

**ENTREPRENEURIAL PROCESS:
Mapping a Multiplicity of Conversations**

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the study of entrepreneurship as a process. It highlights the complexity of this topic through the questions and challenges it raises as well as multiplicity of perspectives and topics that it invites. It provides a meta map of possible conversations about entrepreneurial process, in which each conversation is a configuration of an academic stance and certain aspects of entrepreneurial process. The map aims to help identify scholarly communities, facilitate conversations, and articulate research contributions.

INTRODUCTION

What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from. (T.S. Elliott)

In Gränna, Sweden, there is a museum devoted to the failed Andrée Expedition, which in 1897 attempted to reach the North Pole by a hot air balloon. Salomon August Andrée took on the challenge of the open contest to reach the North Pole using a novel approach. Having commissioned a workshop in Paris to manufacture a strong-enough balloon, he recruited two fellow Swedes to accompany him: photographer Nils Strindberg and engineer Knut Fraenkel. They set off from Danes Island of Norway's Svalbard archipelago in the Arctic Ocean on 11

July 1897 and 65 hours and 295 miles later were forced down onto pack ice. With three sledges, a boat, and several week's supplies, they camped on ice floes for more than two months, shooting and eating polar bears, seals, and gulls. Their remains were discovered by chance on White Island in 1930, after a thaw, by the crew of a whaling ship. From Andrée's diary found in the camp, it became clear they had not come any closer than 475 miles from the North Pole.

This is a story of an ambitious goal, a novel approach to reach it, in a journey fraught with risks, and the overcoming of continuous challenges. It could have unfolded differently, but it did in the way it did, ending tragically. The surviving diary provides a chronological account of actions and events that make up the story, a piecing together of the expedition journey. It shows what happened and offers clues as to how the expedition ended the way it did (even though no one knows how the men died). What defines the story is not just the final outcome, but the vision that had been driving it along the way. Even then, the story seems to change along the way from one of reaching the North Pole to one of survival. Save for its tragic ending, this story has all the elements of an entrepreneurial journey (McMullen and Dimov, 2013). Indeed, inspiration, vision, preparation, take-off, hard landing, and hardship can be seen in almost any combinations in the entrepreneurial stories we hear. Every entrepreneurial journey is a sort of expedition. It has its sort of 'North Pole', i.e. the attainment to be reached. It has its sort of take-off, the elation of getting under way. It has its sort of hard landing, when the wings that carried the take-off have been clipped. It has its sort of fight for survival on limited means.

Our quest to understand entrepreneurship needs to account for several essential features. First, its ultimate outcome (e.g. new venture) represents a complex task that cannot be executed in one go, but in small actionable chunks, in some sequence. This implies that, second, entrepreneurship transpires over time, with the different elements of what ultimately constitutes the realized entrepreneurial opportunity coming together in a path-dependent

sequence (McMullen and Dimov, 2013). Third, it takes place in a context and, as such, is constrained, enabled or shaped by it (Welter, 2011). Entrepreneurship is inherently social: its activities take place among and are intertwined with other activities and are directed towards other people. And it takes place among the constraints of a physical environment, e.g. the vagaries of the Arctic weather, as in the case of the Andrée Expedition.

These features are implicit in our conception of entrepreneurship as a process, in the sense that – when examined up close – there are various activities and a sequence to them that comprise it. Indeed, the dictionary definition of ‘process’ is “a series of actions taken in order to achieve a particular end” or “a natural series of changes”, when used in the phrase *ageing process*. In other words, to talk of a process requires an ending, whether that ending is imagined, as in when it has not yet been reached, or real, as when it has been reached or the efforts to reach it have stopped. Actions or changes become meaningful when they are seen to be part of a process, i.e. when there is a sense of direction to them, as defined by the process to which they belong.

At the same time, to talk of a process requires a beginning. The series of actions that collectively define an entrepreneurial process form a causal chain, with subsequent actions linked to earlier ones, and that chain has a natural beginning, the start of a story, without which subsequent happenings would not make sense. An entrepreneurial story takes place in the context of life – there is life before it, concurrent with it, and after it – and life is also a collection of actions. A particular action – among the many actions that we do on a daily basis – is deemed entrepreneurial only if it is seen as a part of an entrepreneurial process.

Therefore, from a process point of view, entrepreneurship is about getting from A to B. The natural question that arises is ‘how’ do we get from A to B? This question, as simple as it sounds, can be unpacked in a number of ways, which reflect two main considerations. First, embedded in this question are two sub-questions: (1) how did this particular entrepreneurial

journey get from A to B; and (2) how do entrepreneurial journeys more generally get from A to B. These sub-questions reflect an interplay between the specific and the general, between the vividness of a particular journey and the abstractness of the conceptual structures to which it can be deemed to belong. The latter question can be unpacked further as *time vs. ensemble* average (Peters, 2011): the former treats sequences as holistic chunks and identifies a modal occurrence, while the latter averages the steps across journeys to produce an average sequence.

Second, in its totality, the journey of getting from A to B represents a complex, moving mosaic of actors, events, relationships, actions, emotions, situations, etc. To understand it and make sense of it requires the imposition of some structure that highlights relevant areas of focus. This is just like the lighting up of the respiratory system within an internal model of the body, which enables us to focus on its parts, while rendering the rest of the body in the background. There are many aspects of the process mosaic that we can highlight as an area of focus, each providing a glimpse into the process, a way of understanding it. We can focus on the key junctions between A and B: events that ultimately define how the journey plays out. In the case of the Andrée Expedition, some of these are Andrée's decision to take on the challenge, the commissioning of the balloon, the recruitment of the team, taking off, and crash landing on the ice. Each of these junctions then invites a closer look of how it came to be, highlighting a number of smaller junctions that lie in between.

We can also consider that the process involves a number of actors and is thus interweaved with each actor's personal life journey. The story of the Andrée expedition can be thus understood through the eyes of Salomon August Andrée, Nils Strindberg or Knut Fraenkel, highlighting their aspirations, emotions, tribulations. Because the three come together to work as a team, this is also a team story: how they came together, how they worked together, how they dealt with challenges, etc.

Getting from A to B is also a story of dealing with situations and challenges. To understand these requires getting closer to them, zooming in, becoming immersed while also keeping a perspective of where they fit in the broader process. For instance, we could focus on how Andrée planned and organized the expedition. This is itself a process that has unfolded over many days and months, blending vision, aspirations, interactions, and iterations. It is informed and affected by what has come before and informs and affects what comes after in the broader process. Crucial for understanding this close-up midst of the process is its playing forward, without a sense of where it actually ends up. In this sense, process is a moving present.

