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Key words; context, emerging economy; practice theory

Towards an entrepreneurial theory of practice; emerging ideas for emerging economies

Alistair R Anderson and Sébastien Ronteau

Introduction

We believe there is a problem with the explanatory power of many existing theories of entrepreneurship in the unique circumstances of emerging economies. Emerging economies range from dynamic contexts such as China (Li and Wang, 2013), to slowly emerging economies in Africa (Harbi et al, 2009) through to the rapid transitions of economies in Eastern Europe (Welter et al, 2015). Clearly they are different from the more established economies. However, they are also considerably different from each other. Nonetheless, the importance of entrepreneurship is clear (Edho, 2016). Our argument is that explanation and understanding of entrepreneurship may be limited by the significant differences in contexts (Anderson and Obeng, 2017). Furthermore, these established theories are themselves fragmentary, tending to explain entrepreneurship only in terms of the parent discipline of the theory, thus unable to build a full understanding of entrepreneurship in action. Yet for Bruton et al (2008:1) “there is a strong need to develop an understanding of entrepreneurship in emerging economies.”

We therefore propose a different approach to further our understanding of entrepreneurship in emerging economies. We suggest that a theory that is grounded in what entrepreneurs actually do within their local context is more likely to provide understanding and explanation. We propose that first asking how entrepreneurs ‘do’ entrepreneurship, will help develop theory; a theory of entrepreneurial practice. We explain how such a theory could enable us to appreciate how context in the form of institutions, cultures values and economic conditions produces the transformational qualities of enterprise which we admire. In this way a practice theory can relate actions to structures and provide more complete understanding. Moreover, rather than simply providing an individualist accounting of entrepreneurship in practice, a *theory* of practice will enable us to comprehend how entrepreneurial agency engages with the structures that characterise the environment in which entrepreneurs work.

The research problem

Entrepreneurship is an interesting but extraordinary phenomenon. It has been convincingly argued that enterprise drive economies, creates jobs and wealth and in its social enterprise guise, provides welfare. The strength of this argument is sufficient to indicate a global shift away from managed economies to what are thought as entrepreneurial economies (Thurik, 2009). Yet paradoxically, as academics we don’t yet fully understand entrepreneurship (Karatas-Ozkan et al, 2014), perhaps reflecting its multidimensional nature (Steyaert and Katz, 2004). Of course we have a battery of theories that explain parts of entrepreneurship, albeit sometimes criticised as too theoretical and remote from practice (Radu Lefebvre and Redien-Collot, 2012). From a functionalist perspective, we know that innovation is a critical component of entrepreneurship; from a social perspective that entrepreneurs are socially situated and psychologists suggest that entrepreneurs have some qualities and traits that create a favourable disposition towards entrepreneurship. These theories are useful, but offer a fragmented contribution to understanding entrepreneurship. Worse still they

seem to work best in disciplinary silos. For example, economic theories may provide useful accounts but only in economic terms. They explain how *homo oeconomicus* should rationally respond to economic change (Hjorth, 2013), but tell us little about how entrepreneurs are socially embedded or how entrepreneurship is socially enacted (Anderson 2015). Similarly, social theories usefully explain the role of formal and informal institutions (McKeever et al, 2014; Lesage and Ronteau, 2014), but they tell us little about the fine grain of how entrepreneurs respond to, or use these institutions. In many cases, theories simply ignore factors that lie outside the disciplinary silo- *ceteris paribus* becomes a major obstacle to understanding. Emerging economies can be characterised as changing economies, so few things stay the same for very long, and rarely are things held constant. Indeed this is one reason why the change making properties of entrepreneurship are so well suited to adaptation in emerging economies and a good reason to understand this better.

Our first argument is that theoretical accounts which are borrowed from other disciplines can only explain entrepreneurship from the (limiting) viewpoint of that discipline. Welter et al (2016) make a similar point, arguing that a wider perspective on what constitutes entrepreneurship will lead to better theory and more insights that are relevant to the phenomenon. Dodd et al (2016:930) add, “we sink into silos and lack the objectivity required by those with broader, perhaps interdisciplinary approaches”, so that “those who think narrow look for detailed analysis, whilst those who think wider look for perceived relevance and connectivity”. It seems that existing entrepreneurship theories offer us a fascinating jigsaw puzzle (Gartner, 2007), but missing a few critical connecting pieces (Anderson et al, 2012).

