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EDITORIAL

CONTEXT AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP RESEARCH. DO YOU SEE THE ELEPHANT?

Silke Tegtmeier
University of Southern Denmark
tegtmeier@iti.sdu.dk

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Abstract

Purpose. *This editorial argues for putting emphasis on context and interdisciplinarity in entrepreneurship and innovation research.*

Design/methodology/Approach. *I propose a conceptual discussion about the topic.*

Findings*. Following Welter (2011), this editorial shows that entrepreneurship and innovation need to be contextualized, that contexts can be intertwined, and that recursive relationships may exist. The case of gendered innovations strikingly demonstrates the role of context and supports the argument that diversity in entrepreneurship and innovation asks for specific targeted research.*

Practical and social implications*. To properly research complex phenomena, such as entrepreneurship and innovation, this also calls for more interdisciplinary research in this field. Exemplarily, the decisive role entrepreneurs' voices play in presenting their business case to relevant gatekeepers, supports the argument of making contributions to expand knowledge in this field following an interdisciplinary approach in research. The Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984, 1986a, b) as a dual-process model is presented as an example to highlight a contribution from research on attitude formation to the field of entrepreneurship.*

1. Introduction

You may be familiar with the parable of the blind men and the elephant: It is about a group of blind men who have never met an elephant and learn by touching the elephant and imagining what it looks like. Each blind man feels a different part of the elephant's body, but only one part, for instance, the side or the tail. They then describe the elephant based on their limited experiences, and their descriptions of the elephant differ from each other. The moral of the parable is that people tend to claim absolute truth based on their limited, subjective experience, while ignoring the limited, subjective experiences of other people, which may be equally true.

In other words, truth, whether actual or perceived, depends on context. Different truths can have value at the same time. They contribute to learning more about the entire phenomenon. The phenomenon (here: the elephant) is *complex*. To properly research the phenomenon, we may also need to take an *interdisciplinary* approach.

When we look at entrepreneurship as the phenomenon to research, we need to look at it in its *context*: to contextualize the context. As Welter (2011, p. 165) points out, context can be asset or liability for entrepreneurial activities and vice versa, entrepreneurship can also influence the context:

> "There is growing recognition in entrepreneurship research that economic behavior can be better understood within its historical, temporal, institutional, spatial, and social contexts, as these contexts provide individuals with opportunities and set boundaries for their actions. Context can be an asset and a liability for the nature and extent of entrepreneurship, but entrepreneurship can also impact contexts."

Contexts are intertwined and cut across levels of analysis—so contextualizing theory needs to apply a multi-context perspective. Most research assumes a "one-way relationship" with the context as given. Scholars investigate how context factors influence entrepreneurial activity but lack a focus on how entrepreneurial activity impacts its contexts. To date, there are few studies that recognize recursive relationships and attempt to bridge between different contexts. If for no other reason, then this occurs because of the conceptual and empirical challenges such designs entail (Welter, 2011).

Welter suggests that a contextualized view on entrepreneurship asks for an interdisciplinary perspective, as it is not realistic to present one overarching theory of entrepreneurship which is valid in all contexts, but rather to integrate knowledge from other disciplines which deliver concepts and tools which scholars need to explore the richness and variety of contexts. Contextualization can be integrated at several stages of the research process, from addressing the research problem, developing a research design, choices about method and location, to data measurement, analysis, and

discussion (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). The latter would also include interpreting the results by putting them into context.

Our world is facing increasing urgency and complexity when it comes to current societal challenges (Wang et al., 2015; Glänzel & Debackere, 2022). *Interdisciplinary* research may be a consequence of this, but also a means of overcoming societal challenges as the National Academy of Sciences et al. (2005, p. 2) emphasize:

> "Interdisciplinarity is a mode of research by teams or individuals that integrates information, data, techniques, tools, perspectives, concepts, and/or theories from two or more disciplines or bodies of specialized knowledge to advance fundamental understanding or to solve problems whose solutions are beyond the scope of a single discipline or area of research practice."