Finally, the processes may look different based on the type of endeavour involved. Intuitively, arctic expeditions are different from opening a coffee shop, which is in turn different from introducing a BitCoin currency, making a 3D-printed rocket or creating a pet vacation platform. Aside from the specific events that comprise them, in what ways can we consider two journeys to be similar or different?

In summary, understanding the process, the ‘how’ of entrepreneurship invites a multiplicity of conversations. To talk about entrepreneurial process is to convey a story, a manifestation of some chronological structure or generative mechanism, a sequence of junctions, an individual journey, a group journey, dealing with the situational challenges of a moving present, or reflecting the specifics of the desired end point. When these conversations occur at the same time, it may be difficult to conceive that they amount to a coherent dialogue. Indeed, they represent a network of family resemblances, whereby each pair may have shared features, but there are different shared features across pairs.

In view of this, this paper aims to provide a map of process conversations, outlining the dimensions based on which shared features can be identified. Similar to a map of world languages, it will help reveal why some conversations are incompatible and thus moot disagreements. At the same time, it can provide an overall sense of belonging to the realm of

entrepreneurial process and help locate the contribution of individual works. But before we get there, it is helpful to have a quick run through where we are.

TAKING STOCK OF CURRENT KNOWLEDGE

The use of the term ‘process’ in the entrepreneurship literature may easily appear overwhelming. In trying to make sense of it, it is helpful to distinguish two meanings of process, as outlined by Van de Ven and Engleman (2004) and McMullen and Dimov (2013). The first relates to process as a category of concepts such as decision making, in which the set of activities conducted between particular start and end points is treated as an entity – a collapsing of time – that can be characterized by some attributes such as long, challenging or exciting. When used with this meaning, the term entrepreneurship implies that a process has taken, is taking or will take place – something happens between A and B – but the interest is in the mere fact that things have moved from A to B. In this sense, the Andrée Expedition represents a dot or event in history, even if it spans a significant period of time and many tribulations. We zoom out until the beginning and end are so close together as to merge and time in between them disappears. The term ‘process’ simply conveys that they are in fact separated in time, the separation expressed in terms of countable duration, e.g. 3 months or 5 years.

It represents the closing down of the expanse of time between A and B in an attempt to link together inputs (conditions at the start A) and outputs (outcomes at the end B). Indeed, the straight arrow we use to connect the input and output boxes in a theoretical model signifies the abstraction necessary for a winding path to be seen as a straight line, for the minute details to fade away in order to focus on the relationship between the start and end points. This reflects a focus on why certain outcomes have arisen as a function of a particular set of inputs. The time gap between A and B assures that the relationship between input and output be deemed

causal, but a causal relationship does not provide a causal explanation, i.e. an elaboration of the mechanisms through which this happens. While this meaning is important – and in fact accounts for the majority of the use of the term ‘process’ – it is not the focus of the discussion that follows. I will nevertheless reconnect with it later on, as part of a map of process conversations.

The second meaning pertains to process as a sequence of events or activities that describe how particular things happen or change over time. When used in this meaning, the term entrepreneurship invites us to re-live the journey, whether as a chronological re-tracing of its main events or as a deeper immersion. This involves reading Salomon Andrée’s diary and getting a closer sense of the expedition as it unfolds. It could also entail an even closer experiencing of it, zooming in on a present moment and engaging in the shaping of the next, stepping into the flow of time.

A process understanding of entrepreneurship adopts this second meaning, in line with the opening definition of process. In mapping out such understanding, it is helpful to start from a review of current knowledge. This is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather as a brief summary of the main tools or tenets for developing a process explanation of entrepreneurship, together with critical questions that still remain. The first relates to having a clear sense of what is to be explained, i.e. a beginning and an end. This brings in discussions of the goal or purpose of entrepreneurship and the related interplay between individual and venture. The second relates to the structure of the process. The third relates to the components of the process.

Individual vs. venture

Entrepreneurship is a multi-level process that begins with individuals but ultimately involves multiple agents (McMullen and Dimov, 2013). Indeed, the very phrase “Andrée Expedition” captures this well: there is Andrée and there is the expedition. Without Andrée,

there is no expedition (process), and without the expedition there is no *entrepreneurial* process. The different nature of the beginning and the end poses some interesting challenges and invites different perspectives and levels of analysis (Davidsson and Wiklund, 2001). In very crude terms, the end point can be seen as the organized or coordinated activities of multiple agents. When this mesh of intertwined agents is traced backwards (i.e. the process is played in reverse), it becomes gradually disentangled, the agents gradually disengaged, until we are left with a single agent whom we can see as the progenitor of the process, i.e. our entrepreneur. It is notable that there is always a last person standing when we trace the process backwards, there needs to be some agential beginning to it.

This crude view enables two basic representations of the entrepreneurial process. One is simply the addition of actions and relationships that gradually leads up to the final mesh of organized activities. In the other, the final mesh of organized activities can be represented as the original initiating agent plus ‘other stuff’. In this sense, the process is about the ‘other stuff’ converging together, whereby this convergence exists as a defined potential at the start – an opportunity – when all the elements of the ‘other stuff’ are disjointed and dispersed (e.g. Ramoglou and Tsang, 2016). These two representations define two major conceptualizations of the entrepreneurial process, namely as new venture creation or opportunity development. The former captures its form, the latter its substance.

In one view, the entrepreneurial process is about the creation of new enterprise (Low and MacMillan, 1988) or new ventures (Gartner, 1985) or the emergence of new business ventures, across organizational contexts (Davidsson, 2003). These represent organizing processes and, in this sense, the overall activities that are put in place can be seen as emerging organizations (Katz and Gartner, 1988). In other words, because the realization of entrepreneurs takes place in the form of some organized activity, that organization – whether

it is called an enterprise, a venture, or simply an organization – can provide a useful endpoint to the process.

At the same time, while any organization can be deemed to serve a purpose, organizations differ in the purposes they serve, i.e. in the entrepreneurial opportunities they have been created to capture. From this point of view, the scholarly examination of entrepreneurship focuses on how, by whom, and with what effects opportunities are discovered, created, and exploited (Venkataraman, 1997). The three pillars of this view are that (1) there is a process involved; (2) specific actors (entrepreneurs) play a central role in that process; and (3) there is a purpose (opportunity) to the actors' efforts.