We have also become increasingly aware of a related problem in understanding entrepreneurship; the issue of context and its role in entrepreneurship (Gaddefors and Anderson, 2016). Smallbone et al, (2013) point out that importance of context is largely missing from theory. It has been robustly argued that context is more than merely the background to entrepreneurship (Welter, 2011); context may play a significant and shaping role (Dodd, Pret and Shaw, 2016). Context may offer resources for entrepreneurship (Berglund et al, 2016) or shape opportunities (Korsgaard et al, 2015). It may even shape how positively entrepreneurship is viewed (Dodd et al, 2013). Steyaert (2016) argues that contextualisation is not just necessary for research, but is central to how we understand the entrepreneurial process. Moreover, Anderson and Gaddefors (2016) explain how insights can be generated by putting context into the theoretical foreground rather than the more conventional treatment as background to entrepreneurship. The influence of context appears particularly relevant for emerging economies which are often characterised as a context which is different from developed market economies.

Context thus holds explanatory power. But as Bruton et al, (2008:1) explain “entrepreneurship research can still be critiqued as almost exclusively focused on North American and European research sites. Moreover, it may be wrong to consider and treat all ‘emerging economies’ as similar, (Smallbone and Welter, 2006). Indeed, problems of applying ‘western’ theory are magnified in the heterogeneity of emerging economies (Wright et al, 2005). As Anderson (2016; 44) claims, the qualities of context and idiosyncratic human behaviour are the very qualities that makes things entrepreneurial. Together these two issues, fragmented theory leading to poor understanding and the underplayed importance of context, seem to present theoretical problems in understanding entrepreneurship in emerging economies.

A solution in 'Practice Theory'?

These problems suggest that strongly contextualised theorising is needed to address the issues of conceptual distance from the subject; addressing local variety and yet at the same time be capable of conceptually abstracting from the practices of individual entrepreneurs. Terjesen and Elam (2009) address the first of these issues explaining how practice theories link actors to the context in which they are embedded. Nicolini (2012) explains how a theory of practice can attend to the latter problem; practice theories do more than just describe what people do. Practices are, in fact, meaning-making, identity-forming, and order-producing activities.

Practice theories offer both theory and method (Chia and Holt 2008); they propose a perspective, a world view that relates everyday practices to structures. As method, practice theory incorporates an empirical focus on how people act in contexts, but within a theoretical framework for understanding relations between the actions people take and the structures with which they interact. As a method, Shotter (1995) follows Bourdieu's advice to use practice theory as a tool. Bourdieu described practice theories as analytic tools which enable people to see connections and create meaning between aspects of their lives and practices, and to account for their actions. As theory, Nicolini (2012) explains how practice theories foreground the importance of activity, performance, and work in the creation and perpetuation of all aspects of social life. For a theory of entrepreneurial practice, it is important to note that the focus is not on the entrepreneur but on the 'entrepreneurial practice', what entrepreneurs actually do. Nicolini (2012) believes that practice-based approaches avoid the misleading belief, the naïve empiricism, that by observing the activities of the world in more detail, one gets closer to 'reality'. Felin and Foss (2012) explain why this is naïve empiricism by noting that the observation of an apple falling in no way embodies the law of gravitation for the observer. They provide another example; it appears that the sun orbits the earth, but the truth is the opposite. Our argument here is that to make sense of an observation of practice, we need good explanatory theory. Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) believe practice theory, with its focus on dynamics, relations, and enactment, is particularly well positioned to offer powerful analytical tools to understand why actors act as they do.

To grasp this important point about entrepreneurial practice theories as offering more than an account of everyday practice, we can turn to the ideas of strategy as practice. Strategy as practice is now well established, but originally confronted similar problems to those we outlined for entrepreneurship. Practice approaches are fundamentally processual and see the world as an ongoing routinized and recurrent accomplishment (Lounsbury and Crumley, 2007). However, we can distinguish between activities and the 'practice' of practice theory. Jarzabkowski (2005) describes activity as the actions and interactions of actors performing their daily duties and roles, In contrast, practice refers to activity patterns across actors that are infused with broader meaning and provide tools for ordering social life and activity. She explains activity involves acts that are generally devoid of deeper social meaning or reflection, such as hammering a nail; while practice, such as professional carpentry, provides order and meaning to a set of otherwise banal activities. Schatzki (2001) makes the same point, a 'practice' implies actions that invoke aggregate sets of interactions. As routinized types of behaviour, practices transcend individuals and time (Suddaby et al 2013).

