Article

Concepts as Mirrors and Torches: Rigor and Relevance as Scholarly Performativity

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Abstract

This article aims to further the rigor and relevance discussion in entrepreneurship studies. It argues that tensions arise due to an adherence to a rigor-as-correspondence perspective, which can be addressed through the advancement of a rigor-as-performativity perspective. Entrepreneurship concepts are tools used to define, represent, and explain entrepreneurial experience, yet how these tools hook onto the world is a question of performance and application rather than unambiguous correspondence. We advocate for a view of rigor and relevance that appreciates the torch-like features of concepts—how they help entrepreneurs deal with the world so that they may fulfil their intentions—whilst retaining an understanding that the future is unknowable and change a constant.

Keywords

performativity, social practices, entrepreneurial action, speech acts, correspondence

Introduction

Rigor and relevance are dual values for entrepreneurship research that regulate how we develop and use concepts to understand, predict, and enhance entrepreneurial practice (Dimov et al., 2020). A gap between rigor and relevance in entrepreneurship studies is lamentable for it implies that our concepts are not useful in practice, that scholars prioritize rigor over relevance and diligence over usefulness, as defined by disciplinary training and incentivized by university systems (Gartner et al., 2006). Persistent concerns about such a gap suggest that researchers "spend too much time and effort on research that is only of interest and value to them and their peers, while the bill for the research is being paid by those who get little or nothing in return" (Wiklund et al., 2019, p. 420). While

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entrepreneurship research originates from a tradition that remained in close contact with practitioners, there are fears that it has become an "increasingly institutionalized field legitimized by highly ranked journals and the ivory towerism of academia" (Frank & Landström, 2016, p. 70). These views seem to imply that a divide between theory and practice is a necessary price to pay for the field to be considered a legitimate and distinctive scientific domain.

Rigor in scientific activity pertains to the diligence and care in creating and applying concepts.[1] Because we always use concepts for a purpose, any consideration of rigor should be done in the light of that purpose, prompting us to reflect on how our concepts stand in relation to entrepreneurship practices. Similarly, entrepreneurs use concepts for their purposes (e.g., "negotiate," "launch" and "lean start-up") and any consideration of their rigor should be done in the light of their intentions. As Wittgenstein reminds us (1958, p. 108), "the question 'what is a word really?' is analogous to 'what is a piece in chess?'." Concepts are, in other words, tools that enable scholars and entrepreneurs to make sense of and act in the world. As such, their relation to the world can be characterized by two distinct *directions of fit*, namely concept-to-world and world-to-concept (Searle, 1979, 1983). On the one hand, we can aim for our concepts to fit the world, accounting for and making sense of its facts; on the other, we can aim for the world to fit our concepts, opening new possibilities and making new facts. In a concept-to-world fit, we are rigorous when we focus on the rightful application of concepts in certain circumstances, which ensures that we use language in a precise, thoughtful, and careful manner. But we are also rigorous when we diligently draw out the implications of adopting new concepts, travelling down new inferential pathways (Brandom, 2015). Respectively, we can distinguish correspondence and performative perspectives of rigor, one prompting us to metaphorically hold a mirror to reality and the other prompting us to shine a torch ahead to make or reveal a new reality.

In this paper, we unpack the notion of directions of fit to reflect on and reshape the perceived divide between rigor and relevance. To do so, we highlight the tacit commitments of entrepreneurship scholarship to a rigor-as-correspondence perspective, revealed by an emphasis on objective and valid theory-data correspondence (Maula & Stam, 2020). To open the door for an alternative way through which such concepts can be deployed, we review McMullen and Shepherd's (2006) seminal article to illuminate problems of extension and objectivity related to the concept of "third-person opportunities." We then develop a rigor-as-performativity perspective to understand scholarly work in a world in which entrepreneurial performances are still unfinished, intentions are at center stage and errors of intentional performance, errors of judgment, evolution of intent, and unfortunate occurrences are all possible. Finally, we discuss the implications of a rigor-as-performativity perspective for the ongoing rigor and relevance discussion. In particular, we suggest future research can be both rigorous and relevant by: (1) paying greater analytical attention to entrepreneurship practices (speech acts, performances, reproductions, transformations, and relations); (2) adopting a future-focused research orientation, and: (3) strengthening the impact of concepts by supporting moments of co-creation and practical usefulness.

Our work contributes to the advancement of entrepreneurship scholarship by offering an expanded and empowered sense of our main tools, namely the concepts that constitute our theories. Concepts are two-sided tools—a mirror on one side and a torch on the other—with which we can engage with the external world, both making sense of what has already transpired and looking ahead to new possibilities. Accordingly, concepts are valued as versatile tools not only for describing and explaining but also enabling a diversity of entrepreneurial performances.

Concepts and Directions of Fit

In this section, we follow Anscombe (1957) and Searle (1979), as well as recent applications of their work to entrepreneurship (e.g., Sergeeva et al., 2021), to develop a theoretically-driven conceptualization of rigor in scholarly pursuits. It identifies two different directions of fit between concepts and entrepreneurship practices—that is, concept-to-world and world-to-concept. We describe how both directions of fit have implications for the conceptualization of rigor (rigor-as-correspondence or rigor-as-performativity). This importantly enables us to expand our conceptualization of setbacks or discrepancies.

Directions of Fit

We begin by recognizing that the relationship between entrepreneurship and scholarship involve relating entrepreneurial action to concepts: entrepreneurs aim to do what they say; scholars aim to say what entrepreneurs do. To illustrate the interplay between concepts and entrepreneurial action, Anscombe (1957) invites us to imagine (1) a person going around town (shopper) with a shopping list in hand and (2) a detective—not privy to the shopper's list—following the shopper and making a record of what the shopper purchased. The items the shopper bought stand in different relation with the list they hold and with the record made by the detective. For the shopper, their list is an expression of their intention to buy certain things; for the detective, their record is an expression of what they observe, a factual account of what the shopper bought.