Within this view, the defining feature of entrepreneurs, embedded in the question 'what do entrepreneurs do?' (Gartner, 1989), lies in a simple, yet non-substantive answer 'they pursue opportunities'. This answer reflects the fact that there is distinct purpose to what they do and that they are engaged in an ongoing, unfinished process. If one asks the analogical question, 'what do parents do?' one obvious answer is 'they raise children'. This answer similarly lacks substance since it provides no sense of the specific activities involved, from changing nappies, to feeding, dressing, supporting, etc., all recurring and all in the name of an ultimate purpose, yet happening in different sequences, combinations and intensity across parents.

The two representations of the process raise deeper issues about the time asymmetry between forward and backward views of an entrepreneurial process. The entwinement of individuals and their activities poses the question of what defines the individual involved as an entrepreneur and the process or activities in which the individual is involved as entrepreneurial. Is one more fundamental than the other? On the one hand, if we deem an individual an entrepreneur, then by implication they must be involved in an entrepreneurial process. But in drawing the boundaries of that process, we can easily imagine some activities that, even if done by an entrepreneur, are non-entrepreneurial. For instance, buying groceries for the family,

alongside buying groceries for a new restaurant being opened. Because such activities are clearly not entrepreneurial, regardless of who does them, the constitutive elements of entrepreneurial activities must reside in the activities themselves.

But what makes an activity entrepreneurial, to be seen as part of an entrepreneurial process? How can we look at what someone is doing and determine that it is entrepreneurial? We have to look for the meaning of the action or activity. The defining feature of a process is its end point. Buying groceries is not entrepreneurial if done for the family, but could be entrepreneurial if done as part of opening a new restaurant. There is thus a need to account for the purpose of the action, which brings us to the intentional states of the individual involved (Bird, 1988). This requires considering what is going on in the individual's mind as s/he undertakes the various actions, focusing on the social cognition involved in the process, i.e. how the external environment is represented in experience: we "need a person, in whose mind all of the possibilities come together" (Shaver and Scott, 1991: 39).

Structure of the Process

We already get a sense from the previous section that the entrepreneurial process consists of activities. Indeed, the creation of new venture or enterprise involves a series of associated activities (Low and MacMillan, 1988; Gartner, 1985). Identifying the nature and sequence of these activities has been a major focus of research over the past 20 years. The most significant empirical account of this process is the Panel Studies of Entrepreneurial Dynamics programme (Reynolds and Curtin, 2008), developed initially in the USA and later replicated in a number of other countries. It tracks a set of activities and milestones that typically occur in business creation efforts, based on the premise that they can help reveal how a nascent business reaches operating status. The current state of the art, however, is that the entrepreneurial process so defined is too heterogeneous to be described by a dominant set of activities and actions (Davidsson and Gordon, 2012; Yang and Aldrich, 2012). Indeed, recent

work shows that there are no particular activities or sequences of activities that explain venture creation (Arenius et al., 2017).

Other work has moved away from a linear sequence, focusing instead on the inherent complexity of the process. Bygrave and Hofer (1991) highlight its non-linear nature, marked by discontinuity, dynamism and sensitive dependence of initial conditions. McKelvey (2004) reinforces this theme, conceptualizing entrepreneurship as the creation of new order, involving away-from-equilibrium, dynamic processes with many interacting parts and more complex causality. Some evidence for this view has arisen from the portrayal of the venture emergence process as one of punctuated equilibrium (Lichtenstein, 2007) and from the distinct, long-tail patterns of entrepreneurial outcomes that attest to the non-linear processes behind their generation (Crawford et al., 2015).

Most recently, Dimov (2016) argues that the structure of the entrepreneurial process is recursive in nature, i.e. it consists of iterated decisions whereby the outcomes of previous actions become the context (input) for subsequent actions. In this regard, each action is undertaken in the name of solving some immediate problem arising at the intersection of purpose and context. The application of such simple recursive mechanism makes the entrepreneurial process a dynamical system that generates non-linear paths and complex structures over time.

The main implication from this view is that the entrepreneurial process has a nested structure, i.e. it consists of (sub-)processes and each of these in turn consist of further processes. In other words, the process can be represented at different levels of aggregation, but each such representation can be unpacked further based on finer start-end intervals. For example, in the most aggregate terms, the process can be represented as pursuit of opportunities. This in turn consist of sub-processes such as developing / validating business idea and assembling resources. Validating a business idea consist of finer processes such as conducting market

research or making financial projections. Delving deeper, conducting market research could consist of even finer processes such as doing internet or database searches and conducting customer surveys. And even these can be split further into finer steps.

Elements of the Process

What does an entrepreneurial process consist of, i.e. in what terms can it be explained? What are the elements of the causal explanations that comprise it. The predominant conception of an entity connecting A and B, is underpinned by a nomothetical or variance-explaining logic. It seeks to derive a covering law, whereby a set of inputs can be related to a set of outputs through a deterministic relationship based on the systematic co-variation between the two. In this sense, the process is explained in terms of the specified relationship. Even though the relationship can be given a name based on the theory it represents, its content – i.e. why it works – remains unspecified or at best speculative. For example, when research suggests that entrepreneurs' human capital, social capital or planning activities are associated with the number of milestones achieved (Davidsson and Honig, 2003) or with the operating status of the venture (Dimov, 2010), there is no sense of what happens in between the measurement of the inputs and the observation of the outputs.

The basic components of this approach are entities and their characteristics. Entities are assumed to be stable over the time-span of the process and include actors (individuals, firms) or other. The 'other' category includes a collective, entity-like set of activities such as planning or decision making, that can be characterized in some overall sense. It can also include actions, interactions or events, which – for the sake of being treated as stable over time – are homogenized in terms of their generic form in order to be counted. In this way, we can derive counts of relationships, such as the number of helpers or stakeholders with whom the entrepreneur has interacted, without focusing on the content or implications of each particular one. Similarly, we can derive counts of milestones, such as first sale or first employee, without

differentiating their roles in the process. In some cases, there may be focus on whether particular types of relationships or actions take place, such as bringing in investor or writing a business plan. In such cases, the entities can be represented with 0/1 for non-occurrence/occurrence, while still overlooking the specific content or process leading up to it.

