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# Entrepreneurship and Context

## Is entrepreneurship research out of context?

## Dilemmas with (non) contextualised views of entrepreneurship

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We know that entrepreneurship is dynamic and complex and thus difficult to describe, understand and pretty well impossible to predict. But still, or perhaps because of the challenge, as researchers we are thrilled and fascinated by what happens in this entrepreneurial process. There is obviously value from entrepreneurship for society, especially the highly esteemed possibility of creating change. Researchers want to describe and explain the nature of entrepreneurship and how it works. However, in improving our understanding and to communicate our insights we have developed some limitations in our approaches. One important dimension of entrepreneurship process that has been rather neglected is the context of entrepreneurship. At best, context is relegated to some kind of background condition- *where entrepreneurship happens*- or the social context- *how it happens*, without much thought for the

role of context in shaping entrepreneurship. Casulli et al (2017) recently reminded us of the importance of refreshing our assumptions about entrepreneurship. The three papers that follow address this issue by examining the effects of context.

The entrepreneurial process is; idiosyncratic, without novelty it would hardly be ‘entrepreneurial’. Nonetheless, we have to look for similarities and patterns, often at a higher level of abstraction, in order to be able to delve deeper into entrepreneurship and to make our useful insights. One conventional approach is to identify an individual entrepreneur as the source of agency and place her central in explanations of entrepreneurship (Anderson and Starnawska, 2008). This has worked quite well, but the appeal of entrepreneurship for personal practice is uneven and not universal (Kalden et al, 2017) and seems to vary by context (Nguyen, 2015; Dodd et al, 2013). We also note how similar entrepreneurial processes in different places may produce different outcomes (Welter, 2011; Harbi and Anderson, 2010). For example, Lee and Mueller (2017) offer a vivid example of how the context of Junpu village transformed a Chinese rural village into an e-commerce hub. This extraordinary story of how 70% of the resident families became engaged in e-commerce is explained by the bringing a number of factors and enabling technology together to form this remarkable entrepreneurial context.

It seems then that context matters for practicing entrepreneurship (Anderson and Ronteau, 2017). But rarely does the mainstream positivistic literature seems to challenge *not* having context as a unit for analysis in the entrepreneurial process. As a consequence of the dominating research agenda, the particularities of context such as spatial, social and geographic have been muted or even lost. Context is often discussed as a more or less stable and continuous background to the action, or as a resource base for the entrepreneur to draw from when developing new ideas. However, much less has been said about how entrepreneurship is shaped by context and indeed,

how context itself can be reshaped. Insights have been generated from alternative units of analysis; processes around networks (Johannisson, 1996), social interaction (Anderson, 2002) communities (Johannisson and Nilsson, 1989) or societal entrepreneurship (Berglund et al 2015). What they have in common is a redirecting of our attention to where to look for entrepreneurship. Context seems to offer potential for explain the difficult questions around the ‘how’ issue of entrepreneurship. Thus there is an under research entrepreneurial dynamic which offers opportunities to understand the interplay.

First however, we should consider, what is context and what do we mean by interplay? The Oxford Dictionary define context as situation, background, scene or setting. “The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood”. To be “in context” is to be considered with the surrounding circumstances and to be “out of context” is to be (miss)understood without the surrounding context. Thus, in our case to fully understand entrepreneurship we need to set it in context, we need to contextualise, to consider entrepreneurship “in relation to the situation in which it happens or exists”. Arguments for discussing entrepreneurship without context has been for example that it is implicitly understood, it is unfortunately too complex for theory building or it is not important. However, understanding context as background open up for discussions about entrepreneurship in different settings such as business, social, spatial or institutional (Welter, 2011). This gives nuance to how entrepreneurial processes are different and what might be of more universal nature.

When it comes the interplay The Oxford Dictionary suggest “weaving together” as a metaphor for the co-authoring of context. Thus, context is a noun; background, but also a verb; a process. Context as a noun can explain how entrepreneurship is shaped by context; context understood as a verb can help us to explain how context itself can shape and be reshaped by entrepreneurship.

In the dynamics between background and entrepreneurship we see the interplay, how agency is in the weaving process. The weaving is happening in a particular place and time. As suggested by Anderson and Gaddefors (2016: 6) "... entrepreneurship is always contingently practiced as a combination of the entrepreneurial self and the circumstances they encounter".

To integrate context as background complicates theory building, and to accept context as a verb is an even bigger challenge. From a methodological point of view there are arguments for context sensitive research methods for improved quality (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Gartner et al, (1992:21) argue for "... more studies that utilize a variety of data collection methods that describe what entrepreneurs do". Moreover empirical material collected from multiple sources should set the material in context (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). As such the multiple voices involved in the construction of context result in less misunderstandings. (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001).

What are the consequences and shortcomings of non-contextualised views of entrepreneurship? Perhaps one could argue that non-contextualised research works better in urban growing areas than in remote, rural declining areas and that we know more about the positive effects of growing firms in society than we know about struggling but entrepreneurial small firms. If we consider this statement to be valid it would illustrate how non-contextualised views brings with them taken for granted assumptions that shape our understanding of what entrepreneurship is and what it comes from. If we as an example of contextualised view focus the social dimensions of context it offer considerable theoretical purchase in explaining the nature, style, even the types of entrepreneurship as they arise in specific contexts. The interplay between entrepreneurship and location (McKeever, Jack & Anderson, 2012), culture (Kreuger, Linan and Nabi, 2013) and institution (Kalantaridis and Fletcher, 2012) contexts all offer richer accounts of how and why

entrepreneurship is formed. Context is not just a site for entrepreneurship, but as the operand through which enterprise becomes entrepreneurship, Gaddefors and Anderson (2017).

We conclude our plea for more context in our work by repeating some of the questions from our call for papers. Interesting studies could consider-

- What is context and how can we frame contexts related to entrepreneurship?
- How does context influence entrepreneurial activity, or conversely, how does entrepreneurial activity influence context?
- What are the contributions to research on context and entrepreneurship and what development tracks for the future can be identified?
- Does influence on entrepreneurial processes from context vary over time, and if so, how?
- What potential, if any, lies in the interplay process?
- How might we measure context or the interplay between entrepreneurial processes and context?

We recognize that the range of *context* is broad - location, culture, societies, embeddedness, gender, rural, family, teams, ethnicity, education, growth – the scope of context is great; context not only matters, but also holds the promise of explanatory power.



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