Searle (1979) uses the same example to illustrate the difference between concept-to-world and a world-to-concept direction of fit. In a concept-to-world fit, one aims for their concepts to match the world. This is the relationship between the detective's record (concept) and what the shopper bought (world). If the detective realized that the shopper had bought cabbage rather than lettuce (as the detective had recorded), then the detective can simply correct their record by erasing "lettuce" and writing "cabbage." In this way, the detective's rigor is affirmed by whether they get the world right in their concepts. We call this a rigor-as-correspondence perspective.

In contrast, in a world-to-concept fit, one aims for the world to match their concepts. This is the relationship between the shopper's list (concept) and what they bought (world). If the shopper realized they had bought cabbage rather than lettuce, they cannot simply correct their list—they have to correct their performance by going back to the shop and buying lettuce, that is, they need to correct the world. In this way, the shopper's concept is fulfilled by getting the world to match it. The rigor of their effort lies in their ability to deal with the world through the lens of their shopping list. We call this a rigor-as-performativity perspective.

In most entrepreneurship research, we can readily see rigor used in the sense of correspondence, analogous to ensuring that the shopper's actions are correctly reflected in the detective's record. Here the scholar is committed to rigor by getting the world right in their concepts, validating them by whether they are matching the world. Under such a concept-to-world fit, rigor becomes a matter of affirming correspondence. The focus is on explaining the facts by developing accounts that match the entrepreneur's actual deliberations. However, scholars also have the choice to adopt a stance of world-to-concept direction of fit: it recognizes that it is the future-focused intentionality through which entrepreneurs engage with the world that provides insight into how they understand and subsequently perform in the world. Under this stance, rigor becomes a matter of enabling action possibilities to bring about new facts that are aligned with aspirations.

Setbacks and Discrepancies

Distinguishing between concept-to-world and world-to-concept directions of fit importantly enables us to conceptualzse setbacks and discrepancies, so as to avoid explaining entrepreneurial action only by its *successful* fulfilment of intentions. Anscombe (1957) shows that the shopper's intention is different from the detective's record in the following sense: if there is a discrepancy between what the shopper buys and what is on their list, the mistake is not in the list but in the shopper's performance; in contrast, if there is a discrepancy between the detective's record and what the shopper buys, the mistake is in the record. Anscombe concludes with the distinction between mistake in (intentional) performance and a mistake in (observational) judgment: "That is, we do not say: What you said was a mistake, because it was supposed to describe what you did and did not, but: What you did was a mistake, because it was not in accordance with what you said" (1957, p. 57).

In a rigor-as-correspondence perspective, we are guided by the settled facts, aiming to ensure that they are recorded and explained correctly. We can, like the detective, correct our records on the basis of whether they agree with the facts. In such an account, knowledge of the entrepreneur's intention and the vagaries of the entrepreneurial process are superfluous because entrepreneurs have already finished their performance. We can build explanatory accounts entirely from hindsight, ensuring that our concepts correspond to the settled facts.

However, in a rigor-as-performative perspective, we are guided by the entrepreneur's intention, aiming to explain and improve performance in the light of it. We can, like the shopper, seek to correct the performance in order to generate the desired facts. This is a world not yet settled, in which performance is still unfinished and ongoing, and where discrepancies between entrepreneurial intention and desired outcomes can be due to five possible reasons:

1. A mistake or error in performance. Imagine that an entrepreneur sells low-quality baked goods instead of high-quality as intended. In this case, the entrepreneur lacks the focus, competencies, discipline, or capabilities to practice what is intended.
2. An error of judgment in choosing the performance context (e.g., selling high-quality baked goods in a shopping mall with high competition). Here the entrepreneur might have performed differently in a different context. However, this is an error of judgment only if the entrepreneur had known beforehand what eventually transpires, for example, that they chose the wrong entry point in a market.
3. An error of judgment in acting. In this case, the entrepreneur exercizes poor judgment in trying to do what is largely deemed impossible, for example, Elizabeth Holmes's ambition for Theranos to do hundreds of tests from a single drop of blood (Liubertė & Dimov, 2021). Had the entrepreneur known this and still acted, then we could speak of error of judgment in their action plan and describe entrepreneurs as delusional, overly optimistic or plain fraudulent. Had the entrepreneur not known this, then no one would consider an error in the action plan as an error in performance.
4. The entrepreneur changing their mind (e.g., one decides they no longer want to sell high-quality baked goods but want to sell baking equipment instead). This is about evolving intent and it arises in response to contingencies in the entrepreneurial journey (McMullen & Dimov, 2013).
5. Discrepancies can be due to "bad luck," that is unfavourable contingencies beyond the control of the entrepreneur which could have turned out differently. For example, an entrepreneur becoming ill and unable to perform or a natural disaster that changes the world.

In this light, different perspectives of rigor influence how we describe and explain entrepreneurial outcomes based on how many of the above reasons we can include in our theoretical accounts. Concepts in a performativity perspective have recourse to the full range of reasons for discrepancies between intention and performance in a way that can be fed forward, treating the future as open—just like the horizon, always ahead of us. On the other hand, concepts in a correspondence perspective have recourse to only reasons 2 and 3 above. In this world, there are no errors of intentional performance, evolution of intent or bad luck; there are only judgments by those who did or did not get the world right. In other words, concepts are related to entrepreneurial action entirely from hindsight, ensuring that they correspond to the settled facts.