According to this definition, knowledge integration is the core of interdisciplinary research (Glänzel & Debackere, 2022). Indeed, interdisciplinarity is a concept closely linked to our understanding of academic disciplines, and there is ongoing debate about the distinctions between interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary research (Choi & Pak, 2006). Instead of clear boundaries, there is a spectrum with blurred lines and overlapping areas. This makes it difficult to define these categories precisely. In essence, interdisciplinarity incorporates elements from two or more disciplines to create a new framework for the discourse as well as the integration of knowledge (Choi & Pak, 2006; Glänzel & Debackere, 2022; Rafols and Meyer, 2010).

From a policy standpoint, there is a growing emphasis on program-oriented directives, shaping the mechanisms for funding research. Funders play a crucial role by acting as catalysts as they promote interdisciplinary research through the establishment of "grand challenges" that call for cognitive and organizational interdisciplinary approaches. However, the task of defining and mapping interdisciplinary research is complex, as highlighted by Glänzel and Debackere (2022). This is supported by The Royal Society (2016, p. 1):

> "Many of the major challenges that society faces today will require solutions developed through interdisciplinary research and cross-disciplinary collaboration. Improving support for and addressing the barriers to this work could contribute to major scientific breakthroughs at the interface of disciplines, develop new technologies and ultimately support the economy and develop novel solutions to societal challenges".

In the following, I will elaborate on two examples to demonstrate the decisiveness of *context* as well as of *interdisciplinarity* in entrepreneurship and innovation research.

2. Focus on Context-related Research: An Example

The field of gendered innovations gives a striking example of why *context* plays a crucial role (Birkner et al., 2020; Tegtmeier & Birkner, 2021). While innovations are often associated with thoughts of progress, new technologies, and improved work and lifestyles, the example of "health" shows that this is not always the case.

From the 18th century onward, numerous innovations have played a crucial role in enhancing public health and overall quality of life. These advancements extend across disease control and epidemiology, as highlighted by Porter (1999). The progress is not solely attributed to medical faculties and institutions; researchers and inventors in chemistry and physics have also made substantial contributions. Examples include the creation of X-ray and radiation diagnostics as well as the development of vaccines.

Nevertheless, advancements in medical diagnosis and therapy have yet to achieve universal accessibility across the global population. Disparities not only exist in the healthcare opportunities and structures specific to each country but also manifest as significant health deficits in innovation development and implementation, particularly when considering various diversity categories and in that sense also various contexts. The World Health Organization (WHO) has, for almost 80 years, recognized health as a fundamental human right. According to the definition of the WHO, health goes beyond the mere absence of symptomatic signs of illness; instead, it encompasses a dynamic state of complete physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being (Dhar et al., 2011; WHO, 1946).

Addressing gender inequalities in (public) health is vital for countering negative effects related to it. Neglecting gender-sensitive research results in costly misdiagnoses and missed market opportunities (European Commission, 2013). Failure to consider diversity in innovation development leads to discriminatory effects with serious social consequences. For instance, certain cars are 71% less safe for women and people assigned female at birth (AFAB) due to development based on a stereotypical male dummy, leading to increased injuries in accidents for them. To promote safety, innovation must account for differences in female injury tolerance, spinal alignment, neck strength, biomechanics, and other relevant factors (Stanford University, 2011).

Recently, the World Economic Forum has estimated the economic benefits of addressing the women's health gap (2024) and calculated an estimated boost of $1 trillion annually by 2040 if it was properly addressed. Among other women related diseases, the World Economic Forum is putting endometriosis into the spotlight which has been overlooked and underdiagnosed for many years. Endometriosis is a persistent inflammatory disease that affects around 10% of women of childbearing age worldwide

(Shafrir et al., 2018). Overlooking this disease results in less than half of the women living with this gynecological condition have a documented diagnosis (Horne & Saunders, 2019; Westwood et al., 2023). Although endometriosis is clinically benign, pain and dysfunction associated with endometriosis seriously affect women's health and therefore their personal, social, and professional lives (Della Corte et al., 2020; Surrey et al., 2020; Westwood et al., 2023).

