

Envisioning Entrepreneurship's Future: Introducing Me-Search and Research Agendas

Entrepreneurship Theory and
Practice

2021, Vol. 45(5) 955–966

© The Author(s) 2021

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/10422587211026872

journals.sagepub.com/home/etp



Dean A. Shepherd¹ , Johan Wiklund² , and Dimo Dimov³ 

Abstract

The future of the field of entrepreneurship is bright primarily because of the many research opportunities to make a difference. However, as scholars how can we find these opportunities and choose the ones most likely to contribute to the literature? This essay introduces me-search and a special issue of research-agenda papers from leading scholars as tools for blazing new trails in entrepreneurship research. Me-search and the agenda papers point to the importance of solving a practical problem; problematizing, contextualizing, and abstracting entrepreneurship research; and using empirical theorizing to explore entrepreneurial phenomena.

Keywords

cognition/knowledge/learning, creativity/innovation, decision making, entrepreneurial behavior/bricolage, entrepreneurial orientation

Look to the future because that is where you'll spend the rest of your life (George Burns).

Introduction

This essay's purpose is to focus on future research that will contribute to our knowledge of entrepreneurial phenomena. We hope to do this in two ways. First, we introduce me-search as an approach that scholars can use to generate streams of research that they are capable and motivated to pursue and are most likely to offer something new and useful to the field. Second, we introduce the research agenda papers of the special issue that reflect on where “we” (as entrepreneurship field) have been and speculate on productive paths forward. We hope you consider me-search as part of your research portfolio and find some suggestions for future research useful as you map your path forward as an entrepreneurship scholar.

¹Notre Dame University, IN, USA

²Syracuse University, NY, USA

³University of Bath, UK

Corresponding Author:

Dean A. Shepherd, Notre Dame University, Mendoza College of Business, Notre Dame, IN 46556, USA.

Email: Dshepherd@nd.edu

Me-Search for Contributions to Entrepreneurship

Me-search focuses scholarly attention on the future based on one's personal experiences (see Wiklund, 2016). This me-search approach is a useful tool for generating research opportunities in which one has idiosyncratic knowledge and is motivated to see it through to publication. Although we have not always followed this approach, it has led to research outcomes for which we are most proud. For example, Shepherd used the experience of the failure of his father's business to develop a stream of research on the role of grief in learning from failure. He used the loss of his Auntie Shirley's house to a bushfire to develop a stream of research on compassion venturing and resilience. He also used the experiences of coauthors to explore their me-search on veterans disabled in combat, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, people living in the slums of India, expedition cruise ships in Norway, the refugee crises and terrorist attacks in Germany, inclusive growth in rural India, and so on.

Likewise, Wiklund's experience with mental health issues led to his interest in how entrepreneurship relates to psychiatric diagnoses, mental well-being, and diversity. This work started almost a decade ago and has been his main research focus since. This me-search has forged many productive working relationships in which scholars, entrepreneurs, and students share experiences and create new knowledge. Therefore, this me-search has led to a new stream of research at the intersection of entrepreneurship and clinical psychology.

For Dimov, life experience—with its shifts, serendipity, and unpredictability—has been a constant source of reflection on entrepreneurship as a gateway to a different future. Looking back with the clarity of hindsight at past selves—a schoolboy studying hard to become a diplomat, a young professional mapping out a career in the hospitality industry, a hotel finance director attending a PhD program induction with little idea of what academia was—Dimov has been fascinated by entrepreneurs' forward-looking hopeful stances in which they construct a future that did not previously exist. Based on our own experiences, we offer the following recommendation:

Recommendation 1: Add to your research portfolio some me-search (and coauthors' me-search) to generate novel and useful contributions to the entrepreneurship field and beyond.

There are some challenges with conducting me-search. First, a tenet of me-search is that we can use our idiosyncratic knowledge to provide unique insights into a phenomenon and motivate us to conduct and publish research explaining the phenomenon. However, there must be some balance between the personal and the universality of the experience. For example, a challenge with conducting me-search into the COVID-19 pandemic is that most people worldwide, including most scholars, have some experience dealing with the pandemic. Therefore, scholars writing about COVID-19 may find it difficult to convince reviewers and editors of the relevance of one's perspective. Second, with a substantial ubiquitous event, one is concerned that one is jumping on the bandwagon of a hot topic that may soon flare out. As of June 2021, scholars have flooded journals with COVID-19 papers. Finally, even if accepted for publication, the paper's longevity may be short as life returns to (a new) normal after the pandemic passes. In this way, the practical and theoretical importance of the research may be short-lived.

