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# Special issue: Listening to voices from the margins of entrepreneurship

## Introduction

### Robert Smith

Robert Smith is one of the Guest Editors of this special issue. He is a Research Fellow at the Charles P. Skene Centre for Entrepreneurship, Aberdeen Business School, The Robert Gordon University, Kaim House, Garthdee Road, Aberdeen AB10 7QE, UK. E-mail: r.smith-a@rgu.ac.uk. His Co-Editor, Helle Neergaard, is Associate Professor in the Department of Management at the Aarhus School of Business, Aarhus University, Haslegaardsvej 10, DK-8210 Aarhus V, Denmark. E-mail: hen@asb.dk.

This special issue is concerned with entrepreneurial activities that occur at the 'margins of entrepreneurship'. Traditionally, many entrepreneurs have emerged from pariah groups at the margins of individual societies. Moreover, it would appear that entrepreneurship as an activity flourishes at the margins and frontiers of societies, cultures and regions, and at the edge of the 'known' and 'accepted'. The expanding academic discipline of entrepreneurship, or perhaps more appropriately the *indiscipline*, as it is a life theme (Bolton and Thompson, 2000), spans many academic and practical frontiers. Despite an inability to define logically exactly what entrepreneurship is, over the past three decades a broad consensus has emerged concerning the types of behaviours, practices and processes that constitute it. Nevertheless, as one would expect from such a dynamic subject, there is still a healthy level of uncertainty and chaos at the known margins. In recent years a new generation of qualitative researchers, using heuristics such as narrative, semiotics and aesthetics, has uncovered a richer, darker side to entrepreneurship. Thus it is now generally accepted that all forms of illegal and criminal entrepreneurship are equally valid as frameworks as their moral counterparts. To paraphrase the words of Rehn and Taalas (2004), entrepreneurship scholars should not study only 'nice' entrepreneurs.

The aim of this special issue is to expand the known margins and frontiers of entrepreneurial knowledge

while demonstrating that there are many areas of entrepreneurship that exist at the boundaries of our knowledge and that are worthy of further study.

Consequently, we extended an invitation to a wide variety of academic practitioners, spanning many disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, history, geography and criminology. We envisaged a broad selection of papers within the following categories:

- criminal entrepreneurship (including immoral and amoral forms of entrepreneurship);
- predatory or aggressive forms of entrepreneurship as practised in corporations (both contemporary and historical);
- underclass entrepreneurship (including studies of entrepreneurial and criminal underclasses);
- entrepreneurship as practised among elite social groups in societies (where it is traditionally deemed not to exist);
- entrepreneurial fraternities;
- the entrepreneur operating at the margins;
- socioeconomic activities that are entrepreneurial in nature but have not been articulated as such.

I am indebted to the Editor of the *International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, Gerard McElwee, for inviting me to edit this special issue. This invitation

was extended over a series of conversations during early 2006. As a newly qualified academic, I was delighted and honoured to be asked to serve as Guest Editor for the journal. I am also indebted to Helle Neergaard, my Co-Editor, for her help and for the benefit of her editorial and academic experience in compiling the selection of papers presented here.

### **Why this special issue came into being: an auto-ethnographic explanation**

Johnstone (2007, p 117) stresses that entrepreneurship scholars using ethnographic methodologies are forced to publish their research in books or in non-entrepreneurship journals. I am therefore delighted to be given the opportunity to push the boundaries of what is acceptable in an entrepreneurship journal by writing this section in the form of an auto-ethnography.

As I came to academic entrepreneurship from the margins, the topic of this issue holds a special appeal for me. This requires a brief explanation. I came to academia later in life as a serving police officer. Originally from a sheltered farming background, I joined the police in 1983. I therefore had had no exposure to business or entrepreneurship, unlike many other entrepreneurship scholars. The first time I remember encountering the word 'entrepreneurship' was in 1984, when I was reading a popular crime book called *Bullion* (Hogg *et al*, 1984), in which the infamous villain and criminal entrepreneur Kenny Noye was referred to as a self-made man.