In contrast, in a non-entitative conception, explanation focuses on developing an account of the transpiring process (McMullen and Dimov, 2013; Van de Ven and Engleman, 2004). Thus, the answer to the question ‘why this happened’ lies in detailing the sequence or pattern of events that have led up to the event/outcome in question. An example of this approach is Baker and Nelson’s (2005) account of the processes of survival and growth among entrepreneurs as a reflection of different approaches to resource construction (bricolage) in the face of resource constraints.

The set of components is similar – individuals, firms, actions, interactions and events – except that they are described in the specific terms of a particular entrepreneurial journey rather than as general forms across journeys. Inasmuch as the central thrust of the journey is focused on individuals – who they are, what they do, and how they think – this reflects a particular social ontology, methodological individualism, in which social phenomena and processes are to be explained in terms of the actions and frames of reference of individuals (e.g. Packard, 2017). To the extent that scholars need to choose a social ontology as a foundation for the theoretical edifice they seek to build, i.e. what basic elements they have at their disposal in building explanations, we need to recognize that more than one social ontology is possible and that each serves as foundation for different theoretical pictures.

Process Voices Over Time

Several prominent papers that have aimed previously to take stock, evaluate, or otherwise encourage process research in entrepreneurship. They raise issues that have not yet

been properly addressed in the current literature but are nevertheless important building blocks for the development of a process understanding of entrepreneurship.

Van de Ven and Engleman (2004) argued that outcome and event-driven explanations represent different kinds of theories, resting on different ontological assumptions. They call for process-based social science that moves away from variance explanations.

Steyaert (2007) uses the concept of entrepreneuring to denote a process view of entrepreneurship and provides an overview of a spectrum of process-oriented theories that provide different conceptualisations of process. He suggests that the term entrepreneuring apply only to theories that adopt a non-entitative view of process (i.e. creative process view), opening up social theoretical and philosophical thinking and moving away from dominant anchoring in economics and psychology. In Steyart's view, practice and relational-materialist perspectives hold the greatest promise as they bring the field away from methodological individualism and towards a social ontology of relatedness and becoming.

Moroz and Hindle (2012) highlight a heterogeneity of notions of “entrepreneurial process” and identify several points of convergence: relationship between individuals and opportunities is crucial; need to assess transformative and disruptive value of knowledge; shared emphasis on evaluation to create value; recognized importance of temporality, action, and context. They emphasize the need for clarity on the fundamental process issues of entrepreneurship – “what goes in, what comes out, and how the transformation takes place” (p. 32) – and call for the harmonization of diverse voices.

Finally, McMullen and Dimov (2013) call for a shift in conception from entrepreneurship as an act to entrepreneurship as a journey. They highlight the difficulties associated with determining the beginning or the end of the journey and question what remains constant throughout. “The only thing constant is the energy and momentum that comes from

the intention, an energy that comes from stakeholders believing that the endeavour is a means of advancing their own ends” (p. 1504).

KEY QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES

What comes across from the previous section is that entrepreneurship is a complex process, involving and interweaving a multitude of elements. As such, our understanding should seek to complexify, not simplify it (Tsoukas, 2017). This suggests that a process understanding of entrepreneurship should not be limited to a single perspective, but involve a multiplicity of perspectives. While each perspective is necessarily a simplification – focusing on some aspects of the process and not others – it is through their connections to the whole that multiple perspectives can be brought together. To use the analogy of a map, to understand a geographical area as a complex system, we build different maps of it: physical, political, roads, waterways, industries, etc. Each enables us to think about a distinct aspect or a problem. Putting everything together can be quite overwhelming, but it is through our awareness of the whole system that we can connect the maps, while choosing individual ones to deal with specific issues.

The key task for this section is to define the different maps of the entrepreneurial process and articulate how they fit together in a coherent whole. Each map represents a distinct conversation about entrepreneurial process. It starts with basic assumptions or building blocks from which its picture or subject matter is to be built, thereby outlining the dimensions along which shared features can be identified. By highlighting these building blocks, we can in turn construct a meta map of process conversations. These conversations will form a network of family resemblances (Wittgenstein, 1958), i.e. two conversations can share features but

different features will be shared by different pairs of conversations. Perhaps the only thing they all may have in common is simply ... their focus on entrepreneurial process.

As academics, when we talk about the entrepreneurial process, we assume the position of external observers, i.e. what we talk about is outside of us. Therefore, a conversation about entrepreneurial process has two sides: those who conduct the conversation (i.e. the academics) and what the conversation is about (i.e. the entrepreneurial process). Thus, to map conversations requires mapping of both sides of the conversation. I will now address each of these in turn.

The Academic Community

For us academics, the conversation is part of a practice and we identify our community of practice by the assumptions or interests we share. These define a fundamental stance from which research is conducted. As scholars of entrepreneurship, we belong to the domain of the social sciences, defined by their focus on social phenomena. To talk about such phenomena requires a conception of the building blocks of the social, a social ontology. In addition, we express an interest in the specific or the general: are we looking to understand a concrete process in all its historical embeddedness or to explain it in terms of abstract conceptual structures to which it can be deemed to belong? Finally, we take a stance on whether we see the phenomenon we study as natural, i.e. taken for granted to exist, vs. artificial, i.e. contingently made or in the making. These interests in understanding vs. explanation and natural vs. artificial interlace with our choice of social ontology to define a distinct conversational stance.

Social Ontology. Entrepreneurship is inherently social. Its activities take place among and are intertwined with other activities and are directed towards other people. Therefore, any discussion of entrepreneurship rests on a fundamental social theoretical stance, i.e. a conception of how its social reality is constituted and actions within it explained. Such a

conception constitutes a theory in the sense that it provides general formulations about social life that are defended intuitively and argumentatively (Schatzki, 1988). While such conception is typically implicit, making it explicit can play an instrumental role in our conversation mapping. The purpose here is not to engage deeply with an impossibly complex topic, but simply to raise awareness of what we normally may not question.

Reckwitz (2002) provides an elegant summary of three fundamental types of social theory: purpose-driven (*homo economicus*), norm-driven (*homo sociologicus*), and what he refers to as cultural theories. The first two are perhaps the most familiar and reflect the perennial tension between agency and structure. Explaining action in terms of purpose represents a stance of methodological individualism, from which action is explained in terms of individual intentions, interests, and purposes; the social is thus a collection of individuals. This stance dominates entrepreneurship research as seen in the primacy afforded to entrepreneurial action and the judgmental processes behind it (e.g. Shepherd, 2015). Explaining action in terms of adherence to norms represents a stance that recognizes social institutions as primary building blocks of the social. It reflects a strong sociological tradition in entrepreneurship research (e.g. Thornton, 1999).