These challenges are not new. Scholars face these issues when they consider starting a new research stream, especially when it relates to a hot topic. We highlight these challenges not to discourage such research. On the contrary, we hope to encourage me-searching the important events of our lives by offering some recommendations for overcoming (or lessening) these research challenges. Our recommendations in this essay involve problematizing, abstracting, (re) combining, inducting, abducting, and contextualizing.

Me-Search and Problematizing the Entrepreneurship Literature

Problematization refers to a “methodology for identifying and challenging assumptions that underlie existing theories and based on that, generating research questions that lead to the development of more interesting and influential theories within management studies” (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011, p. 248). Me-search can be a useful tool in problematizing an entrepreneurship literature and its theories to develop research questions that are intertwined with personal motivation, the basis for a contribution, and a focal audience. Using me-search to problematize the literature provides a basis for questioning scholars’ weakly-held assumptions. However, such an approach may lead to research questions that challenge people’s strongly held assumptions. Challenging people’s strongly held assumptions will be a tougher route to publication because readers, including editors and reviewers, may be unwilling to give up these assumptions. Indeed, we need to look for the “interesting” as occupying a Goldilocks position between the obvious and the absurd (Davis, 1971). We do not want to dissuade scholars from challenging strongly held assumptions, but they should go in with a realistic understanding of the challenges.

Shepherd problematized the literature on learning from failure by using his experiences with the failure of his father’s business to challenge the weakly held assumption that learning from failure is automatic and instantaneous. Instead, he found that failure generated grief, which required a process of recovery before an entrepreneur could learn from the experience. He and Trent Williams used the bushfire experience (that took aunty Shirley’s house) to problematize the venture emergence literature and challenge the assumption that ventures take time (months or years) to emerge. Instead, their me-search led to theorizing on the rapid formation of new ventures (within hours or days) driven by compassion.

Similarly, Wiklund used his me-search to problematize the entrepreneurship human capital and capabilities literature and much of the psychology literature, to question the assumption that ADHD is a disability. Instead, he showed that ADHD could represent a resource that generates advantages in specific entrepreneurial contexts. Dimov’s approach has been to problematize the relationship between scholar and entrepreneur, from subject-object to subject-subject. Just as a past self is not a simple object of explanation for a future self, an entrepreneur is not an anonymous object, defined or validated by the observation of what ultimately happens. Rather than looking *at* entrepreneurs, scholars can look *with* entrepreneurs to provide a different perspective of entrepreneurship scholarship and entrepreneurial phenomena. We display these examples to illustrate how scholars can problematize a literature or theory to generate important research questions. Based on the above, we offer the following:

Recommendation 2: Use me-search to problematize entrepreneurship theories in the literature to generate research questions that challenge scholars’ weakly (and perhaps, strongly) held assumptions.

Abstracting From Me-Search

Me-search is based on oneself because we have an interest in our own experiences. The same likely applies to readers: “I am interested in reading about you if I can learn something about myself.” Indeed, scholars are interested in generalizing explanations and models beyond another individual’s experiences. Therefore, me-search faces a challenge similar to inductive research based on a single case. In both research contexts, the researcher needs to abstract the raw data to aggregate theoretical constructs and connect those aggregate constructs in a more generalizable or readily transferable model. This generalizability can be particularly challenging when conducting me-search because experiences are deeply personal and challenging to extract the

general from the specific and personal. By systematically asking how unique experiences relate to general concepts and theories, it is possible to take me-search and abstract it to broader constructs and relationships. This way, readers can more readily contextualize the abstract theorizing to their personal or research experiences. For example, Shepherd (2003, p. 320) tells the story of his father's reaction to the failure of the family business:

When our family business died, my father exhibited a number of worrying emotions. There were numbness and disbelief that this business he had created twenty odd years ago was no longer "alive." There was some anger toward the economy, competitors, and debtors. A stronger emotion than anger was that of guilt and self-blame: he felt guilty that he had caused the failure of the business, that it could no longer be passed on to my brother, and that, as a result, he had failed not only as a businessperson but also as a father. These feelings caused him distress and anxiety. He felt the situation was hopeless and became withdrawn and, at times, depressed.