In the next section, we review the benefits and limitations of the correspondence perspective, before discussing the performativity perspective and its implications for rigor and relevance.

Concepts as Mirrors: The Benefits and Limits of Rigor-as-Correspondence

Current thinking explains the existence of the rigor–relevance problem as derived from a misalignment between scholar and practitioner interests (i.e., theory vs. practice) (Berglund et al., 2018; Wiklund et al., 2019). In this section, we extend this explanation by grounding the crux of the problem in contemporary scholarship's tacit commitments to rigor-as-correspondence (Maula & Stam, 2020)—that is, rigorous scholarship which generates objective and valid theory-data correspondence. In this framing, solutions to the rigor–relevance problem have been posited as addressing the "problem of relevance," whilst retaining correspondence understandings and standards of rigor (Wiklund et al., 2019).

In contrast, we aim to delineate a "problem of rigor" by discussing the conceptual limitations embedded within rigor-as-correspondence, which is grounded in a concept-to-world direction of fit. In particular, we draw out two main limitations of rigor-as-correspondence as applied to the domain of entrepreneurship, specifically extension and objectivity. To do so, we have chosen McMullen and Shepherd's (2006) influential article as an exemplar case of rigorous work. As we will show, these limitations open the door for an alternative, complementary perspective of rigor, which we describe in the remainder of the article.

Overview of McMullen and Shepherd (2006)

An exemplar case is a single case that serves as an ideal or standard example of a larger group. We have chosen the McMullen and Shepherd (2006) article as a prominent example of rigor-as-correspondence theorizing. Below we offer a brief overview of the article, before providing a critical evaluation and re-assessment.

McMullen and Shepherd (2006) aim to make the conceptualizations of uncertainty and entrepreneurial action more rigorous. They develop a framework through which we can differentiate entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial action against certain external reference points. Inclusion and exclusion conditions set the necessary and sufficient means through which a case may be described as "entrepreneurial action" and be meaningfully mobilized in an explanatory framework. In this sense, "entrepreneurial action," and associated definitional concepts must provide the conditions for scholars to include and exclude cases, in order to set the groundwork for methods of achieving reliability, validity, and generalizability.

McMullen and Shepherd begin with the argument that past theories of entrepreneurship have considered two levels of theorizing—a system-level concerned with functioning of economic systems and an individual-level concerned with why some individuals are more likely than others to pursue possible opportunities for profit. The authors seek to integrate both levels in a multidimensional conceptualization of entrepreneurial action. To achieve this aim, they define entrepreneurial action *as profitable opportunity-seeking behavior set forth by a judgmental decision whether a third-person opportunity exists and whether it represents a first-person opportunity for profit*. They see this definition as inclusive of other conceptions of entrepreneurship (e.g., any specific taxonomy of behaviors that are thought to be especially "entrepreneurial" in nature), based on subscribing to Hebert and Link's (1988) position that "entrepreneurial action refers to *behavior in response to a judgmental decision under uncertainty about a possible opportunity for profit* (italics added) (2006, p. 134). The key premise of their theorizing is that "entrepreneurship is observable as a behavior that can be attributed to some definitive theoretical attribute capable of differentiating entrepreneur (actor) from non-entrepreneur (non-actor)" (2006, p. 136). The attribute relates to awareness and evaluation of third-person opportunity, defined as "a potential opportunity for someone in the marketplace" (p. 137) and serving as objective yet veiled beacon against which people generate noisy internal responses.

Responding to the beacon of third-person opportunity, requires a "judgemental decision," which is conceived as a "component of the larger decision-making processes that are concerned with assessing, estimating, and inferring what events will occur and what the decision-maker's evaluative reactions to those outcomes will be" (citing Hastie, 2001, p. 657). Therefore, judgment is what must be exercized to make a decision between alternative courses of action to obtain profit that takes place in an uncertain future (this connects closely with Foss and Klein's (2020) judgement-based view of entrepreneurship). Uncertainty arises because "action takes place over time, and because the future is unknowable, action is inherently uncertain" (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006, p. 132). In this scenario, unwillingness to bear uncertainty is what prevents prospective entrepreneurs from engaging in entrepreneurial action.

In sum, McMullen and Shepherd (2006) make the concepts of uncertainty and entrepreneurial action more rigorous by providing a rational account of entrepreneurship that aims to facilitate correspondence to the empirical world. In doing so, they provide the basis through which scholars can differentiate entrepreneurial action as a process of reasoning about first- and third-person opportunities for profit. To be clear, McMullen and Shepherd make third-person opportunities the main reference point and then articulate the reasoning process in terms of two stages: (1) whether one notices or becomes aware of such third-person opportunities; and (2) whether one has the willingness to bear the associated uncertainty, based on assessments of feasibility and desirability. The first stage relates to overcoming ignorance, while the second relates to reducing doubt. The behavioral differences in regard to stages 1 and 2 arise from the fact that third-person opportunities lie behind a veil of uncertainty, a sort of opaque glass that reveals fuzzy, amorphous images.

Problems of Extension and Objectivity in Rigor-as-Correspondence

While clear, elegant, and cohesive in its conceptual exposition, McMullen and Shepherd's account of entrepreneurial action helps us illustrate two main limitations of the conception of rigor-as-correspondence. In brief, we argue that (1) there are no clear referent objects in the world that entrepreneurship concepts refer to (problem of extension), and (2) the meaning of entrepreneurship concepts cannot be independent of scholarly interpretation (problem of objectivity).

