



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Business Venturing

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusvent

Going pro-social: Extending the individual-venture nexus to the collective level

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this Special Issue is to demonstrate how drawing on multidisciplinary insights from the literature on prosociality can broaden the individual-opportunity nexus to make room for a variety of actors. Five feature articles emphasize the collective level of the analysis, underscoring the social distance between the entrepreneurs and the different communities they serve. Leveraging construal level theory, we abductively derive an organizing framework that helps us articulate how stretching or compressing social distance can transform initial opportunities into occasions for serving the greater good. We identify two distinct mechanisms present in all five empirical studies that explain how the needs and hopes of many others may add creativity, consistency and connectivity to one's venture. We also connect these abductive insights with the two editorials that follow this introduction and nudge our collective attention towards the research opportunities awaiting our academic community once we begin to relax the egocentric reference point that, until recently, has defined the discipline of entrepreneurship.

1. Executive summary

The March 2018 volume of the Journal of Business Venturing, “*Enterprise Before and Beyond Benefit, Entrepreneurship and For Benefit Corporations*,” was the first part of a double special issue. The five articles featured in the first part discussed different ways in which individual entrepreneurs choose to imprint their ventures with purpose in different geographies (Moroz et al., 2018). This current issue is the second part. The seven papers assembled below underscore the involvement of multiple stakeholders from both outside and inside the venture to reveal how “the many” identify and pursue opportunities within varied types of collectives and communities (Fletcher, 2006; Jennings et al., 2013).

The individual level of analysis has dominated the entrepreneurship field for over three decades (Busenitz et al., 2003). Yet few entrepreneurs truly venture alone (Busenitz et al., 2014; Hoogendoorn et al., 2017), especially when purpose takes precedence over profit (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014; Smith and Besharov, 2017). The five empirical articles featured in this special issue underscore communal aspects of entrepreneuring, noting how others' needs are identified (Peredo et al., 2018), communicated (Moss et al., 2018), negotiated (Powell et al., 2018), referenced (André et al., 2018), and leveraged (Dentoni et al., 2018) over time. The two invited editorials remind us that creating impact is a collective endeavour (Wry and Haugh, 2018), fundamental to understanding, and cautiously altering, the broader entrepreneurial ecosystems that prosocial ventures inhabit (McMullen, 2018).

We argue for stretching the individual-venture nexus to more explicitly take into account the roles many others, often in desperate need, typically play in prosocial organizing. The five empirical articles comprising this special issue, the two editorials, and the

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusvent.2018.06.007>

Received 22 June 2018; Accepted 25 June 2018

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overarching framework abducted in this introduction, stretch the ego-centric reference point that has dominated our discipline for over three decades to make room for *alters* and articulate the elastic relationship between ego and alters in recalibrating the nexus of entrepreneurial intention and action (Dimov, 2007).

Alters include both human and non-human actors (Muñoz and Dimov, 2015), and do not require prior entrepreneurial intentions or skills (Fletcher, 2006). Together, we complement theorizing and testing at the individual-venture nexus – the interface between one entrepreneur and her/his venture (Shane, 2003) by asking who else may inform what an opportunity is, or should be (Garud and Giuliani, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2015).

Until recently, the critical role of others in defining what an opportunity is has been largely overlooked in traditional entrepreneurship (for exceptions see Mezas and Kuperman, 2000 and Wright and Zammuto, 2013). Social entrepreneurship, however, has long drawn attention to tight interdependence between individual entrepreneurs and others. Because social ventures aim to alleviate poverty (Bruton et al., 2013), mitigate suffering (Williams et al., 2017), and restore well-being (Gamble, 2018; Wiklund et al., 2018), social entrepreneurs pursue quintessentially alter-oriented opportunities (Bacq and Janssen, 2011) and identify strongly with the communities they serve (Wry and York, 2017). Therefore, many others inclusive of and beyond the initial entrepreneur(s) may shape the norms, roles, and structures that enable entrepreneurial action (Plowman et al., 2007; Sine and David, 2010).

This special issue explores how interactions with different actors inside and outside their respective communities¹ inform and influence the individual-venture nexus over time (Smith and Besharov, 2017). Starting from the premise that prosociality, defined as an entrepreneur's orientation towards others (Shepherd, 2015), affords explicit attention to the underserved needs and hopes of human and non-human actors, we explain how alters may 'morph' ego's relationship to their venture over time (Rindova and Kotha, 2001; Williams and Shepherd, 2016).

