, and Curtis 1982)

I believe the strongest contribution to entrepreneurship scholarship made by individuals in the 'European School of Entrepreneurship' occurs through their efforts to connect to thoughts, ideas and methods in fields beyond the social and physical sciences. I would surmise that the normative disciplines in entrepreneurship scholarship tend to be based in certain distinct or narrowly proscribed forms of psychology (e.g. cognitions, motivations, decision-making, risk and prospect theory) sociology (e.g. institutional theory, population ecology and demography), economics (rational choice, 'Austrian School'), physics (e.g. complexity theory) and biology (e.g. genetic dispositions, evolutionary theory and systematics). The 'European School of Entrepreneurship' scholars are more likely to utilize ideas and methods from philosophy and the humanities. A number of articles in this special issue are excellent examples of this approach.

The article by Popp and Holt (2013) uses, primarily, a historical analysis of over 200 letters written by John and Elizabeth Shaw, friends and family between 1799 and 1839. John Shaw began his career as a commercial traveller, eventually starting a business to distribute metal wares, which then grew to include a number of other businesses in distribution and manufacturing. The article provides a rich tapestry of ways to explore the nature of entrepreneurship: history, narrative and philosophy. The authors show how letters can be gleaned for a variety of insights into the lived experience of entrepreneurship during the 1800s. Narrative methods are used to offer various interpretive contexts for making sense of entrepreneurship at that particular time and place. And, the article is grounded in the phenomenological sensibilities of Heidegger (1962) as a way to challenge how we think about the nature of human experience vis-à-vis what 'being in business' means in the context of broader lives as spouses, family, friends, etc. Big stuff.

Watson (2013) struggles with atomistic tendencies in entrepreneurship scholarship by making a case for a pragmatic and realistic frame of reference grounded in American (e.g. James 1908, 1912) and European (e.g. Joas 1993, 1996) forms of philosophical pragmatism. The article gathers together a wide range of views and ideas to present a case for seeing the phenomenon of entrepreneurship through the processes of social construction that exist in the 'real world'.

To read Hjorth (2013) is to get a glimpse of the powerful de-stabilizing effect of the French philosophers (e.g. Foucault 1975, 1980; Deleuze 1998; Rancière 2006) on seeing how language distorts our assumptions about the nature of the world. The article champions the idea of 'public entrepreneurship' as an antidote to current ideas of what 'social entrepreneurship' is, and how 'social entrepreneurship' has become an 'epiphenomenon of the economic' (Hjorth 2013). Hjorth expands ideas about what entrepreneurship is to include transforming society and creating sociality, which he ties to Nietzsche's 'new possibilities of life'. Hjorth's article reads as a manifesto for seeing entrepreneurship in a broader context of the 'humanitas' of who we are.

These articles cover a lot of distance in a variety of fields that are not germane to typical articles in mainstream entrepreneurship scholarship; they are comfortable mucking around in the ideas of philosophy and the humanities. From a 'European School of Entrepreneurship' perspective, they represent a sensibility to consider the deeper meanings of our beliefs and views about the nature of entrepreneurship. We are challenged to consider the underlying ontological and epistemological aspects of our scholarship. This challenge asks us to reconsider what we are trying to explain, predict and control (Flanagan 1981). But, more apt are the demands that this places on scholars to broaden their knowledge or appreciation of ideas and methods from disciplines seemingly far outside the realm of where most entrepreneurship scholars labour: Foucault? Heidegger? Joas? Should an entrepreneurship scholar be conversant in these philosophers when it is already difficult enough to keep up with the literature in the 'mainstream' journals in entrepreneurship?

Seeing the 'Unseen' naming the 'Unnamed'

We tend to make a number of assumptions about the nature, values and purposes of entrepreneurship that are often unstated, yet implicit, in our research efforts. I believe scholars who are more inclined towards the 'European School of Entrepreneurship' approach are more sensitive to the power of these implicit assumptions to mask critical issues that direct our research questions and efforts. As Hamilton (2013) points out, there tends to be, in many major mainstream efforts in entrepreneurship research (such as in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor), 'a gendered view of entrepreneurship, through

misleading reductionism, gendered essentialism, and an implicit belief in the virtues of high growth, technology, innovation and ambition'. Her point, I believe, is not simply for researchers to pay attention to gender in entrepreneurship scholarship, but to 'pay attention' to the values and assumptions that we bring to our entrepreneurship scholarship. This, I think, is the bigger task, of which 'gender', as a perspective (Ahl 2004, 2006; Baker, Aldrich, and Liou 1997; Calás, Smircich, and Bourne 2009; Hamilton 2006), has borne the brunt of being the primary systematic attempt to challenge our ways of 'not seeing' what we are doing as entrepreneurship scholars. The other articles in this special issue may also be understood as attempts to challenge current scholarship to see beyond taken-for-granted assumptions about what entrepreneurship is: Hjorth (2013) questions our sense of what 'social entrepreneurship' is, and expands our sense of the what 'social' means and is in entrepreneurship; Popp and Holt (2013) invite us to see entrepreneurship in the 1800s within the context of family and spousal relationships as a way to broaden our view of who entrepreneurs were/are and what entrepreneurship means; Watson (2013) dares the entrepreneurship field to bridge the gaps in social constructionist approaches with realist perspectives; and Dodd, Jack, and Anderson (2013) compare and contrast various meanings that individuals in different European countries ascribe to entrepreneurship to suggest that demonstrated differences in meanings will colour differences in motivations.