First, entrepreneurship concepts, such as third-person opportunities in this case, cannot fully extend to, that is, "mirror," the empirical world because they are not *a priori* determinable. McMullen and Shepherd's theory hinges on the notion of third-person opportunity, as it is against it that all other concepts acquire their meaning. Without the benefit of hindsight, however, as scholars we cannot say for certain if a person's beliefs refer to a true third-person opportunity, as we cannot adjudicate the veracity of the beliefs at the same moment in time as they are expressed (e.g., McMullen, 2015). Consider a case in which a person believes that there is a third-person opportunity for product or service X in their region and the person then evaluates this third-person opportunity in a first-person sense. In order to describe the person as entrepreneur and non-entrepreneur, we need to know that introducing X is a reliable marker, against which we could observe differential responses and thus infer differential beliefs and reasoning. The fact that we cannot know its status for sure means that we cannot adjudicate beliefs, reasoning and thus entrepreneurial action in the manner that McMullen and Shepherd do in their Figures 1 and 2, that is, in relation to the presence of third-person opportunity.

Similar to what Ramoglou (2021) contends, differentiating entrepreneurial and non-entrepreneurial action in this manner implies that error is not possible, opportunities are somehow knowable *ex ante*, and that only true entrepreneurs can somehow overcome or defeat uncertainty. McMullen and Shepherd's theory does not allow us to say someone undertook an entrepreneurial action whereby they responded to an opportunity that was absent. As such, we cannot determine *a priori* whether one has overcome ignorance in acknowledging the existence of this third-person opportunity and is acting entrepreneurially; or one is simply delusional. Similarly, we cannot determine whether one has the reasoned willingness to bear uncertainty or one is simply reckless. In this sense, third-person opportunities are only meaningful when we prioritize the time of the scholar over the time of the entrepreneur, and in doing so, we ignore the fact that the future about which an entrepreneur speaks and the future that transpires are separated in time (Dimov, 2020).

Second, to the extent that entrepreneurship concepts are deemed to mirror an external reality, the meaning that arises is a matter not of objective perception but of interpretation and use. As Leunbach (2021) recently argues, entrepreneurship concepts are family resemblance concepts. Family resemblance concepts are those whose extensions do not share a common essential feature, but instead a series of overlapping similarities. For example, Wittgenstein (1958) applies the idea of family resemblance to our understanding of games. We can think of many games that we call a "game" that share no essential set of defining characteristics but simply bear certain family resemblances to one another (Leunbach, 2021). As Wittgenstein (1958) argued, the ultimate thing that all games share is in fact the very word "game" is used to refer to them. Similarly, empirical instances of entrepreneurship concepts, such as "third-person opportunities," "new venture beliefs," or "entrepreneurial action," are grouped together in our language not because they share a set of non-trivial characteristics that differentiate them uniquely from other phenomena, but because of their "overlapping" and "crisscrossing" similarities. As such, there is no set of conditions that all and only the phenomena we accept as entrepreneurship will satisfy, and hence no essentialist definition of entrepreneurship concepts exist in terms of individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. All attempts to definitively define family resemblance concepts so that they mirror empirical reality will always be subject to contradictory counterexamples.

By this token, any set of identity conditions we can come up with to define the meaning of entrepreneurship concepts in an objective sense will either fail to cover some activities or circumstances that we all recognize as cases of the entrepreneurship concept in question, or include activities and circumstances that do not belong to the concept. This is in essence attempting to capture the "Heffalump" (Kilby, 1971). The meaning of entrepreneurship concepts is thus not a matter of objective perception, but of interpretation of how such concepts are used. This is clearly seen when debates exist over whether small business management or family business count as "entrepreneurial" phenomena, or whether a certain action can be considered entrepreneurial or not. These are not arguments about facts, but about differing interpretations regarding the use of family resemblance concepts. Accordingly, entrepreneurial action as the recognition of third-person opportunities is not an intelligible and interpretable event in a correspondence sense; there is no ready fact to associate it with. Rather, the meaning of these concepts is derived by shared interpretation and agreement upon additional singular existential statements (particular circumstances, singular entities located in time and space) that link them to experience and thus put them into action ("so and so believes in this opportunity here") (Callon, 2008).

For example, consider that in order to apply McMullen and Shepherd's theory, we must introduce additional statements, say, a business school scholar at University of Y who writes an academic article and who stands to gain a bonus if said article is published in a top journal. Entrepreneurship scholars must now either agree or disagree upon interpretations of this case as entrepreneurial act or not—but cannot rely on observations to determine whether the case itself is objectively entrepreneurial according to a correspondence between concepts and facts. Accordingly, entrepreneurship concepts cannot fully objectively mirror an external reality because this connection always requires additional subjective interpretation and clarifications by scholars.

Finally, even the most objectively presented third-person theory of entrepreneurship has the possibility to shape future entrepreneurial action if it becomes widely believed (Callon, 2008; Garud & Gehman, 2019). If this belief is shared by other people, entrepreneurs and scholars align themselves to the model and everyone's expectations are fulfilled by everyone else's behaviors. A theory of entrepreneurial action which states that people are only entrepreneurial when they perceive and act on real third-person opportunities may feed forward into practice and shape the practices of entrepreneurs who might focus on familiarizing themselves with external conditions and strengthening their subjective perceptions. Effectuation, as another example, was developed as a third-person explanation of behaviors and cognition by expert entrepreneurs (Sarasvathy, 2001), but has fed into influencing entrepreneurial research and practice through education, media, and books to the extent that it is plausible that entrepreneurs act effectually because of effectuation theory. This is possible because entrepreneurship is enacted by human beings whose actions and behaviors, unlike atoms and molecules, depend on their evolving beliefs and the meanings that they attribute to the social world around them. This is neither right nor wrong per se, but it simply challenges the idea that concepts should solely mirror practical experience in a detached manner. Since entrepreneurship concepts and theories act as premises for action rather than mere representation, they can shape future practical action and, as such, prove more or less useful.