However, the rest of the article theorized more abstractly about the constructs of grief, emotion regulation, learning, and motivation in the failure context.

Similarly, when conducting interviews with entrepreneurs diagnosed with ADHD, Wiklund et al. (2016) developed a conceptual model of how ADHD symptoms relate to entrepreneurial decision making, action, and outcomes. While the model is built explicitly from empirical observations and interviews, these findings corroborate personal experiences of decision making, action, and outcomes in similar situations. Consistent across these examples is using a tangible set of experiences and then abstracting them to offer a more generalizable or transferable theory. Based on the above, we offer the following:

Recommendation 3: Abstract from me-search to theoretical constructs and relationships that are more generalizable or transferable.

Combining Me-Search with Knowledge Elements at Hand

Me-search often starts with personal experience with a phenomenon. The next step in the process is to determine how to approach this phenomenon. The me-searcher can use many different theoretical lenses to offer a perspective and explanation of a phenomenon, but which theoretical lens(es) should be adopted? A first step toward me-searching the phenomenon is to consider the theories and literatures (constructs and relationships) with which the me-searcher is most familiar. Those theories likely resonate with the me-searcher on a personal level. Therefore, there is likely an inherent fit between the phenomenon and the theory, with the me-searcher connecting the two. The same may go for the me-searcher's most familiar methods, existing data, and set of coauthors. In this way, me-search involves looking at the resources and capabilities the scholar has at hand and combining and recombining them with personal experiences to generate a research opportunity and a plausible theoretical story of the phenomenon. This process is consistent with entrepreneurs engaged in bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005). Indeed, Boxenbaum and Rouleau (2011) explained how scholars use bricolage to "assemble various knowledge elements into new organizational theories." We argue that me-search provides some of the knowledge elements that a researcher has at hand and can facilitate experimenting (perhaps as thought experiments) with different combinations and recombinations of knowledge elements to develop a plausible theoretical model.

Indeed, me-search can serve as an anchor for disciplined imagination (Weick, 1989), combining different knowledge elements to develop a theoretical model, that is, given my personal

experiences with the phenomenon, does the combination of knowledge elements (from, for example, a thought experiment) seem plausible. This process is likely highly creative, relatively costless, and could lead to a research opportunity that the researcher is already somewhat capable of exploiting and motivated to pursue. For example, Shepherd and Williams used their me-search in helping people in need and combined it with their existing knowledge elements of startups, entrepreneurial action, and cognition to construct research opportunities on compassionate venturing and resilience. This basis of a research opportunity also highlighted knowledge elements that they needed to acquire to build and communicate plausible theoretical models. This process is ongoing.

Similarly, ADHD represents a collection of traits observable (and often diagnosed) in childhood. These traits and the associated lived experience tend to shape the individual across the span of their lives. The insight of how ADHD observed early in life potentially influences outcomes decades later sparked Wiklund's and coauthors' interest in how other aspects of childhood could potentially influence adult life in the entrepreneurial context. Combining knowledge elements and interests led them to investigate how childhood adversity influences entrepreneurial outcomes.

Finally, reflections on the open-ended nature of the entrepreneurial journey, with the acting entrepreneur at its center, prompted Dimov to explore new perspectives and expressive language, taking him beyond the familiarity of his PhD training. A foray into complexity science, design science and the philosophy of mind and language provided new ways of seeing and understanding the entrepreneurial experience. In this way, although entrepreneurial opportunity has been a central theme of his research over time, the topic has been continuously refreshed with each new perspective.

These examples demonstrate how me-search provided some knowledge elements and how me-searchers combined these knowledge elements with other knowledge elements at hand to generate research opportunities that were of interest to them and for which they were capable of exploiting. Based on the above, we recommend the following recommendation:

Recommendation 4: Use me-search as knowledge elements to be combined and recombined with other knowledge elements at hand to construct a plausible theoretical model.