Cultural theories locate the social in collective symbolic structures that enable the creation of meaning. Just to allude to their diversity, I note that Reckwitz distinguishes four strands of such theories: mentalism, textualism, intersubjectivism, and practice theory. I would like to provide an example here of how such an account of social life represents an expanded form of individualism: while it can still ascribe a central role for individuals in performing actions, it recognizes that there is more to the social world than just individuals and their relations.

Schatzki (1998) refers to the phenomena of social life as those that constitute and interrelate lives. These include (1) actions, (2) intelligibility-determining factors, (3) the

entities found in settings, and (4) interrelations. Practical intelligibility broadly refers to what makes sense to an actor to do. In this regard, intelligibility-determining factors pertain to what provides this sense of what to do. They comprise a wide range of factors such as ends, ideas, projects, customs, knowledge, etc. Settings and the entities encountered in them – people, events, and objects – not only represent the spatiality of human existence, but also help shape and evaluate the relevant intelligibility-determining factors. Finally, Schatzki outlines five main types of interrelations between human lives: (1) interpersonal molding of intelligibility, i.e. how the intelligibility-determining factors are distributed across different lives; (2) people as the objects of intelligibility-determining factors of others; (3) lives connect in settings; (4) there are chains of actions, whereby each action is a response to previous actions; (5) there are recurrent actions.

This view acknowledges that action is affected by intelligibility-determining factors that are located not within individuals but in the world. It also highlights the importance of setting as creating spatiality to human existence, shaping intelligibility-determining factors, and connecting human lives. Directing attention to such these can diversify our conversations about entrepreneurial action. As we strive for ever-refined partitioning to reveal pockets of sameness, we effectively come face to face with the fact that entrepreneurial endeavors form an extended family, a network of resemblances. Entrepreneurs have different experiences, worldviews, ways of thinking, and motivations and their journeys take place in a multiplicity of contexts – e.g. business, social, spatial, institutional – which help to explain where, when, and how entrepreneurship takes place (Welter, 2011). To top it all, all these factors change over time.

The complexity of individual and contextual configurations is overwhelming. Two people could have the same motivations but different experiences, worldviews or ways of thinking. They could be acting in the same industry but in different spatial or social contexts.

Or they can act in the same place, but in different industry contexts or with different motivations. And so on. This suggests that any two actions can be similar in some respects but different in others, and the similarities and differences would be different between different pairs of actions. Therefore, we need a sense in which the family resemblances can be defined. This is what social ontology provides. It pushes us to go beyond the simple demarcation of business, social, spatial, institutional context and define the common building elements through these can be seen as overlapping strands of a social reality.

Explanation and understanding. As we look at different entrepreneurial journeys, we are faced with a raw observation space that we have to structure in order to determine what is the same and what is different across the journeys, i.e. we apply arbitrary choices of replication and partitioning (McMullen and Dimov, 2013). These choices reflect implicit scholarly goals and suggest that the question of ‘how’ can be addressed in different lights. They expose a tension between explanation and understanding as distinct goals in our quest for knowledge about the entrepreneurial process.

Explanation focuses on descriptions that permit prediction, thereby delivering knowledge that is nomothetic and value-neutral in nature. It inherently focuses on what is the same across a diverse set of entrepreneurs and thus develops descriptions that are abstract enough as to accommodate a larger number of observations. In contrast, understanding focuses on descriptions that make the actions of entrepreneurs intelligible, thereby delivering knowledge that is idiographic and evaluative in nature. It naturally seeks to elicit what is different about each entrepreneur, to sense his or her specific circumstances, aspirations, and deliberations.

One consequence of these contrasting perspectives is that predictive knowledge is non-intelligible, while intelligible knowledge is non-predictive (Rorty, 1982). On the one hand, the abstract concepts that enable us to make predictions are not situationally attuned – and thus of

little use – for understanding individual entrepreneurs. On the other hand, the situational and emotional immersion that enable us to make sense of entrepreneurs’ actions does not readily translate to other action situations. Hence the tension between rigour and relevance: rigour is ascribed to law-like explanation, while relevance pertains to making our descriptions of entrepreneurs intelligible to others. The vocabulary of explanation / rigour is irreducible to the vocabulary of understanding / relevance, and vice versa, because each serves a distinct research purpose (Rorty, 1982). Recognizing these differences is important for accommodating a plurality of conversations.

Natural vs. artificial. We can relate to point B of an entrepreneurial process in two ways: (1) as something that has already happened and thus can be taken for granted; and (2) as something that is not yet realized and is thus in the making. These reflect, respectively, a retrospective and a prospective stance in how we describe the process. In the first case, we have a clearly defined end point towards which all previous events and actions converge, thereby acting as a final cause, i.e. “an end point whose existence connotes the occurrence of certain prior events” (Mohr, 1982, p. 59). In other words, it is the end point that makes prior actions and events meaningful.

In contrast, in the second case, there is no future marker to signal a right path ahead. All we can see in a forward-looking sense is a long chain of possible contingencies, forming an intimidating tree of possibilities. The question of contingency (vs. necessity, i.e. taken-for-granted occurrence) is a central premise for sciences of the artificial (Simon, 1969/1996). Indeed, Simon discusses their main challenge as developing empirical propositions about contingent phenomena. Accordingly, with artifact creation inherent to the entrepreneurial process, its study can be represented as a science of the artificial or design science (Dimov, 2016; Selden and Fletcher, 2015; Venkataraman et al., 2012).

At any point, what happens is a subset of what is possible, thereby creating an asymmetry between the backward or forward tracing of a process. If we think of an entrepreneurial journey as a branching out structure of new possibilities, events, actors, and relationships, then it is easy to trace the structure backward: starting from any point along the way we could always go back to some beginning. But to move forward, we face the open-ended nature of its future outcomes. In other words, the past is fixed and a retrospective stance enables us to take it for granted, as something that already exists, a natural phenomenon. This stance enables the academic to totalize the entrepreneurial experience, to connect facts that exist only in succession (Bourdieu, 1990). But the future is open and a prospective stance prompts us to face up to its contingency, its making, an artificial phenomenon. This stance places the academic in the very indeterminate situations that entrepreneurial practitioners face (Dimov, 2018).