From my point of view, these articles provide an expanded sense of the nature of entrepreneurship, entrepreneurs and the process of entrepreneurship. I do not see these articles as setting up an alternative view or sense of what entrepreneurship is. It is not 'either/or', rather 'and'. Rather than point out places in entrepreneurship scholarship (beyond my effort to do this for the idea of 'opportunity') that might benefit from a more inclusive approach (which, I think, merely sets up this sense of 'either/or') I direct attention towards Hjorth's (2012) exploration of this dilemma of entrepreneurship within the ideas of creativity and innovation as an 'art of the weak'. Again, my belief about the European approach is that such efforts are not in contrast to existing ideas and methods, rather they enhance, broaden and provide depth to normative scholarly efforts.

Conclusion: difference making a difference

The impact that the 'European School of Entrepreneurship' approach will have on the entrepreneurship field overall will be determined by whether these scholars are read and cited by their peers. Apropos of this, I am always cognizant of Davis' (1971, 1986) categorization of scholarly efforts into the following: obvious, irrelevant, absurd and interesting. Research that affirms current assumptions held by readers are obvious; is not related to any assumptions held by readers are irrelevant; denies all assumptions held by readers are absurd and shows that certain assumptions that readers hold true are actually false are interesting. What tends to get cited is the interesting: when a limited aspect of a reader's assumptions and knowledge are shown to be false. The challenge then for the 'European School' approaches is in hitting the 'sweet spot' of interesting, rather than drifting into the irrelevant or absurd. I believe that the 'European School' oriented scholars are, for the most part, actively engaged in a dialogue with normative ideas and methods that can generate a sense of what is interesting and thereby have impact. That is, when aspects of the taken-for-granted assumption base of the entrepreneurship field are at the edges, stretched by new ideas from the 'European School' approaches, there are likely to be opportunities for the 'interesting'. Challenging current assumptions of what is true (that might be shown to be false in the Davis perspective) could actually be an over-arching

characteristic of the 'European School of Entrepreneurship'. Where the challenge in being different in an 'interesting' way from current norms lies is in whether readers can see the connections between the taken-for-granted and these new approaches. That is, research that is not related in a viable way to current entrepreneurship scholarship will be seen as irrelevant or research that denies all assumptions and evidence in the entrepreneurship field will be seen as absurd. In either case, differences of this magnitude will not be given credence and therefore not be seen as 'interesting' or have an impact. Determining such boundaries can only occur through the generation and publication of 'different' research. Whether such different research will be less likely to be both published or cited can only be determined after the fact.

Finally, it is worth pondering whether there is a 'European *Community* of Entrepreneurship': an identifiable group of individuals who approach entrepreneurship scholarship from historical, philosophical/humanistic and 'other' oriented perspectives. While I believe one can identify scholars who are engaged in the 'European School' approaches, there is not, from a bibliometric perspective (Reader and Watkins 2006; Teixeira 2011), a community of scholars who appear to both read and cite each other's work. Dialogue among the 'European School' scholars, through co-citations, that is, through the process of finding articles that have commonalities of certain citations within their reference sections, does not occur with sufficient frequency. Differences among the 'European School' scholars may be so different that they simply do not pay attention to each other. If there is a community of scholars that approach entrepreneurship scholarship through a European perspective, it is not yet visible in ways that one might empirically measure 'community'. But, such a community does, I think, exist in a way that we can label such scholars as 'European School', and thereby, over time, think of these scholars of difference as a group, rather than as singular outliers.

I believe that the simplest way to identify and develop a community of 'European School' approach scholars is through the sharing of 'reading lists' of scholarly articles that we so often generate for entrepreneurship doctoral courses, workshops and seminars (cf. Brush et al. 2003). What would be your representative list of articles that are exemplars of the 'European School of Entrepreneurship'? What would be the topics used to categorize and organize such a reading list? What would be your sense of the fundamental questions that a 'European School' would seek to answer? I believe that putting effort into identifying reading lists, topics and questions and then sharing such lists would lead to the convergence of such a community. So, send me your lists.

And, there needs to be more opportunities to meet in the kinds of venues that Simon Down hosted at Newcastle. Indeed, such conferences that emphasize the different differences among entrepreneurship scholars will converge into interesting ideas and methods that have impact. By highlighting differences, we become more aware of what commonalities we hold together. Scholarly communities are both, and by enhancing the tensions among our differences and similarities, we enrich our understanding of what entrepreneurship is and what it may become.

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