Inducting From Me-Search

When scholars find it difficult to combine their me-search knowledge elements with those from the existing literature (e.g., the research is so unique or novel that it is relatively distant from the existing literature) or the me-search research question challenges people's strongly held assumption, the researcher may need to rely on inductive research methods to exploit the me-search opportunity. For some researchers, an inductive approach requires them to learn a new research method. Learning a new research method also opens new avenues for "seeing" and "constructing" research opportunities. While learning a new method (such as an inductive research method) adds a new tool to the researcher's toolbox and provides an additional research lens to view the world, it is not without risks.

Inductive researchers, like all researchers, have specific expectations for how to construct and communicate such papers (and there are different "camps" within this broad method). It will take time to learn the new method and its peculiarities in publishing these studies. Our simple advice is to find exemplars of inductive studies, study them, and follow their idiosyncrasies in structuring and otherwise communicating one's inductive theory. For example, Mike Haynie (a former captain in the Air Force) set up an entrepreneurial boot camp for military veterans injured in

combat in Afghanistan and Iraq (me-teaching and me-service). As an instructor at the Airforce Academy he felt that he had trained individuals to go to war but not how to come home. He wanted to rectify this situation, so Hayne and Shepherd set out to me-search it. Despite their ignorance of inductive methods, they realized it was the only way to address the research questions that interested them. They read texts on inductive methods and compared and contrasted different inductive studies (Eisenhardt studies, Gioia studies, and Langly studies). Despite extensive work, the process and outcomes were highly rewarding. This experience with learning inductive methods opened Shepherd's eyes to the possibilities of this method to address other me-search opportunities. Based on the above, we offer the following:

Recommendation 5: Highly novel me-search may require inductive research methods and alternate data sources to construct a plausible theory.

Abducting From Me-Search

Me-search can lead to a hunch—a feeling that something else is going on, conditions have changed, or an anomaly that difficult to explain using existing theories) fact. This hunch can start a process of inquiry called abduction. Abduction refers to “the creative act of constructing explanations to account for surprising observations in the course of experience (hypothesis generation)” (Hansen, 2008, p. 457). Abduction is a process of inquiry that starts with a guess and uses doubt to fuel inquiry (Locke et al., 2008; Shepherd & Sutcliffe, 2011). However, it may be a slow process for finding a plausible theoretical explanation of the phenomenon (because guesses likely lead to many dead ends before finding a complete path). Furthermore, most journals are not yet fully accepting of research that is neither deductive nor inductive. In an attempt to make abduction more palatable, Shepherd and Suddaby (2017, p. 59) offered pragmatic empirical theorizing as “an approach that uses quantitative empirical findings to stimulate theorizing.” Empirical theorizing allows me-search to “scratch an itch” by exploring a hunch empirically and then theorizing to provide a plausible explanation of the empirical findings. This approach to communicating exploratory research is transparent about how the research happened and, if it becomes an accepted and mainstream approach to theorizing, should eliminate the unethical practice of HARKing (i.e., hypothesizing after results are known).

For example, having worked with entrepreneurship policy in various capacities, Wiklund is interested in entrepreneurial ecosystems, questioning the extent to which extensive government spending on supporting entrepreneurship leads to intended benefits. Given the complexity of ecosystems and the broad question, it is difficult to generate narrow hypotheses that would address this topic. Therefore, instead of posing hypotheses and conducting traditional regression analyses, he and his co-authors relied on exploratory bivariate analyses that allowed them to probe into how a specific national entrepreneurship support program panned out. These findings provided the basis for then attempting to construct a plausible theory.

Abduction represents a major thinking logic for design science, in that one reasons from a desired outcome, to explore how to approach the current situation, with theory operating as a forward-looking, framing device (Romme & Dimov, 2021). In this regard, the very act of studying entrepreneurship can be regarded as a design process aimed at generating knowledge that can help entrepreneurs think forward and reflect on their experiences. Framing entrepreneurship as an open-ended, iterative journey with opportunities as design artifacts that entrepreneurs articulate and communicate via language can bring theory and practice into closer alignment. Based on the above, we offer the following:

Recommendation 6: A me-searcher can use empirical theorizing to explore a hunch, an anomaly, or anything that stimulates a guess of personal interest to the researcher.