2. Applications of prosociality in entrepreneurship theory and practice

While this special issue is the first concerted effort to empirically explore the specific ways prosociality informs the research and practice of entrepreneurship, it builds on several notable theoretical precedents. For example, the introduction to the 2009 Special Topic Forum of the *Academy of Management Review* suggestively titled “*Entrepreneurship as emancipation*” (Rindova et al., 2009) explicitly humanized the subjects we study, reversing then-received wisdom to suggest that entrepreneurship is merely a means to the greater end of individual growth and social transformation. Two out of the nine papers included in the 2012 special issue of the *Academy of Management Review* Special Topic Forum on “*Care and Compassion*” (Rynes et al., 2012) introduced compassion theorizing to entrepreneurship (Atkins and Parker, 2012; Miller et al., 2012). An open invitation from then Editor-in-Chief Dean Shepherd to “*Party on!*” at JBV's 30th anniversary (Shepherd, 2015) advocated for making room for others across a broader range of entrepreneurship theories.

There has since been considerable forward momentum in asking and answering how others help individual entrepreneurs cope with, and sometimes successfully overcome, adversity. Prosocial forms of organizing have been studied across a broad range of economic and political regimes – from Peru (Muñoz et al., 2018a; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006) to China (Marquis et al., 2015) – in good times (Mathias et al., 2017) and bad (Shepherd and Williams, 2014). The turn towards prosociality is especially informative for entrepreneurs facing matters of life and death (Hälgren et al., 2018; Muñoz et al., 2018b). Other actors can help entrepreneurs anticipate and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles (Smith and Besharov, 2017), ranging from sudden hardship (Ballesteros et al., 2017; Tilcsik and Marquis, 2013) – such as hitting rock bottom after job loss (Shepherd and Williams, 2018) or facing catastrophic political disruptions (Branzei and Abdelnour, 2010; Fathallah et al., 2018) – to chronic distress such as recession (Powell and Baker, 2014) or witnessing suffering in animal shelters (Schabram and Maitlis, 2017).

Transformative entrepreneurship is perhaps the most noteworthy stepping stone towards a programmatic integration of prosociality in theories of entrepreneurship. The core argument is that ventures sometimes “accidentally” (Plowman et al., 2007), but more often than not, deliberately (Tobias et al., 2013) tackle grand social and environmental challenges (Muñoz and Dimov, 2015). The study of prosociality underpins the increased interest of entrepreneurship researchers in the intentional grappling of endemic issues like poverty (Bruton et al., 2013; Packard and Bylund, 2018), informality (Godfrey, 2011), inequality (Suddaby et al., 2018; Pathak and Muralidharan, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2018), and inclusivity (Mair et al., 2012). Recent deliberate applications of entrepreneurship to affecting the desperate needs of others include decreasing inequality or increasing equality (Newbert, 2018; Sarkar et al., 2018) by overcoming class, race and immigration biases (Gray and Kish-Gephart, 2013; Neville et al., 2018; Wosu Griffin and Olabisi, 2018). Transformative entrepreneurs who are prosocially motivated can scaffold entire ecosystems that replace the status quo (Autio et al., 2018; Spigel and Harrison, 2017; Roundy et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2018) to enable large-scale positive change (George et al., 2016; Mair et al., 2016; Stephan et al., 2015).

Collective-level phenomena, such as the genesis of entrepreneurial ecosystems (Autio et al., 2018; Thompson et al., 2018) or the regeneration of nature (Branzei et al., 2017; Muñoz and Cohen, 2018) begin to suggest that individual entrepreneurs may also, and with the help of others, leverage venturing to repair the socio-cultural fabric of communities (Martí et al., 2013), protect endangered species (Volery, 2002), and create symbiotic links with highly vulnerable natural eco-systems (Muñoz et al., 2018b). Initial attention

¹ By employing the terms ‘communities’ and ‘collectives’, often interchangeably, we refer to a collection of individuals within a delimited group or groups that may be framed by a wide variety of network perspectives (social, spatial, cultural, etc.), share common beliefs, values, objectives, or adhere to behavioral constraints, have direct and many-sided relations and are often perceived through obligations of loyalty and reciprocity (Dasgupta, 1996; Granovetter, 1985; Peredo and Chrisman, 2006; Taylor, 1982).

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