Other than overlooking diseases which are specific to women, a central issue is the historical exclusion of women from clinical studies related to diseases of men and women alike, extending even to preclinical research on mice. This exclusion not only affects the application of current medical innovations but also significantly impacts the growing digitization of healthcare. In the realm of digital medical diagnostics, the absence of sufficient data on female subjects results in a 50% higher likelihood of misdiagnosis and mistreatment during a heart attack (Criado Perez, 2020).

In the future, if medical innovation is to bring better health care to all people equally, it is important to close this data gap, also known as the "gender data gap" (Criado Perez, 2020). Given the relevance of gender analysis for health research and practice, it is surprising that there is still little empirical evidence from research in this area on how gender-specific innovations are reflected in newer (also: digital) business models (Birkner et al., 2020).

Encouragingly, there is ongoing research into integrating gender as a key consideration in health research processes—from crafting research questions to method design and data interpretation. Professor Londa Schiebinger from Stanford University has played a significant role in promoting gender-conscious research, uncovering the societal harm caused by unconscious gender biases. Emphasizing the value of gender analysis across various sciences, including chemistry and physics, Schiebinger's consortium introduced the term "gendered innovations" to unite these efforts. This approach commendably considers intersectional effects, i.e., it involves other diversity aspects such as age or origin as specific contexts (Ettl et al., 2021; Sundermeier et al., 2020). In doing so, this research promises new discoveries across disciplines (Schiebinger, 2014; Schiebinger & Schraudner, 2011; Schiebinger & Klinge, 2015).

Regardless of whether one is a researcher, inventor, or practitioner in health or other fields, the inclusion of gendered innovations not only reduces discrimination but also promotes innovation. In a gender-sensitive perspective, previously researched or developed concepts can yield fresh scientific insights, mitigate social discrimination, and create additional value. The methods and tools required for this are readily accessible at no cost, making it straightforward to initiate this transformative approach which acknowledges this specific and important context.

3. Focus on Interdisciplinary Research: An Example

Together with my colleagues, I propose a fresh avenue of investigation which highlights the significance of interdisciplinary methodologies in the field of entrepreneurship research (Niebuhr et al., 2017; Niebuhr et al., 2019). Entrepreneurs, in their quest to bring new ideas to the market, often encounter resistance to change and face increased investment risks when they introduce innovations. Successfully turning these ideas into reality requires effective persuasion aimed at supervisors, potential investors, and customers. We propose a focus on the charismatic aspect of speaking, particularly the tone of voice, as a crucial skill for entrepreneurs. Our research direction builds on previous analyses of political speakers and traditional rhetorical characterizations of charismatic tone, aiming to enhance existing approaches like charismatic leadership tactics. The goal is to advance and potentially replace descriptive rhetorical terms with an unbiased, acoustically grounded, perceptually informed, and technologically supported analysis, evaluation, and training of tone of voice (Niebuhr et al., 2017).

The realm of charismatic speech has seen more progress in researching and training verbal aspects, such as words and their meanings, than in exploring the non-verbal domain, particularly the speaker's tone of voice. Despite its pivotal role in shaping perceptions of charismatic speakers, tone of voice has been largely described using vague, impressionistic terms. This abbreviated view limits our understanding and training capabilities despite the existence of solid phonetic foundations that render the speaker's tone of voice as quantifiable as their words. In response, our new area of research focuses on acoustic charisma profiling and training and aims to define the speaker's tone of voice objectively and quantifiably. This interdisciplinary approach combines acoustics, psychology, and phonetics with management and entrepreneurship research. It allows for progress from acoustic profiles to audience-oriented performance profiles and integrated charisma scores (Niebuhr et al., 2017).