Suddaby et al (2013) relate the emergence of SAP (strategy as practice) to two related research trends. First the turn toward more processual understandings of organization and management

most explicitly advocated by Weick (1979) that urges researchers to use verbs or gerunds instead of nouns (*entrepreneuring*); thus arguing that social phenomena are accomplished through activities. Accordingly, SAP researchers adopt an activity-based view, emphasising the doing of strategy by studying micro-activities. The second trend is the broader “practice turn” in social science (Schatzki et al., 2001), which emphasises the wider social context that shapes and is shaped by observable activity. Thus, SAP scholars emphasise that all strategizing activity is based on “regular, socially defined modes of acting that arise from the plural social institutions to which [actors] belong” (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007:6). Suddaby et al (2103) consider the approach cuts across multiple levels of analysis, connecting the micro-level of individual activities to the meso-level of the organization and the macro-level of the organizational field.

The theoretical heritage of strategy as practice, and that for an entrepreneurial theory, has its underpinnings in New Institutional Theory which itself was a reaction to problems in explaining behaviour that was outside the rational world of economic accounts. Suddaby et al (2013; 330) explain “organizations respond to pressures in their *social* and *symbolic* environment rather than simply economic pressures”. Practice, according to Swedberg (1997) is grounded in the new economic sociology emphasising the importance of embeddedness, which can be traced to Grannovetter’s 1985 classic paper. In turn, Grannovetter’s work is close to Polanyi’s (1957) conceptualisations of embeddedness as combining the economic and non-economic. As we see it, the explanatory power in theories of practice lies in its ability to relate and to explain what entrepreneurs do in terms of their relationships with the structural elements within the society and economy in which they work. Moreover the ensuing theory is not static, but dynamic and hence well suited to the changing circumstances so evident in emerging economies. As Nicolini (2012) explains, practice theories have space for initiative and individual performance. This is necessary because performing a practice always requires adapting to new circumstances so that practising is neither mindless repetition nor complete invention.

Towards an entrepreneurial theory of practice.

Initially, the idea of a ‘theory of practice’ sounds absurd. Theory is knowledge that represents the general and universal; in contrast practice is the local, the specific everyday action (Johannisson, 2011). They appear as different, even incompatible domains. However when we examine what is meant by a theory we can recognise that what is meant is the theoretical ‘situating’ of practices in a broader explanatory framework. Reckwitz (2002; 249) distinguishes between ‘practice’ and ‘practices’ “(in German there is the useful difference between Praxis and Praktiken)”. ‘Practice’ (Praxis) in the singular represents human action. ‘Practices’ in the sense of the theory of social practices, however, is something else. A ‘practice’ (Praktik) is a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other. Praxis is the concrete, unfolding activity as it takes place. While praxis is necessarily unique in that it only exists in the present, it is informed and guided by practices. That is, whenever people act, they draw on some pre-existing, socially defined practices (Suddaby et al, 2013).

Indeed, if we step back from the issue it is striking to realise that explaining entrepreneurship in practice is already established as a methodology we call narratives (Popp and Holt, 2013). These stories of entrepreneurial derring-do, or of the everyday prosaicness, carry meanings in their natural context. Indeed it is the contextualisation within a narrative that carries its explanatory power. The

entrepreneurial tale is a (his)story of practice (Smith and Anderson, 2004). However whilst narratives work well as sense making and for sense giving, they work less well for determining patterns across multiple cases and probably suffer from being *overly* contextualised. There are however some useful examples of practice theory's explanatory reach.