Figure 1 provides a summary of the academic positions just discussed. It portrays conversational stances as different sections of a cube, in which each section can be represented as a distinct combination of a social ontology, knowledge goals, and type of phenomenon. The latter dimensions are shown on the front face, mapping out four different stances of inquiry: process theory (understanding, natural), variance theory (explanation, natural), policy science (explanation, artificial), and design science (understanding, artificial). The first two represent the familiar distinction between process and variance explanation discussed earlier, both operating as science of natural phenomena (e.g. Romme, 2003). The last two represent an orientation towards the problem-solving interface at which artifacts emerge and vary in the scale of the problems they address. In turn, each of these stances of inquiry can be underpinned by a different social ontology – which grounds the theories developed within it – to create a distinct conversation about process. There are thus 12 combinations ... just from the academic side.

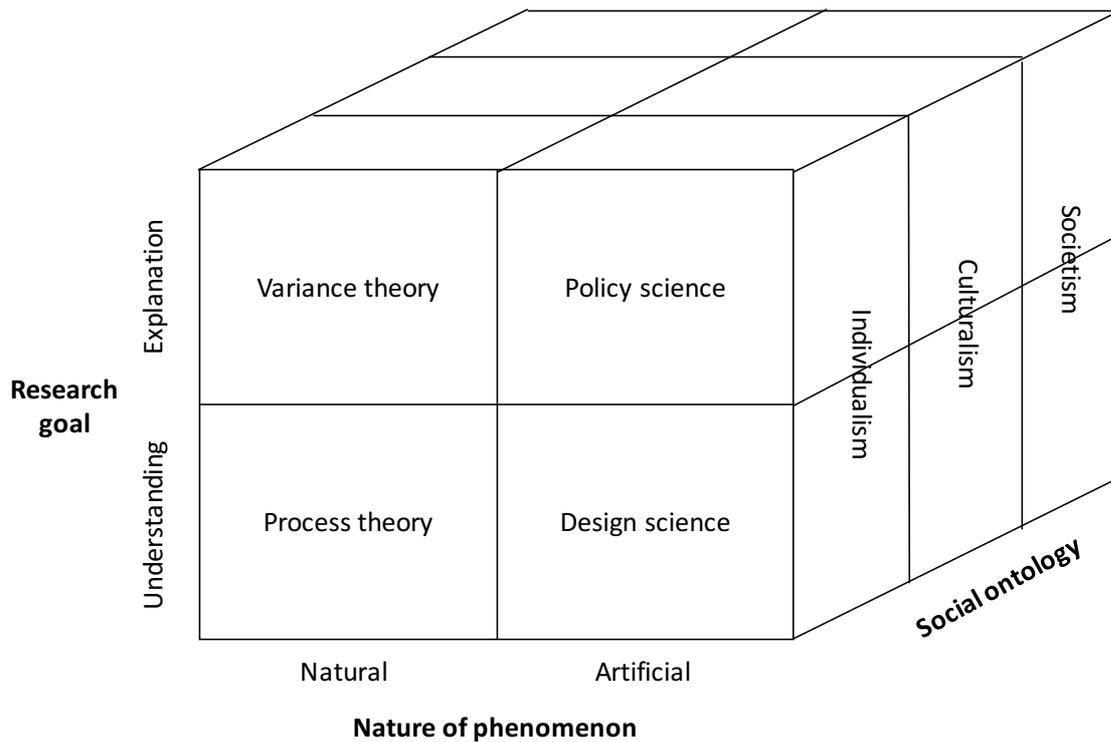


Figure 1: A map of academic stances towards entrepreneurial process

The Entrepreneurial Process

Now that I have described the positions from which academics can set out to inquiry into entrepreneurial process, the next task is to sketch out the object of inquiry itself. This is of course a tricky task because here I am – an academic – trying to talk about something in a way that strips away my academic layer. But I will try to do this in an intuitive, common sense manner. In broadest terms, we can say that an entrepreneurial process involves the completion of a complex task, takes place in some context, and takes place over time. I will discuss each of these aspects in turn.

A complex task. Regardless of whether the entrepreneurship is viewed as the creation of a new venture or pursuit of opportunity, underpinning both these conceptions are the actual business activities to be put in place, i.e. what the business / venture is about. The definition of entrepreneurial opportunity as “situations in which new goods, services, raw materials, and

organizing methods can be introduced and sold at greater than their cost of production” (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000: 220), gives a good indication of the different parts the entrepreneurial task. First, there is *something* that is the object of activity, i.e. new goods, services, raw materials or organizing methods. Second, this something needs to be *introduced*, which comprises the activities, objects and people associated with production and distribution, i.e. getting the something to the point or place where it is ready to be exchanged. Third, this something needs to be *sold*, which comprises other people who act as the other party to the exchange (buyers, customers). Finally, there is the *financial tally* of the first three elements, whereby the income from the sale is compared against the costs of production.

Seen in these terms, the entrepreneurial task is a complex one, seeking to pull together other people and resources into an organized activity, a set of exchange relationships (Dimov, 2011). What defines the structure are the functional relationships in which people and materials are engaged. These relationships cannot arise without the efforts of the entrepreneurial team – i.e. someone needs to institute the contracts, transactions, and activities that constitute them – but, equally, their realization depends on contingencies beyond the control of the team.

There are various to classify this task space, but for the current purposes I will use the simple distinction between *activities* and *people*. The former recognizes that certain activities need to be done and organized in a certain way, while the latter recognizes that these activities are done by people, which requires an extra layer of interaction and coordination. For instance, although I referred to ‘entrepreneurial team’ earlier as something that already exists in a unified sense, there is an underlying – and not necessarily smooth – process through which this such alignment happens. The same applies to the alignment of external people such as customers, suppliers, investors or advisors.

Context. As an inherently social activity, i.e. oriented to produce value for others (e.g. McMullen and Dimov, 2013) and involving an organizing process that inevitably involves

others (e.g. Katz and Gartner, 1988), entrepreneurship already takes place in a social context. How this context is viewed has already been reflected in the social ontology that the academic scholars adopt in their stance towards entrepreneurship. Indeed, what we see as a social context is inextricably linked with our implicit theory of what the social is. Therefore, the discussion of context here aims to stay clear of its social side. Based on Welter's (2011) discussion of context, this leaves us with what she refers to as spatial and business contexts. I will outline these in a cursory manner, to highlight the diverse and complex paths they open, without aiming to do full justice to them in this short space.