Me-Search to Contextualize Entrepreneurship Research

Me-search provides insight into the role of context that can extend the boundaries of current theories or add context into existing models. Context refers to “situational or environmental stimuli that impinge upon focal actors and are often located at a different level of analysis from those actors” (Johns, 2018, p. 22). Welter (2011) argues that entrepreneurship research needs to be more contextualized. We can use me-search to inform our understanding of context and use that contextualization to generate new research opportunities, for example, an extension to an existing theory to accommodate the entrepreneurship context, which tends to be more extreme. For example, Wiklund explored ADHD and other cognitive conditions considered a liability in traditional work contexts and theorized how ADHD and other cognitive conditions become advantageous in some entrepreneurial contexts. His me-search into mental conditions opened up an important stream of research on neurodiversity because he shifted our assumptions from the normal work context to specific entrepreneurial contexts that differed in important ways.

Me-search can also be used to find the context in which a theory does not apply. For example, if an existing theory appears to explain one’s thoughts, feelings, or actions, it can be useful to ask, “When doesn’t it apply to me?” By exploring when it does not apply, the me-search adds a boundary condition or extends a theory by adding a moderator or a mediator to the model. Therefore, research can facilitate theorizing by incorporating context into the model but keeping in mind our point about the importance of abstracting me-search (detailed above). Therefore, it is important to find a balance between contextualizing through me-search and abstracting from the me-search.

Recommendation 7: Use me-search to contextualize existing theories to create boundary conditions or extend theories by including context as a moderator or mediator.

Having introduced a me-search approach to generating interesting and useful future research, we now turn to the content of the future research opportunities offered by leading scholars of the field (and us).

The Research Agenda Papers of the Special Issue

This special issue is the third of *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* focusing on the future of our field—each special issue appearing roughly a decade apart (Davidsson et al., 2001; Wiklund et al., 2011). We thought it would be good to bring the most recent contributors back a decade later to reflect on where entrepreneurship has been and where it is headed over the next decade or two. This special issue is the outcome of that idea. There are 11 papers in the special issue. In line with our model of me-search, we bundled these papers (after we had accepted them for publication) in terms of (1) solving practical problems, (2) problematizing the entrepreneurship literature, (3) contextualizing entrepreneurship research, (4) abstracting entrepreneurial elements, and (5) empirically theorizing on entrepreneurial phenomena.

Solving a Practical Problem

The idea for the Shepherd and Gruber (“The lean startup framework: Closing the academic divide,” this issue) came about from recognizing the popularity of the Lean Startup framework with practitioners and Shepherd’s desire to teach about it in class. However, Shepherd wants to teach material justified in the academic literature and found insufficient scholarly attention on this important topic. Given that Gruber has a similar interest and has written a practitioner text on opportunity navigation, they set out to build on the practitioner literature on the lean startup framework (i.e., the bones) and put some scholarly heft behind some of those practitioner assertions (i.e., put meat on the bones). The authors focused on the lean startup’s building blocks—navigating market opportunities, designing business models, validating learning, using minimum viable products, and pivoting versus persevering—in laying out a research agenda for scholars. The belief (and hope) is that such future research will help to close the academic-practice gap.

George, Merrill, and Schillebeeckx (“Digital sustainability and entrepreneurship: How digital innovations are helping tackle climate change and sustainable development,” this issue) built on George’s interest in addressing grand challenges by focusing on the components of two trends. They combine the trend in concern over the climate crisis with the trend of using digital technologies to focus on how the latter can help solve the former. Interestingly, while they note that management and entrepreneurship scholars have not paid much attention to the climate crisis, entrepreneurs in practice have. Therefore, this study begins to close the academic-practice divide on an important topic. Consistent with the me-search notions mentioned above, George and colleagues have taken their *personal interest* in addressing grand challenges, their *knowledge* of digital technologies and innovation, and combined them with the climate crisis to *abstract* from the data six managerial problems obstructing sustainability and how digital technologies provide the pathways and tools to address these problems.

