

Learning to see NOTHING but seeking to gain EVERYTHING: Entrepreneurship Research as an artistic process of inquiry

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What is real and unreal, what is good and bad, what is the right way and wrong to the “doing of research”- these challenges set the scene for the unfolding discussions and tensions surrounding current norms and expectations of research practice in the Entrepreneurship field. The image presented evokes and indeed provokes the need for interdisciplinary approaches to both explicit and implicit aspects of entrepreneurs. The individualistic soul sitting on a twisted, knitted branch, pondering what to do next, contrasts the uncertainty and perfect imperfection of human inquiry. The metaphor of intertwining in this drawing can be used to depict how our written words as researchers, come to life by our engagement in ongoing debates and critical conversations with past established methods and parallel new narratives and text. Current research texts, methods and

techniques are not different in the field of Entrepreneurship; they are to some degree a serendipitous accumulation of ideas and theories woven together which has formed the fabric of knowledge in the field. This image; the metaphorical lonely figure “out on a limb”, trying to find new ways of ‘doing’, compels tenacity against the fear of the unknown, counter-balanced and measured by a desire to weave new knowledge or indeed draw on new ideas and understanding. The branch is weak, the task carries a heavy burden but determination and courage push us to become better.....

The choices we make with regards to the type of scholars we want to become and how we develop into researchers does not happen in isolation; our research identities are shaped and mediated through our interactions and relationships with others and the nature of those interactions which influence our practice and learning (Hopwood 2010). The word ‘becoming’ can be associated with that of change or moving to a new state of being; for a person to be accepted as a scholar the academic community requires such a person to have obtained certain levels of skills and knowledge along with attitudes, values and competencies, (Antonacopoulou, 2007; Cunliffe, 2008; 2010). The development of our learning and identity as researchers is as much our own process of sense making as it is a development approach, which is integral to the research process. Our interest lies in our ability as a community and “self” to create, to innovate and exceed in our practice rather than simply achieve specific competences.

Keywords: methodological variety, approaches to inquiry, reflexive inquiry, entrepreneurship

Introduction

Over the last decade Entrepreneurship research has become a popular field of inquiry with a growing research community covering a wide spectrum of subjects, resulting in a large body of research publications and outputs (Weiskopf and Steyaert, 2009; Jennings *et al.*, 2005; Aldrich and Ruef, 2018; Jones, O. (2022). However, despite the developing richness of the field, it still suffers from a lack of methodological diversity . The subject matter of research in the entrepreneurship field has and continues to be a focus of great debate, particularly when confronted with the issue of how we engage with current and new methods of research diversity (Acs and Audretsch, 2003; Zahra, 2007; Neergaard and Ulhøi, 2007; Wiklund *et al.*, 2011). In particular, we see these tensions arise through questions such as why and how do current methods used in Entrepreneurship endeavour to bridge the relevance gap between practice and theory. For some time theoretical and methodological heterogeneity, fragmentation, and segregation have been a matter of contentious debate for scholars working in the field (Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020). While no scholar can be an authority in all methods of inquiry, and personal preference and natural skills may draw a researcher to a specific mode of inquiry and related

methodology, it is important that as researchers we are aware of the range of differing methods and their applications, (Welter and Lasch, 2008; Blackburn and Brush, 2008; Dodd *et al.* 2021) and allow ourselves to open up space for novel ideas and theories, ask new questions, where new aspects to phenomena can be uncovered. Thus, using different theoretical framings and ontological positions may help bring new insight and necessary criticality to research (Fayolle, *et al.* 2016; Welter *et al.* 2017). While viewed by some as a successfully developing field, our observations suggest a worrying trend neglecting the social, moral and cultural aspects of what it means to research in Entrepreneurship. There is a very real danger of becoming fragmented and self-contradictory, trying to meet the values of academic rigour at the expense of practice and practical relevance. Writing and research conventions or norms embedded within institutions have the capacity to limit our imagination, writing styles, and choice of methods. Our conviction in this opening chapter and the central basis of this publication is to reflexively consider how we collectively afford the development of new knowledge in our field by allowing ourselves to enact our own autonomy as knowing subjects and authors, and to research in a more purposeful and meaningful way.