Concepts as Torches: Toward Rigor-as-Performativity

In our identification of the limits of rigor-as-correspondence, we wish to clarify that this approach has an important role to play in developing third-person knowledge. While the perspective reflects a behaviorist inclination toward the world of entrepreneurship by privileging observation and measurement, there is much to be gained about entrepreneurship phenomena in this way. Yet, there are limitations in assumptions of extension and objectivity that mean concepts can never fully mirror reality, whilst also downplaying the evolution of intent, sources of error, nor appreciating luck (good or bad). In other words, we operate only with errors of judgment, as exemplified in Foss and Klein's (2012) judgment-based view of entrepreneurship. Alternatively, in this section, we develop a rigor-as-performativity perspective through which we envisage the rigor as the design and use of concepts as constituted by speech acts and task verbs that enable and support entrepreneurship practices.

Speech Acts

Adopting a world-to-concept direction of fit acknowledges that scholarship is actively engaged in the constitution of the reality that it describes (Callon, 2008). This is to say that the creation and use of certain concepts involves making speech acts that can affect scholarship as well as entrepreneurship practices. Speech acts are statements where the issue of an utterance is considered the performance of an action (Austin, 1975; Garud et al., 2018). Searle (1979) outlines five basic categories of speech acts, reflecting different intentions by a speaker and different directions of fit: assertives (believe, conclude), directives (ask, command), commissives (promise, intend), expressives (congratulate, apologize), and declarations (pronounce, declare).

Many of our scholarly speech acts are assertive in nature—we make claims and reach conclusions. These acts have a concept-to-world direction of fit and, as such, are accountable to the facts of the external world and thus operate within a rigor-as-correspondence frame. But some of our speech acts are declarative in nature, such as when we bring certain phenomena or empirical observations under a new conceptual schema. Declarative acts operate with both directions of fit in that they may settle how facts are interpreted, as well as being sensitive to furthering a state of affairs (Searle, 1979). Influential scholarly work often comes from influence of declarative acts by shifting perspectives, for instance, when we are invited to think about organizations as open systems or about entrepreneurs as bricoleurs, scientists, effectuators, hustlers, or alert arbitragers. Similarly, our writings about entrepreneurship declare certain attitudes, such as positivity, and orientations, such as money focus (Lundmark et al., 2022).

In contrast, much of what entrepreneurs say are commissive speech acts—characterized by a world-to-concept direction of fit—and thus referring to future states of affairs they aim to bring about. For example, when we encounter someone working busily on their laptop in a coffee shop, their telling us "I am starting a venture" plays not just a reporting but a performative role: the speech act instructs us as listeners to see them in a particular way (as an entrepreneur) and form certain expectations. Specifically, in such a commissive speech act, the person is using concepts ("venture") and verbs ("starting") to indicate an intention toward some conceptualized future object that may or may not be fulfilled. If they had said "I am doing the performance evaluations of the faculty in my department," we would have responded differently.

As outlined previously, our scholarly engagement with commissive speech acts can be rigorous when we ascertain what was said (rigor-as-correspondence) or when we enable the fulfilment of what is intended (rigor-as-performativity). In the latter, we must recognize that it is the future-focused intentionality through which entrepreneurs interpret the world that provides insight into how they understand and subsequently perform in the world. Hence, we gain an expression of entrepreneurs' intentions, akin to a shopping list or a blueprint of what they aim to do (Dimov, 2011). In this sense, this blueprint provides a first-person sense of what they aim to make work (Sergeeva et al., 2021). On this basis, we can infer what the world will need to be like for the entrepreneur's intention to be fulfilled. In other words—to invoke McMullen and Shepherd's (2006) language—it is not in reference to third-person opportunities that we identify entrepreneurs; rather it is in reference to entrepreneurs and their speech acts that we identify and understand their intentions, performances, and outcomes.

In addition, we also gain an ability to engage and enable entrepreneurs' commissive speech acts by creating or invoking concepts that are actionable, deemed useful, and relevant and thus become part of the entrepreneurs' toolkit for shaping their world. For example, Alex Osterwalder developed the concept of a "Business Model Canvas" from his 2004 PhD thesis titled "The Business Model Ontology: A Proposition in a Design Science Approach." Osterwalder did not merely develop a theoretical model of business in a past-oriented, correspondence sense, but put forth new concepts that open toward the future so as to become practically useful (Osterwalder et al., 2005). Rigor, in this sense, pertains to the extent to which such concepts are meaningful and actionable from a practitioner point of view. When such conceptualizations become widely used, rigorous scholarship leads to action possibilities. Consequently, scholarly concepts can function as an interpretative starting point for further commissive speech acts by entrepreneurs, just as a "Business Model Canvas" empowers and guides entrepreneurs to express and structure their intentions in a particular way.