Entrepreneurial practice theory in use

Dana and Light (2013) used practice theory to explain how an Alaskan group engage with entrepreneurship. Their analysis draws out the importance of cultural capital in shaping the entrepreneurship within this particular context. They employ Bourdieu's notion of *habitus* following Drori, Honig, and Ginsberg (2010) where *habitus* is deemed "embodied history internalized as second nature". Bourdieu (1990) uses the notion of *habitus* as a shorthand for the shared values and practices of a practitioner group. In Bourdieu's practice theory, *habitus* is the common relationships that define the field of activity. It acts as a structure with which social actors engage. Consequently *habitus* becomes the means to explain actions as the intersections between the individual and the collective. Thus this theory of practice shows how long established cultural values become a benchmark of what is appropriate for the detail of individual entrepreneurship practice in this context.

To single out a particularly good example of the beneficial use of practice theory, consider De Clercq and Voronov, (2009) who are interested in entrepreneurial legitimacy and its processes. They argue that entrepreneurs have two opposing roles. First to "fit in" with what is expected of an entrepreneur, what we have referred to as enacting entrepreneurship (Anderson et al, 2013); but paradoxically as entrepreneurs they also have to be different, to "stand out" from others (Anderson and Warren, 2011). They explain how structures, the *habitus* as the structuring rules of the game, are employed by entrepreneurial newcomers. On one hand they conform in their enactment of entrepreneuring, but on the other they add novelty. Legitimacy is conferred to conforming to expectations of what entrepreneurs do, but endorsed by doing this a little differently. Thus their application of a theory of practice shows us what are the rules of the game for novice entrepreneurs, yet also shows how this informs what they do. In other words in the duality of structure and agency; the *habitus* as shaping entrepreneurial actions, explains what newcomers do and both how and why they do it. This is a powerful approach for explanation and understanding.

These examples show how a practice theory of entrepreneurship can help us understand the phenomenon. There are already well established reasons to believe that 'practice' is a good building block for entrepreneurial theorising in emergent economies. Leitch, Hill and Harrison (2009) suggest the status of entrepreneurship as a practice-based discipline indicates how its knowledge is bounded by its contextual nature. Moreover, drawing on the wisdom of one of entrepreneurship's disciplinary founders, Bill Bygrave, they believe (2009; 71), "In relation to entrepreneurship, Bygrave (2007) argues that its status is a practical professional discipline in which the fundamental questions are, "what should entrepreneurs do?" and "how can we improve entrepreneurial practice?" Such questions raise the issue of the nature of the entrepreneurship discipline and the implications for choice of methodology. In other words, the status of entrepreneurship as a practice-based discipline suggests that knowledge, of and for entrepreneurship, is bounded by its contextual nature. Drucker (1985) a great admirer of entrepreneurship, argues that entrepreneurship is best understood as a practice. As Johannisson (2011) has argued entrepreneurship is an (everyday) hands-on practice.

Practice sits across disciplines. Functionalist and disciplinary bound theory will always struggle to provide explanations outside the domain of the discipline. For example the old 'traits' view of the individual entrepreneur provided us with a convincing account of the attitudes of entrepreneurs. Yet it failed dismally to 'explain' how these traits produced entrepreneurship. As de Clercq and Voronov (2009) put it, this challenged the dominant assumption that entrepreneurship is an intrinsic quality of an individual. But, and this but is the nub of our argument; if we accept that traits are a particular disposition (as the obviously are), then by applying a practice approach, what entrepreneurs actually do, we now have a much more convincing account and a better explanation.

Watson (2013:406) suggests we work with a concept of entrepreneurship as a particular type of human activity. He encourages us to adopt a much wider focus and see 'entrepreneurial action' as a key and widely existing feature of the 'how things work in the social world'. Similarly, Steyaert (2007) talks about 'entrepreneurship' which has the ring of authentic description in how it situates and prioritises action as primary. This of course goes against our traditional research focus on the entrepreneur. As Holmquist (2003) points out- the entrepreneur is the visible part of entrepreneurship. Chia (1997) offers us a reason why we have followed the entrepreneur rather than what they do. He explains this reification as a consequence for our concern for the 'thingness of things'. Social entities, their properties and their attributes are taken as more fundamentally real than actions, interactions and relationships. Accordingly we propose that developing an entrepreneurial practice theory is both apt and appropriate to further our understanding. We believe practice theory, with its focus on dynamics, relations, and enactment, is particularly well positioned to offer powerful analytical tools to help our understanding of entrepreneurship.