Finding opportunity

Some suggest that as a research field develops, it becomes increasingly characterised by a set of defined theories, models, methods and measures which are used to direct future research agendas (Martin, 2011). This is already evident in the Entrepreneurship field, where we see the systematic adoption of certain research paradigms, characterised by a shared belief towards theory building and testing through a structured process of deductive methods and generalised data sets, with a view to establishing generalisable findings. This emerging trend is becoming increasingly problematic in Entrepreneurship research and there is much discussion surrounding the replication of methods - the vast majority of empirical research practiced and published is evidenced using of the same methods again and again (Mullen, *et al.*, 2009 Higgins *et al.* 2015; Trehan *et al.* 2018; Radu-Lefebvre and Hytti, 2022). Diversity is less apparent when considering the deeper, philosophical assumptions that underpin research in Entrepreneurship (Brentnall & Higgins 2022). As such, we respond to calls for methodological diversity by crafting a publication which evidences and debates methodological openness to research, as a means of re-examining traditional and embracing new methods of research in the field (Fillis and Rentschler 2010; Fayolle, 2013; Hlady-Rispal and Jouison-Lafitte, 2014). In the first instance the field appears to be taking a functional paradigmatic approach to normalise the subject matter into sets of deductive logic - yet we know through entrepreneurial learning literature that entrepreneur's gain knowledge through lived practice (Sklaveniti and Steyaert, 2020). Secondly, how the field views the construction of knowledge appears to be that of extracting, testing and deducing, as is normal in the natural sciences. However, we know to practice as an entrepreneur is a complex and highly dynamic socially constructed reality which must be enacted in many ways by context; and influenced by culturally oriented settings and factors. As such, there is a need for greater diversity and development, encompassing the challenges in the design, application and philosophical underpinning of research in Entrepreneurship and its related fields, be that positivist, critical realist or interpretive perspectives, or the many other philosophical nuances that have been discerned in other social science fields.

There are increasing calls for methodological and theoretical variety when researching Entrepreneurship, to mobilise creative ways for developing, generating and analysing empirical data (Harirchi, and Landström 2021; Thompson, *et al.* 2020). By calling attention to alternative approaches and their supporting theories and methods, placing emphasis towards aspects of process driven theory enables the creation of new methodological/theoretical perspectives which hold the capacity to offer practice-based insight and understanding (Landström and Lohrke 2010; Tan *et al.* 2009). Such an understanding can have a key impact upon empirical data which can directly influence researchers, policymakers, educators and practitioners alike. Methodologies and techniques that capture context, richness and diversity are becoming more appropriate to how we advance our awareness of Entrepreneurship and its related issues and topics. These topics are characterised by explicit and implicit complex processes which are interlinked by differing aspects of agency, social structure, policy, and technology, pointing to the breadth of skills and awareness required by researchers and scholars alike when studying such environments. This requires scholars to recognise and explore how to research

through the adoption of a variety of approaches be that deductive, inductive, or a plurality of methods and logic.

Creating voice & space

This publication represents an opportunity to offer the reader a freedom to explore, to refresh, and proposes direction to new or existing approaches to inquiry, where multiple voices are able to utilise a space to debate, probe, present and critique. Crafted in a manner designed to be inclusive to “the sharing of experiences” the reader is encouraged to learn from others’ experience. Through narrated material which is both supportive and innovative, readers can engage with their personal experiences, drawing consideration towards how their practices contribute to their own learning and development as scholars. The importance of developing a scholarly voice that seeks to foster innovative and accessible scholarly inquiry is of crucial importance to any research field. The aim of any scholarly activity should be to develop understandings which engage with practical experience. Such actions must be a key priority in the advancement of future practice and scholarship. One of the most important contributing factors for the expansion of our knowledge is the questions we ask, in particular the manner in which we pose questions. Our capacity to ask meaningful and insightful questions is critically more important than finding a right answer. In this sense the creation of an academic/practice-oriented research agenda which offers the opportunity to build upon their capabilities to become more informed and knowledgeable is one of the most impactful attributes any mode of inquiry can offer, (Welter et al. 2017).

So, the question becomes – how can we make inquiry (into Entrepreneurship) more interesting and purposeful? Recognising the continued institutional pressure being placed upon scholars to publish in high-ranked journals using preferred methods (Anderson, et al. 2021), this can be achieved by acknowledging the relationally responsive nature of our interactions – questioning our assumptions, influencing what we say and do, but equally how others respond, while also challenging or daring to ask what is left unsaid or not asked. Our capacity to question can be viewed as an ongoing process, paying attention to new understanding/knowledge is how we survive and make suitable adjustments to our lives and the world around us as we live. For any inquirer, every moment of everyday can become the subject of our curiosity and a point of study - indeed every aspect of our lives, the world in which we live and that of others in the world around. How we come to explore “human practice” in whatever guise we adopt, at the very basis involves questioning and dealing with what is discovered, through thoughtful processing and appropriate action. To be open and receptive to new encounters, as opposed to simply observing and reporting upon them, is a challenge - but as researchers/educators we need to become more attentive and appreciative of these encounters. Rather than being afraid of the unknown, why not embrace its complexities and dynamics in a purposeful manner. Inspired by our own instinct, encouraged by close friends, through endless conversations, thrashing around ideas, topics of “rants” and a desire to change how we engage, use and appreciate methods of inquiry, we present this publication as an experience - a living embodied experience, as a process of researching in practice (action), in terms of both form and content (Fotaki *et al.* 2017).

