
**Entrepreneurship Safari:
A Phenomenon-Driven
Search for Meaning**

Entrepreneurship Safari: A Phenomenon-Driven Search for Meaning

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Abstract

We propose a model that links seven different conceptions of entrepreneurship and maps them in relation to eight associated disciplines and theories, specifying their corresponding units and levels of analysis and stage in the entrepreneurial process. Entrepreneurship scholars are attempting to either carve out a distinctive domain for the field or build a distinctive theory of entrepreneurship. However, an obstacle for understanding entrepreneurship is the lack of integration of the assumptions implicit in different conceptualizations of entrepreneurship. We contribute a scholarship of integration approach for understanding the phenomena underlying these conceptualizations and linking entrepreneurship domain, theory, method, and policymaking.

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1

Introduction

Entrepreneurship as a *field of study* is relatively young (Cooper, 2003). Although the concept of entrepreneurship can be traced to the work of Cantillon (1755), it has emerged as a fast-growing line of inquiry during the last 30 years. Evidence of this interest in entrepreneurship is found in each part of the “value chain” from creation (academic and policy research), through diffusion (research and policy publications and the popular press) to implementation (cf. Busenitz et al. (2003) for a review). The evidence is even stronger when the study and diffusion of the phenomena are institutionalized through specialized journals, endowed chairs, international conferences, international organisms’ policy units, and national policies. For example, relevant international organisms such as the World Bank, OECD, the European Commission, UNIDO, and UNCTAD have created specialized units, launched international conferences, or suggested policy options on entrepreneurship.¹ Also, national governments from both developed and developing

¹ See, for example, OECD (1998; 1999; 2001), the European Commission (2003), UNIDO (Nadvi, 1995; Ceglie and Dini, 1999), IADB (Kantis et al., 2002), and UNCTAD (2004).

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countries are adopting entrepreneurship policies to promote economic development.²

A typical feature of a field of study in its early stage of paradigmatic development is the lack of agreement regarding the definition of the phenomenon under study (Ireland et al., 2005). Given the current state of the field, which has been defined as potpourri (Low, 2001), many entrepreneurship researchers have attempted to define entrepreneurship and carve out a distinctive domain for the field (Low and MacMillan, 1988; Venkataraman, 1997; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Zahra and Dess, 2001; Low, 2001; Brush et al., 2003; Busenitz et al., 2003) and/or build a distinctive theory of entrepreneurship (cf. Phan, 2004). The search for a unifying entrepreneurship domain and its interrelationship with other fields still continues today (cf. Zahra and Dess, 2001; Phan, 2004; Ireland et al., 2005).

Eschewing the discussion on whether entrepreneurship should be an independent field of study for the moment (cf. Low, 2001; Zahra and Dess, 2001; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000), we argue that one of the obstacles for understanding the entrepreneurship phenomenon is the lack of integration of different assumptions, units and levels of analysis that are implicit in the different conceptualizations of entrepreneurship underlying current theoretical perspectives, empirical work, and public policies. For example, entrepreneurship has been either defined or measured in terms of the entrepreneur, the small/medium sized company's owner, the development of new businesses, market entry, and innovation. Although these different conceptualizations imply different units and levels of analysis, many theories argue that entrepreneurship is beneficial to economic growth (cf. Caree and Thurik, 2003; Rocha, 2004a). However, it is not clear how different units such as individuals, firms, and industries, or a combination of any of them, could translate into economic growth without clearly specifying the causal mechanisms linking those units at different levels.

This need for integration is at the ontological level — i.e., the integration of entrepreneurship related phenomena — rather than at the

²See, for example, Reynolds et al. (2002:6), Sexton and Landstrom (2000), OECD (1999, 2001; 2002), and Kantis et al. (2002).

epistemological level — i.e., the building of a unique entrepreneurship theory that could encompass the variety of perspectives that reflect the current state of the field (cf. Gartner, 2001; Busenitz et al., 2003; Phan, 2004). In effect, as it is the case in the strategy field with the concept of strategy (cf. Mintzberg et al., 1998) and in the organization theory field with the concept of organizations (cf. Scott, 1998; Baum and Rowley, 2002), different conceptions of entrepreneurship highlight particular features which necessarily provide only partial views. As a consequence, scholars lose theoretical clarity and policy makers lack conceptual guidelines for designing and evaluating the impact of their entrepreneurship policies.

Acknowledging this research need, some scholars have started integrating particular theoretical assumptions (Alvarez, 2005), constructs (Busenitz et al., 2003), and levels of analysis (cf. Wennekers and Thurik, 1999; Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001) implicit in different conceptualizations of entrepreneurship. In this paper, we contribute to the effort of this group of scholars by proposing a model that integrates the different phenomena implicit in previous theoretical and empirical works on entrepreneurship. Our aim is threefold. First, we aim to understand both the phenomena underlying the different conceptualizations of entrepreneurship and the relationships among those phenomena. Second, we aim to make explicit the theoretical assumptions in terms of units and levels of analysis implicit in the disciplines and theories that are studying the entrepreneurship phenomenon. Third and finally, by mapping out the different entrepreneurship related phenomena and their associated theoretical assumptions, we aim to provide a template to scholars and policy makers for understanding the connections and overlapping of different phenomena and their distinctive impact at the individual and societal levels. Our focus is on the identification of links between different phenomena related to entrepreneurship according to different perspectives. Given this focus and space limitations, we do not analyze in detail each entrepreneurship perspective.³

³Representative bibliography is provided in each section for detailed analysis. For a review of the evolution of the entrepreneurship field over time refer to Livesay (1982), Gartner (1989), Cooper (2003), Thornton (1999), Shane and Venkataraman (2000), and Shane (2003). For an economic historian perspective, see Hébert and Link (1982) and Blaug

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We structure this paper as follows. First, we present the overall model based on previous theoretical and empirical works on entrepreneurship. Then, we analyze each entrepreneurship phenomenon and its associated disciplines and levels of analysis. Finally, we conclude with directions for future research and policymaking.

(1997). For an economic perspective, see Casson (1982) and Parker (2005). For a sociological perspective, see Martinelli (1994), Thornton (1999), and Swedberg (2000).

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