Achievement and Task Verbs

A world-to-concept direction of fit also enables a critical reflection about the use of task and achievement verbs in entrepreneurship scholarship, which according to Ryle (2009) have different logical forces. Task verbs (e.g., play, compete, look) refer to some activity, process, or undertaking, while achievement verbs (e.g., score, win, convince) do not refer to some activity distinct from that referred to by their corresponding task verbs. They are used to report the success of the undertakings concerned. To play a game is to do something; to win a game is not another activity over and above that of playing it but simply to play the game successfully. These are differences, for example, between verbs such as presenting and convincing, looking and discovering, or trying and exploiting. When we use an achievement verb rather than task verbs in concepts, "we are asserting that some state of affairs obtains over and above that which consists in the performance, if any, of the subservient task activity" (Ryle, 2009: p. 132). Consider that there is a logical impossibility of a discovery being fruitless, or of convincing someone being a failure. This is because only task verbs are compatible with mistake-related words such as erroneous or ineffective. In this regard, task performances—with their associated exertions and feelings—need not lead to achievements when actors fail, while achievements need not be preceded by certain task performances as they could be down to luck. Furthermore, this space in between task activity and achievement can be seen—from the point of view of the player or task performer—

as the uncertainty or suspense of an unfinished process; or—from the point of view of the analyst or external observer—as the completion of a process as settled facts. In adopting a correspondence or performative perspective of rigor, we inadvertently assume either the role of analyst or player (Sergeeva et al., 2021). In correspondence, we act as analysts to look back in time and take stock of what has happened using achievement verbs. From a performative perspective, we look as players ahead in time toward shaping the future. Accordingly, rigor-as-performativity is couched in a language of task verbs from a player perspective, acknowledging that the use of concepts does not obviate possibilities of error or discrepancies between intention and desired outcomes.

Implications for the Rigor–Relevance Discussion

In this article, we argue that reflecting on the performative practices of entrepreneurs illuminates how scholars' theories can be similarly performative. The influence of scholars' speech acts becomes salient once we recognize that different directions of fit can be invoked, each implying a distinct conception of rigor: concept-to-world is a relationship of correspondence, while world-to-concept is a relationship of performativity. In the former, we say "the entrepreneur did not know" when interpreting discrepancies (errors) in terms of quality of assertions to suggest that they would have known better if the necessary information had been collected and analyzed, a "God's-eye justification" (Toulmin, 2003, p. 218). In this way, correspondence directs our focus on whether their words correspond to the world and make attributions in terms of judgment. Alternatively in the latter case, we could equally say "the entrepreneur thought she knew" which takes the entrepreneur's aspirations and practices as something fallible in the sense of the world not always fitting it. Because the future cannot be known, world-to-concept scholarship aligns the time of the scholar with the time of the entrepreneur. The scholar then creates or uses concepts rigorously to interpret, understand, and motivate unfolding practices in certain ways, thus also (re)producing meaning and intentionality in the world. In the remainder of this section, we consider the implications of performativity for the ongoing rigor and relevance discussion in entrepreneurship research.

Deepening Theoretical Explanations of the Rigor and Relevance Divide

A rigor-as-performativity perspective enables us to deepen our understanding of *why* there is a persistent and concerning gap between rigor and relevance in the first instance. While contemporary discussions tend to explain the crux of the rigor–relevance problem as derived from a conflict of interest between scholar and practitioners (i.e., theory vs. practice) (Berglund et al., 2018; Frank & Landström, 2016; Wiklund et al., 2019), there remains little theoretical reflection on the origin and implications of this proposition. When we consider that most contemporary scholarship adopts a concept-to-world direction of fit, we can conclude there is an implicit or explicit emphasis on correspondence in their conceptions of rigor. Scholars' main preoccupation in doing so is whether concepts accurately reflect and explain phenomena.

It is important to recognize that this places emphasis on the "upstream" consideration of a concept (i.e., what it aims to fit), by focusing conversation on the circumstances of its application. For instance, the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics project has specified strict criteria for the application of the concept of nascent entrepreneur (Reynolds & Curtin, 2008). A person has to give a positive answer to at least two questions: (1) "Are you, alone or with others, now trying to start a new business?" and (2) "Are you, alone or with others, now trying to start a new business or a new venture for your employer? An effort that is part of your job assignment." In addition, one needs to answer positive to two further questions: "Will you own all, part, or none of this new business?" and "In the past 12 months, have you done anything to help start this new business, such as looking for equipment or a location, organizing a start-up team, working on a business plan, beginning to save money, or any other activity that would help launch a new business?" Such conceptual rigor is important because it ensures that we use language in a precise, thoughtful, careful manner. Indeed, the notion of construct validity ensures that the stimuli we elicit in our empirical work are appropriately mapped to theoretical labels. This aims to establish correspondence between empirical observations and theoretical constructs. Rigor, in this sense, is accomplished through the strength of the hooks through which we keep our theoretical edifice fastened to the realm of practical experience. Conversely, a lack of rigor suggests research methods fall short on these criteria, which are criticized as "oftentimes atheoretical, quite descriptive, quasi-consultancy," and as such lack "academic legitimacy" (Wiklund et al., 2019, p. 421).

The preoccupation with a correspondence relationship between concepts and the world also shapes the nature of relevance, as receptive audiences are those who also see the value of third-person knowledge of a world already settled, such as other scholars and policymakers. While a concept-to-world direction of fit certainly leads to new third-person knowledge when rigorously pursued, it does have some limitations that prevents it from being the only way to rigorously develop a future-focused knowledge base. As we have discussed, correspondence assumptions are limited by the nature of third-person opportunities as being unknowable *ex ante*. Scholarly interpretation and speech acts are necessary to connect family resemblance concepts to empirical research, and theories can even feed into shaping entrepreneurship practices they seek to explain in their own image. At worst, these limitations can create a "hall of mirrors" effect in which legitimated academic discourse and interpretations overrule observations of changing empirical experience, thus side-lining entrepreneurs entirely (Frank & Landström, 2016). Practicing entrepreneurs, however, need knowledge to develop blueprints for their aspirations through which to act upon the world: they aim to do what they say, operating with a world-to-concept direction of fit, as we have explained.