In 1993, at the age of 33, I embarked on my first degree at Aberdeen University. I had always been an avid reader, particularly of books about criminology and psychology. As luck had it, I ended up studying management because fewer contact hours were involved: I had really wanted to study psychology, but was unable to attend the classes and continue working full-time. I used what spare time I had in the university library, reading up on criminology. Management was interesting enough, but criminology remained my passion. It was in the library in 1995 that I came across a series of five seminal books that had a major impact on my academic genesis and moulded my future interest in entrepreneurship. The first, by the sociologist and criminologist Dick Hobbs, was *Doing the Business: Entrepreneurship, the Working Class and Detectives in the East End of London* (Hobbs, 1988). Hobbs linked entrepreneurial propensity to criminality, and the book reminded me of many of the professional criminals I knew professionally. The second was *Violent Peasant Entrepreneurs: the Mafia of a Sicilian Village 1860–1960* by the social anthropologist Anton Blok (1974). The third, *Mafia and Mafiosi: the Structure of Power* by the sociologist

Henner Hess (1973), and the fourth, *Mafia Business: the Mafia Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by Pino Arlacchi (1986) both discussed Mafiosi as entrepreneurs. The fifth, *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio* by the anthropologist Phillipe Bourgois (1995) was based on ethnographic methodology and reports on a five-year study of a Puerto Rican drug gang in New York.

In relation to this special issue, a common characteristic of these five books is that their respective authors did not embed their studies directly in the literature of entrepreneurship. Instead, entrepreneurship becomes a heuristic sense-making mechanism that helps authors and readers to understand more clearly the complex social environments in which the crimes were enacted. Protracted definition of the term is not necessary because all the authors appear, as if instinctively, to understand entrepreneurship as elucidated in the context of their studies. The reader is not left with a sense that something is amiss in these works, despite the fact that, having reached a state of *Verstehen*, the authors rest contented with their achievement of a personal understanding. That they stop at the very point we entrepreneurs would see as merely the beginning of the study is neither here nor there, because the simplicity and clarity of their explanations bring closure.

It is also pertinent that all these authors chose to express themselves and their studies via the medium and structure of a book. Standard academic journal articles do not readily lend themselves to the presentation of marginal topics or long, rambling and sweeping expositions. As the years go by, I am repeatedly drawn to those five studies for inspiration and have since bought my own copies. As well as having provided me with an entrée into entrepreneurship, the books still possess a magic quality for me and have a permanence and authority that I find difficult to attribute to articles in many entrepreneurship journals. They serve too as a reminder to entrepreneurship scholars that there are valid alternatives to publishing in journals and that different styles of writing and expression can be very effective.

I embarked on a PhD on the 'social construction of entrepreneurship' in 2000. The power of entrepreneurship to intrigue and draw in fresh academic talent from the margins should not be underestimated. To survive and expand, all disciplines need to encourage, develop and retain committed researchers. With fresh talent comes new ideas, and a broadening of the research field. This is very important at a time when entrepreneurship scholarship is developing its own orthodoxy of what is and is not acceptable within its bounds.

## Why is this special issue important?

In their Introduction to the *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Entrepreneurship*, Helle Neergaard and John Parm Ulhøi, while acknowledging the fact that entrepreneurship has drawn its scholars from a broad spectrum of disciplines, nevertheless echo the sentiments of Low (2001, p 20) that entrepreneurship is less steeped in academic rigour than traditional disciplines. While this may well be the case, it is also a discipline that is rapidly developing its own notions of what constitutes entrepreneurship scholarship and research. Entrepreneurship is no longer the final bastion of mavericks from other disciplines. Although this small community of scholars is still a friendly and open network, it is only natural that an elite is developing of those academics who have become well established and respected for their prowess and their rhetorical and written skills. Those who have achieved tenure and gained a reputation for publishing high-quality articles deserve their elevated stature both in and outside the entrepreneurship research community. But with reputation and legitimacy comes an obligation to encourage and mentor those who will follow. Over time, our hard-working research community has learned to produce a product that, within its own domain, is of a high standard. To be published, one has to learn to produce to the orthodox standard. As Editors of this special issue, we did not appreciate how deeply we had been indoctrinated into this orthodoxy until we were faced with the task of editing the papers received for it. All these papers in their own way had the potential to make a valid contribution to the field. Yet after our initial review, it was apparent to us that it was the entrepreneurship scholars writing on the margins of entrepreneurship and not the scholars from the margins writing about entrepreneurship who stood the best chance of being published. Why? Because they spoke our language and wrote in a style that was acceptable and pleasing to us. Their logic and material were deeply embedded in the literature of entrepreneurship, from which we take comfort. Neergaard and Ulhøi (2007, p 4) also warn against the dangers of enforced methodological orthodoxies that channel scholars into writing in styles and formats acceptable to top-tier journals. Wigren (2007, p 401) notes that in the academic world the validity of research is judged by the 'inner circle' based on journal rankings and citation counts. Consequently, she argues, researchers produce what the inner circle wants. To be published in a top-tier journal is to be invited into 'an othered world'. This is important because not all aspects of entrepreneurship can be packaged into the format appropriate to such journals. Indeed, entrepreneurship at the margins positively resists