In the realm of entrepreneurship, this line of research provides quantifiable insights because it fills gaps in understanding the impact of a speaker's voice on investor decisions. We offer new ways to analyze and train investor pitches that go beyond the content of pitch decks and business plans to communication skills and overall impression. Therefore, entrepreneurship research enriches our understanding of the interplay between expressivity, speaking styles, and charismatic tone of voice. In recent work, we show the benefit of interdisciplinary approaches in entrepreneurship research that follow the suggestion above by investigating the role of voice in venture evaluation (Tegtmeier et al., 2020). To explain why the pure voice can play a decisive role in this context—investors can be seen as powerful gatekeepers who could be expected not to be guided by the voice of the speaker,

i.e. of the entrepreneur—, the suggestion by Shepherd and Wiklund who advocate for "[c]ontribut[ing] to the entrepreneurship literature by theorizing from another literature" (Shepherd & Wiklund, 2020, p. 3) can bring significant added value.

As a theoretical lens on how the process of persuasion works, literature on attitude formation and change can contribute to entrepreneurship research. The Elaboration Likelihood Model proposed by Petty and Cacioppo is a dual-process model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1984, 1986a, 1986b; Petty, Cacioppo, Strathman, & Priester, 2005) which focuses on ways of processing stimuli and distinguishes two essential routes to persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route.

Via the central route, an individual carefully and thoughtfully evaluates issue-relevant information by means of a critical thought process. Issue-relevant information can be all credible key evidence which relates to the communicated topic and its true merits (Crano & Prislin, 2006; Darley & Smith, 1993). In our context, this can, for instance, be entrepreneur- or product-relevant information (Allison, Davis, Webb, & Short, 2017).

In contrast, through the peripheral route, an individual invests less cognitive effort into her evaluation of a message, but rather forms an evaluation by means of peripheral cues (Kelman, 1961; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986b). Instead of providing support for the benefits of the topic in question (quality of the stimulus) as done by issue-relevant information, peripheral cues stand for the remaining or non-issue-relevant elements of a message. These positive or negative cues can, for instance, be related to the tone of language used (Yang, Hung, Sung, & Farn, 2006), describing the venture in question as a personal dream (Allison et al., 2017) or just the count of arguments used in a pitch (Briñol & Petty, 2006).

The Elaboration Likelihood Model distinguishes processes of attitude change along an elaboration continuum which ranges from low to high. Persuasion based on processing a message at the low end follows the peripheral route while persuasion based on processes to determine attitudes at the high end follow the central route. The central route is applied when the individual has both the motivation and the ability to reflect on the message and its content. Instead of evaluations based on object-relevant information, peripheral processes make the individual rely on heuristics when reacting on a message (Petty & Briñol, 2012), that is, in the peripheral route the elaboration likelihood is lower. In principle, both routes of persuasion can apply in parallel, but the impact of the one or the other can be higher (Petty & Wegener, 1998).

An argument for consciously including peripheral cues can be investing into ventures which potential customers and further investors would be most likely to prefer because those groups would indeed infer from peripheral cues (for instance, from attractiveness) to competence, social

skills, and success (Brooks et al., 2014). On the contrary, peripheral cues can cause subconscious reactions, such as positive or negative emotions. These emotions can evoke social approach or avoidance behavior in a social interaction (Agthe, Spörrle, & Maner, 2011; Lemay, Clark, & Greenberg, 2010). Seen this way, the attractiveness of a pitch or the entrepreneur who presents the pitch can be a non-issue-relevant peripheral cue which leads to a subconscious decision to finance a venture.

In this way, "[t]he second literature […] [from another discipline] provides the theoretical basis for filling the gap in the first", as Shepherd & Wiklund argue for (Shepherd & Wiklund, 2020, p. 3) and the interdisciplinary approach can contribute to exploring and explaining the entire phenomenon.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, I hope that I have been able to support the argument that both, contextual studies, and interdisciplinary work, are important. While I stressed *context* more in the first example above and *interdisciplinarity* more in the second, of course, both should be addressed in any single research endeavor. As authors, we should emphasize both more in our research, but also as reviewers and editors of journals, we should recognize this type of study and work to research the entire phenomenon, in other words: to see the elephant.

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