Researchers should ask themselves a number of questions prior to and during their research. What, for example, makes research interesting? Are we at a point where our research is simply a game of who can best replicate existing studies? Have we lost our ability to ask meaningful questions? In this context it is now time to examine what will make how we research interesting and purposeful. Insightful and interesting studies can be broadly defined as well-crafted and well-written material which offers a plausible point of supportive argumentation and which directly challenges existing or established knowledge by producing new ideas, findings or purposeful points of interest. These can then be used to inform how we question or view aspects of the existing field by promoting new values and perspectives. We take the position that research is a craft where the researcher’s knowledge of methods and paradigmatic debate alone is not enough for engaging in the craft of research. The dynamic nature of the research field illustrates the complexity of what it means to research in practice, and also presents the difficulty for teaching research methods which is most often designed as it is enacted (Bygrave, 2007). The development of research skills and competent researchers is one of the main challenges facing the Entrepreneurship research field. It is important that researchers consider and account for how they learn their skills, develop their knowledge and report it, so that the recipients of research can have

confidence in what is reported. While in the entrepreneurship field there does not specifically exist a pre-described text on which provides instructional advice on data development, analysis and collection, there are many edited publications which provide insight on these matters and related issues surrounding the adoption of differing philosophical perspective and traditions of methods in the field. An important question emerges as how to make sense of how researchers learn these necessary skills. Of course, text books illustrate the basic principles which can provide a range of supportive direction on practical issues of research design, analysis and data presentation - however the subjective experience of actually engaging with this material in the practice of conducting the research agenda is critically significant (Cassell and Symon, 2004; Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). Criticisms have surrounded the instructional type approaches of some textbooks which simply do not give enough insight into the applied nature of these methods in the field. The need for more reflexive accounts of what it means to “be” a researcher and how to cope as a researcher in the field surely holds equal, if not more value, to how we can learn in a more informative manner? A further point to note is that some skills can only be learned through the experience of doing/using these methods, it is only through the actual experience of “doing” does that learning become apparent. In the field of entrepreneurship, one can argue that the use of qualitative methods in particular is a craft where knowledge of the methods and theoretical underpinnings is simply not enough for engaging in such a craft.

If as a scholarly community, we are serious about developing and crafting our practice, we must be always mindful, not be afraid to question our own assumptions and beliefs, in doing so reframing and extending the manner in which we seek meaning. There is need to move beyond the simple what, how and why questions - to questions which provoke and challenge - such as where, when and who, as a method of unlearning. To unlearn (question/critique), in this context, means to draw on the social dynamic tensions in the learning process, the questioning of existing practices as a means of exposing our underlying assumptions and beliefs which can restrict our ability to ask different and often difficult questions. At the most basic level these questions involve researchers thoughtfully considering the relevance and application of existing knowledge, by offering new insight and future debate. Connecting these question sets offers the possibility of drawing together research material which reveals the relational orientations of enacted learning. Such practices open up the possibility of introducing different perspectives from how we view and practice in the subject area of action learning. We can then learn how we can work as a community to shape future relationships and expand the theoretical field in a manner which allows us to theorise in practical ways. We continuously see grand theories, in which definitional aspects of entrepreneurial research are pre-defined, as ‘searching’, ‘perceiving’, ‘creating’ or ‘selecting’ ‘opportunities’. While these words can to some degree be helpful, they are also restrictive. They become problematic when they are taken literally as a casual mechanism; these words only offer a purely semantic or linguistic connection to the field (Shotter 2005). Contemporary language has the capacity to influence our research practices, “we say and do the things that others are doing”, but it may be the case that this language is doing us a disservice. We need to re-discover that current academic discourse continues to reify entrepreneurial phenomena into taxonomies and models of generalised yet empirically unspecified concepts. Leaving us unfamiliar with the ordinary, everyday ways in which we (entrepreneurs as well as researchers) relate to ourselves and to others around us (Welter *et al.* 2016; Harirchi and Landström 2021; Thompson, *et al.* 2020). We call upon a need to renew our understanding of social science inquiry by promoting engaged conversations/ approaches to our scholarship. Academic debate and challenge are essential components to how we develop knowledge generation, practice and learning. The act of rethinking and re-examining principles and precepts that may be long held in traditional course of practice is critical in advancing new and different ways of understanding and sense-making. This might be through the introduction of radical ideas, through the integration of perspectives from other fields and disciplines; through challenging existing paradigms; or simply through an altered level of analysis that elevates or sharpens our understanding of how we can participate in researching entrepreneurship in a more engaged and natural manner. By giving space to revisit and focus our awareness to how we think, write and engage with methods can afford us the ability to use eclectic, improvisational and experimental modes of expression - sometimes pushing the boundaries of acceptability, yet evocative and meaningful. A reflexive inquiry to the “what if” as a form of experimentation shows what is possible. It creates and exposes moments of moving

conversations during scholarly interactions. Such affective experiences hold the potential to expose moments of learning which are unknowable, unpredictable, and always embodied.