We borrow from Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) and Orlikowski (2010) to set out the basics of an entrepreneurial theory of practice. They propose three ways of studying practice; an empirical focus on how people act in contexts, a theoretical focus on understanding relations between the actions people take and structures, and a philosophical focus on the constitutive role of practices in producing entrepreneurial reality.

- 1) The "what" of a practice lens (*empirical*), a focus on the everyday activity of entrepreneuring. This approach is, to some extent, a reaction to an earlier emphasis in theory that focused primarily on structural features while neglecting the agentic capacity of human action.
- 2) The how (*theoretical*) approach to practice explicitly takes on board the apparatus of practice theory. Although it includes a focus on everyday activity, it is critically concerned with a specific explanation for that activity. This approach answers the "how" of a practice lens—the articulation of particular theoretical relationships that explain the dynamics of everyday activity, how these are generated, and how they operate within different contexts and over time.
- 3) The third (*philosophical*) approach to practice entails the premise that social reality is fundamentally made up of practices; that is, rather than seeing the social world as external to human agents or as socially constructed by them, this approach sees the social world as brought into being through everyday activity. This approach answers the "why" of a practice

lens—a focus on everyday activity is critical because practices are understood to be the primary building blocks of social reality.

To move this argument from the abstract towards utility, we propose an example of using a theory of practice to examine entrepreneurial orientation (EO). EO has taken a pole position as an explanation for why some firms succeed. Yet it is also criticised for its circularity. For example Randerson (2016) gives a full but critical account of EO. She demonstrates how the convenience of the concept has resulted in the original purpose- to show the processes of being enterprising- being hijacked and subverted into almost a definition of entrepreneurship itself. As she explains (2016:584), “The aggregate dependent variable (which has become EO) has been taken out of its initial context (designed as a dependent variable to identify the organizational properties that lead to this result) to become an independent variable explaining firm performance “. Moreover the concept has become normative telling us what entrepreneurs should do. Worse still is how EO has come to be applied, as a pseudo-theory purporting to encapsulate entrepreneurial qualities as a predictor of particular outcomes. As critics we have come to realise that the theory, probably quite properly, identifies useful entrepreneurial characteristics. However we also realise that that there is a black box in the middle of EO. It tells us what the characteristics are, but fails to tell us how they are ‘practiced’. Practice theory may go some way to opening up this black box. Our point is that to understand entrepreneurship we need to look at the actions that comprise what entrepreneurs do. Thus EO may become much more useful if we used a practice theory to explore the elements of EO in use. Thus, their extent and their interactions might offer an understanding of how EO actually works.

Conclusions

In sum then there are several reasons for supporting a different research approach to understanding entrepreneurship in emerging economies, indeed much of the argument holds good for entrepreneurship in all economies. However the case is stronger when changing circumstances are fore fronted.

1. Western theories may not work very well when underlying conditions and attitudes differ
2. In any case existing theory seems to be too fragmented to provide a holistic and complete accounts of how entrepreneurship arises and what forms it takes.

Emerging economies are unique environments that offers the ability to obtain fresh insights to expand entrepreneurial theory and our understanding by incorporating more contextualized considerations.

We are not yet sufficiently confident about how well a theory of practice will explain all entrepreneurial events in emerging economies to propose rejecting our established theories and ways of looking at the entrepreneurial world. We are however convinced that such an approach to entrepreneurship will usefully complement our theories. The strengths and promise of a theory of practice is not only that it tells us about what people do, it contextualises practices into a broader schema of things such as norms, values and the institutions which have come to present these structured qualities. Consequently we believe that a theory of practice goes some way to explaining both how and why these practices occur. Yet it is not deterministic because how agents or actors understand these norms shapes how they respond. Thus an entrepreneurial theory of practice

would help us to understand both continuity and change, which is very appropriate for emerging economies. What such theories do is to open our eyes to how entrepreneurial processes work. This is the role for theories of entrepreneurial practice. We see a theory of entrepreneurial practices as an organising theory, offering us a way of looking at what goes on; an interpretative tool to provide us with conceptual purchase on complex entrepreneurship and the diversity of its practice.

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