While Shepherd and Gruber (this issue) and George, Merrill, and Schenkenhofer (this issue) look to practice to inform scholarship, hoping, in turn, to inform practice and reduce the academic-practice gap, Dimov, Schaefer, and Pistrui (“Look who is talking ... and who is listening: Finding an integrative ‘we’ voice in entrepreneurial scholarship,” this issue) take a different approach. They see the academic-practice gap as a linguistic barrier arising from different practical interests. The disconnect between entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship scholars is due to not talking with each other. Specifically, entrepreneurs talk in the first person about their situation and are concerned with what they should do. In contrast, entrepreneurship scholars observe entrepreneurs to explain what they do and talk about them in the third person to other scholars. The authors proposed that a second-person approach can help develop an integrated “we” voice between the scholarly and practitioner worlds, positively impacting both and closing the gap between them. Talking to entrepreneurs through this second-person approach requires scholars to balance passively observing entrepreneurs with actively engaging them to gain insights into their reasoning and perspectives of important phenomena.

Problematizing the Entrepreneurship Literature

Carter, Charmers, and McKenzie (“Artificial intelligence and entrepreneurship: Implications for venture creation in the fourth industrial revolution,” this issue) focus on a technological trend in practice that has gained scholarly attention in strategy research, but only scant research in entrepreneurship. The technological trend is the use of artificial intelligence (AI). AI can generate a seismic shift in business practices and therefore represents an opportunity for scholars. The authors take a big picture perspective in developing what we know about AI from various theories across various fields and allow the authors to envisage “what could be” as they think about

AI in entrepreneurship. While AI has many possibilities for facilitating the entrepreneurial process, the authors acknowledge what they call the “liabilities of technology leverage.” In this balanced review of the possibilities of AI on entrepreneurship, the authors ask and begin to answer broader societal questions about technological change.

Sarasvathy (this issue) provides some theoretical tools to tackle some of the 21st century’s wicked problems. To do so, Sarasvathy challenges some commonly accepted assumptions of entrepreneurship research. Perhaps these assumptions are strongly held, so it will be interesting to see how others respond to these challenges (as editors of this special issue, we asked our authors to be bold and take risks). She challenges the assumption of (1) the pre-eminence of entrepreneurs’ goal of growing their ventures to become large organizations and (2) the assumption that churn involving creating many new ventures is best for an economy. In opposition to these assumptions, the author offers the notion of a middle class of business. These are new ventures that grow to middle size (but no larger) and endure over time. Sarasvathy proposes that these middle-class businesses can help co-create robust businesses and communities that generate increased well-being. The paper recommends research on endurance as the dependent variable of entrepreneurship, relying on intersubjectivity and exploring the role of education.

Contextualizing Entrepreneurship Research

Davidsson and Gruenhagen (“Fulfilling the promise: A review and agenda for new venture creation process research,” this issue) offers a comprehensive, systematic review of research on the new venture creation process over the last 30 years. This review is different from other reviews of new venture creation in a few ways. First, this review focused on the *process* of new venture creation, which provides a narrower scope of papers to review and the opportunity to dig deeper—doing so provided more insights into the new venture creation process as an event or pattern and distinguished between new venture creation as a dependent variable, independent variable, moderator, and mediator. Second, after detailing the state of affairs of new venture creation process research, the authors provide advice on topics for future research to build, extend or refine theory. Finally, based on Davidson’s passion for empirical research and research methods, the research agenda section of the paper offers suggestions for scholars on research design, sampling and case selection, and both measurement and analysis.

Patzelt, Preller, and Breugst (“Understanding the lifecycles of entrepreneurial teams and their ventures: An agenda for future research,” this issue) acknowledged the progress in our understanding of entrepreneurial teams and highlighted that this research is static. The paper’s purpose was to take this static perspective of entrepreneurial teams and make it dynamic by contextualizing the phenomenon in lifecycles. Specifically, the authors explain changes in the entrepreneurial process by adding and losing members throughout the formation, collaboration, and dissolution process. The authors highlight how an entrepreneurial team lifecycle is embedded in an venture’s lifecycle of inception, development, and decline. The entrepreneurial team cycle can work in each stage of the venture cycle in a double lifecycle framework. The authors use this double lifecycle framework to offer future research agenda.