Conclusion

Through this publication we have sought to stimulate discussion, share practice, re-discover and re-explore challenges around current and new *approaches to inquiry* and what ‘inquiry’ means to us - encompassing all aspects of entrepreneurship research, from its conception through to its execution and related issues such as education, training and learning. We present this as inquiry in the making, where research and life experiences are central to our conversations. The art of curiosity, the act of giving attention to our inquiry enables us to appreciate the unpredictable and provisional relations between us as researchers/educators and the influence of our research. According to Neergard and Ulhoi, (2007), the use of differing methodologies offers researchers opportunities to accommodate a larger degree of complexity in the research they undertake and the findings they report. In this context the role of our own attentiveness, what it means to be reflexively aware, in our practice, as custodians of knowledge, becomes extremely important (Landström, and Harirchi. 2019). Thoughtful inquiry requires the questioning of the relationship between ourselves, our roles as researchers, writers, and practitioners, how we enact our relationships with our audiences and wider communities and the theories/concepts we work with in a meaningful way. By doing so we can begin to recognise the relationally responsive nature of our interactions – questioning our assumptions, influencing what we say and do, but equally how others respond, while also challenging or daring to ask what is left unsaid or not asked, learning how we can work as a community to shape future relationships and expand the theoretical field in a manner which allows us to theorise in practical ways. The contributions in this publication offer new insights into the developing scholarly field from philosophies, methodologies and data collection approaches and their relevance to contemporary the contributions presented here are centred around three critical questions:

(1) The questioning of our assumptions - who we are and what it is that we want to achieve. In this context **Parkkari** shares their personal experience of academic writing in entrepreneurship research, including the enabling and constraining aspects. **Boughattas and Tornikoski** in their chapter focus on how qualitative research can capture the lived experiences of entrepreneurial individuals by exploring their subjective experiences. Building upon this discussion, **Johnson** stimulates debate and critical thinking about the relevance and effectiveness – especially for ‘non-core’ areas - of prevailing methodological approaches to entrepreneurial ecosystems research and policy development, and argues for the exploration of CR as a potential framework for researchers, practitioners and policymakers. Equally **Wapshott and Mallett** argue for the unrealised potential value of methodologies derived from a critical realist research philosophy in the field of entrepreneurship studies. Their chapter explores this in relation to the specific topic of enterprise policy and demystifies some aspects of critical realism by setting out some of its basic principles to demonstrate their potential to develop new insights.

(2) The questioning of what really makes sense, of how we live and experience, our own and others voices and conversations. **Preedy and McLuskie**, in their contribution, explore the journey of adopting, implementing and reviewing visual methods from the researchers’ perspectives. This theme is further developed by **Williams and Pritchard**, whose chapter explores their experiences of using materials in research interviews, drawing upon research as a playful process. The contribution from **Kaffka and Krueger** sets forth how and why diary data analysis can help significantly advance inquiry into the intersubjective aspects of entrepreneurial opportunities. **Olphin, Larty, and Tyfield’s** offer insight into their experiences of engaging with stakeholders in discussions about the relationship between a place-based university programme for sustainability and local sustainability agendas. **Foliard, Le Pontois, and Verzat** explore innovative data collection methods centered around creating collages and engaging in group discussions to decipher their meaning.

(3) The questioning of understanding our relationship with our social world and recognising its dynamic and emergent nature. This is developed by **Lindvert** whose chapter draws on the complexities of power dynamics and reflects on how to contend with ethical dilemmas that may arise when conducting ethnography and autoethnography within entrepreneurship research. **Schmidt and Santamaria-**

Alvarez explore methodological reflection, proposing using the metaphor of *warp and weft* to think about grounded theory research designs that seek to approximate witness, highlighting the usefulness of multiple data collection instruments, notably diaries and interviews. Similarly, **Arboleya** debates the role of grounded theory as an analytical tool. **Ellborg and Nyby** in their chapter take an alternative route to inquiry by drawing on *intersubjectivity* as a way to challenge taken-for-grantedness in entrepreneurship tools. This is explored by **Gross** where they examine the interpellation of entrepreneurship-as-practice researchers and draws attention to the powerful nature of ideology.

Through this material we actively prompt novel approaches and create space for reflection with regards to various approaches and dimensions of research design and application. We are mindful that the capability of any publication to contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field depends on the ability of the editors to craft a contribution which supports the development of the readers knowledge. This, through the articulation, application and utilisation of methods equips the readership with confidence to generate and interpret findings, with a view to contributing towards create impact on practice and policy.

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