In its spatial aspects, an entrepreneurial process takes place in a particular *geography* and there is a clear sense of its diversity and relevance for entrepreneurship. Location or cluster-related factors can affect the type and impact of entrepreneurship (e.g. Rocha, 2004). More broadly, the geographic concentration of people and activities matters for understanding entrepreneurship as intertwined with other market activities (Plummer and Pe'er, 2010). The spatial heterogeneity of regions thus provides an important context for the entrepreneurial task at hand (Backman and Loof, 2015). Similarly, in an international perspective, there are systematic differences across countries in their division of labor, regimes of appropriability, and resource availability, which affects the identification, evaluation, and exploitation of opportunities (Baker, Gedajlovic, and Lubatkin, 2005).

In its business aspects, aside from the peculiarities of geography an entrepreneurial process can be related to the novelty it seeks to introduce within a technological system that cuts across geographies. In this sense it takes place in a particular *innovation ecology* in which many factors come together to facilitate the development of new technologies (Wulf, 2007). In this sense, the individual entrepreneurial effort is part of a much bigger picture in which its success depends on the development of supporting technologies or longer-term nurturing of ideas and attitudes (e.g. Overholm, 2015; Sine and Lee, 2009). Equally, an entrepreneurial

effort can simply be a ready plug-in into a well established technology, as in the opening of a restaurant, a coffee shop, or simple online retail.

Time. Viewed from a distance, an entrepreneurial process is a sequence of actions and events. In this sense, time is a medium through which we are able to order the traces of the process and thus reconstruct it. Indeed, as in Newtonian physics – where time as a primitive, undefined, absolute quantity that is used simply to measure motion (Coveney and Highfield, 1990) – time in entrepreneurship tends to be used to establish a chronology of events. But just as Einstein’s theories of relativity shattered the Newtonian notion of absolute time, so do the ideas of Henry Bergson (1913/2001) highlight that how we experience the time of the entrepreneurial process matters.

Bergson uses the listening the chimes of a church bell as an illustration of the difference between ‘externality without succession’ and ‘succession without externality’. For the first, when we attempt to count the chimes, we step out of the immediate experience of listening (i.e. externality) and make a mental note, say a dot. As we cannot pile the dots one on top of the other, we facilitate their counting by spreading them out in space. But in marking a new dot, we also retain all the previous dots because in the end we need to count them all. It is in this sense that there is no succession to the chimes: we retain them all, by means of representing them and extending them into space. In ‘succession without externality’, we stay within the immediate experience of listening to the chimes. They inter-penetrate and succeed one another.

The concept of space is thus essential for carrying out the extension and counting. Therefore, as a medium that allows such extension (chronology) to be created, time is essentially space: “It is to be presumed that time, understood in the sense of a medium in which we make distinctions and count, is nothing but space” (The Multiplicity of Conscious States. The Idea of Duration, paragraph 10). When time is projected into space, duration becomes expressed as extensity. The attempt to measure replaces duration with space.

But for Bergson, the immediate conscious experience of time is of a qualitative nature. The multiplicity of moments are psychic states whose causes are within us. Pure quality cannot be counted or even compared. We can talk, at most, about the intensity of psychic states – such as the intensity of feeling or of effort – but by admitting some degree of quantification, intensity implicitly presupposes some form of extension in space. There are thus two kinds of multiplicity: (1) of material objects that can be counted and thus represented by a number; and (2) of states of consciousness, which cannot be counted without symbolical representation that requires the medium of space.

The immediate experience of time is one that preserves the pure quality of psychic states. Bergson refers to this as “pure duration”. In pure duration, past and present are part of an organic whole, like the notes of a tune. Each represents the whole and cannot be isolated and differentiated from the rest. The multiplicity of states is holistic, the states form a succession, inter-penetrating each other, whereby no single state is singled out. We stay in the moment because to single out and differentiate successive states requires stepping out of it.

Therefore, externality and succession represent two ways in which an entrepreneurial process can be expressed in a language of time. From a position of externality, time becomes space represented by a timeline that becomes the medium for recording its extension. Bergson offers another interesting example of a straight line and a material point A on it. The point would see itself changing, but this change would not necessarily be in the form of a line. To see itself moving along the line, the point needs to rise above (outside of) itself and perceive different points on the line, thereby forming the idea of space. In other words, in order to perceive a line as a line, one needs to step outside of it and take account of the void around it. Similarly, to see the entrepreneurial journey as a timeline, we need to step outside of it.

Figure 2 provides a summary of the aspects of entrepreneurial process just discussed. Similar to Figure 1, it portrays the aspects as different sections of a cube, in which each section

can be represented as a distinct combination of task elements, time stance and context. The front face shows the combinations of task elements and time. The task elements – activities and people – can be viewed from a stance of externality, whereby the development of each can be plotted on a timeline, or from a stance of succession, wherein their past, present, and future are meshed together. In turn, each of these combinations can be situated in the context of a geographic or innovation ecology. This conceptualization yields 8 combinations overall.