this. Ahl (2007, p 237) discusses the discursive (or should it be coercive?) power of mainstream journals to control the content of articles submitted to them by presenting accepted styles of writing to which authors feel they must conform. As Ahl rightly points out, 'outliers are less likely to submit' and those who do submit are made to conform by the review process. Those entrepreneurship scholars who publish outside entrepreneurship journals face a double jeopardy of having the importance of their research marginalized (Ahl, 2007, p 239). This is crucial, considering that much qualitative research is being published in non-entrepreneurship journals (Neergaard, 2007, p 257).

As avid scholars of entrepreneurship, we find inspiration in many venues and medias – we can watch a film or read a novel and draw sophisticated parallels with entrepreneurship theories. We see and sense entrepreneurship everywhere. We often write for fun and produce several hundred words of explanation probing and exploring such connections, which are in themselves enough to satiate curiosity, but such ramblings would never stretch to a full-blown journal article with the necessary rigorous theoretical underpinning. Nevertheless, they are crucial in developing our thoughts on entrepreneurship. The presentation of such work at conferences reveals that these thoughts also serve as an inspiration to others. For example, having failed to persuade orthodox reviewers at one conference that our work with 'fairytales of entrepreneurship' was worthy of presentation, we presented it at an ICSB Workshop on 'Entrepreneurial Intentions' by special invitation. To our amazement and delight, our thinking resonated with more than a few in the packed audience. Thus we see a place for such writings in the form of 'dispatches from the field' – discussing research in progress or telling stories with a power to explain. Moreover, we agree with Bygrave (2007, p 23) that journal articles sometimes tend to over-theorize. How are we ever to advance in the field if we keep within the strictly enforced parameters of traditional research? Entrepreneurship research should, in essence, be entrepreneurial! However, it is the researching and crafting of the more traditional articles that we find so time-consuming. By the time we have done that, the moment has passed – and so has the excitement. Perhaps there is more room for writing up such revelations as case studies, but, as Bygrave (2007, p 43) points out, case studies are not regarded as proper research by many academics, although they often provide more insight into the 'real-world practices of entrepreneurs' than much theoretical work. Such is the power of orthodox doctrine that we are pressured into writing up our research as journal articles. It is most likely the fear of ridicule (Bygrave, 2007, p 19) that prevents us from adopting a more liberal approach to

our writing. We are energized by the writings of scholars such as Dey (2006, p 137), who talks of subverting the prevailing discourse. Dey (p 138) points to a clear bias in the construing of entrepreneurship against the background of management theory and business administration and calls for multidisciplinary and multi-paradigmatic experimentation.

While we stop short of advocating subversion, we do call for greater tolerance of the different. This special issue therefore seeks to explore other avenues of editorial presentation. Czarniawska (2004) discusses how the disciplinary heritage of organization scholars hinders them from seeing fiction, polyvocality, comedy, satire and visual representations as legitimate forms of knowledge. We encourage entrepreneurship scholars to take heed of this advice as they build their own disciplinary heritage.

A related concern is the growth of contributors to entrepreneurship journals. As a growing number of scholars learn to produce technically proficient papers which 'pull out all the stops', it will become increasingly difficult to achieve publication. This poses an exciting challenge for those who can articulate their arguments and thus make their voices heard above the clamour. Steyaert and Hjorth (2006, p 2) talk of an opportunity to 'alter the disciplinary hierarchy that has favoured theories from economics and (individualist) psychology and to connect with concepts and notions of less frequently visited disciplines and theoretical domains'. They also (p 3) discuss entrepreneurship as a 'field establishing a self-limiting discourse' and, building on this (p 6), identify a feeling of discontent between the 'core establishment of entrepreneurship scholars and the new scholarship of social entrepreneurship scholars'. Swedeberg (2006) suggests that this may well be because writings such as those in traditional journals are not connected to a 'general theory' of entrepreneurship, if indeed there should be such a theory. This special issue ventures into lesser-known entrepreneurial territories.