Welter and Baker (“Moving contexts onto new roads: Clues from other disciplines,” this issue) review and reflect on papers that have followed Welter’s (2011) call for greater contextualization in entrepreneurship research. They acknowledge that while entrepreneurship scholars have made some progress in contextualizing entrepreneurship, they believe that these efforts have mostly traveled down well-trodden pathways. These well-trodden pathways take the context as too static and mechanistic. Therefore the authors suggest ways to inject greater dynamism in the contextualization of entrepreneurship theories. Specifically, they focus on how entrepreneurs “do” context in interacting with and enacting their context. They focus on the “where” and

“when” to highlight the potential of future research to add greater dynamism to entrepreneurship’s theories. Specifically, the authors focus on the importance of place as narrated, collected memories, and in a built environment, as context emerges, persists, and vanishes.

Abstracting Entrepreneurship Research

It is interesting to follow Welter and Baker and the other contextualizing papers with McMullen, Brownell, and Adams (“What makes an entrepreneurship study entrepreneurial? Toward a unified theory of entrepreneurial agency,” this issue). McMullen and colleagues acknowledge the importance of contextualizing entrepreneurship research but also recognize its limits. In the ultimate form of abstraction, this paper takes on the challenging task of defining the field by exploring the common core of entrepreneurship to enable the coherence and progress of the field. The abstracted elements “necessary for entrepreneurial agency to transform social structures through entrepreneur action” are ability, motivation, opportunity, institutions, and process skill. The authors then explore sub-communities that differ in their emphasis on these elements to offer research that can contribute to our understanding of the contextualization of entrepreneurship.

The next paper of this issue is a Delphi study of the editorial boards of *Journal Business Venturing* and *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice* on what entrepreneurship research will look like in (2013). Indeed, Van Gelderen, Wiklund, and McMullen (“A Delphi study of ETP and JBV editorial board members,” this issue) categorize (and thus abstract from) an array of future research opportunities. Specifically, this paper builds on the expertise and visions of the field’s senior scholars to look forward and anticipate the topics most important for contributing to our knowledge. The authors organize these potential research opportunities into categories based on what makes a good theory—the “who” (as entrepreneurial agent), the “why” (as the aim of the entrepreneurial agents), the “where” (as the context), the “how” (as the mode), and the “what” (will change). The authors do more than organize others’ thoughts of the future of the field and offer their own beliefs about where the field of entrepreneurship is heading (at the prompting of the special issue editors).

Empirically Theorizing on Entrepreneurial Phenomenon

Building on the notion of entrepreneurship heterogeneity, Audretsch, Lehmann, and Schenkenhofer (“A context-choice model of niche entrepreneurship,” this issue) set out to explore the prevalence of niche entrepreneurship (vis-à-vis scale entrepreneurship) across countries. Although not completely using an empirical theorizing approach (because the paper offers a theoretical basis for the study [Roberts, 2004]), the theoretical foundation was broad, did not lead to hypotheses, and the new insights arose from the interesting findings (more so than the deductive theorizing). Indeed, perhaps much of the empirical economic research is closer to abductive inquiry than deductive theory testing (a point to be debated by those more qualified than us). The authors base the study’s purpose on the premise that there is a “diverging spread of Niche and Silicon Valley entrepreneurship” and the authors “empirically investigate what kind of contexts are conducive for Niche Entrepreneurship.” Specifically, they explore the national context in terms of inheritance taxation, the system of corporate boards, legal origin, capital market development, economic geography, and vocational education. Therefore, this paper highlights the contexts that “reward” niche entrepreneurship and contexts that reward scale entrepreneurship. This study helps explain the prevalence of niche entrepreneurship across countries by investigating the nation’s economic context in which entrepreneurs are embedded.

Conclusion

In the course of the three special issues focusing on the future of entrepreneurship research over three decades, we have moved from the need to project external legitimacy within academia (i.e., the old distinct domain versus phenomenon conversation) to the need to live up to its promise in terms of social impact. We have moved from focusing on demonstrating legitimacy to reflecting the rich and complex social world within which entrepreneurship operates. In the spirit of Ashby's law of requisite variety (1956), which states that dealing with the diversity of problems of the world requires a repertoire of equal diversity, we have expanded our theoretical repertoire to recognize entrepreneurship as a meeting point of questions of practice, technology, social context, economic geographies, and etc. We hope that our efforts providing some guidance on conducting me-search will give scholars the tools and courage to use their own experiences to inform their theorizing to offer new insights into entrepreneurial phenomena. We also hope that the reflections from leading scholars on where we have been and where we are going (as a field) will stimulate interest and future work.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.


Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID IDs

Dean A. Shepherd  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4269-1826>

Johan Wiklund  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1105-2469>

Dimo Dimov  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0894-7736>

References

- Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2011). Generating research questions through problematization. *Academy of Management Review*, *36*(2), 247–271.
- Ashby, W. R. (1956). *An introduction to cybernetics*. Chapman & Hall.
- Baker, T., & Nelson, R. E. (2005). Creating something from nothing: Resource construction through entrepreneurial bricolage. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *50*(3), 329–366. <https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.2005.50.3.329>
- Boxenbaum, E., & Rouleau, L. (2011). New knowledge products as bricolage: Metaphors and scripts in organizational theory. *Academy of Management Review*, *36*(2), 272–296.
- Davidsson, P., Low, M. B., & Wright, M. (2001). Editor's introduction: Low and MacMillan ten years on—Achievements and future directions for entrepreneurship research. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, *25*(4), 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104225870102500401>
- Davis, M. S. (1971). That's interesting! Towards a phenomenology of sociology and a sociology of phenomenology. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, *1*(2), 309–344.
- Hansen, H. (2008). Abduction. In D. Barry & H. Hansen (Eds.), *New approaches in management and organization* (pp. 454–463). Sage.
- Johns, G. (2018). Advances in the treatment of context in organizational research. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, *5*(1), 21–46. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-032117-104406>

- Locke, K., Golden-Biddle, K., & Feldman, M. S. (2008). Perspective—making doubt generative: Rethinking the role of doubt in the research process. *Organization Science*, 19(6), 907–918. <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1080.0398>
- Roberts, J. (2004). *Organizational design for performance and growth*. Oxford University Press.
- Romme, A. G. L., & Dimov, D. (2021). Mixing oil with water: Framing and theorizing in management research informed by design science. *Designs*, 5(1), 13. <https://doi.org/10.3390/designs5010013>
- Shepherd, D. A. (2003). Learning from business failure: Propositions of grief recovery for the self-employed. *Academy of Management Review*, 28(2), 318–328. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2003.9416377>
- Shepherd, D. A., & Suddaby, R. (2017). Theory building: A review and integration. *Journal of Management*, 43(1), 59–86.
- Shepherd, D. A., & Sutcliffe, K. M. (2011). Inductive top-down theorizing: A source of new theories of organization. *Academy of Management Review*, 36(2), 361–380.
- Weick, K. E. (1989). Theory construction as disciplined imagination. *Academy of Management Review*, 14(4), 516–531. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1989.4308376>
- Welter, F. (2011). Contextualizing entrepreneurship—conceptual challenges and ways forward. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 35(1), 165–184. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2010.00427.x>
- Wiklund, J. (2016). Re-search = me-search. In D. Audretsch & E. Lehman (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to the makers of modern entrepreneurship* (pp. 245–257). Routledge.
- Wiklund, J., Davidsson, P., Audretsch, D. B., & Karlsson, C. (2011). The future of entrepreneurship research. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 35(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6520.2010.00420.x>
- Wiklund, J., Patzelt, H., & Dimov, D. (2016). Entrepreneurship and psychological disorders: How ADHD can be productively harnessed. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights*, 6(4), 14–20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2016.07.001>

Author Biographies

Dean Shepherd is the Ray and Milann Siegfried Professor of Entrepreneurship at the Mendoza College of Business, Notre Dame University. Dean received his doctorate from Bond University (Australia). His research investigates entrepreneurial decision making, responding with resilience to adversity, and learning from experimentation (including failure).

Johan Wiklund is the Al Berg chair and professor of Entrepreneurship at Whitman School of Management, Syracuse University, USA, and professor Two at Nord University, Norway. His research interests include entrepreneurship and mental health as well as the entry, performance, and exit of entrepreneurial firms.

Dimo Dimov is Professor of Entrepreneurship and Innovation at University of Bath, UK. Dimo received his doctorate from the London Business School. His research focuses on entrepreneurial thinking, processes, and practice.