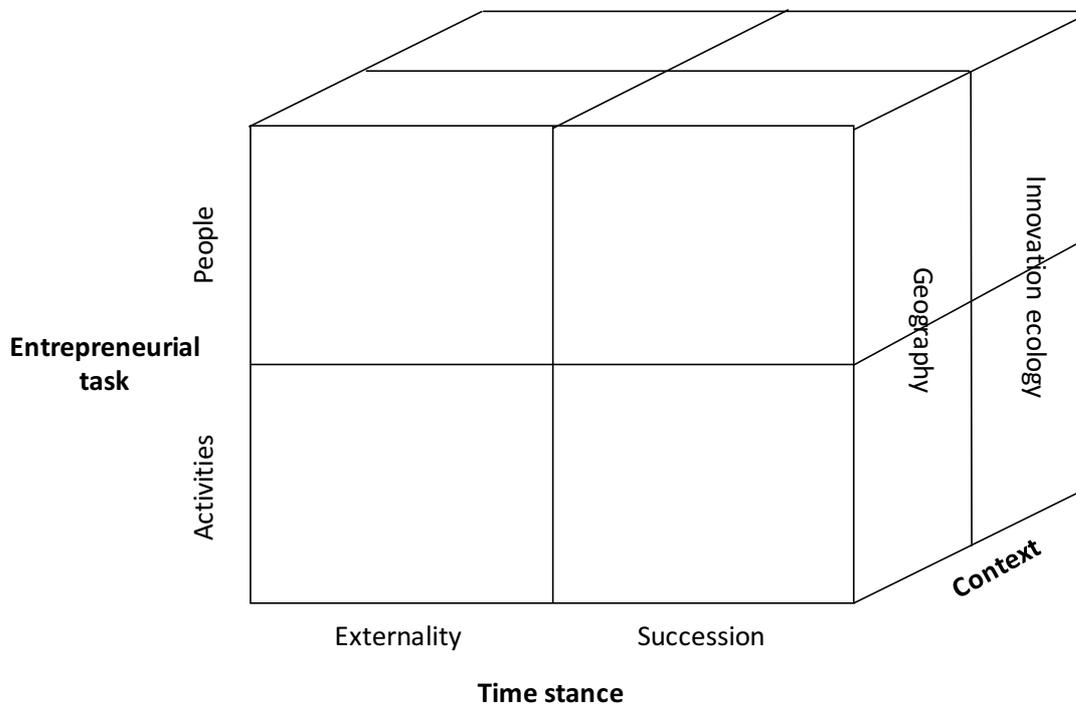


Figure 2: A map of aspects of entrepreneurial process

CONCLUSION

This paper started with an example of a process that quickly revealed the complexity and multiplicity of perspectives that could be deployed to discuss it. An invitation to study entrepreneurial process therefore creates an exposure to multiple voices. Mapping out the

various conversations in which they can be expressed is thus an important step towards building an academic dialogue. It can help identify common stance or focal points that can facilitate the linkage of disparate strands of knowledge and, at the same time, reveal difference that can channel disagreements into reflection and reconciliation.

The crude mapping effort was based on viewing each conversation as an interplay between an academic stance and focal point of the entrepreneurial process. It revealed 12 difference academic stances, representing constellations of knowledge goals, assumptions about the nature phenomena, and social ontology and 8 focal points, representing constellations of task aspects, spatial considerations, and time position. Without considering whether all combinations are possible, there are 96 combinations or distinct types of conversation about entrepreneurial process as shown in Figure 3. They form a network of family resemblance in the sense that adjacent conversations share features but not the same featured are shared across different pairs of adjacent conversations. What they all have in common is that they are all about 'process' in some sense, but the impression of uniformity that the term 'process' creates effectively masks the different senses or meanings of process that are deployed in different conversations. These in turn help determine methods that are appropriate for the particular stance and focus, and at the same time acknowledge that there is no single correct method to study process.

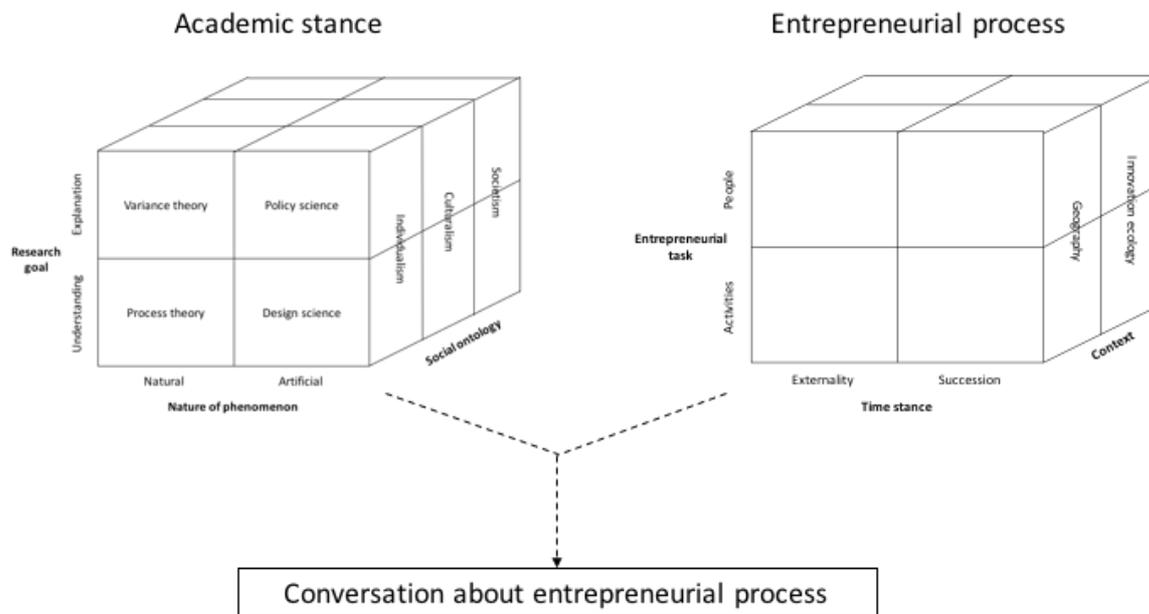


Figure 3: A meta map of conversations about entrepreneurial process

The value of the meta map is twofold. First, it can help identify relevant academic communities behind the conversations. Rather than conduct a generic search on ‘entrepreneurial process’, with the resulting challenge of having to recreate a similar map in order to make sense of the overwhelming volume of papers that arises, the map can help define beforehand what one might be looking for. This can help sift through a network of concepts, theories, and phenomena and thus facilitate communication and scholarly development. In addition to the focal community that the map helps identify, there are also adjacent communities both in terms of academic stance and focal point. This in turn can help frame the contribution of a work in terms of connections it might build to those communities.

Second, the meta map can facilitate the publishing process particularly in terms of framing papers and selecting reviewers. By signaling clearly the focal point of process that a paper addresses and the academic stance from which it is addressed, authors can create a gateway to an audience and potential reviewers. In addition, by raising awareness of adjacent audiences, there is an opportunity to add constructive voices that can help develop the work

without offering impractical criticism that simply reflects an insurmountable distance on the map of conversations.

In conclusion, by studying entrepreneurial process we inevitably “fix” it in the medium of our research output. As we communicate through our outputs and look to develop a sense of rigor by which to organize them, there is a natural fragmentation that occurs in terms of pushing for refinement of the representations that the outputs create. This in turn leads to moving from the model of reality to the reality of the model (Bourdieu, 1990), whereby one can lose sight of the bigger picture. We avoid that by re-uniting the realities of different conversations about entrepreneurial process. In the words of Nietzsche, “the more eyes, different eyes, we know how to train on the same thing, the more complete our ‘idea’ of this thing, our ‘objectivity’, will be” (2007:87).

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