## **The importance of listening to other voices**

Achtenhagen and Welter (2007, p 193) refer to texts being voiced from different locations. Riseberg (1999) writes of the need to give voice to many groups and calls for multivocality in research. There are sections of entrepreneurship scholarship that remain marginalized. Bollingtoft (2007, p 406) argues that very few articles on observation are published in journals. There are other options. For example, Wigren (2007, p 388) implores researchers in the entrepreneurship field to concern themselves with issues of credibility and position some of their work as monographs and book chapters. Dey

(2006, p 139) advocates different writing styles to capture the sensitivity of different voices. This is important because some of the papers received did not fit our orthodox writing style. After a critical reading of many of them, I was tempted to deconstruct and reconstruct some of the writings from the margins to bring out their obvious potential, which the authors had not fully articulated. Indeed, had time permitted, we would have suggested that they were rewritten before they were sent for independent review. However, we do not believe that rewriting papers to make them fit an accepted disciplinary orthodoxy is within an editor's remit. We both now have a greater appreciation of the editorial process and an awareness that the lack of time consigns many potentially valuable articles to the dustbin of obscurity. Perseverance, doggedness and persistence, on the other hand, can and do lead to greater success in publication. Entrepreneurship scholars undoubtedly change as they mature and become established. An excellent illustration of this is provided by Swedeberg (2006), who paints a picture of an energetic, impetuous and more radical Schumpeter who, as an unknown scholar, wrote with passion and perhaps naivety because he had nothing to lose and, in his youthfulness of expression, explored exciting ideas that he ruthlessly suppressed in later writings. In this venture, I too could be accused of being impetuous and radical, because many of the contributions I read excited me with their challenging subjects and opinions. However, in listening to the voice of reason of Gerard McElwee, Helle Neergaard and I have matured as writers and scholars.

In the papers finally selected, many different styles are evident. For example, the first contribution, by Virgil Henry Storr and Bridget Butkevich, is written more in the style of an essay than of a conventional paper. This fluid style suits the presentation of two very important subjects – the issue of the subaltern voice seldom considered in entrepreneurship and also the use of novels to illustrate this forgotten voice. This paper went through four revisions before it reached its present form. The subaltern voice is worthy of further research.

The paper by Lorraine Warren, also a fluid, non-traditional paper, tells the story of the rise and fall of Japanese Internet entrepreneur Takafumi Horie as seen through the eyes of international journalists. In documenting his fall from popularity and grace, it covers the very topical but nonetheless marginal theme of the influence of the establishment in intervening in the personal narratives of entrepreneurs by withdrawing favour and legitimacy. A powerful historical example of this is the case of the historical Scottish entrepreneur Sir Thomas Lipton who, despite generating great wealth in

Britain and America, never achieved his ambition of being truly accepted by the British establishment. This paper updates the narrative on the love–hate relationship between the entrepreneur and the establishment.

The paper by Laura Galloway covers the equally important issue of entrepreneurship and the gay minority. This is not a paper about gay entrepreneurship *per se*, but it makes an important contribution to this neglected area of research by documenting discriminating voices.

Dieter Bögenhold and Uwe Fachinger explore issues relating to those who work at the margins of entrepreneurship on a self-employed or freelance basis. This is a significant contribution because the debate continues as to when self-employed people are and are not to be equated with entrepreneurs. Indeed, we have still to come to an agreement on how to define an entrepreneur. And, in addition, the voice of near-entrepreneurs or atypical entrepreneurs is often forgotten.

David Valliere and Norm O'Reilly discuss the analogy between entrepreneurs and mountaineers and the value of the analogy perspective to entrepreneurship research. The paper focuses on metaphors and traits and draws on an empirical study of mountaineers.

This very eclectic selection of papers is fittingly brought to an end by another essayistic contribution from Matt Qvortrup, who examines the relevance of Joseph Schumpeter's work on entrepreneurship for political science – another uncharted field at the margins of entrepreneurship.

Other often-unacknowledged voices are those of the anonymous reviewers. We therefore thank them for their efforts. They should hopefully see their mediating voices in print. As Guest Editors, we learned the hard way how to edit a journal and, more importantly, how not to. We have been energized by the eclectic nature of the papers received. Although many of these were good, many did not meet the entrepreneurship orthodoxy test. Even maverick editors have a duty to present a journal issue with a balanced voice. The major learning point that we take from the process is that there is a need for increased collaboration between experienced entrepreneurship scholars and those in other disciplines. Finally, we once again thank Gerard McElwee for the opportunity to edit this special issue and for his advice and forbearance on what to publish and what to reject.

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## Introduction

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