



# Entrepreneurship through a qualitative lens: Insights on the construction and/or discovery of entrepreneurial opportunity



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## ARTICLE INFO

Available online 11 October 2014

Field Editor: D. Shepherd

### Keywords:

Entrepreneurial Opportunity

Qualitative Methods

Imprinting and Reflexivity

## ABSTRACT

This article applies inductive analytic techniques to identify and elaborate on two recurring themes that underpin the core puzzle of entrepreneurship research – where entrepreneurial opportunities come from. The first theme is the unique role of *imprinting*, or the profound influence of social and historical context in constraining the perceptual apparatus of entrepreneurs and delimiting the range of opportunities for innovation available to them. Second, our analysis offers insight into the counterbalancing role of *reflexivity*, operating at both individual and collective levels of analysis, in generating the ability of entrepreneurs to overcome the constraints of imprinting. These insights are based on a thematic review of the nine studies that comprise this special issue on qualitative research. The nine studies, individually and each in their own way, offer key insights into how we might better understand the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunity.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

## 1. Executive summary

This article explores the various ways in which adopting a qualitative lens can help advance our understanding of entrepreneurship as a phenomenon. Early research in entrepreneurship has traditionally relied primarily upon quantitative methods grounded in a positivist epistemology. We believe that this overreliance on quantitative methods has artificially constrained entrepreneurship research. While the use of quantitative methods has produced considerable knowledge accumulation, the field of entrepreneurship research has largely failed to develop an indigenous theory (Suddaby, 2014) and is often seen as a subset of strategic management theory. Entrepreneurship has failed to develop an indigenous theory because it has failed to generate a defining theoretical question or what Kuhn (1970) would describe as a “core puzzle.” This article, thus, explores how qualitative methods might be used to generate a theory for examining entrepreneurial settings. We focus on an emerging “puzzle” within the entrepreneurship research community – the origin of entrepreneurial opportunity – and draw from the nine outstanding qualitative studies of entrepreneurship that comprise this special issue to advance a new conceptual model. To illustrate our argument, we apply grounded theory analytic techniques to the studies generated for this special issue on qualitative methods in entrepreneurial research. This article applies inductive analytic techniques to identify and elaborate on two recurring themes that underpin the core puzzle of entrepreneurship research – where entrepreneurial opportunities come from. The first theme is the unique role of *imprinting*, or the profound influence of social and historical context in constraining the perceptual apparatus of entrepreneurs and delimiting the range of opportunities for innovation

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available to them. Second, our analysis offers insight into the counterbalancing role of *reflexivity*, operating at both individual and collective levels of analysis, in generating the ability of entrepreneurs to overcome the constraints of imprinting.

The nine studies in this special issue, individually and each in their own way, offer key insights into how we might better understand the emergence of entrepreneurial opportunity.

Our analysis of the nine outstanding papers that comprise this special issue of the *Journal of Business Venturing* offers insight into the emerging debate about the origins of entrepreneurial opportunity. We identify imprinting and reflexivity as key mechanisms and core constructs that underpin the larger tensions that question whether entrepreneurs discover opportunity or create it. That is, theorists who advocate a discovery perspective see imprinting as a key process that explains how some entrepreneurs are more likely than others to “discover” an opportunity. Reciprocally, theorists who advocate a creation perspective see reflexivity as a core construct that explains how some actors are better able to “create” entrepreneurial opportunity.

## 2. Introduction

This essay explores the various ways in which adopting a qualitative lens can help advance our understanding of entrepreneurship as a phenomenon. Early research in entrepreneurship has traditionally relied primarily upon quantitative methods grounded in a positivist epistemology. We believe that this overreliance on quantitative methods has artificially constrained entrepreneurship research. While the use of quantitative methods has produced considerable knowledge accumulation, the field of entrepreneurship research has largely failed to develop an indigenous theory (Suddaby, 2014) and is often seen as a subset of strategic management theory. Entrepreneurship has failed to develop indigenous theory because it has failed to generate a defining theoretical question or what Kuhn (1970) would describe as a “core puzzle.”

We argue that qualitative methods are uniquely suited to address this issue. Scholars have traditionally employed qualitative methods to generate new theory and to impose conceptual order on new or relatively undefined phenomenon. More significantly qualitative methods can help researchers overcome the ideational ruts and cul-de-sacs of prior theories. The original intent of grounded theory, for example, was to encourage the discovery and elaboration of new conceptual categories “not contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 37). While there has been some debate as to whether the original intent of grounded theory can ever be achieved (Charmaz, 2009; Suddaby, 2010), there is considerable consensus that grounded theory, specifically, and qualitative methods, more generally, are the best hope for generating new, empirically based theories (Eisenhardt, 1989). Entrepreneurship scholars have criticized the narrow range of methodologies used to study their phenomenon as overly reliant on quantitative methods and positivist thinking (Churchill, 1992; Van de Ven and Polley, 1992). Aldrich (1992, 2003) notes that “... entrepreneurship research is still very much a mono-method field, in spite of repeated calls for the field to free itself from dependence on mailed surveys and related questionnaire-based methods.” These methods, Gartner and Birley (2002: 387) observe, tend “to drive out what for us would often seem to be common sense, i.e., some concern for the intuitions we have in our experiences of working with and studying entrepreneurs”.

This essay, thus, explores how qualitative methods might be used to generate theory for examining entrepreneurial settings. We focus on an emerging “puzzle” within the entrepreneurship research community – the origin of entrepreneurial opportunity – and draw from the nine outstanding qualitative studies of entrepreneurship that comprise this special issue to advance a new conceptual model. To illustrate our argument, we apply grounded theory analytic techniques to the studies generated for this special issue on qualitative methods in entrepreneurial research. While these nine studies were not limited in any way in the topics they could write, we identify and elaborate two recurring themes that underpin the question of where entrepreneurial opportunities come from that appear in each one. First, each of the studies, in different ways, offers insight into the unique role of *imprinting* or the profound influence of social and historical context in constraining the perceptual apparatus of entrepreneurs and delimiting the range of opportunities for innovation available to them. Second, each of the studies offers insight into the counterbalancing role of *reflexivity*, operating at both individual and collective levels of analysis, in generating the ability of entrepreneurs to overcome the constraints of imprinting.

We describe these two constructs and the essential tension between them that helps construct entrepreneurial opportunity. However, we will first discuss entrepreneurial opportunity as the core puzzle of entrepreneurship research.

## 3. Entrepreneurial opportunity: a defining puzzle

Thomas Kuhn (1970) reminds us that any advance in knowledge accumulation is facilitated by “puzzles,” or agreed upon research questions and methods that help to define a scientific paradigm. There is, however, an interesting tension between puzzles and methods in understanding a phenomenon. Often, the puzzles that we elevate as defining questions for a phenomenon contain within them hidden assumptions that lead us to select some methods over others. If we are not careful, our choice of methods can constrain or bias our understanding of the phenomenon. Reciprocally, sometimes the selection of a new method can help reveal hidden assumptions and biases and lead to a process of refining and redefining research questions.

Research in entrepreneurship has struggled, over the years, to achieve consensus on its defining “puzzle”. Indeed, the field has sometimes struggled to define its core phenomenon (Garner, 2001; Low and MacMillan, 1988; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Recently, however, scholars appear to have reached an emergent consensus on a defining puzzle that focuses on the origins of *entrepreneurial opportunity* (Ardichvili et al., 2003; Sarasvathy et al., 2010; Shane, 2000). And, as is typical for paradigm defining puzzles, scholars are debating fundamental questions about the epistemological and ontological nature of entrepreneurial opportunities.

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