Closing the Rigor–Relevance Divide—Future Research Directions

Complementing a concept-to-world direction of fit, scholars can recognize the utility of adopting a stance of world-to-concept fit in their speech acts, which can assist in improving the "downstream" implications of scholarly research. The inferences enabled by creating or using certain concepts and their connection to other concepts increases relevance for entrepreneurial audiences. In particular, we suggest future research further both rigor and relevance by (1) paying greater attention to entrepreneurship-related practices (speech acts, performances, reproductions, transformations, and relations), (2) adopting a future-focused research orientation, and (3) strengthening relevance by supporting moments of co-creation between scholars and entrepreneurs.

First, while one aspect of the world-to-concept fit focuses on the practices underlying entrepreneur's intention and action, performativity acknowledges the abilities of researcher's concepts to shape future practices (Cabantous et al., 2018; Callon, 2008). In other words, concepts can also be active interventions that can constitute worlds, rather than merely purport to regulate or evaluate (Garud & Gehman, 2016). As Aggeri (2017, p. 45) explains:

> "What performativity adds with respect to other theories is the idea that these mechanisms never operate generically but rather are activated and reconfigured in situation by the actors themselves. Hence the importance granted to the pragmatic analysis of situations, which is never in accordance with the ostensive approaches to collective action and how it should theoretically take place."

In this light, echoing Dimov et al. (2020), scholars can reconnect with entrepreneurs' first-person practical decision-making perspective (player) by recognizing that a world-to-concept direction of fit is implicated in the entrepreneur's speech acts that describe their intentions and commitments. When we view scholarship and entrepreneurship as unfolding amongst performances of (discursive and material) practices (Garud et al., 2018; Teague et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2020), whose relations are joined by an indeterminate future, rigorous and relevant scholarship co-designs concepts as tools for stepping into the unknown (cf., Berglund et al., 2020). In doing so, the world-to-concept fit focuses scholarly attention to primarily matters of practices to understand intentions, performances, and errors. As pointed out by Johannisson (2011), the resulting knowledge that is developed is more akin to what Aristotle calls phronesis—a form of knowledge associated with practical wisdom of knowing how to proceed in particular circumstances that cannot be equated to knowledge of general truths. In this light, rigorous research requires the close study of situated practices (of intention and action) that also may or may not transform social arrangements. When exploring these practices, one must consider intersubjective meanings which are constitutive of the context (Nicolini, 2012), or semantic space (Taylor, 1985), in which individuals find themselves and act.

For example, imagine three entrepreneurs who all state that they follow a "lean start-up method" to create a blueprint of their intentions. Merely recording this provides no information about how they are actually using the method, thus glossing over the practices that are going on underneath and how outcomes might vary due to variation in performance. Instead of inferring intention to engage in entrepreneurship abstractly, further research should infer intention by observing how the entrepreneur (along with others) engages in creating blueprints including business plans, business models, pitching presentations, and strategy documents, which capture what the entrepreneur intends to do (see Thompson & Byrne, 2021). Next, rather than focus on the accuracy and usefulness of these devices in a generic sense (i.e., concept-to-world), research should consider what these tools mean to the people using them, what they do and how entrepreneurs put them into action in various ways (Doganova & Eyquem-Renault, 2009). Future research might also consider the varied ways in which these blueprints are constituted by entrepreneurs' relational-temporal aspirations and memories (Garud et al., 2018), and ask where entrepreneurs came across these blueprints originally and whether their engagement with the tools changed over time. Another consideration for further research is a person's interactions with customers or clients as a way to explore the collaborative practices between the entrepreneur and their stakeholders, and the relationship to their intentions. Researchers could ask what practices underlie these exchanges and how they unfold, whilst documenting variations in performance and intentions. Lastly, we might more broadly consider who else is working with or supporting the entrepreneur, how these dynamics unfold through practices, and how they shape the emergence of artifacts and an entrepreneurial venture, keeping in mind changes in intentions and errors in performance.

Second, by adopting a world-to-concept fit and focusing on practices, scholars become oriented toward the future rather than the past, such that the world about which an entrepreneur speaks and acts and the world as it will become are in motion. In this view, we also must choose to focus our scholarly rigor on what entrepreneurs do and on what they intend to achieve by aligning the time of the scholar with the time of the entrepreneur—recognizing that the future about which an entrepreneur speaks and the future that transpires are separated in time (Dimov, 2020). This is elegantly articulated by Bourdieu (1990, p. 81):

> "Science has a time which is not that of practice. For the analyst time disappears: not only because … arriving after the battle, the analyst cannot have any uncertainty as to what can happen, but also because he has the time to totalize, that is, to overcome the effects of time."

In this sense, rather than evaluating scholarly language on whether it gets the world right, future research should appreciate the creative role concepts play in enabling and shaping a person's intentions, interpreting errors and happenings in the moment. Hence, interpretations on behalf of scholars are essential to illuminate aspects of unfolding practices and the world, and how entrepreneurs attempt to align them. Entrepreneurs are focused on what is yet to happen—they consider present circumstances not under their control, and look for possible performance moves that would bring the world in line with their image of the future. Thus, concepts are able to make a difference in what entrepreneurs do when they align with this temporal orientation. Accordingly, future research should recognize and seek understanding of the possibilities and pitfalls of designed concepts to shape the world in the future-focused, forward-looking sense that entrepreneurs engage with it.

