Why not take a performative approach to entrepreneurship?☆

Raghu Garud[a,*], Joel Gehman[b,*], Antonio Paco Giuliani[c]

[a] Pennsylvania State University, USA
[b] University of Alberta, Canada
[c] IÉSEG School of Management, France

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Among entrepreneurship researchers, there has been growing attention to questions of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Recently, Packard (2017) advocated an interpretivist approach to entrepreneurship. In this paper, we articulate a performative approach, which offers a far more distributed and emergent view of entrepreneurship as process. In addition to briefly introducing some of the intellectual traditions underlying a performative approach, we highlight important differences between interpretivism and performativity and summarize the implications of taking a performative approach to entrepreneurship.

1. Introduction

Alongside interest in entrepreneurship as a phenomenon, there has been growing scholarly attention to questions of ontology, epistemology, and axiology (e.g., Alvarez and Barney, 2010; Berglund and Korsgaard, 2017; Foss and Klein, 2017; Garud, Gehman and Giuliani, 2014a; Gupta et al., 2016; Ramoglou and Tsang, 2016). Reflective of this metatheoretical turn, Packard (2017: 536) advocates an "interpretivist philosophic approach" arguing: "Interpretivism offers a potentially groundbreaking philosophical alternative that highlights the source of entrepreneurship in individuals rather than in abstract markets, emphasizing emergence rather than presuming opportunity existence".

While appreciating Packard's efforts, we believe that there is utility in adopting a far more distributed and emergent view of entrepreneurship as process than interpretivism affords. For instance, a performative approach to entrepreneurship is one such metatheoretical perspective (e.g., Garud et al., 2014a, 2018). Although there may appear to be homologies between interpretivism and performativity on certain points, there are key differences that we explicate here. To set the stage, we begin by briefly introducing some of the intellectual traditions that inform our position.

2. A brief introduction to performativity

The notion of performativity is not new in the social sciences (for reviews, see Cochoy et al., 2010; Gond et al., 2016; MacKenzie et al., 2007; Muniesa, 2014; Pollock and Williams, 2016). Those not familiar with this literature might confuse the slogan "saying is doing" (Austin, 1962) (that offers one entry point into performativity) to conclude that entrepreneurial actors have the license to say and thereby constitute phenomena at will. Besides the risk of conflating performativity with constructivism, there also is a tendency to confuse it with determinism. For instance, a superficial understanding of gender performativity as theorized by Butler (1990, 1993,

2004) may lead some to only focus on prior institutional arrangements that accord actors their capacity to interpret, act, and speak. But, performativity embraces neither of these two extreme positions. Instead, performativity is an acknowledgement that phenomena are constituted, de-constituted, and re-constituted through the sayings and doings of multiple socially embedded and materially embodied actors who attempt to make meaning of unfolding processes (Bruner, 1986). Implicating a distributed metatheoeretical position, Barad noted:

> Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather, statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities. This field of possibilities is not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity. (Barad, 2003: 819)

Indeed, at the heart of performativity lies a puzzle. Specifically, if actors are embedded and embodied within institutional arrangements, then what does it mean to possess a capacity to transform existing institutional arrangements, especially when the very arrangements that accord agency for some deny agency to others who may want change? It is beyond the scope of this commentary for us to explore this puzzle in any depth, and therefore refer interested readers to this topic elsewhere (Garud et al., 2017). For now, we focus on introducing the metatheoretical assumptions underlying performativity by comparing it with the interpretivist approach advocated by Packard.

3. Some differences between interpretivism and performativity

In his article, Packard advocates an individualistic perspective arguing that "an interpretivist philosophic approach has been neglected in modern entrepreneurship research, but that such an approach may be most appropriate to the individualist nature of entrepreneurship" (Packard, 2017: 536). Contrasting interpretivism with realism, Packard (2017: 540) noted: "Interpretivism, on the other hand, might be described as holding to a monist ontology with a dualist epistemology—only the physical reality is 'real' and knowledge of that reality, which entails the actions of others, is subjective, derived from two sources: (1) empirical experience and (2) imagination."

Performativity differs from these assumptions (see Table 1). First, performativity is based on relationality (e.g., Barad, 2003). In such a view, social and material ("physical" in Packard's terms) entities are co-constituted in the sayings and doings of multiple actors (e.g., entrepreneurs, regulators, etc.) with different matters of concerns (Latour, 2004) who become "mangled" in practice (Pickering, 1995). By "mangle", Pickering connotes decentered agency that emerges as humans encounter resistance and accommodations in their interactions with materials. This dialectic process brings about transformational shifts in the identities of the actors and the functionality of the materials that become entangled.

Viewed from an actor-network approach (with which Pickering's work aligns), there is utility in avoiding dualisms—such as between subjects and objects, micro and macro, agency and structure—and instead embracing a flat onto-epistemology comprising a network of associations between social and material agencies (e.g., Callon, 1998a; Latour, 2005; Law, 2009). As Callon explained:

> The agent is neither immersed in the network nor framed by it; in other words, the network does not serve as context. Both agent and network are, in a sense, two sides of the same coin… which amounts to replacing the two traditionally separate notions of agent and network by the single one of agent-network. (Callon, 1998a: 8–9)

From this perspective, sociomaterial networks constitute actors' capacities to interpret, act, and speak (e.g., Garud and Rappa, 1994; Introna et al., 2016). In other words, the sociomaterial onto-epistemology of practices cannot be reduced to individuals.[1] At the same time though, there is no determinism even at the frontiers of the natural sciences (Pickering, 1995; Ravetz, 2011), which is all the more so in the case of applied and social sciences. This is because the ways we inquire into the world around us (which is varied) through the use of multiple apparatuses (epistemology) critically informs what we come to believe to be real (ontology) and value (axiology) (Barad, 2003; Latour, 1987).

Moreover, performativity is based on intertemporality (Garud et al., 2014a, 2018). Imagination and memory (experience in Packard's terms) are not two distinct temporal orientations as implied by Packard, but instead intertwined to forge attention in the present (Ricoeur, 1984, 1988). Such "temporal plasticity" (Garud et al., 2014a: 1182) notwithstanding, actors operate with different temporal orientations to navigate their experiences (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

These considerations of relationality and temporality suggest that agency is an emerging property of the intra-actions (Barad, 2003) that unfold between social and material elements constituting actor-networks (Callon, 1998a; Latour, 2005). As networks change because of intra-actions, so do the capacities of actors to interpret, act, and speak (Callon, 1998b). Such decentering and emergence (Pickering, 1995) differs from the interpretivist approach articulated by Packard (2017: 544) wherein levels of social order (viz., institutions, markets, organizations, society, and individuals) "emerge from individual purpose and action." Performativity does not deny that entrepreneurs may be driven by "purpose and action," but it also draws attention to larger forces constituting phenomena (including entrepreneurial opportunities) that transcend individuals.

Several implications flow from these distinctions. For instance, Packard (2017: 536–537) noted: "interpretivism sees the social world through a distinct lens of intentionality rather than causality, of 'becoming' rather than 'being,' and relationships and interactions rather than social entities." An emphasis on relationships and interactions clearly speaks to "process metaphysics" (Rescher, 1996), which performativity is well equipped to handle. Where performativity differs from Packard's observations is in its emphasis

---

[1] We thank Dimo Dimov for encouraging us to emphasize this point.