One example of aligning temporal orientation is Van Burg et al. (2008) in which the researchers inductively explored existing incubation practices at a university in collaboration with the university. Next, informed by a systematic literature review on academic spin-offs, the authors develop several principles using various concepts that were evidence-based as well as contextualized for the university, for example: "Set clear and supportive rules and procedures that regulate the university spin-off process, enhance fair treatment of the parties involved, and separate spinoff processes from academic research and teaching" (Van Burg et al., 2008, p. 123). Importantly, these principles were subsequently used in subsequent incubation practices of the university with an aim to improve academic spin-offs (which also spread to other universities). Following their lead, future research may begin by considering how and why entrepreneurs are performing practices in different ways, what these practices mean to them, what the practices do in certain circumstances, and how practices transform as they are re-enacted across time and space. Subsequently, scholars might propose new conceptualizations of these practices or new ways of performing these practices in close collaboration with entrepreneurs. Such concepts, when rigorously developed, are actionable and may become part of the entrepreneurs' descriptive arsenal and, in this sense, be deemed useful and relevant. While this will not lead immediately to general third-person knowledge in a single study, as a collective body of research, it does provide nuanced and broad insight into the phronesis being deployed, and even inspire its transformation, such as novel ways that practices can be performed toward different practical aims.

Finally, future research should also experiment with various methods in which concepts are co-constituted between researcher and those being researched—in our case, the entrepreneur—as well as capturing and reflecting active interventions between the researcher and the entrepreneur at the point of study (see Van Burg et al., 2020). A renewed focus on practices and their diversity advocates that entrepreneurs and scholars might collectively conceptualize and execute research projects. Goodman's (1978) distinction of "two senses of realistic" is helpful here, as insights can be realistic in the sense of habituation, that is, it expresses the researchers' methodological customs or habits, but it can also be realistic in the sense of revelation, that is, disclosing new or hitherto unseen aspects of the world. His notion of "worldmaking" involves transforming extant reality into new futures and new ends worth pursuing by virtue of describing and thus seeing the world in different ways. As Goodman puts it, "for a categorical schema, what needs to be shown is not that it is true, but what it can do. Put crassly, what is called for in such cases is less like arguing than selling" (Goodman, 1978, p. 129). Worldmaking is not magic, but a mundane part of what we do as human beings. Performativity recognizes that worldmaking research is active in reproducing or altering meaning and intentionality in the world. Consequently, methodological plurality and innovation is a strength that allows scholars and practitioners to rigorously seek co-knowledge through various means, illuminating the diversity of practices, performances, intentions, and outcomes across settings, whilst provoking change and possibilities (see Nicolini & Monteiro, 2017).

Several existing methodologies can enable entrepreneurship scholars to collaborate with entrepreneurs toward reshaping the future: (cf., collaborative ethnography (Fisher & Nading, 2022), ethnotheatre (Saldaña, 2016), pop-up laboratory (Staunæs & Kofoed, 2015), serious games (Susi et al., 2007), walking methods (Springgay & Truman, 2017), participatory video-making and diagramming (Thomas & Bellingham, 2020). Video-reflexive ethnography (VRE), for example, is used in healthcare research (Iedema et al., 2018). VRE involves producing video footage of naturally-occurring practices, clips are then watched by front-line practitioners (which may or may not be the same people in the clips), and finally researchers moderate a reflexive discussion about "what goes on" with those who inhabit the practices. VRE not only provides researchers with insight into everyday practices, phronesis and concepts used *in situ*, but enables researchers and participants to co-design alternative concepts that may alter the ways in which entrepreneurs understand, feel about and take action in various circumstances and situations. The temporal alignment achieved by VRE may enable researchers to examine the diversity of performances that collectively, as a field, adds nuance and texture to understanding more inclusive entrepreneurial experience, whilst also benefiting (prospective) entrepreneurs by co-developing actionable concepts.

Conclusion

Taking the lead from Wittgenstein (1953), we have argued that one way of addressing the crux of the rigor and relevance divide is through a more careful consideration of how we use the concept of rigor. Current scholarly discussion on rigor and relevance implies separation and trade-offs between two parts: those who act in the world and those who talk about it; the world as being from the world as becoming. In this article, we argue that there is no existential gap between the two sides—rather the gap between rigor and relevance is an artifact of a correspondence view of scholarship. Yet, because concept-to-world direction of fit is limited in terms of extension and objectivity, there is a need for critical reflection on questions of how entrepreneurship concepts hook onto the world. Just as relevance can be to scholars and entrepreneurs, so rigor can be seen in a correspondence and a performative sense, one looking upstream and the other downstream from what we say.

A rigor-as-performativity perspective means speaking in a different tongue—rigorous empirical work is couched in an alternative conceptual vocabulary (i.e., commissive speech acts using task verbs) that emphasizes the complexities of entrepreneurship's unknown horizons of meaning, relational becoming, intersubjectivity, and embodiment (Steyaert et al., 2011). Whereas entrepreneurs are currently seen as consumers of scholars' third-person knowledge in contemporary discussions, we argue they can also be active co-constructors of rigor when engaging in performative methods. Such a view re-establishes contact with today's practitioners to further rigorous scholarship and practice. Concepts are practically meaningful when they help make robust sense of past experience and help deal with the incoming experience as they pursue their aspirations. Certain ways of speaking about entrepreneurship can be limited when it comes to forward-looking action and coping with an uncertain, unknowable future. As scholars, we are the makers of concepts, but we should recognize they are two-sided tools. We can hold them as mirrors of past experience, but we can also hold them as torches in the darkness of incoming, future experience. As toolmakers, we have to think carefully about the users of our tools. One set of users are fellow scholars or policymakers who focus on the mirror-like features—do our concepts fit the world? But another set of users are the entrepreneurs who focus on the torch-like features: do our concepts help them deal with the world so that they may make it fit their intentions?

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Note

1. Throughout the paper, we will variously refer to words, concepts, and theories in discussing scholarly activity. We treat these terms as interchangeable, recognizing that theories consist of concepts and concepts are expressions of assertions or intentions about a particular subject, conveyed through words in scholarly discourse.

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